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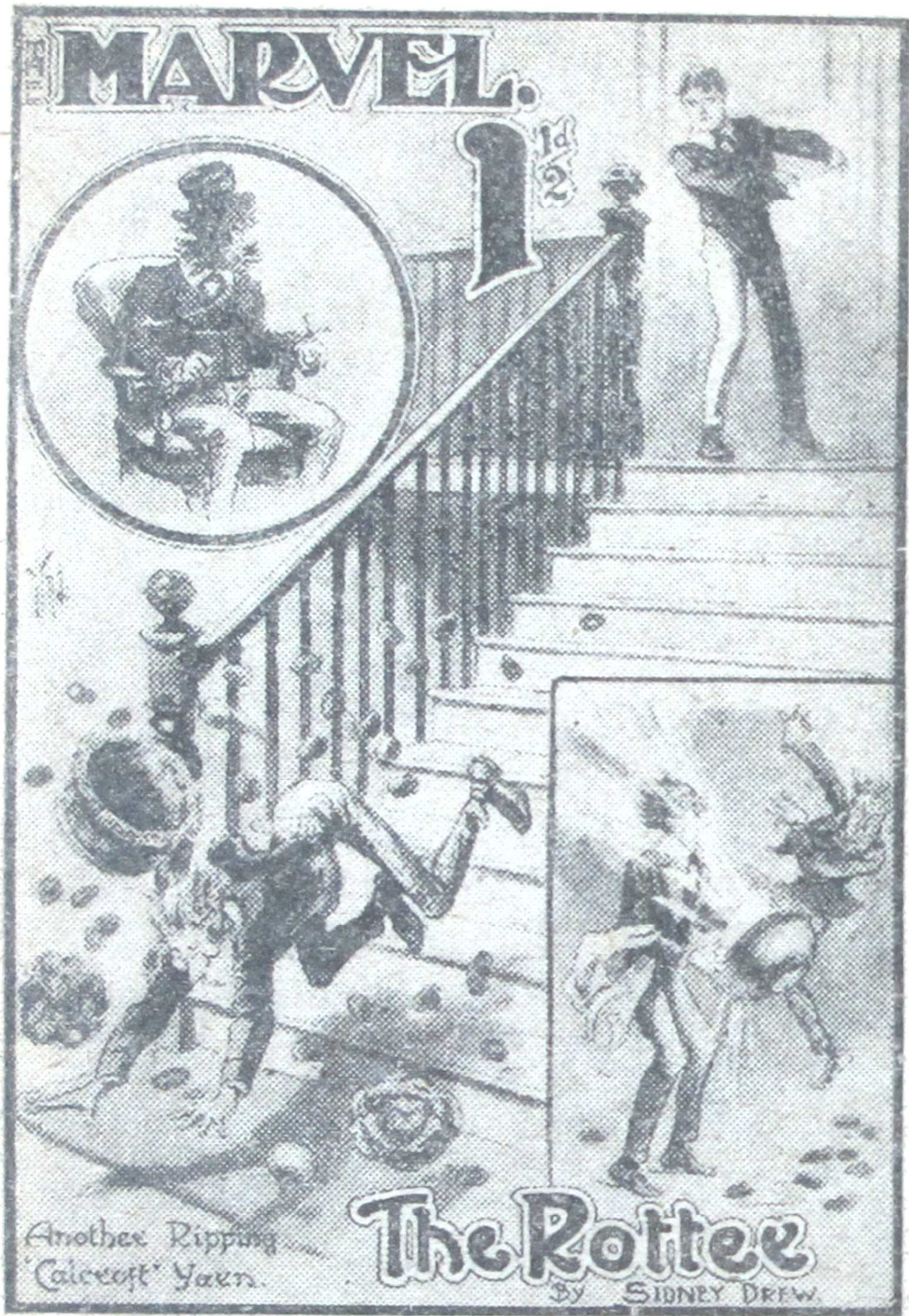
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A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S. By the Author of "The Remove Against Him," "The Golden Locket," and other Stories. November 23, 1918.



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(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

JACK MASON SEEKS ADVICE.

JACK MASON, of the Ancient House at St. Frank's, stared moodily at the letter he had just opened, and frowned with worry. His gaze fell upon Reginald Pitt, who had entered Study E at that moment.

"Confound it!" exclaimed Mason impatiently.

"Same to you," said Pitt, "and many of 'em!"

"I didn't mean you, Pitt. I was thinking about this letter," said Jack, with a faint smile, "I don't know what to do about it, and I'm worried."

"You look it," said Pitt candidly. "What's the trouble? Some awful person dumping you for an account?"

"It's from my uncle," explained the boy from Bermondsey. "This is the second letter he's written me this week, and he's threatening all sorts of things now. Says I must meet him this evening."

"That's a long way off," remarked the serpent. "It's only just breakfast-time, so you needn't worry about that until after tea. Besides, it's not a calamity, in any case. It won't kill you to see your uncle, I suppose?"

Jack Mason crumpled the letter in his fingers.

"I won't see him!" he declared hotly.

"Keep your wool on! No need to jump my throat," said Pitt. "If you won't see him, you won't. Mr. Simon Grell isn't exactly the type of man I should care to be pally with. But he's your uncle, ain't he? I don't wish to be rude, but I must say that your choice in uncles is pretty rotten!"

"I don't intend to see him!" exclaimed Mason firmly. "Why should I? He acted like a scoundrel the other day—and he is a scoundrel. I can't help saying so, and I'm ashamed to own that he's a relative of mine. But if I don't see him he'll keep writing these

letters, and he might even come to the school."

Reginald Pitt shuddered.

"Don't let it come to that!" he said in alarm. "We don't want the beauty here, you know. Why don't you take some good advice and see him this evening? Talk to him like a Dutch uncle—one uncle to another, so to speak—and tell him what you think of him. Say that you're not going to stand any of his nonsense, and that you'll make things hot for him if he plays the giddy ox. In short, tell him off!"

Mason smiled.

"I suppose you mean well, Pitt, but it's not so easy as it sounds," he said. "You know what my uncle did the other day, he tricked me to Bannington and tried to steal that locket and Mr. Strong's package. The whole plot was absolutely contemptible, and only an utter cad could have thought of it!"

Pitt winced unconsciously. That shot had gone home, although Mason was quite unaware of the fact. He would have been considerably surprised had he known that the "contemptible plot" had originated in Pitt's active brain. It was he who had suggested the idea to Mr. Simon Grell. True, Pitt had regretted it since, and he was secretly glad that the whole thing had fizzled out. But this didn't alter the fact that Pitt had been the chief culprit.

"Yes, the chap who thought of that was an utter cad," he agreed, the bantering tone of his voice changing. "It's a good thing that our Housemaster got on the track. He only rescued you just in time."

"Mr. Nelson Lee is absolutely splendid," declared Jack warmly. "But, of course, he's more than a schoolmaster, isn't he? He's one of the greatest detectives in England, and it's only natural that he should do things which ordinary masters wouldn't dream of doing. But I don't know what to do, Pitt."

"I'll tell you—"

"No, I'm not going to see him," said Jack steadily.

"I wasn't going to say that," put in the Serpent. "My advice is to think over the matter during the day. You'll arrive at some conclusion by tea-time, and everything will come smooth. Life's too short to worry, so take my tip, and don't do it."

Pitt strolled out of the study, but his tip was not accepted. For Jack Mason was worrying a great deal, and he certainly had excellent reason. His uncle, Simon Grell, was a disreputable rascal—as Nelson Lee had been able to testify. For Lee had recognised him as "Captain Jim," a man who had very nearly fallen into the hands of the police some years before.

He had come to St. Frank's with the main object of getting all he could out of his nephew. For Jack Mason had previously been a very poor boy, and had been educated at a London County Council School in Bermondsey. He was now at St. Frank's under false pretences, in a manner of speaking.

He believed that some money had been left by an obscure relative for the purpose of paying his fees at St. Frank's. As a matter of fact, they were paid by a genial old gentleman named Mr. David Strong, whose life Jack had saved some months earlier. Mr. Strong had been attracted to the boy, and had taken a great interest in him.

Jack would not think of taking any reward for his heroic action, and so Mr. Strong had played a little trick upon his young friend. He had pretended to be in poor circumstances, whereas he was really very rich. Mason knew nothing to the contrary, and he hadn't the slightest idea that Mr. Strong had worked the legacy ruse with his lawyers—just a little deception to make Jack comfortable.

I had discovered all this because Mr. Strong had confided in the gar'nor; and Nelson Lee, of course, had no secrets from me. Mason had had rather a bad time of it at first, a great many juniors proving themselves to be snobbish. But Mason was such a splendid fellow that he soon settled down, and was now accepted by everybody except Fullwood and Co. and other members of the Nuts' brigade. Jack's prowess on the football field had added greatly to his popularity.

And now Mr. Grell had appeared upon the scene and was making things uncomfortable. There was a certain mystery connected with Captain Jim's activities, and Mason himself was decidedly puzzled.

Mr. Strong, while on a visit, had unintentionally left a little sealed packet behind him; and Grell, for some unearthly reason, was very anxious to get hold of this. He had already made a firm attempt, but it had failed miserably.

And now he was writing to his nephew, ordering him to meet him. Grell knew better than to come up to the school; to do so would be to court disaster. He would, in short, be ordered off very sharply. But so

long as he remained in his lodgings at the White Harp, in Bellton, nothing could be done. He would probably await an opportunity and intercept Jack Mason while the latter was taking a walk to the village.

This state of affairs was most uncomfortable, and Jack had every reason to be worried. After breakfast he strolled in the Triangle, attempting to think of some way out of the difficulty. More than anything else he wanted to see Mr. Strong and seek his fatherly advice. But although Jack didn't know it, Mr. Strong was now in France on a brief visit.

There was a very anxious look upon Mason's face as he paced under the almost leafless chestnuts. The morning was fine and rather mild and the sun was shining quite brilliantly.

Nelson Lee, crossing from the College House to the Ancient House, did not fail to see the worried expression on Mason's face. And the Housemaster, knowing something of what had occurred, approached Jack and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"You are looking worried, Mason," he said kindly. "Is there anything wrong, my boy?" Mason hesitated.

"I don't want to bother you, sir," he said slowly.

"Come, come, that won't do," said Nelson Lee. "What am I here for if not to take an interest in the boys under my care? You will not bother me, Mason, if you confide in me. I don't like to see that frown on your face. It oughtn't to be there, and I must try to remove it."

"It's about my uncle, sir," began Jack.

"I thought as much," said Nelson Lee. "Come, Mason, we will go to my study and have a little chat. Tell me just as much as you wish, and I will give you the advice I think best."

"Thank you, sir," said Mason gratefully.

They entered the Ancient House and passed along the passage until they came to Nelson Lee's study. A cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and Nelson Lee took his stand before it and invited the junior to sit down.

"Now, Mason," he said quietly. "I understand that you are worried because of your uncle. I have already had some little experience of Mr. Grell, and I am convinced that he is a man of an unscrupulous character. I have no wish to hurt your feelings, my boy—"

"You're not, sir!" put in Jack quickly. "It would be silly of me to resent a statement like that. My uncle is unscrupulous—he's an absolute rascal. Before he left my aunt—five years ago—he treated me terribly, and I—I hated him. I thought he was dead until he turned up again the other day."

"But why is he bothering you, Mason?"

"Well, I don't know exactly, sir," replied the Removite. "I should like your advice on that question. He told me that he wanted money at first, but I don't believe it. His game is a different one."

"You are referring, of course, to that

sealed package of Mr. Strong's?" asked Lee, selecting a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece. "You gave that package into my charge, Mason, and it is at present quite secure."

Mason nodded.

"That's one thing, sir," he agreed. "And then there's this locket, or, rather, half a locket. My uncle is very anxious to get hold of it. He seems to believe that it isn't the same half that I've always had, and I can't understand why he wants it. It's not at all valuable."

"Let me see it, my boy."

The schoolmaster-detective took the half locket and examined it with great interest. It was of plain gold, and had been evidently carried about for years. Upon the inner surface, where one usually finds a miniature, there was nothing. Even the tiny glass cover was gone. And on the plain gold there were some curious signs scratched into the metal.

"H'm! Arabic," remarked Nelson Lee. "Most interesting, Mason."

"Does that writing mean anything, sir?" asked Jack eagerly.

"I can't tell you off-hand," said Lee. "The writing is Arabic, but it was evidently written in a great hurry, or under great difficulties. I have little doubt that Mr. Grell is only interested in this writing. Can it be possible that he is capable of reading Arabic?"

"He might be able to, sir," replied Jack.

"He's been to sea most of his life, and travelled a great deal between England and Africa."

"That, I think, is sufficient evidence," said Nelson Lee. "Well, Mason, do I understand that this locket is in danger?"

"My uncle tried to make me give it to him, sir, and I believe he means to make another attempt to get both the locket and the package," replied Jack. "I don't like to ask you to take care of it for me. It's—it's imposing on your good nature, sir, and the responsibility—"

"I do not think I am overawed by the responsibility, Mason," smiled Nelson Lee.

"Yes, certainly, I will take care of the locket for you. You may positively rely upon your property being kept secure. Now with regard to your uncle. The man is still in Bellton, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, and he's been writing me letters—"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Nelson Lee quickly. "Threatening letters, Mason?"

"Look, sir," said Jack, handing over the one which had come that morning.

The detective perused it with a frown upon his brow. It was a somewhat illiterate composition, and instructed Mason to be at a certain spot that evening alone. If he failed to keep the appointment the consequences would be serious. It was undoubtedly a threat.

"What was your intention, my boy?" asked Lee, looking up.

"I didn't mean to take any notice of it, sir."

"Splendid! That is the very best course you could adopt," said the Housemaster approvingly. "You asked me for some advice, Mason, and I will give it to you. Take no notice of this letter, or any letters which may come in future. Ignore them completely, no matter what threats they contain. If Mr. Grell becomes really violent in his warnings, bring such letters to me. I shall take advantage of the very first opportunity to rid the neighbourhood of this disreputable relative of yours. It is painful to speak in these terms, Mason, but it cannot be helped."

"I know that, sir," agreed Mason readily. "But what if my uncle comes up to the school?"

"In that event I shall have much pleasure in ordering Mr. Grell off the premises," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, I shall rather welcome the opportunity of dealing with the man on a square basis. But I do not think he will come, my boy."

"I hope not, sir."

"It is just possible that Mr. Grell will attempt to molest you on the road," went on the detective. "I should therefore advise you, Mason, to take two or three companions with you when you have occasion to enter the village. I don't suppose that sort of thing will continue for long; Grell will soon get tired of it again if he finds himself ignored completely."

"Thank you, sir," said Mason, getting up. "I feel much more comfortable now, and I'll do exactly as you say. And I hope that my uncle will soon leave the neighbourhood for good."

"That's right, my boy," said Nelson Lee smiling. "Don't worry yourself any more, the matter isn't really worth it."

A minute later Jack Mason took his departure. And he was now smiling and easy. That little talk with Nelson Lee had worked wonders. But Jack was to find that Mr. Grell was not so easily choked off.

CHAPTER II.

GOING TO THE BAD.

AFTER lessons that day there was still plenty of light for practice on Little Side, and I led my men out cheerfully. Mason was there, and I was glad to see that he looked care-free and cheerful.

He played splendidly, and his form, if anything, showed signs of improvement. It was nearly dark by the time we finished up, and we should all arrive indoors late for tea. But this didn't matter, since tea was a free-and-easy meal, and it was partaken of in our own studies.

"I expect Pitt will have finished his tea by now—in fact, nearly everybody will," I remarked, as we strode across the Triangle. "You'd better join us in Study C, Mason. What do you say?"

"Thanks. I should like to," said Jack readily.

"That's rippin'," remarked Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "We're always glad to receive visitors—when we've a good supply of grub in the cupboard. When we haven't, visitors are a frightful worry. Appearances have to be kept up, an' it's simply a shockin' bother to make one sardine go round amongst five!"

"I don't think that'll happen to-night," I grinned. "We've got some tinned salmon and some of Mrs. Blake's special rissoles. We don't know what's in 'em, but that makes it all the more interesting."

"You always were keen on mysteries, old boy," remarked Montie languidly.

We chuckled, and entered the Ancient House. It took us about ten minutes to change into Etons, and then we made for Study C. But just as we were passing the door of Study E—shared by Mason and Pitt—Jack paused and frowned slightly.

Laughter sounded within the apartment, and we had no difficulty in recognizing the voice of Ralph Leslie Fullwood. There were other voices, too, and Mason looked at us steadily.

"I'll be along in two minutes, Nipper," he said. "I just want to pop in here to have a word with Pitt."

"Right-ho," I said, and I passed along with my chums.

"Trouble brewin', dear fellows," remarked Sir Montie sagely, as we entered Study C. "I ain't a prophet, but you mark my words. There'll be the most appallin' bust-up soon—there will, really!"

Jack Mason was still frowning as he grasped the handle of the study door and turned it. But the door refused to budge—it was locked. This was significant, and Jack's frown deepened.

It was not pleasant to be locked out of his own study. He suspected that Reginald Pitt was entertaining the Nuts, and Mason had frequently told his study-mate that he disliked Fullwood and Co. entering Study E. The study was as much Mason's as Pitt's, and he had a perfect right to make objections.

"Open this door, please," he called out quietly.

"That you, Mason?" came Pitt's voice.

"Yes."

"Go away, you slum beast!" roared Fullwood. "We don't want you here!"

"Open this door!" replied Mason steadily.

"I thought you weren't coming to tea, so I invited these chaps," called Pitt. "Just run along and rake up some tea in another study, Mason. You'll be made welcome somewhere or other!"

"We provided the grub in here," came Gulliver's voice. "An' we're not going to share any of it with a beastly council-school urchin. Clear off! Pass me another of those cakes, Bell."

For one moment Jack thought that it would be best to retire. After all, he was invited to tea in Study C, and Pitt was at

liberty to invite his own friends if he wanted to. There was really no occasion to make a fuss.

But why was the door locked? In order to keep Mason out—the boy was sure of that. And he rebelled against this treatment. He was not a masterful junior, but he was always willing to stand up for his rights. Pitt, he felt sure, had been persuaded by his questionable friends—and Mason did not mean to go away until he had gained admittance. Things had come to a fine pass when he was locked out of his own quarters.

"Pitt, don't be an ass!" exclaimed Mason. "I don't want to join your pals at tea, but I'm not going to be harried by them from my own study. Please open this door, and don't act the fool!"

"Can't you wait?" demanded Pitt impatiently.

"No."

"Then you'll have to!" retorted Pitt. "More tea, Fullwood?"

Mason's own self-respect would not allow him to depart now. To do so would be to admit defeat—and Jack was not a boy who would willingly knuckle under. He commenced to hammer upon the door-panels with great energy. The noise was considerable, and angry exclamations sounded from within.

"You'll have the prefects on us if you make that din!" shouted Pitt savagely. "Go away, you rotter!"

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

It didn't sound as though Mason was going away, and several heads came out of several studies, and there were numerous inquiries as to when the bombardment was going to cease. But Mason persisted.

Then the door of Study E opened and Pitt's face appeared.

"Can't we have tea in peace now?" he demanded hotly.

Mason was about to reply, when he sniffed sharply. The next moment he forced open the door and pushed Pitt right back. The scene which Mason witnessed caused his eyes to blaze with fury.

The "tea" was a most curious one, for the study table was littered with playing-cards and little piles of money. The air was thick with cigarette-smoke, and Fullwood and Co. were sitting round the table at their ease.

"You cads!" shouted Mason hotly.

"Oh, don't make a fuss!" muttered Pitt. "There's no harm done—"

"Who threw my books over in that corner?" demanded Jack, quivering with anger.

Fullwood grinned, and Mason had little doubt that Fullwood was the culprit. Those books were new ones which Mason had purchased only the previous week. A glance told him that their covers were half-torn off and that they were covered with ink. It could have been no accident, but a vindictive act of malice.

"You shouldn't leave your books lyin' about the table," sneered Fullwood. "Clear out of this study, you confounded little toad!"

In Mason's present mood that was a most unwise remark for Fullwood to make. Slap! Jack's palm smote Fullwood's cheek forcibly, and the leader of the Nuts uttered a howl as he collapsed backwards, chair and all.

"Steady on—steady on!" exclaimed Pitt hastily.

"I'll give you one minute to get out of this study—the lot of you!" shouted Mason furiously. "Do you think I'm going to have this room turned into a rotten gambling-den? You ought to be downright ashamed of yourself, Pitt!"

Pitt scowled, and clenched his fists. Somehow, he couldn't quite face Mason's wrath. He felt that his study-mate was right. Often enough Pitt promised to throw up smoking and gambling. It had seemed, indeed, as though he had been sincere. And now this had happened!

Pitt was never to be relied upon—he was always breaking out. In this present instance he was not so much to blame as Fullwood, for the Nuts had invaded Study E and had commenced playing. They thought it would be rather a good trick upon the gutter-brat. And Reginald Pitt, instead of resisting, had allowed them to remain. But that, after all, was no excuse for him.

"Can't you keep quiet?" hissed Gulliver, in alarm. "If you go shouting about like that you'll get us all the sack——"

"You'll get yourselves the sack, you mean," retorted Mason fiercely. "That minute's nearly up, and I sha'n't give you a second's grace."

Fullwood scrambled up, white with passion.

"You silly fools!" he muttered. "Are you going to let this beast frighten you? We can chuck him out in two seconds—and we know he won't sneak. Now then, all together!"

"I'm not in it!" said Pitt. "I was an ass to let you——"

Mason did not wait for more. He grabbed Gulliver's collar, yanked him to his feet, and shot him out in the passage with terrific force. The attack was so sudden that Gulliver was taken off his guard. He collided violently with a junior who was just passing. The terrific uproar which ensued proved beyond doubt that the junior was Edward Oswald Handforth. Nobody else could possibly create such a din.

"Who the—— Great pip!" gasped Handforth, sitting up. "What the dickens was that? Why, you—you awful beast! What do you mean by butting into me, Gulliver?"

"I couldn't help it!" howled Gulliver violently.

"Oh, couldn't you!" snorted Handforth. Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Yaroooooh!" roared Gulliver, as Handforth proceeded to punch him liberally. "Stop it, you frightful bully! I'll—I'll smash you——"

"What the dickens is all the row about?" I demanded, coming out of Study C. "Oh, it's you, Handforth! I might have known it

Handforth glared.

"You silly fathead!" he roared. "Gulliver butted into me as I was walking along the passage. Great Scott! What a bill of smoke! It's coming out of Mason's study, too!"

I walked forward grimly.

"You needn't look suspicious," I said, addressing the crowd in general. "Mason was with me until about two minutes ago. Hallo! Fullwood doesn't seem to be very happy, does he?"

Fullwood, in fact, had just come hurtling through the doorway of Study E. He was saved from falling by bumping into Gulliver, who was just about to enter. This was rather unfortunate for Gulliver, for he staggered backwards, caught his head a terrific crash against the opposite wall, and collapsed dazedly.

Handforth grinned.

"Oh, good!" he said callously. "Serves you right, you rotter!"

Fullwood had charged back into the study, and a most terrific din was proceeding. This wouldn't do at all. Prefects were liable to sally out with canes if any commotion occurred. There was, of course, always a certain amount of din proceeding in junior quarters, but this was something quite out of the ordinary.

I hurried into Study E, followed by Sir Montie, Tommy Watson and several others. Handforth attempted to get in first, but became squashed in the doorway, and my elbow accidentally got in the way of his

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LOAC. At all events, Handforth added to the dis. generously—almost doubling it, in fact.

Within the study pandemonium reigned.

Jack Mason was fighting three fellows at the same time, and Reginald Pitt stood by the window, looking on gloweringly. Fullwood, just before I entered, had sprung upon Mason from behind, and the junior was borne to the floor.

The cards and the money on the table told their own story, to say nothing of the smoke-laden atmosphere. It was little wonder that Mason was enraged.

"Great Scott!" I shouted. "Kick these cards out!"

The next few minutes were very interesting. Fullwood and Co. were hurled out violently, and their belongings were kicked into the passage after them. But their troubles did not end there. The passage was filled with juniors, who took a keen delight in making the Nuts run the gauntlet to their own study.

By the time they reached that haven of refuge they were dishevelled, sore, and exhausted. Somehow that little party in Study E had not been a complete success.

Reginald Pitt was simply furious. He had wanted to keep the whole thing secret, and now it was public knowledge.

"Well, are you satisfied?" he demanded hotly.

"No, I'm not!" I replied. "Don't chip in, Mason. I'm skipper of the Remove, and I reckon this is a time for action. You're an absolute cad, Pitt, for having those chaps in here for the purpose of smoking and card-playing."

"Mind your own business!" roared Pitt.

"It is my business," I retorted. "I thought you were going to turn over a new leaf, but you're a disgrace to the Form!"

"I didn't want the rotters in here!" snapped Pitt. "They forced their way in—"

"And made you play?" I asked sarcastically. "It's your study—and Mason's—and you wouldn't have let Fullwood and Co. remain if you hadn't wanted them. We're going to give you a Form ragging, as a lesson."

"Hear, hear!"

"Jolly good idea!" declared Handforth heartily. "I vote we duck him in the fountain, too. He needs cooling down!"

"Look here, don't you touch me——" began Pitt, in alarm.

"Oh, leave him alone!" said Mason. "Those rotters have gone, so there's no need to carry it any further."

But Mason was ignored. I might have been inclined to let him have his way; for, after all, he was Pitt's study-mate. But the other fellows were determined, and Pitt was grasped by many hands and hustled out.

He undoubtedly needed a sharp lesson—and he got it!

As a commencement he was forced to run the gauntlet down the Remove passage. After that he was frog-marched round the Triangle three times, an operation which was

punctuated by a series of bumps which couldn't have done Pitt any good. It certainly didn't do his clothes any good.

The frog-marching finished, Reginald was like a limp rag, and his heart was filled with bitterness and hatred. His feelings were not improved when Handforth suggested that he should be rolled in the mud as a finale. As Handforth pointed out, it couldn't possibly harm Pitt's clothes more than they were harmed already, and it would be a fitting round-off.

So Reginald Pitt was rolled in the mud. Incidentally, his face was rolled in it, too. He was bedaubed with grit and gravel; it penetrated down his neck and into his ears, and his hair was in a shocking state. Possibly the juniors went a little too far, but there was no real harm done. A wash and a change of clothes would make Pitt all right again—except for his aches and pains.

He crawled away at last, and his cup of bitterness was filled to the brim when he met a prefect on the stairs, who promptly gave him five hundred lines for being dirty!

Handforth wanted to treat Fullwood and Co. in the same way, but the other fellows were not in favour of it. They were rather fagged after their efforts already, and they considered that Pitt was the actual culprit—as, indeed, he was. Pitt had been under no obligation to entertain the Nuts.

His rage was a terrible one, and it had not subsided when he came down an hour later, cleaned and in different attire. In his bitter mood he accused Mason of being the cause of all the trouble. Mason had started the row—Mason had caused the whole disaster by persisting in his efforts to enter the study.

And the Serpent's old vindictive spirit was revived. Whether it would last was a problem. On the morrow, perhaps, he would realise that the fault had been entirely on his own side.

For the present, however, he was sulky, and the occupants of Study E were no longer on speaking terms.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECRET OF THE ARABIC SIGNS.

"DURN the kid—that's wot I say!"

Mr. Simon Grell addressed his own pipe, and he glared at it as though it had done him an injury. He was in a savage mood, and there was much fury in his tone of voice.

Captain Jim was seated in his private room at the White Harp Inn, and he was momentarily expecting the arrival of a visitor. The evening train was already in—Mr. Grell had heard it stop at the station—and it should have been carrying a gentleman who was bound for Mr. Grell's lodgings.

Jack Mason's uncle was enraged because the boy had studiously ignored his letters. The last one had been delivered that morning—the

one which Jack had shown to Nelson Lee—and Mr. Grell had attended the meeting-spot in vain. It was only too obvious that the boy meant to take no notice of his uncle.

It was hardly to be expected that Simon Grell would approve of this. He had hoped to frighten Jack into meeting him, but his threats were hollow, and he knew it. He could do nothing by continuing his present course. It would be necessary to take the offensive.

Grell wanted to get Mason alone, so that he could obtain possession of the half-locket and the sealed package. Once he could come face to face with the boy he would use such methods that would scare him into obeying the demand.

And in order to strengthen his arm, Mr. Grell had made arrangements for a friend to come down. That friend would be admitted into the secret. Between the two of them they ought to be able to do the trick, and Grell was confident.

He knocked his pipe out in the fender, and rose to his feet as he heard voices outside in the passage. A moment later the door opened and Mr. Jonas Porlock appeared. The landlord smiled expansively.

"Visitor for you, Mr. Grell," he announced.

"I was expectin' him, Porlock," replied Mr. Grell. "Hallo, Jake! I thought you'd come down. Always willin' to oblige an old shipmate, hey?"

"There ain't a more obligin' feller than me in this 'ere world," exclaimed Mr. Jake Starkey, shaking hands warmly. "'Ow are you, Simon, old mate? I must say as 'ow you're lookin' reg'lar fine!"

The two friends partook of whisky, and Mr. Porlock retired. The visitor was not a prepossessing-looking man. He was long, lean, and decidedly ganat. There was a sinister expression about his little, bead-like eyes.

"Got into a queer place this trip, ain't you?" asked Mr. Starkey, looking round him with interest. "We ain't far from Calstowe, are we? I remember puttin' in there in the old schooner——"

"Never mind about that," interrupted Grell. "The fact is, Jake, I'm on a big thing just now—leastways, it may turn out to be a big thing. I don't quite know yet whether we shall touch lucky or not."

"A sportin' chance, so to speak?" asked Mr. Starkey.

"That's it," agreed Captain Jim. "Sit ye in that chair, mate, an' listen to me. Have one o' them cigars—they're good. I come down here because my nephew's at the big school up the road—St. Frank's."

"Wot!" exclaimed the visitor. "A nephew o' yours at a school like that? You're kiddin' me, Simon!"

Mr. Grell smiled.

"No, I ain't," he replied. "I don't know the rights of it myself yet. But there's the fact as it stands. Jack's at St. Frank's, an' I reely come down here to make him dub up the brass."

"Oh, so that's the game——"

"Don't you keep interruptin'," said Grell. "It ain't the game, Jake. It was at fust, but it ain't now. I found that I couldn't touch the money. The kid's expenses are bein' paid by some lawyers. I don't know why, but that don't worry me. Wot I do know is that Jack is in possession of a secret which might be worth thousands—an' yet he don't know it."

Mr. Starkey scratched his head.

"It's a bit mixed," he remarked. "I don't get the 'ang of it, old man."

"You will presently," said Mr. Grell. "This secret is one which I first suspected years ago. My neevy's got half a gold locket, and there's some Arabic writin' on it. As you know, I can read that lingo arter a bit o' trouble, and I was always curious about that locket. But the message wasn't complete, only half the locket bein' there. So I never troubled my head about it."

"Then wot's the good of troublin' now?" asked the other.

"Every good. When I saw Jack the other day I had a look at that locket—an' found that he'd got the missing half," exclaimed Mr. Grell impressively. "I wasn't able to read everything on it, but I got the gist of it. An' then the young varmint snatched it away from me an' cut off."

"Haven't you got it now?"

"No—that's where the trouble lies," replied Captain Jim. "Y'see, I got a bit pally with a smart kid named Pitt. Seems he's a bit of a scorcher in his way, an' ain't very particular about honesty."

"Somethin' like you, Simon, eh?" remarked Mr. Starkey placidly.

"No need to be personal," frowned Grell. "Well, this kid Pitt gave me some information which come in handy. It seems that the other half o' the locket is wrapped up in a little sealed package which Jack has got. I don't know how it got there, nor anythin' about it—an' it reely don't matter a brass penny to us. We know that the whole locket—or the two halves, strictly speakin'—is bein' kept by Master Jack. He don't know how valuable they are—but I do. An' we've got to git them afore he can get wind o' the real game."

"That's all very well," said Starkey, his little eyes fixed upon his companion. "But 'ow are we goin' to do the trick? We can't break into a school, cap'n, an' it'll be a queer job nosin' round a place where there are 'undreds o' boys."

Mr. Grell nodded.

"That's the trouble," he said. "Wot's more, my nephew won't take no notice o' me. He won't come down to see me, an' I can't get a word with him, try as I will. Twice he passed me to-night, but there was three or four kids with him, an' he went past as though he didn't know me."

"Young rascal!" exclaimed Mr. Starkey disapprovingly.

"So we shall have to think o' some idea," continued Mr. Grell. "I was wonderin' if we couldn't make that kid help us again—"

Pitt, I mean. He's got three quid o' mine, an' I've never had no satisfaction. Still, it'll be all the better if we can work the trick without him. All we've got to do is to wait our opportunity—keep our eyes open until we find Master Jack alone."

"We might 'ave to wait weeks!" protested the other.

"I ain't denyin' it, but we ain't goin' to wait weeks!" said Mr. Grell. "It won't be hard to trick a kid like Jack. It only wants a bit o' brainwork, Jake."

"That's why you asked me down, I s'pose?"

"No, it ain't!" snapped Mr. Grell. "If there's any brainwork to be done, I'll do it! Well, there's the position, an' now we've got to think of—"

"Old 'ard," interposed the other. "Where do I come in?"

"Wot do you mean?"

"Where do I touch?" asked Mr. Starkey.

"I'll see that you don't come to no harm," said Grell. "I'm payin' your expenses, an' you won't be a loser, whatever happens. An' there's more than a chance that we shall strike it rich—an' then you'll have enough to keep you in luxury for the rest o' your life."

"I'll believe it when I see it!" said Mr. Starkey doubtfully. "Wot's the game, anyhow? You 'aven't told me nothin' about this locket yet."

"I'm goin' to tell you now," said Mr. Grell.

He spoke mysteriously, and the two men drew their chairs together and spoke in lower tones.

"It's this way," said Captain Jim. "I've read a good bit o' the Arabic on that locket—quite enough to get the hang of the message which is scratched on the gold."

"Then wot do you want the locket for?"

"Do you think I kept it all in my memory, you fool?" snapped Grell. "I didn't find out no details, only the main idea of it. An' without the locket we can't do a blamed thing. Them words written on it are significant, an' it appears that the locket was found on a little oasis in an African desert."

"Lummy!" exclaimed Mr. Starkey.

"It must ha' been left there by some pore feller that was dyin'," went on the other. "Leastways, there was mention of thirst an' no water, so it's easy to gather wot that means. An' the man—an Arab, I s'pose—wrote down on the locket where he'd hid his belongin's."

"Ah!" exclaimed Starkey, greatly interested.

"Them belongin's are diamonds an' jewels by the handful," said Mr. Grell impressively. "That's just the truth, Jake. See? That locket tells us where a big fortune is hid, an' once we've got the information we can ship on board an African-bound steamer—before the mast, if necessary—an' make our way inland once we arrive on the coast. There'll be trouble, an' the job won't be as

easy as drinkin' milk out of a bottle. But the game's worth tryin' on."

Jake considered.

"Strikes me there's a good few doubts about it," he remarked. "How do we know that somebody else 'asn't got that treasure? Why, we might go out there an' find that we're five or ten years late! It don't seem good enough to me, Simon."

Mr. Grell swore.

"You never was a man for a bit o' sport," he snorted. "O' course we might be late, I ain't denyin' it. But it won't cost us anythin' to git to Africa—both you an' me would ship somewhere, in any case. An' as for gettin' to the oasis, we can take our time over that, an' mebbe do some profitable business amongst the natives at the same time. So, even if the whole thing falls flat, we sha'n't come to no harm. That's my way o' lookin' at it."

He thumped at the table.

"An' I don't believe it will fall flat!" he went on. "If that treasure had been recovered, we should have heard somethin' about it. An' the locket wouldn't have been lyin' about as if it was of no use. It must have been found by some fool tourist who couldn't read Arabic, and he brought it away never knowin' that a treasure was there. I tell you, Jake, this thing's goin' to make our fortunes. I can absolutely feel it in my bones!"

"I wish I 'ad that feelin'!" said Starkey, shaking his head. "Still, as you've pointed out, it ain't the time to grumble. Arter you've got the locket it'll be easier to git the hang o' things."

"That's wot I say," declared Mr. Grell. "The first thing for us to do is to get that locket into our hands, an' it's worth a bit o' trouble an' risk. The chances are that there's a fortune at the end of it, an' I was allus a man for a bit o' sport. We can't reely know whether the treasure's still there until we git to the spot, but I wouldn't mind bettin' you five quid this here minute that I'm right. That'll show you wot faith I've got."

Jake Starkey thrust out his hand.

"I'm with you, old mate," he said heartily. "But there's one little point which seems sort o' queer to me. Why 'as the kid got that locket in two 'arves, an' why is one 'arf wrapped up in a packet?"

"Didn't I tell you I don't know?" replied Grell. "Jack's allus had one half, an' that's another reason why I've got an idea that we shall win. These two halves ain't never been together afore, so nobody could read the message. It might have been broken in half by two fellers when it was found—as keep-sakes—an' they never took the trouble to read it. It seems that some old chap who's friendly with Jack—name o' Strong, I believe—left the package by mistake. Anyhow, I know that Pitt opened it an' found the other half o' the locket inside. So we don't want to trouble about nothin' else. O' course, Jack himself don't know a thing about that package, he don't even know that there is

another half of the locket. We've just got to get 'em, an' then we can clear."

Mr. Starkey filled his pipe.

"Well, you know more about it than wot I do," he said. "An' now, Simon, how do you reckon we're goin' to begin?"

Mr. Grell reached for the whisky bottle.

"We'll have a little drink an' then we'll talk it over," he said. "I've got several ideas in my mind, but the best way, I reckon, is to wait until we get the chance of way-layin' Jack on the quiet. Tricks are all very well, but they're liable to fail. One o' these days the kid will come out by himself, an' then we shall get him."

The opportunity was to come sooner than Mr. Simon Grell expected!

CHAPTER IV.

REGINALD PITT'S SISTER.

WEDNESDAY was quite a fine day, and a half-day holiday.

There was no football on for that afternoon. By this, I mean that we, ourselves, were not playing. For there was actually a great deal of football on. The First Eleven was playing one of its most important matches with a visiting team of renowned quality. We had every faith in Fenton, the First Eleven skipper, and were confident that he would pull off a victory.

The match was so important, in fact, that junior football was put into the shade for the time being. The crowd round Big Side would certainly be a record one, for every junior footballer would be a spectator.

It was one of the really vital matches, and there was naturally a good deal of speculation amongst the fellows. A wave of subdued excitement prevailed throughout the school after dinner had been disposed of.

Fullwood and Co., I believe, were busily making bets on the result of the match. Pitt was risking ten shillings, probably out of sheer bravado. For since that terrific ragging he had been regarded with ill-favour.

So far, he had not spoken a word to Jack Mason; and Jack, for his part, was determined to remain silent until Pitt emerged from his "sulks." It was really up to Pitt to make the first overture.

And he did so in Study E when Mason was just getting out his books for an hour's work. He could easily do this, and still be on Big Side for the start of the match. Mason did not believe in wasting good time. The other juniors were quite content to hang about the playing-fields, punting a ball up and down, or watching the seniors at the nets.

"Swotting again?" asked Pitt, entering the study.

Jack looked up in some surprise.

"Yes," he replied.

"What about the match?"

"Oh, it won't start for an hour," replied Jack shortly.

"I say, Mason, we're a couple of fatheads

you know," said Pitt, sitting on a corner of the table. "At least, I'm one. It's potty to keep up this ill-feeling. Suppose we call a truce?"

Mason looked at his study-mate squarely.

"I don't think I'm vindictive," he said.

"I'm ready to be sociable, Pitt. But you can't expect me to be friends with you while you continue your present games. It isn't reasonable to suppose that I can be your friend while you're so thick with those cads of Study A."

Pitt laughed sardonically.

"I suppose I can choose my own pals?" he asked. "It strikes me, Mason, that you're too jolly particular. What the dickens does it matter to you whether I'm thick with Fullwood and Co. or not?"

"I think you know what it matters!" replied Jack quietly. "For one thing, I don't believe in having this study turned into a beastly gambling-den. I didn't mean to say anything about it—it's all over—but you force me to."

"Oh, all right, have your own way," said Pitt. "I shouldn't have said anything, either, only I don't want my sister to find us at loggerheads. It would look fine, wouldn't it, for her to come here and find us squabbling like two monkeys?"

Jack Mason laid down his pen.

"You never said anything about your sister," he remarked.

"I got a letter this morning, and I didn't tell you anything about it because we weren't on speaking terms," replied Pitt. "Of course, you can start the row all over again if you want to—after she's gone. But let's have a truce——"

"Don't be so silly," interrupted Jack. "I sha'n't start anything over again, Pitt. It seems to me that you've done that more than once. If your sister's coming here I sha'n't let her see that there's been trouble between us."

"Good man!" said Pitt. "She's rather a decent sort of girl, and she thinks a good bit of me. That's because she doesn't know me—eh? Well, I don't suppose she knows so much about me as you do. She's staying with some friends at Caistowe, and she's promised to cycle over on Thursday—to-morrow. I expect she'll get here about tea-time, so I'm going to lay in an extra-special feed. That's why I've spoken, Mason—we might as well be a happy party."

"Oh, of course," agreed Mason readily.

"Well, that's settled," observed Pitt, with satisfaction. "By to-morrow perhaps we shall have made up our squabble altogether. You won't have cause to grumble at me again, Mason. You see, you're such a particular boulder that you require a bit of getting used to. Now that we're becoming more intimate I know exactly how to get along."

"I'm only particular with regard to ordinary decency," replied Jack. "I don't believe in gambling or smoking, and I couldn't be sincerely friendly with you while you act the fool like that."

"Thanks," yawned Pitt. "It's just as well to know your opinion."

He walked to the door, went outside, and then put his head into the study again.

"Coming over to Bannington?" he inquired.

"What on earth for?"

"I'm going to look in at the picture palace," replied Pitt. "They've got a ripping picture on this afternoon—Charlie Chaplin, or Lonesome Luke, or somebody. Anyhow, the announcements seem first-class."

"What about the match?" asked Jack.

"My dear, innocent chap," said the Serpent. "Do you suppose I'd rather stop for the match than see Charlie Chaplin? Football is all very well, but I'd prefer to wait until I can be a player myself. Coming?"

"No thanks."

"Well, you can't say that I haven't tried to be pally," said Pitt. "If you change your mind, you'll find me in the bob seats."

"I don't think I shall find you there, because I sha'n't come," replied Mason, with a smile. "I'd much prefer the match, thanks."

For two or three minutes after Pitt had gone Mason sat drumming the table with the end of a pencil. He was glad that the Serpent had come round, for he hated discord. And he believed that Pitt had profited by the lesson.

The boy from Bermondsey got to work in a more cheerful frame of mind, and the time soon passed. The Ancient House was singularly quiet, practically everybody being out upon the playing-fields.

A round of cheering told Mason that the visitors had arrived, and he knew that the game would start almost at once. And he was just putting his books away when footsteps sounded in the passage and a tap sounded on the door.

"Come in!" said Mason in surprise.

Tubbs, the page-boy, entered, grinning.

"Young lady to see Master Pitt, sir," he said.

Mason gave a start.

"A—a young lady?" he repeated.

"Name o' Miss Pitt," replied Tubbs. "I suppose she's Master Pitt's sister, sir. Just arrived on her bicycle."

"Well, Pitt isn't here just now," said Jack, looking troubled.

Why on earth had Pitt gone out? Obviously he had made a mistake, for he had positively said that his sister was not coming over until Thursday. Mason hardly knew what to do, but decided that the best thing was to instruct Tubbs to take the fair visitor to the Housemaster.

"Pitt has gone over to Bannington," he went on. "You'd better tell the young lady that—"

"She's here, sir, just be'ind me," said Tubbs.

Jack Mason jumped up.

"Why, you silly young ass!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Why didn't you tell me so before? I shall look an awful idiot!"

Tubbs grinned sheepishly and stepped aside. And Mason saw that a young lady was standing out in the passage. She was very neatly attired, slim, and had dark eyes. A mass of dark chestnut hair adorned her head, and it was arranged very becomingly over her ears.

Although not exactly pretty, Miss Pitt was undoubtedly an attractive-looking girl. Tubbs's introduction would have been quite unnecessary, for Mason could see at a glance that she was Reginald Pitt's sister, the family likeness being apparent.

"I'm awfully sorry that Pitt isn't here," said Mason apologetically. "I didn't know you were standing out in the passage, Miss Pitt. You can clear off, Tubbs."

"Yes, sir!" said the page-boy, grinning.

Jack felt rather uncomfortable, especially as he noted that the fair visitor was regarding him with quite a cool, self-possessed air. She sat down and looked round the study with a critical eye.

"Is this where Reggie does his lessons?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly," replied Jack smiling.

"We've got proper Form-rooms, and this is just our study—Pitt and I share it between us."

"How splendid!" exclaimed Miss Pitt. "But I wish you'd tell me where Reggie is. I have come over especially to see him on something really important, and I mustn't waste any time. I meant to come over to-morrow—"

"Oh, then Pitt didn't make a mistake?" asked Jack.

"Of course not," said the girl. "He had a letter this morning, hadn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't know until after that was written that it would be necessary for me to come over so soon," said Miss Dolly Pitt. "You see, mother is terribly ill just now, and she's staying at Caistowe for her health. We're terribly afraid that she is—she is getting worse. And I want Reggie to come back with me at once."

Mason was all concern in a moment.

"I say, that's awfully rotten!" he exclaimed. "Pitt's gone over to Bannington!"

"To Bannington!" exclaimed the girl. "Oh, whatever shall I do? I must take him back with me—mother made me promise, and she'll be terribly upset if I go without him. When do you think he'll be back?"

"Not until tea-time—"

"But that's hours!" protested Miss Dolly in dismay. "Can't I go over for him—er—er—"

"My name's Mason," said Jack smiling.

"Well, can't I go over for him, Mason?" she asked. "I suppose you know where he's gone, don't you?"

"To the picture palace, I believe—well, I'm sure of it," answered Jack.

"Oh, dear! I don't know where Bannington is, or where the picture palace is!" exclaimed the girl in a worried voice. "And I'm in such a dreadful hurry, too. I don't know what to do at all."

Jack Mason saw the football match fading away.

"Why, I'll take you to Bannington with pleasure," he offered gallantly.

"Will you—will you, really?"

"Of course."

"Thank you—thank you ever so much!" exclaimed the girl eagerly. "It's just splendid of you, and I'm awfully grateful. I shall give Reggie quite a talking-to when I see him."

"That wouldn't be fair," smiled Jack. "He didn't know that you were coming this afternoon, you know."

They left the study together, and one or two juniors who were hurrying out to the playing-fields stared hard, and then grinned. Mason went rather red. He knew well enough that the whole Remove would be talking about it before tea-time.

He did not overlook the fact, either, that he would be venturing out without an escort. But he thought it hardly probable that his uncle would interfere with him while he was with a young lady. Besides, he would be cycling.

Mason borrowed my bicycle, a spanking new one. He didn't trouble to ask me for it, because I was on Big Side at the time. But I had told him a day or two before that he could take it whenever he wished—if I wasn't contemplating using it myself, of course. So he was quite justified.

He and his fair companion were just about to start, when the girl gave a little cry.

"Oh, I believe I left a little parcel on your table!" she exclaimed. "Would it be troubling you too much if I asked you—"

"That's all right," said Jack readily.

He laid his machine against the gatepost and ran across the Triangle to the Ancient House. The situation was curious, but Jack didn't exactly dislike it. He always took a pleasure in obliging people, and Miss Pitt was so self-possessed that he was not at all awkward in her presence. And she wasn't one of those silly, giggling girls whom Mason detested.

He found the little parcel on the table, and then hurried back.

The pair mounted, and rode easily down the lane. Jack Mason little realised what this unexpected journey was to mean to him.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNFORTUNATE MEETING.

MISS DOLLY PITT could ride splendidly, and Jack had no reason to retard his speed in order to keep level. She was quite capable of maintaining the brisk pace which her escort set.

"It's rather a good thing that Pitt told me where he was going," said Jack, after they had passed through the village. "We shall find him in the shilling seats at the picture theatre, so you won't waste much time, after all. I believe you can get to

Caistowe direct from Bannington without troubling to come round these by-roads."

"Oh, that will be splendid!" said the girl.

Mason rode on by her side. It was hard lines, missing the big match; but he would be back by half-time probably. At the very worst he would be in time to see the finish.

He felt glad that the weather was fine, and the roads in good condition. It made cycling so much more pleasant. The girl talked brightly, and her conversation was free from all silliness.

She particularly wanted to know how her brother was getting on at St. Frank's.

"Oh, he's all right," said Mason. "I think the majority of the fellows like him all right. But Pitt's rather queer at times, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I really believe that he's one of the best chaps going, Miss Pitt," replied Mason. "He and I are study-chums, and I see a lot more of him than the other fellows. Some of them are inclined to misunderstand him, but I don't. At heart, your brother's as good as gold. But his temper spoils him now and again."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the girl. "But I know exactly what you mean. My brother is simply terrible sometimes. He's so cunning—and he doesn't seem to realise the value of a good chum when he's got one. I expect he will be better towards you after I've had a talk with him."

"Oh, but I don't want you to—" began Jack quickly.

"I shall tell him that his study-mate is very nice," smiled the girl. "And I shall make him promise that he'll listen to your advice. Reggie is awfully tricky, and I'm afraid he's rather vindictive. I think that—Oh!"

She had uttered a cry of dismay, and looked round.

"Puncture?" inquired Mason.

"No—my bag's gone!" exclaimed Miss Pitt, applying the brakes, and coming to a standstill. "My bag was swinging on this side of the handle-bars—and now it's gone!"

They had both dismounted, and Jack stared back along the road.

"It must have slipped off," he said. "Don't you remember—"

"Oh, when we were coming through that little, dark stretch of road—just against that wooden bridge. I mean—I felt something hit my foot," said the girl quickly. "I thought it was a twig, thrown up by the front wheel, but it must have been my bag. And we're in such a hurry, too!"

"I'll run back for it," said Mason. "There's a pretty stiff hill just ahead, so you can be walking up it while I'm gone: we sha'n't lose much time. I'll ride like the dickens."

"It's very kind of you," said Miss Dolly, looking at him seriously. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm terribly careless!"

"Bags are always liable to slip off," said

Jack, with a laugh. "You'll have to slip it over your arm, Miss Pitt."

"I hope you'll find it——"

"It's bound to be lying in the road," said Mason, turning his machine round. "Is there anything valuable in it?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid there is," replied the girl. "There's my purse, and that contains twenty pounds in currency notes and silver. And there's a diamond brooch of mine, too. I do hope you'll find the bag."

"It's a good thing this road is a quiet one," said Mason, as he jumped on to his machine. "Don't you worry, Miss Pitt. I'll find it all right!"

"I'll be walking up the hill," called Miss Pitt.

Mason rode away rapidly. The spot the girl had referred to was nearly a mile distant, and Jack reckoned that the bag must be lying right in the centre of the road. He watched anxiously for the sign of any other vehicle coming along. He knew only too well that some people would be quite capable of keeping the bag and saying nothing about it.

But the road was fortunately clear. As he whizzed along he kept his eyes well open, in case Miss Pitt should have been mistaken about the spot. Inwardly he resolved that she was undoubtedly careless. She ought not to have carried a bag, containing such valuables, loosely swung over the handle-bars.

Mason was relieved when he came within sight of the little wooden bridge. This particular spot was very lonely, and the road was clear. It was practically certain that nobody had come along the road recently except themselves. He slowed down as he reached the spot.

Three times he cycled backwards and forwards, making the distance longer each time. But there was no sign of the bag. And at last he dismounted, intending to look closely in the coarse grass which bordered the road.

And then something unexpected happened.

It was singularly unfortunate, but, then, things generally occur in that way. For as Mason was searching in the grass he heard footsteps just behind him. There was a tiny side-lane across the road—a mere farm-track—and he expected to see a labourer, or somebody of that class.

Two men came into sight, and Jack Mason started.

They were Simon Grell and Jake Starkey! Jack had never seen the latter, but the sight of his uncle was quite sufficient. As he caught sight of them, they recognised him.

Grell uttered a roar of surprise.

"It's Jack!" he shouted. "By thunder! It's the boy!"

Mason forgot all about Miss Pitt's bag in that tense moment. He whirled his bicycle round and leapt into the saddle. But Grell was running, and the boy naturally lost a few precious seconds in mounting.

"You young cub!" bellowed Mr. Grell.

As Jack was pedalling away, telling himself that he was safe, he felt the machine

jerk violently. He took a quick, startled glance behind, and there was Captain Jim, hanging on to the rear bar of the parcel-carrier.

"Got you!" panted the man roughly. "Better get off, my fine nerry!"

"Let me go—let me go!" shouted the boy, pedalling vainly.

It was a hopeless effort. With Grell hanging on behind, it was impossible for Jack to make any progress. Indeed, he was quickly jerked to a standstill, and he fell off the machine. He attempted to dash away, but Starkey was there.

Mason was completely captured, and the bicycle was roughly flung against the hedge. Then the men forced their prisoner down the farm-track and out of the sight of the road. They were highly elated.

"Talk about luck!" chuckled Mr. Grell. "Wot do you think of it, Jake? Run right into the nipper as though we'd planned it! Hold still, durn you!"

Mason was hot with rage and alarm.

"You've no right to molest me!" he shouted. "I shall refuse to tell you anything, and it's a shameful thing to force me——"

"Stow your lip!" growled Mr. Grell. "You've got a sight too much to say, young shaver. You're under my control, don't forget—me bein' your kind uncle. I've half a mind to take you straight to London an' shove you aboard ship as cabin-boy. That 'ud make you tame, my lad!"

Jack said nothing. For, truth to tell, he was half afraid that his uncle would carry out the threat; Mr. Grell was quite capable of it. Not that Jack himself would have allowed such a thing; he would have resisted fiercely.

"'Ere we are, Simon," said Mr. Starkey.

They had proceeded about a hundred yards down the rough track. And now they turned into a gateway, and Mason saw a ramshackle building just in front—apparently an old cowshed, or something of that kind. It was isolated from the road and extremely lonely.

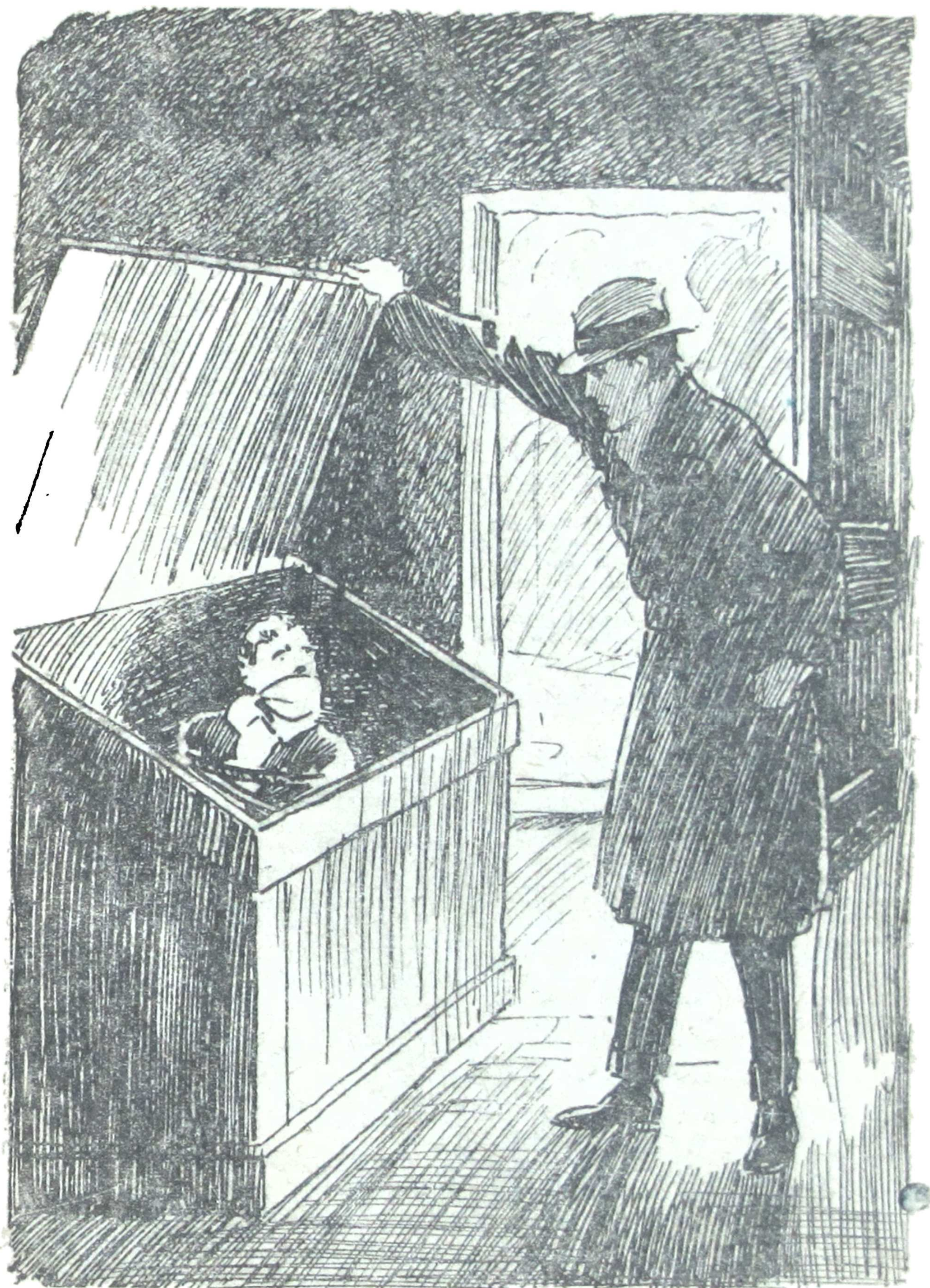
Jack bitterly realised the unfortunate nature of this meeting. He had thought of the possibility before starting out, but had dismissed it. But how had he known that his uncle would be taking a walk with his friend on this very afternoon?

And what would Miss Dolly Pitt think? What would happen when Mason failed to return with the bag? All sorts of thoughts crowded into Jack's mind; but the foremost, of course, concerned his own position.

Once within the cowshed, the door was closed and he was released. Grell stood with his back to the door, and Starkey took up his position against the window. It was quite a small place, and there was no prospect of Jack escaping.

He stood in the centre of the space, looking angrily at his uncle. But the latter calmly lit a cigarette and chuckled.

"Quite a nice meetin', Jack," he said pleasantly. "Now, my boy, I don't mean to



The next moment the lid was off, and Nelson Lee stood looking down at the doubled-up form of the boy!—(See page 18.)

waste no time on you. Give me that locket o' yours."

Jack Mason laughed with real enjoyment.

"You'll have a job to get it, uncle," he said. "I haven't got the locket on me, and it's now safely—"

"Well?" demanded Grell, as the boy paused.

"That's all," said Jack. "I'm not going to tell you where it is."

"You infernal young puppy!" snapped Grell. "You'll tell me where it is, an' you'll tell me where that package is, too. Understand? I won't have no half-measures, my lad. If you don't speak up the truth—"

"I won't tell you a thing!" declared Jack hotly.

"Hold him, old mate!" grated out Captain Jim. "I don't believe the kid's tellin' the truth. He's got the locket on him all the time—an' the packet, too, as likely as not. Hold him, Jake!"

Mr. Starkey obliged, and Mason remained still.

"You needn't trouble," he said quietly. "You won't find anything."

They didn't, although they turned every pocket out, and even went to the length of feeling all over the lining of his coat. Grell stepped back at last, his eyes glittering with fury.

"Where are them things—the locket an' the package?" he asked harshly. "If ye don't speak up, darn you, I'll half kill you!"

Jack remained silent.

"Are you goin' to speak?" demanded Grell, shaking the boy.

"No!" muttered Jack.

"I'll give you just one minute—no, I won't!" exclaimed Captain Jim. "I'll give you twenty seconds. If you don't say where you've put that locket, I'll put you across that bin an' tan you till you're half raw!"

Even this prospect failed to move Jack Mason. It wasn't likely that he would explain to his uncle that both the half-locket and the package were in the hands of Nelson Lee.

"Time's up!" said Mr. Grell grimly. "Now then!"

"Please, I—I—" began Jack cringingly.

"Ah! That's a better tone!" grinned Captain Jim. "I thought you wouldn't be likely to stand a good lickin'! I don't want to hurt ye, boy, so you'd best speak up while you're safe."

"The—the locket is—"

Again Mason paused, and he seemed to be in mortal terror. Grell thrust his hands into his pockets and stood by. Then he gave a bellow of rage and pain. For, in a twinkling of an eye, Jack had butted into his stomach. Mr. Grell went over like a ninepin.

Jack was at the door in a flash, and he tore it open, his heart beating madly with excitement. It seemed as though his little trick would succeed—for, of course, he hadn't been terrified in the least.

With just ordinary luck Jack would have escaped; but the luck he met with was of the

most abominable character. He dragged the door open all right, and shot out before Starkey could get at him, and before Grell could rise.

But Jack hadn't noticed an iron spike projecting out of the doorpost, rusty with age and rather dangerous. As he attempted to rush out the spike caught a portion of his jacket and pulled him back.

With a gasp, he tried to tear himself free, but couldn't. It was necessary to disentangle the coat. And whilst he was doing so Starkey made a fierce grab at his shoulder and yanked him headlong backwards into the shed again.

"Oh!" panted Jack, ready to cry with disappointment.

"Hold him!" snarled Grell. "By thunder! I'll make the brat pay for this! Tried to trick me, did you? We'll see, my lad—we'll see!"

Captain Jim had partially recovered by this time—he had been nearly winded—and he whisked a pliable cane through the air with fierce energy. Jack's heart sank, for he knew that his effort to escape had only made matters worse.

"Lay him acrost that bin!" rapped out Mr. Grell.

Jack struggled fiercely, but he was almost powerless in the iron grip of Jake Starkey—whose muscles appeared to be made of whipcord. Gaunt and lean, Starkey was, nevertheless, as strong as an ox.

There was an old bin in the shed, and Jack was held across this while Mr. Grell brought the walking-cane down again and again. It was a tricky task, however, for the prisoner persisted in shifting about continuously, in spite of Starkey's grip. And he received his punishment without uttering a cry.

He was in great agony, for Grell laid it on with a heavy hand. At last the rascal tired himself out, and he paused, panting heavily.

"Now will you speak?" he gasped furiously.

"I've told you three or four times already that I won't say a word!" said Jack, breathing hard. "Oh, you're a cowardly bully—a brute—a scoundrel! You ought to be put in prison—"

Slash!

Again the cane descended, and several more cuts followed. But Mason positively refused to speak any further. At last, thoroughly disgusted, Simon Grell delivered himself of several curses, and glared at his victim helplessly.

"Hang the boy!" he snarled. "Wot's to be done, Jake?"

"There's some rope 'ere," said Mr. Starkey. "Why not truss the kid up an' leave 'im in this 'ere place until 'e's 'ad starved? That'll do 'im a sight more good than a tannin'. But you know more about it than wot I do, Simon, so I'll leave it to you."

"We'll starve him!" declared Grell promptly. "That's a good idea, old man. This shed looks as if it hadn't been used for years, an' if we make a good job o' the kid,

there's no fear of his bein' discovered. By to-morrow evening he'll be as meek as a lamb!"

And then and there the two rascals roped Jack Mason up with extreme viciousness. A mauler was tied round his face, and he was finally deposited in the empty bin, which was quite large enough to accommodate him. There was a great wooden lid, rotten, and with several holes in it. This was thrust over the top, and Grell and Starkey left the building.

They secured the door so that it couldn't possibly be opened from within. The window was only small, and a heavy piece of timber thrust into position against it, and then propped, made it quite secure. Jack Mason was a prisoner within the shed. Even if he succeeded in getting free from his bonds—which seemed impossible—he would be unable to leave the building.

And this was the result of performing a gallant action! How it was to end, Mason had no idea. And he was too sore to think much at the moment. He could only lie in the bin, bitterly realising that everything had gone wrong.

And, meanwhile, things were going still further wrong!

CHAPTER VI.

A TERRIBLE SUSPICION.

"GOAL!"

A mighty roar went up when Fenton, of the Sixth, scored the first goal in the First Eleven match for St. Frank's. It was getting on towards half-time, and this was the first blood. The game had been hard and fierce, and all the spectators were worked up to a fine pitch of excitement.

That goal, therefore, put everybody in a good humour. I yelled as lustily as the rest, although I didn't chuck my cap into the air. I wanted it for my own use.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were just beside me. We were standing near the ropes, just against that point of Big Side from which it was possible to look into the Triangle.

Owen major and one or two others were standing a short distance off, and I noticed that Owen suddenly turned and gazed over towards the gates.

"Who's the flapper?" he asked, with interest.

We looked round then, and saw that a girl, wheeling a bicycle, had just entered the Triangle. She came to a halt, and looked about her uncertainly. Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez and coughed.

"The young lady appears to be in doubt," he remarked. "Surely this is a moment for us to distinguish ourselves, old boys? An' pray refrain from usin' that horrid word in my hearin', Owen major."

"What, 'flapper'?" asked Owen. "Well, she's a flapper, ain't she?"

"It's a frightful word, dear boy. And I really can't understand why all the girls don't get up a protest against it," said Tregellis-West. "I would, if I happened to be a girl—I would, really."

"Well, we won't start an argument about the merits of the word 'flapper,' Montie," I grinned. "It's nearly half-time, so we might as well make ourselves useful by seeing what the young lady wants."

She was already wheeling her bicycle in the direction of Big Side, having evidently failed to see anybody near the school. As we drew near we saw that the girl was looking anxious and worried; also, she seemed familiar.

"Why, you're Pitt's sister, ain't you?" asked Watson, as bluntly as usual.

"Yes," replied the girl. "How did you know?"

"Easy!" said Tommy. "You look just like Pitt, except, of course, that you're a girl. Can't you find him?"

"I'm not really looking for him," replied Miss Dolly. "I was wondering if Mason was here—"

"Mason?" put in Hubbard, who had strolled over. "Why, I saw you leaving the school with him three-quarters of an hour ago. Miss Pitt."

We all looked at her somewhat curiously.

"Isn't he here?" she asked, her voice very anxious.

"Not that I know of," I replied. "If he'd come back, Miss Pitt, he would have made a bee-line for the footer field, so you can reckon that he isn't on the school premises. Why, is anything the matter?"

"I don't know—I hardly know what to think," said the girl. "You see, I came here for my brother, and Mason told me that Reggie was in Bannington, and he offered to cycle over with me to show me the way."

"Who wouldn't?" asked Owen major blandly.

"And I really don't know what has become of him," continued Miss Pitt. "I dropped my bag on the road, and Mason very kindly went back for it. I waited for ever so long, but he didn't return. I thought that he had perhaps come to the school, but it doesn't look as though he has."

"You must have missed him on the road," I said.

"But I couldn't have done," she replied quickly. "It's quite a straight road, and he had no reason to go in any other direction—unless it was some reason of his own. I'm sure he found the bag, because it was nowhere to be seen, and it must have been lying in the road."

"Oh, I say!" protested Watson. "Mason wouldn't go off with your bag, you know!"

Gulliver, who had strolled up, laughed.

"I'm not so sure of that," he said sneeringly. "Mason used to be a County Council School kid, an' he lived in all sorts of slums—bobbobbed with pickpockets, I expect. It all depends upon how much the bag contained."

"Shut up, you rotter!" I said angrily. "It's a beastly shame to say such a thing as that, Gulliver. If you repeat it I'll knock you down!"

"Oh, keep your hair on!" growled Gulliver.

"How much did the bag contain, Miss Pitt?" asked Watson.

"Oh, quite a lot," replied the girl. "Twenty pounds in notes and silver, and a diamond brooch."

"Phew!" I whistled. "And you've lost it?"

"I don't see how it can be lost," replied Miss Pitt. "It only just slipped off the handle-bar, and there wasn't another soul on the road. I think that Mason must have gone to Bannington in some other way. He wouldn't steal the bag, would he? That would be a terrible thing to do."

"Well, it looks jolly queer!" sneered Gulliver.

"You can take my word for it, Miss Pitt, that Mason isn't a thief," I said quietly. "You needn't take any notice of this cad standing here. If Mason found your bag he'll return it. He's probably still searching on the road—or, as you say, he might have gone to Bannington, although I don't quite see how he could do that without meeting you again."

The girl looked very worried.

"I don't know what to think," she said in distress. "I don't like to suspect Mason, but—but— Well, he knew that the money was in the bag, and it might have been a temptation to him. But it's such an awful thing to suspect. Oh, I'm sure he's gone on to Bannington!"

"Somethin' of that sort, you may be sure, dear gal!" observed Sir Montie.

"I thought he had come back here, perhaps," said Miss Pitt. "But as he hasn't, I'll hurry on to Bannington at once."

"I say, shall we escort you?" inquired several juniors.

"No, thank you," said the girl firmly. "I wouldn't dream of putting you to the trouble. Good-bye."

She mounted her machine and rode swiftly towards the gates. It was obvious that she was in a state of alarm and concern. We looked at one another curiously after she had gone.

"Something fishy about this, my sons," I said grimly. "Mason wouldn't pinch the girl's bag. I'll swear. There must be some other explanation."

As a matter of fact, I was thinking of Mr. Simon Grell. The idea had struck me that Mason might have recovered the bag, and had then been seized by his rascally uncle. This would easily account for the disappearance of both Mason and the bag. But I couldn't air this view aloud.

"I'll bet an even over that Mason's done the pinchin' act," said Fullwood calmly. "It's just the sort of thing we could expect from a Bermondsey kid. A jolly good thing if he's found out an' sacked. The sooner we get rid of him the better."

To my regret quite a number of fellows

were ready to believe that Mason had been guilty of sticking to Miss Pitt's valuable bag. The facts were undoubtedly significant, but I didn't believe in forming any opinion until there was much stronger evidence, and until Jack Mason could speak for himself.

But the other juniors were liable to draw hasty conclusions. And while the second half of the senior match was proceeding there was much speculation concerning Miss Pitt's loss, and Mason's connection with it.

The match itself had an exciting finish. The visitors had equalised, and it was only in the last minute of play that the home team scored the winning goal. There was much enthusiasm and excitement, and after it had died down the Triangle was filled with groups of juniors discussing the merits of senior football compared with junior. Needless to say, the majority of the fellows considered that the Junior Eleven was far and away superior to the First.

In the midst of the discussion somebody let out a hail. Reginald Pitt had just cycled swiftly in at the gateway, and he came straight over towards us and dismounted. I was standing with my chums against the Ancient House steps. Pitt was rather breathless, and his expression was grim and anxious.

"Where's Mason?" he asked quickly.

"I don't think he's come in yet," I replied. "Why, what's up, Pitt? Where's your sister? Do you mean to say that you missed her after all?"

"No, I met her on the road," replied Pitt anxiously. "Careless little bounder! She's lost her bag, with piles of tin in it, and some of it was for me, too!"

"No wonder you're worried—what?" said De Valerle.

"Oh, don't be funny!" snapped Pitt. "I told Dolly to buzz off back to Caistowe—a girl's no good in this sort of thing. She'll get into a frightful row about the bag, but that's her look-out. Mason must have got it, so I'll return it to Dolly by post this evening."

"Yes, if Mason admits that he found it," said Fullwood calmly.

"Do you think he'd steal it?" demanded Pitt. "Don't be such an ass, Fullwood! But I certainly can't understand why the chap hasn't turned up. He's had time enough, goodness knows."

"He's probably chasing your sister about," I remarked. "You know what girls are, Pitt. She must have taken the wrong road, or something, and missed Mason on the way."

The Serpent nodded.

"Yes, I suppose so," he remarked. "Dash it all, I don't like to think that Mason would run off with Dolly's bag, but there was a good bit of money in it, you know."

Fullwood grinned.

"I thought you told me not to be an ass?" he remarked calmly.

"Oh, well, I was a bit wild!" said Pitt. "Mason's absence is jolly queer, whatever you say. He couldn't have gone to Banning."

ton, because I should have passed him, and he couldn't have come back here, either."

"Perhaps he met somebody," I said. "No need to get alarmed, Pitt. Wait until Mason comes back, and then you'll be able to understand."

"Begad! It's a shockin' thing to raise all these beastly suspicions, you know," said Tregellia-West, shaking his head. "There may be twenty ways of explaining why Mason hasn't come back."

"Hear, hear!"

"Quite right!" agreed Fullwood. "But I wouldn't mind betting that I suggested the only real explanation. The rotter has run off with that bag—Yaroooh! Mind where you're shovin' your beastly feet, Handforth!"

"Did I tread on you?" said Handforth ominously. "It's just possible that my fist might accidentally hit your nose—in fact it will do if you make any more of those rotten remarks!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Fullwood.

Handforth glared.

"Did you say rats to me?" he demanded.

"Yes, I did!" roared Fullwood savagely.

Smack!

Ralph Lealie staggered back, his cheek burning.

"And you can repeat it as many times as you like," said Handforth. "I don't mind a bit. But the next time I sha'n't smack—I shall punch. Mason ain't exactly a chum of mine, but I'm not going to stand here and hear him accused of being a thief. If he is a thief, I'll be down on him like a ton of bricks. But until the proof is here I believe him innocent!"

"Good man!" I said heartily.

Fullwood growled something under his breath and walked off. And Reginald Pitt strolled towards the gates with his hands in his pockets. He was worried and troubled, and knew that nothing could be done until Jack Mason turned up.

There was quite an amount of speculation in the Remove. The story was significant, especially as Mason showed no sign of appearing. Twenty pounds—to say nothing of a diamond brooch—is a pretty decent sum. But I found it very hard to believe that Mason could have taken it. In fact I didn't believe it—I laughed at the very idea.

And, meanwhile, the boy from Bermondsey remained absent.

Where was he? Why didn't he turn up?

Well, I'll just tell you.

CHAPTER VII.

NELSON LEE TAKES A HAND.

DR. BRETT had been most genial, and Nelson Lee was feeling in a good humour as he strode along the Bannington road. The village medico, in fact, had taken advantage of the Wednesday half-holiday to ask Nelson Lee over for an hour or two.

It was no half-holiday for Brett, of course, but the afternoon was free for Nelson Lee. And the object in view was to inspect some old ruins midway between Bellton and Bannington, but some little distance from the road.

The pair had arrived and had spent quite an interesting time—for Dr. Brett, of course, was one of Lee's firmest friends in the district. He was a well-informed man, an excellent talker, and possessed plenty of sound common-sense.

As luck would have it, however, Dr. Brett had met a woman of the labouring class in a tiny hamlet near the ruins. She, it appeared, was even then on her way to Bellton for the doctor—her worthy husband having suddenly fallen ill. From the symptoms described, Brett had a suspicion that the man had been partaking of something which did not quite agree with him. At all events, as the matter seemed rather serious, the doctor accompanied the woman to her cottage.

And Nelson Lee therefore wended his way homewards alone. Brett was profuse in his apology, but Lee laughed it aside.

"My dear man, a doctor is not a free agent," he smiled. "You are always at the beck and call of everybody, and you can call no time your own. So be off to attend to this patient of yours. We have had quite an enjoyable afternoon, and I don't mind walking back alone in the least. I may drop in this evening for a smoke and a chat."

"Do!" said Dr. Brett heartily.

And that's why Nelson Lee found himself striding along a narrow lane between Bellton and Bannington that afternoon—alone. He certainly had no idea that he would meet with any untoward incident.

But chance was a curious thing, and it was purely a piece of luck which led Nelson Lee down the farm track near the old wooden bridge. It was a short cut on to the main road, and he took it.

As a direct result, he turned a corner just in time to see Mr. Simon Grell and Mr. Jake Starkey wheeling a bicycle into a gateway. Their backs were towards Nelson Lee, and he instinctively came to a halt.

The two men had as much right in the lane as the detective had. But the fact which aroused Lee's interest was that they were calmly handling a bicycle which undoubtedly belonged to me! For the gov'nor had recognised my jigger; it will be remembered that Mason had borrowed it.

It was not a very marvellous feat for Nelson Lee to spot my jigger. For it was practically a new one, and was enamelled olive green, instead of the customary black. Further, the handle-bars were of an unusual design, and the lamp was a spanking one of an expensive pattern.

One glance told the gov'nor that it was my machine. Then what was it doing in the hands of Mason's uncle? Nelson Lee considered that the point needed looking into. And he waited, creeping forward a yard or two.

This gave him the advantage of a break in the hedge. Peering through, he saw that the men approached an old cowshed, the door of which was very securely fastened. They forced it, placed the bicycle inside, and then secured the door again.

This was father suspicious. As a matter of fact Mr. Grell had completely forgotten the bicycle while he was attending to Jack Mason. And he and Starkey, striding down the lane, had spotted it.

They couldn't very well leave it there, so the best thing to do was to put it in the shed with the boy—which they did. There was now no clue which would lead anybody to suppose that Mason was in the vicinity.

The two rascals made off, intending to hold a discussion in their lodgings at the White Harp. Mason was safe enough; he couldn't possibly escape. But they wouldn't have been so confident had they known that their movements had been watched—by Nelson Lee, of all people!

"This is quite a pretty little problem," Lee told himself. "That was Nipper's bicycle, and yet there is no sign of Nipper. Has the careless young rascal left it by the roadside for some reason? If so, Grell probably took advantage of the situation to conceal the machine—with the possible idea of profit later on."

The schoolmaster-detective considered that it was his affair to look into the matter. He wasted no time, but strode down the rutty lane, leapt lightly over the gate, and approached the old cowshed.

He gained admittance in a minute or two, and found the shed to be empty, except for the bicycle, a big old bin, and some odds and ends. Yes, the bicycle was certainly interesting.

"It's Nipper's, right enough!" murmured the gov'nor. "Now why on earth did those two men— Dear me!"

A most distinct sound came from the bin, and Nelson Lee turned and stared at it with curiosity. A wooden lid was in position, but the sound seemed to indicate that a human being was within.

"Can it be possible that Nipper is—"

Nelson Lee paused and strode across the shed. The next moment the lid was off, and he looked down upon Jack Mason's doubled-up form.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Lee, startled.

He jerked the boy upright, and was greatly relieved when he observed that Mason's eyes were open and alight with excitement and gratitude. Lee pulled off the muffler, and Mason gave a little gasp.

"Oh, thanks awfully, sir!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Are you hurt, lad?" asked Lee, lifting him bodily on to the floor. "You must tell me what this dastardly outrage means—"

"I'm not really hurt, sir," said Mason. "My uncle beat me with a stick, and I'm rather tender—but that's nothing to cry over. Oh, this is simply splendid! How did you find me, sir?"

"I am afraid I must take no credit upon

myself, my boy," said Nelson Lee. "It was quite accidental, I can assure you. But you must tell me the exact truth, Mason. This affair is simply beyond all bounds—it is an outrage, and your uncle has laid himself open to prosecution—"

"Oh, don't let it go as far as that!" exclaimed Jack anxiously. "You've rescued me, so what does it matter? I—I'm not thinking of my uncle, but it would be simply awful for me at St. Frank's if it all came out in a police-court."

"You are quite right, Mason," said Lee. "As you say, it would be far better to take no action, seeing that Grell has been foiled. But if he goes on at this rate he will overreach himself, and he will find himself in serious trouble. But how is it that he got hold of you, lad? Did I not tell you to be very careful—"

"I was, sir," explained Mason, whose bonds had been cut free by this time. "But something unexpected happened."

And he told the detective of Miss Pitt's visit, and how he had been captured while looking for the missing bag. Lee realised, of course, that the position had been practically forced upon the lad.

"The circumstances were quite exceptional, Mason, and you are not at all to blame," he declared. "At the same time, you must be very wary—"

"By thunder!" exclaimed a harsh voice outside. "The kid's gorn! Look at the door, Simon! You didn't fasten it—"

Only an oath came in reply. Nelson Lee motioned to Mason to get in the rear, and he stood ready—grimly amused. Grell and Starkey had returned for some reason. Lee never understood why, but in all probability Mr. Grell had thought of some fresh question to ask his nephew, or he might even have changed his plans.

Grell and Starkey entered the shed at the same moment; and they started back in dismay as they saw Nelson Lee facing them.

"Why, what—?" began Captain Jim furiously. "Git out of this place, durn you! Leave that kid alone! Here, Jake, help to kick him out!"

Nelson Lee laughed as the two men charged. They lent one another strength, and strongly believed that they would be able to vanquish this intruder. But that's just where they made a big mistake.

Lee allowed them to come right on. Then he let himself go. He hit them left and right, delivering the most powerful blows—and Nelson Lee, when he gets fairly going, can punch like a steam hammer.

Grell went down with a crash, and Starkey followed him, wondering if his jaw was in three pieces or two. At all events, the rascal felt sure that it was broken, and he rolled over backwards with a scream of pain and alarm.

In a second he was on his feet, streaking away for all he was worth. Simon Grell did not wait for any more, but lurched to his feet, swearing horribly. For this he received another punch which sent him flying once

more. And this time he got up and fled precipitately.

"They are soon settled, Mason," smiled Nelson Lee, gently rubbing his knuckles. "I was hoping for something far more entertaining. Well, the rascals know that you are safe now, but I should advise you to be very careful in future. Cut off on your bicycle and go straight to the school. The ruffians have fled away from the main road, so you will not run into them."

Mason was very grateful.

"It's wonderfully good of you, sir," he exclaimed warmly. "I—I don't know how to thank you—"

"Don't try, young 'un, hurry off as fast as you can go," interrupted Nelson Lee. "As for Miss Pitt's bag, you can't stop behind for that. In any case, I expect she has recovered it herself by this time."

"Unless my uncle took it, sir," put in Jack.

"There is that possibility, of course, but I do not think it is probable," said Lee. "You would surely have seen some sign of it, or would have heard some reference to it, if Grell had it in his possession. In any case, that can be settled later."

Mason was soon off, and Lee remained behind to have a look round. He also suspected that Grell and Starkey might be prowling about, and he would have welcomed another opportunity of meeting them.

Jack pedalled for all he was worth as he went home. Not that he was scared. Nelson Lee had told him to hurry, and he was hurrying. The match would be over by this time, of course, but Mason had much to be thankful for. If Nelson Lee hadn't appeared upon the scene he might have been kept in that shed for days.

Jack was worried about Miss Pitt's bag. He had promised to recover it, and had failed. This wasn't his fault, but he was in the unfortunate position of being unable to explain what had actually occurred.

If he did do so, the whole school would know about his rascally uncle. And if he concealed the identity of Mr. Grell, the juniors would almost certainly refuse to believe the yarn. It was far better to say nothing about it. Indeed, at the last moment, Nelson Lee had warned the boy to say nothing at all. Neither he nor Jack realised how Mason's absence had been construed by a great many fellows.

Jack had become quite calm by the time the school gates were in sight. It was rather painful for him to ride, owing to the energy of Mr. Grell. That gentleman had wielded his cane so effectively that Mason was extremely sore.

But the main trouble was over, and Jack could stand a little pain. He thought it quite possible that Miss Pitt herself would be at the school, having returned to make inquiries about the bag. Indeed, Mason remembered the incident of the forgotten parcel—when he and the girl had been starting off. Was it not likely that she had forgotten her bag, too? It would be rather rich

if the missing article turned up in Study E, after all.

Mason turned into the Triangle, and there was an immediate shout. There were still several groups of juniors standing about, my chums and myself being included. And Reginald Pitt ran forward.

"I say, Mason," he exclaimed anxiously.

Jack turned his bicycle away from the cycle-house—where he was making for—and dismounted. Then he walked over to Pitt. The other fellows crowded round interestedly.

"I say, Pitt, where's your sister?" asked Mason quickly.

"She's gone, and I want to know what the dickens you mean by running off," was Pitt's grim reply. "You offered to escort her to Bannington, and then deserted her half-way along the road—"

"I didn't do anything of the sort!" retorted Jack hotly. "She dropped her bag, and I went back to find it."

"Then where have you been all this time?"

Jack coloured slightly.

"I—I was detained," he said uncomfortably. "I'm awfully sorry, and I hope your sister doesn't think I acted rudely. But I couldn't help it, Pitt. I was hoping to find her here." He looked straight into Pitt's eyes. "I'll explain everything to you in private," he added quietly.

"All right, but you'd better hand that bag over at once," said the Serpent. "Some of the fellows have been making nasty suggestions—"

"Why, I didn't find the bag," said Jack quietly. "I searched along the road, but it wasn't there. I thought that your sister perhaps left it behind in the study. Why are you looking so queerly at me?"

"I should think you ought to know that," said Pitt. "The bag wasn't left behind. Mason, and you know jolly well that my sister dropped it on the road. You went back to find it, and didn't return it to Dolly. You've been absent for close upon two hours, and now you turn up and say that you haven't seen the bag! Do you think that's quite good enough?"

Jack Mason started back.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"Thief!" came a hiss from the rear.

"You're mad!" gasped Jack, going white. "Do you think I kept the bag? It's a horrible thing to say!"

"Begad! An' so it is!" said Sir Montie. "Mason, dear old boy, you can rely on me to back you up. Don't take any notice of these cads!"

"We don't believe you took the bag," I said smilingly.

"If Mason will tell me what he did and why he has been so long away I'll believe him, too," said Reginald Pitt. "I can't say anything fairer than that. Why didn't you go back to my sister?"

"I'll tell you—later on," said Jack steadily.

"That's no good to me," snapped Pitt.

"If you can't say it in front of these other fellows, it proves that there's something

wrong. I hate suspecting you, but you must say that the facts look jolly rotten."

"Search him!" advised Fullwood, from the rear.

"I don't mind!" shouted Mason hastily. "You can search me all you like!"

Handforth snorted.

"Don't you let them touch you, Mason!" he roared.

"I think it would be just as well, Handy," I put in. "I'm certain that Mason hasn't got the bag, and it's only fair to him to give him a chance of showing that he's not a thief. If I were in his position, I should prefer to be searched."

So Mason was searched—without result.

"It proves nothing," jeered Fullwood. "He's had time to hide the bag miles away, an' I'll bet that's what he's done, too."

"What about the bike?" suggested Merrell.

"By gad!" ejaculated Pitt quickly. "We'd forgotten the jigger!"

Ready hands—mainly the hands of Fullwood and Co.—seized my bicycle and examined it. They were intensely eager to prove Mason guilty. They hated him, and wanted to see him kicked out of the school.

"Go easy with that jigger!" I said sharply.

The cads were pulling it about roughly, and they took a delight in damaging any property of mine. I pushed forward with my chums, and took the bicycle out of Fullwood and Co.'s hands.

There was an extra-big tool-bag fixed to the carrier—one that I had ordered especially. It was not made to carry tools only; there was space for quite a decent lunch. When on a picnicking trip this was most handy.

"The whole thing's a disgrace," I snapped, as I unfastened the straps. "Do you think Mason would shove your sister's bag in here —"

"I didn't suggest looking in your bicycle," interrupted Pitt. "I think it's potty. You needn't open that bag, unless you like. It's simply a waste of time, anyhow. I don't accuse Mason of anything, but I think he ought to be frank with us, considering what's happened."

"If you understood everything as I do, you wouldn't say that," put in Mason quietly. "I don't blame you—it does look queer, I'll admit. I think it's quite possible that after tea I'll be able to tell you everything."

Jack, in fact, had determined to explain why he had been detained—but he wouldn't do that until he sought Nelson Lee's advice.

"There you are—squint inside," I exclaimed impatiently, as I freed the last strap. "I think it's utterly rotten—Oh, great Scott!"

I broke off blankly as I caught sight of something. The next second I pulled out a lady's small leather bag—and there was a roar. Mason himself started back as though dazed.

"Somebody put it there!" he panted huskily.

"Of course!" sneered Fullwood. "You put

it there, you sneakin' thief! By gad! This'll mean the sack for you, and a jolly good thing, too!"

Pitt took the bag without a word, and opened it.

"There's no money in here," he said quietly. "Where is it, Mason?"

"Do you think I know?" shouted Jack, in a fury. "I haven't seen the bag before—I don't know anything about it! I—I—don't know—"

He paused helplessly.

"You'd better go straight to the Head, Pitt," advised Fullwood.

"And you'd better mind your own business!" snapped the Serpent. "I'm not going to the Head—I'm not going to do anything. The matter can drop, for all I care. My sister shouldn't be so jolly careless!"

"Oh, I say, we ain't going to have a thief in the Remove!" yelled Gulliver. "Tain't likely! I'll go to the Head myself —"

"I think you'll have to, Pitt," I interrupted quietly. "You can't let the thing drop in that way. Even if the Head knows nothing about it, Mason's life will be made a misery, now that there's suspicion against him. The whole thing's got to be cleared up."

Pitt laughed uneasily.

"No need for any fuss!" he said. "What does it matter to you? What does it matter to the other chaps? It's my affair—and Mason's. Everybody else can mind their own confounded business!"

Jack Mason was deadly calm now.

"Do you think I took that bag, Pitt?" he asked deliberately.

"No—I don't!" said Pitt, speaking distinctly. "I think somebody has been up to some rotten trick. That's all. The less said about it the better. I don't believe you're guilty for a second—and here's my hand."

Mason took it, but there was an angry roar from the fellows.

"That is all very well, but it can't finish as you'd wish, Pitt," I said grimly. "You may think Mason innocent, but there's plenty of fellows who don't. And it's only fair to have it cleared up. He went to search for the bag, came back after two hours, and wouldn't say where he'd been. On the top of denying where the bag had got to, it's found on the bicycle that Mason was using. That looks jolly suspicious, and everybody knows it!"

"He's guilty—of course he's guilty!" yelled a dozen Removites.

"That's just my point," I said quietly.

"You—you don't believe Mason's a thief?" gasped Tommy Watson blankly.

"I know he's not a thief!" I replied, looking round with perfect calmness. "I just pointed out the significance of the case. All the evidence is against Mason, and it's only fair that he should have evidence in his favour. In other words, I mean to conduct a form trial—as once! That'll be absolutely fair."

"A trial isn't necessary—" began Pitt.

"You may not think so, but I do," I replied. "I must say, Pitt, that I'm surprised at your attitude—and I'm jolly pleased, too. It points to the fact that you've got more decency in you than I supposed."

"Thank!" said Pitt coolly.

"And I can quite understand your not wanting a form trial," I went on, looking at him straight. "You're willing to let the matter drop, and you've said that you believe in Mason's innocence. That's good of you—but the whole truth has got to come out. You can't escape it, Pitt."

"What the dickens do you mean?" he asked uneasily.

"I think you know better than I do," was my reply. "Some fellows here can be deceived—but I'm not quite so inexperienced. That's touched you on the raw, eh? Well, you brought this thing on, Pitt, and you'll have to go through with it to the end. A form trial is the only way to settle things."

And, although Jack Mason protested, the whole Remove decided that my plan was the best. And a form trial was held.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRIED BY THE REMOVE.

CECIL DE VALERIE looked very imposing.

He had borrowed one of Mr. Crowell's gowns from the Form-room cupboard, and although it was several sizes too large it nevertheless lent a solemnity to De Valerie's appearance which fitted the occasion.

For De Valerie had been appointed judge, and he occupied the "bench" in the Court. This was the Common-room, and De Valerie's seat was elevated by the simple process of putting a chair on to the table and shoving the table against the wall.

The witness-box and the dock were provided by other chairs, and the body of the Court was filled with excited Removites. They were somewhat inclined to treat the matter as a joke, but it was really very serious.

Pitt didn't like it at all, but the matter had now passed beyond his control. And, as he refused to prosecute, Fullwood appointed himself for the prosecution. I didn't object—because it would be rather good to see Fullwood defeated.

Naturally, I was counsel for the defence, and I had several witnesses all ready to be called upon. But nobody else knew this at the time, and they hadn't the slightest suspicion that I had one or two cards up my sleeve.

There was some little commotion because Handforth insisted upon being judge. As he was going to be a witness, this could hardly be possible. Besides, if Handforth had been judge, he would have declared Mason innocent before the proceedings had been going five minutes. Handforth was not exactly impartial.

"Oh, all right! Have your own way!" he snorted, at last. "Only, if Mason's found guilty, don't blame me! I'll be foreman of the jury—"

"You silly ass!" I exclaimed. "A jurymen can't be a witness! The jury's got to be twelve fellows who don't know a giddy thing about the case at all. They've got to hear the evidence and give their verdict."

"Quite right," said the judge. "But all the chaps know the whole giddy yarn—what? Why can't Fifth-Formers lend a hand—"

"No need for that," I interrupted. "I've already arranged with Christine and Co., of the College House. They're impartial, and they don't know anything of what's happened. They ought to be here by this time."

The door opened, and a crowd of Monks appeared.

"Talk of angels and they appear!" grinned the judge.

"Jurymen ain't angels," said Bob Christine calmly. "Now, what's all the giddy trouble? I've brought eleven chaps with me, and we've come here with the solemn determination to see that justice is done. I'm foreman of the jury, and, as a first act of justice, I suggest that Fullwood is cleared out of Court!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly idiot!" roared Fullwood. "I'm prosecuting counsel!"

"Oh, my mistake!" said Christine. "It's rather a bad look-out for the prisoner if you're against him, Fullwood. It wouldn't matter if you only told the truth; but you're quite capable of faking up a story of your own."

When things had quietened down—for there was a considerable commotion for a few minutes—the jurymen took their seats, and the common-room assumed a grave aspect. Jack Mason was sitting in the dock, looking calm and composed. Just before entering he had paid a visit to Nelson Lee, and he had nothing to fear from this trial. In fact he was in agreement with me that it would be the best way of clearing the matter up.

"In opening the case for the prosecution," began Fullwood, looking round him importantly, "I should like to make a few remarks concerning the record of the prisoner who now stands in the dock accused of committing a particularly outrageous theft—"

"Rate!" said Pitt. "I never accused him. Besides, he's not standing in the dock at all—he's sitting."

"I cannot allow this levity," said the judge severely. "And is it necessary to rake up Mason's past record, as you call it? What's that got to do with the case? We don't want any vindictiveness, Fullwood."

"I contend that Mason's record is necessary," declared Fullwood.

"What kind of a record is it?" asked Handforth. "A gramophone record?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This joking is most unseemly!" exclaimed De Valerie, frowning. "If there's any more

of it. I shall instruct the ushers to clear the Court!"

"There ain't any ushers, you ass!" shouted somebody.

It was, of course, quite illegal to address the judge as an ass, but his lordship overlooked the point, and Fullwood was allowed to proceed.

"Mason is not the same as the other boys of this school," he declared. "He was previously educated in a low, common council school, and we have every reason to believe that he lived in a slum in Bermondsey. Is it not reasonable to suppose that such a boy as that would be tempted by the sight of such a valuable——"

"I protest against this!" I shouted, jumping up. "The prosecuting counsel has no right to make suggestions; it is his job to stick to the facts. I wish to have him called to order."

"Shut up, Fullwood!" said the judge severely. "Stick to the case!"

"Oh, all right!" growled the prosecuting counsel. "Only I wish the jury to know the character of the prisoner. The facts of this theft are quite simple, and they do not allow of any doubt. I now call upon Reginald Pitt."

"Lot of tommy-rot!" snapped Pitt. "Rats to you!"

"Enter the witness-box, Reginald Pitt," ordered the judge.

The Serpent walked over uneasily. His attitude was a surprise to most of the fellows, for it was thought that he would welcome an opportunity of getting in a blow at Mason. But Pitt didn't seem to like it at all.

"Now, sir," said counsel. "What is your name?"

"Oh, get on with it!" snapped Pitt.

"That is no answer. I asked for your name."

"William Shakespeare!" said Pitt calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The witness is inclined to be foolish," said Fullwood sourly. "We will let the point pass, and get on to another one. Now, Reginald Pitt, your sister came to St. Frank's this afternoon for the purpose of seeing you. I can't understand why she should, but I believe I am right?"

"I understand that your suggestion is correct," said Pitt guardedly.

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"In Bannington."

"Did you see your sister at all?"

"I met her on my way home," replied Pitt. "She told me about the loss of the bag, and explained everything. Mason had been escorting her to Bannington when she missed the bag. Mason went back for it, and nothing more was learned until Mason came in."

"And what happened then?"

"My sister's bag was found on Mason's bicycle."

"After he had positively denied seeing it or touching it?"

"Yes."

"Then the inference is obvious," said Full-

wood. "Mason kept the bag for himself, and meant to stick to it, denyin' havin' found it. There's no doubt about that, because he swore that he hadn't seen it. An' yet it was found in his tool-bag! I contend that no further evidence is necessary."

I jumped to my feet.

"I wish to cross-examine the witness——" I began.

"I don't see that it'll do any good," said Fullwood. "The prisoner was caught red-handed, with a lie on his lips. He denied takin' the bag, an' it was on his bicycle all the time. There's nothin' more to be said."

The jury was impressed. So far, it certainly looked as though the evidence was going against the prisoner.

"Now, Reginald Pitt, you declare that you met your sister on the road between Bellton and Bannington?" I asked easily.

"Yes."

"Whereabouts—exactly?"

"How can I tell you that, you ass?" growled Pitt.

"Has it not struck you that our most important witness is missing?" I went on. "I think that Miss Pitt should be called. She is the only one who can really corroborate any statement of Mason's or Pitt's. I put it to the jury that this court should be adjourned until Miss Pitt is able to come over."

"Don't talk rot!" shouted the Serpent, with alarm in his voice.

"To facilitate our trial, I think it is necessary that we should be given Miss Pitt's address at once," I continued. "I call upon you, Pitt, to supply that address."

"I—I don't know it!" exclaimed Pitt sullenly.

"And yet you received a letter from your sister this morning?" I snapped.

"She didn't give the address—and I'm not going to give it to you!" exclaimed the Serpent, suddenly firing up. "I can't give it to you."

"And why can't you?" I asked quietly.

"Oh, rats!"

"Shall I tell you why you can't?" I persisted.

"This is all nonsense."

"You can't produce Miss Pitt's address, because there is no such person as Miss Pitt!" I declared grimly.

There was a tremendous sensation in the court. Nearly every fellow thought that I had suddenly gone off my head. There was much jeering and much incredulous joking. But I held my ground and called upon Mason as a witness.

There was no pretence of sticking to the rules of a proper court; this trial was conducted in our own special way and, from a legal point of view, was horribly out of order. But that didn't matter a toss. We wanted to get at the truth, and not prolong the trial for the sake of collecting enormous fees.

Mason entered the witness-box.

"Please tell your story to the jury," I said quietly.

Jack obliged, and related exactly what had occurred, going over the incidents concerning Miss Pitt's arrival, her forgetfulness concerning the little parcel, and the incident of the missing bag.

"I went back for it," said Mason. "But when I arrived at the spot where it was supposedly dropped, two men set upon me and forced me into an old shed. I was kept there for over an hour, and that's why I was late in getting back. I came straight to the school because I thought that Miss Pitt might be here."

"A likely story, isn't it?" sneered Fullwood. "Why, it's nothing but a fake, and the jury knows it, too!"

The jury certainly looked doubtful.

"How did you get away from the shed?" I asked.

"Mr. Nelson Lee, our Housemaster, rescued me," replied Mason. "I was roped up, and Mr. Lee set me free. He advised me to say nothing about the affair, but I realised that my silence looked queer. So before this trial commenced I asked him if I might speak, and he gave me permission."

"It's a lie!" shouted Fullwood furiously.

"Silence!" ordered the judge. "Am I to understand, prisoner at the bar—or rather, in the witness-box—that you are willing to have Mr. Lee called as a witness?"

"You can call him when you like," said Mason.

"That's good enough," remarked the foreman of the jury. "We're all satisfied, so you needn't go to those lengths."

Fullwood jumped up.

"We will take it for granted that this story is correct," he said. "What of it? How does it prove Mason's innocence? I maintain that it proves nothing, it merely accounts for the delay in the prisoner's return. He took the bag before the men attacked him. I'm fed-up with the way this case is being conducted, and I now conclude the case for the prosecution. Mason stands guilty before you all. He was caught red-handed, and that ought to be enough."

A murmur ran through the court, and I knew very well that the majority of the fellows were still very doubtful. Reginald Pitt was looking more uneasy than ever, and he was afraid of the truth coming out.

"In conducting my case for the defence," I said, "I find it necessary to justify my statement made some little time ago, to the effect that there is no such person as Miss Pitt. That statement was treated as a joke. I now repeat it, and I defy Reginald Pitt to swear that he met his sister this afternoon."

"I will make no statement at all," declared Pitt.

"Why not?" demanded the judge. "If you met your sister, Pitt, as you have already stated, there is no reason why you shouldn't reply to counsel's challenge. Did you meet your sister this afternoon?"

"Go and eat coke!" said Pitt disrespectfully.

"That answer is contempt of court!" snorted the judge. "Another offence and you'll receive the judicial fist on your beastly nose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The whole thing's a farce," said Pitt. "I've maintained all along that Mason is innocent, and I don't want the case proceeded with."

"You can't always have what you want, my son," I said grimly. "You called the tune, and you've got to pay the piper. If you don't like paying, that's your look-out. Strictly speaking, you oughtn't to say anything just now, because you're not in the witness-box. I call upon Edward Oswald Handforth."

Handforth came forward with an important air.

"About time, too!" he exclaimed. "I ought to have been counsel for the defence, really. You ain't conducting it on the lines I should have adopted at all. Now, what I've got to say is this——"

"A witness must make no statement unless it is in answer to a question," put in the judge. "You must only answer questions, Handforth."

"Well, buck up and ask 'em!" said Handforth tartly.

"I have reason to believe that you were in Bannington yesterday evening?" I said.

"Yes, I was. Church and McClure wouldn't come, the rotters——"

"Never mind Church and McClure," I interrupted. "Did you see Reginald Pitt in Bannington?"

"I did."

"What was he doing?"

"He was coming out of the big costumier's in the High Street, carrying a parcel."

"Did he see you?"

"No, I don't think so," replied Handforth.

"And what did Pitt do after that?"

"He went along to that toilet saloon place, where you can hire wigs for amateur theatricals," replied Handforth. "I didn't think anything of it at the time, and I don't know what the dickens you're driving at now."

"Then I'll tell you," I said grimly. "Miss Pitt was nothing but a fake, she was Reginald Pitt himself, dressed up in girl's clothing and made up to suit the occasion. That's what I contend!"

There was a series of yells, most of them incredulous.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Mason, jumping to his feet.

"I am going to let Pitt answer for himself," I said. "It was a jolly clever impersonation, and the way he disguised his voice was wonderful. For two or three minutes I was deceived, but then I tumbled to it. I didn't say anything because I wanted to find out what Pitt's game was. I now know that he made a deliberate attempt to blacken Jack Mason's character. This startling revelation had taken every-

body by surprise. The majority of the fellows didn't believe it. I proceeded to go over the facts, point by point, showing the weak places and proving my case. I produced grease-paints which I had found in Study E, and finally defied Pitt to invite his "sister" to the school.

"This fact disposes of all the evidence against Mason," I concluded. "It is quite obvious that the bag never contained any money, and Pitt's original scheme was to involve Mason so deeply that he would be disgraced and probably sacked. For some reason best known to himself, Pitt changed at the last moment and attempted to undo the harm he had wrought. For that he is to be commended. Now, Pitt, what have you got to say in answer to this charge?"

Reginald Pitt crossed over the witness-box.

"There's one thing I wish to make clear at the very start," he said, all his old coolness returning. "I thought I was pretty smart, but now I find I'm about ten kinds of a silly fool. Nipper seems to know more about this affair than I do myself. When I started the scheme I overlooked the fact that we have a detective in our midst. That's where I've blundered."

"You admit you are guilty?" demanded the judge.

"Yes."

There was another uproar, but it soon subsided. The crowded Common-room was now seething with excitement. The interest had become doubled since my startling statement had been made. And Pitt admitted it!

"Tell the jury your story," I said grimly.

"I can see that my best plan is to be absolutely frank," declared Pitt. "Yes, I acknowledge that I played a beastly, low-down trick. You may remember that there was a bust-up the other day—I was ragged by the Form. I reckoned that Mason had been the cause of it, although I realise now that it was my own fault entirely—although perhaps Fullwood was the actual culprit. I allowed him to come into Study E with the rest of his mouldy crew—"

"What?" roared Fullwood.

"You heard what I said!" exclaimed Pitt quietly. "But I really take all the blame myself. At the same time, though, I felt jolly bitter against Mason, and decided to get my own back. The idea which came to me was a rotten one, but I carried it out. I wanted to get Mason involved in a theft, and I didn't care what became of him. There's no need for me to go over all the details, because you know most of them. I shoved the lady's bag into the tool-wallet of the bicycle when Mason went back for that little parcel. You see I planned every little detail beforehand. I didn't make such a bad girl, did I?" he added with a grin.

"It was marvellous!" exclaimed Mason admiringly. "You acted amazingly, Pitt,

and you tricked me all along the line! You awful bounder!"

"I'm worse than that," admitted Pitt. "If it had been a joke I should have enjoyed it. But soon after I'd started the game I realised what a contemptible thing it was. It wasn't until I'd actually done the whole trick that I came to the conclusion that it was rascally and rotten."

"Eatin' humble pie, ain't you?" sneered Gulliver.

"A lot of chaps, I dare say, would be afraid to admit they're wrong when they know they're wrong," replied Pitt quietly. "I'm not that sort, and I'm not ashamed to tell the absolute truth. I'm not doing it because I want to escape punishment—I deserve the sack for playing such a low-down game. But I want to remind everybody that I did my utmost to undo the harm at the last minute."

Reginald Pitt's attitude had impressed the court greatly. There was no doubt at all about his sincerity. And a fellow who had the courage to admit his wrong was to be respected. A month or two back Pitt wouldn't have dreamed of talking as he had talked just now. I felt that the words came from his heart, and I looked rather anxiously at the jury and the judge.

Christine stood up.

"We find the prisoner guilty," he said. "Of course, Pitt's the prisoner now—Mason's been acquitted. We find Reginald Pitt guilty of one of the meanest tricks we have ever heard of. But in consideration of his courageous admission of guilt, we strongly recommended him to mercy."

Cecil De Valerie gave a judicial cough.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "It is left for me to pass sentence. Under the circumstances I shall sentence Reginald Pitt to a Form ragging—to take the shape of running the gauntlet in the dormitory after lights-out to-night."

It was generally supposed that Pitt had planned his scheme for the purpose of being revenged on Mason. It did not come out that he had hatched the plot with Simon Grell! Yet that was the actual truth. It had been a double trap. Pitt had met Grell after the latter's talk with Jake Starkey and Pitt had suggested the plan. Mason was to be lured out and placed in such a position that he would be alone on the Banington Road. The presence of Grell and Starkey there, while he was looking for the imaginary bag, had been no accident, but a part of the complete scheme. At the same time Pitt saw no reason why he shouldn't get his own back on Jack.

Pitt took his sentence without uttering a word of complaint, and after it was over vowed he would make amends.

Coming events were to prove the sincerity of his vow.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

OUR POPULAR 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. Erans, 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. Challis plays a splendid innings, but Ponsonby foolishly gets in the way of a hard drive, and is laid out. He is taken to bed, and a lot of the boys turn against Challis. When Ponsonby recovers he asks Challis to be his friend. Basil fags for Challis, and one afternoon as he is carrying the tea-things down the passage someone trips him up.

(Now read on.)

THE FAG SHOWS HIS METTLE.

Poor Basil! As the echoing crash of his fall resounded through passage and stairway, he lay full length amid the debris of broken china and wreckage. Myers's dirty trick had been completely successful. Unsuspectingly the fag had run into the trap laid for him.

Luckily for him, he'd fallen naturally, lightly, or he might have cut his face seriously upon the broken fragments that lay around him.

As it was, the breath was knocked completely out of him, and for some seconds he lay still, while the sneak listened behind the door, opened it, looked out, and then, with a swift stroke of his penknife, severed the string from the door-knob, to which it was tied.

He stood a moment, staring down at Basil, with a malicious smile curving his lips, then, thinking it wiser to hide and plead utter ignorance of the accident, he closed the door.

Not before the prostrate boy had seen him, though.

Something told Basil that he was being watched, and, though his head was swimming, he turned, and saw Myers vanishing behind the closing door.

"Oh!" cried the boy, and, pulling himself together, he staggered to his feet.

Indignation and just anger against his enemy caused him to spring to the door and open it.

There was Myers sitting at table, pretending to be deeply engrossed in his studies.

"Hello!" he said, as the door opened. "What do you want here, kid? You've no right to enter my room. Get out!"

Basil, with cheeks flaming and eyes flashing, stood his ground.

"You know why I'm here, you beast!" he cried, hardly able to speak for anger. "You great, lumbering cad, you!"

Myers's face kindled. He could be plucky enough when it was only a case of bullying a smaller boy. Swinging his chair back, he rose to his feet and advanced towards the door.

"Get out, do you hear?" he cried, waving Basil back. "If you don't, I'll chuck you out!"

"Try it! I don't care! I'm not afraid of a brute like you! I'll fight you, big as you are!"

Myers eyed the indignant boy in astonishment. He could hardly believe his ears.

"You seem in a paddy," he sneered. "What's gone wrong?"

"You know well enough! You tied that string across the passage because you know I'd be coming back with Ponsonby's things. But I'll let him know it wasn't my fault. Perhaps he'll have something to say about it. You won't do it twice!"

Myers's eyebrows met, and his lips set fiercely.

"I don't know what you're fussing about," he hissed. "But you've got to go, do you hear? Now quit!"

Basil, however, held his ground. He didn't mean to budge.

Seeing this, Myers rushed at him, seized him, and tried to throw him out of the room.

His fingers pressed deep into the fag's flesh, hurting him. Exerting all his strength, he hurled the boy backwards. But to his surprise Basil swerved, and instead of going out

(Continued overleaf.)

through the door, came to a stand against the wall.

Then, as Myers punched him in the face, he kicked out with all his might, barking the bully's shins for him.

Myers, uttering a howl of agony, struck him twice, thrice! But, as each blow landed home, so did Basil's heavy boot-soles rattle against his shins, until, with a fierce oath, he let the kid go.

Basil hadn't done with him yet. White to the lips and nerved to desperation, he hurled himself on the cad and bore him backwards, raining in blows with fists and boots as fast as he could manage.

Myers gave ground, flinching, crouching, with arm raised to ward off the fag's punches, recoiling before the onslaught of those dreaded boots.

Nor could Basil be blamed for the kicking, since the bigger boy was nearly twice his size.

"You little beast! Wait! I'll kill you—I'll murder you!" shouted Myers. "Oh, I'll make you pay for this! Ow!—Ooo!—Oh!"

So he retreated round the table, with the little firebrand after him, until the din attracted the attention of Ponsonby below, who came running up, to gaze through the open door of Myers's room upon this amazing scene.

For a moment Ponsonby stood watching, and then, as Myers swung a tremendous punch, which would have knocked Basil senseless had it landed, he sprang into the room, seized the fag, and drew him backwards.

The next moment he stood between them, looking Myers full in the face. Had not the bully been blind with rage, he must have seen the contemptuous curl of Ponsonby's lips, the scornful flash of his eyes.

"Get out of the way, Ponsonby!" Myers shouted. "I'm going to give the young cad a sound thrashing."

"I don't think you will," answered Ponsonby quietly.

"Eh, what do you mean?"

"What I say."

They stood facing each other, while Basil looked breathlessly on, his collar crumpled, his face flushed from his exertions, wondering what the end would be.

Gradually Myers's anger vanished, until with a laugh, he unclenched his fists and turned away with a derisive laugh.

"Oh, well, I don't care!" he sneered. "Let the little beast go! I'll get even with him another time!"

Ponsonby, ignoring the bully, turned to the fag.

"Now, youngster," he said, "perhaps you'll explain what all the trouble's about."

PONSONBY FINDS THE MISSING COIN.

CHOKING with indignation and resentment, Basil told his friend what had happened. As he listened, Ponsonby's face clouded.

Though still far from being himself, he was yet ready to champion the cause of a small boy bullied by a big lout like Myers.

His old friendship for the bully was fast vanishing, until little of it remained. His face was very white when he turned to the cad.

"Is what Hood says true, Myers?" he demanded.

"No," replied Myers. "I know nothing about it. If he tumbled over with the tray and smashed all your things, it was due to his own stupid carelessness, I expect."

"But he says you tied a string across the passage from door to door."

"If he says that he lies," retorted Myers hotly.

Ponsonby went outside, and glanced ruefully at the pieces of broken china and debris that littered the passage. And as he looked he saw the length of cord stretching across the floor.

(To be continued.)

NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

UNDER THE TITLE OF

"THE ANCIENT HOUSE BURGLARY,"

Will deal with the further Adventures of NELSON LEE and NIPPER and their Friends at St. Frank's.

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