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Nipper's terrible predicament.—(See page 11.)

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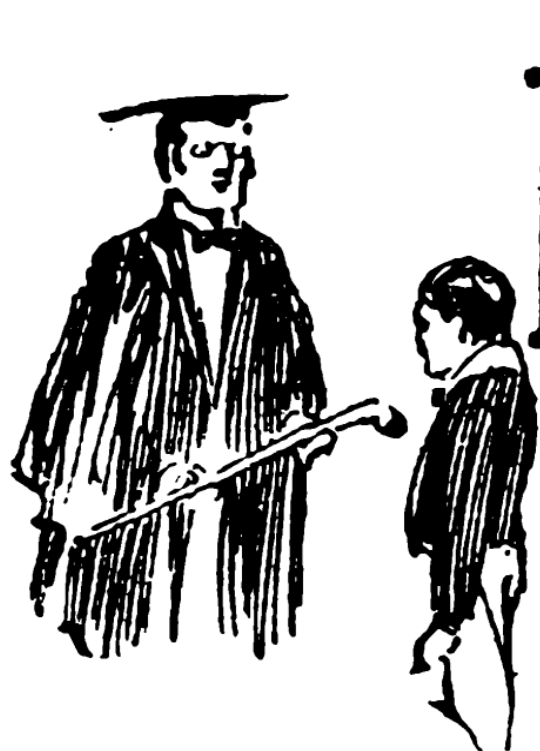
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A BIT OF A SHOCK!

"DULL," said Tommy Watson—"that's what it is—absolutely dull!"

"No bullyin', begad!" observed Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "No frightful rows with Starke or Kenmore. No expeditions after lights-out. No naughty goin's-on at all, dear fellows!"

"We've got into a rut," went on Watson, sipping his tea. "Everything is going smoothly now that Frinton's gone, and now that the mystery of those burglaries has been cleared up. In fact, we're dull."

I grinned.

"Well, you needn't grumble," I said. "This is what we've been wanting for months, isn't it? There's no satisfying some people! We've put down the bullying, and now you're grouching——"

"Rats!" said Watson. "I'm not! I'm only saying that things are rather dull. After our ripping times over that Secret Combine business, when we whopped the bullies, everything seems too smooth and easy."

There was really something in what Tommy said. We were partaking of tea in Study C in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. Things had certainly been going very evenly for a week or two.

Nothing exciting had occurred. Starke and Co., of the Sixth, had been behaving with unusual restraint. They knew, in fact, that they were beaten. Bullying in the Ancient House had been put down—and we, the Remove, had put it down. Our secret organisation, the Combine, had been completely successful in its efforts. But the Secret Combine was dead now; there was no more work for it.

Although we didn't know it then, there were to be far more exciting times for us all—myself in particular—before many days had passed. The new adventures were to be far more dramatic than the last.

"We shall have to go for the River House chaps—that's all," went on Tommy Watson.

"Dash it all, we must have something to do! And Brewster and Co. have been getting rather gay lately, you know. What with sports, and all that, the River House School fellows are beginning to think themselves as good as us. Cheek, I call it!"

"Frightful nerve, in fact," murmured Montie.

"And we might as well jape them," said Watson. "What do you say, Nipper?"

I chuckled.

"I'm game," I replied. "Dr. Hogge's Academy has been going strong lately. Brewster is a fine chap, and we all like him. But there's no reason why we shouldn't work off a jape or two. As you say, Tommy, it'll help to relieve the monotony."

"Exactly!" said Watson. "We'd better hold a meeting of chaps this evening, to decide upon a course of action."

But that meeting was not destined to come off.

For the Remove learned an item of news which caused something like dismay in the Ancient House. I was the first to hear of it, and I was cut up. It happened as I was strolling through the lobby.

Nelson Lee met me just as I was going out. The guv'nor was looking unusually thoughtful. He was the Housemaster of the Ancient House; but Nelson Lee was as much a keen crime investigator as ever.

"Oh, Nipper," he said, stopping, "I want you in my study."

"Anything important, sir?" I asked.

"Yes, my boy."

There was something in his voice which rather alarmed me. He spoke gravely, and walked away before I could question him. I followed close behind until we arrived in his study. There he lit a cigarette, and placed himself back towards the fireplace—force of habit, I suppose.

"Close the door, Nipper," he said quietly. I did so.

"Look here, guv'nor, there's something wrong somewhere," I declared. "Why this

thousness? Why the serious looks? Why the gravity?"

"Well, young 'un, I am afraid I am going to give you a bit of a disappointment," he said. "At least, I hope so."

"You hope so?" I repeated, staring.

"Well, I should not like you to be indifferent, at all events, Nipper," he smiled.

"When you've finished talking in riddles, sir, perhaps you'll tell me what the dickens you mean," I said politely. "What is it that I've got to be disappointed about?"

"The fact is, Nipper, I'm going away," said Nelson Lee smoothly.

I gave a jump.

"You're—you're going away?" I gasped in alarm.

"Yes."

"For how long, sir?"

"I don't quite know," he replied. "It may be a month, or it may be six or seven weeks—but not more. You needn't look so thunderstruck, Nipper. I shall not come to any harm."

"But—but it's rotten, guv'nor!" I burst out. "How the dickens shall we get on here without you? Can't I go with you? And for two months! I suppose that means about six, really?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"It may mean only one, as I said at first," he remarked. "And the Headmaster has arranged that Mr. Crowell will take temporary charge of the Ancient House during my absence. It is not considered necessary to appoint a new Housemaster for such a short period."

"Well, that's a good thing, anyhow," I said. "But can't I come—"

"No, Nipper. The business which takes me away from St. Frank's is of a very secret nature, and I must go quite alone," interrupted Lee. "I have not told you anything until now because my own plans have not been definite."

I was certainly dismayed—and keenly disappointed. As for being indifferent, the idea was absurd. The Ancient House without Nelson Lee would seem another place. It would be almost bare.

"I don't like it at all, sir," I said gloomily. "Still, I know it's no good arguing with you. And where are you going to—London?"

"To begin with—yes."

"And where else?"

"Again I am not quite certain," smiled Nelson Lee. "But I can safely say that within a week from to-day I shall be in that land of sunshine—Italy."

"Italy!" I ejaculated. "Oh, my hat! This is getting worse and worse! What's the idea of going to Italy, sir?"

"I have already told you, Nipper, that I cannot go into any details," said the guv'nor. "I would tell you if I could—but, really, I know very little myself at this present moment. I can only say that the case upon which I am embarking is one of international importance. I have been requested by a Minister of His Majesty's Government to undertake this work—and, well, I could

hardly refuse. But be careful to mention nothing of this to a soul. Not even to your own chums, Nipper."

"You can trust me, sir," I said. "So you're off to Italy on a really important detective case? I envy you, guv'nor! Couldn't you possibly manage to find room for me somewhere?"

Nelson Lee smiled, and patted me on the shoulder.

"Much as I should like you to come, my boy, I am afraid it is quite impossible," he said kindly. "I did not think you would be quite so cut up. But the time will soon pass. I shall be back before the summer holidays commence—you may absolutely rely upon that; and then we will have a fine time together, eh?"

"It's all very well to say that the time will soon pass, sir," I growled. "It'll drag on awfully. And when are you going—next week?"

"No, my boy—this evening."

"And you didn't tell me until now!" I said reproachfully. "Oh, guv'nor, you might have given me a little warning!"

"I thought it was better that you should not know until the last moment," said Lee. "I leave by the evening train for London. I shall stay at Gray's Inn Road for the night, interview several highly important people in the morning, and take my seat in the boat train in the afternoon."

It was the unexpectedness of the thing which rather bowled me over, which gave me a bit of a shock. If I had known a week beforehand, it would have been different. But I should only have worried all the time, and perhaps the guv'nor's idea was the best.

We talked together for another half-hour—mainly about personal matters. I knew no more about Nelson Lee's projected trip than I had known at the commencement. And I had a sudden idea as I was about to leave the study.

"Can I come with you as far as Bannington, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Why, certainly."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I should like to see you into the London express. And may I tell the other fellows that you're going?"

"There is really no reason why you should not," smiled Lee. "The boys will know within an hour or two, in any case. I must be getting ready now, Nipper, so you had better trot along."

I hurried out, trying to push aside the feeling of disappointment which had come to me by thinking of the new idea. In the lobby I found Sir Montie and Tommy chatting with Handforth and Co., Pitt, De Valerie, and a few others.

"We've been looking for you everywhere, you ass," said Watson. "Where the dickens did you slide off to?"

"I've been with Mr. Lee," I replied. "Look here—"

"We've got to hold that meeting about a jape on the River House," went on Watson. "And what's the matter with your face? What are you looking so blessed glum about? Been having a lecture?"

"No," I replied quietly. "I've had some bad news."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Tommy. "I didn't know—"

"Bad news for all of us," I went on. "To be exact, Mr. Lee is leaving St. Frank's this evening, and he might be away for the rest of the term."

All the fellows stared at me.

"Gammon!" said Handforth firmly.

"Of course it is!" ejaculated Pitt. "None of your larks, Nipper!"

"Dear old boys, I believe Nipper is serious," said Tregellis-West gravely. "Don't you see that look in his eye? Begad! It's really shockin' news if Mr. Lee is goin' away for the rest of the term."

"I don't believe it," said Handforth flatly. "Where the dickens would he go to, anyhow? And what about the House? Who's going to look after us?"

"Mr. Crowell," I replied. "Don't be an ass, Handy. I'm really serious. My guv'nor's going away by the evening train. He didn't tell me before because he thought I might be cut up."

There was a buzz of talk in the lobby. Other fellows came in, and the news spread through the Ancient House like wildfire. Seniors and juniors alike—they were all dismayed.

If Mr. Stockdale, of the College House, had been going away for a period, his boys would not have wept. It is quite possible, in fact, that they would have secretly rejoiced. Mr. Stockdale was a decent old sort, but the College House fellows wouldn't miss him much for a month.

With Nelson Lee it was quite different.

Half the fellows in the Ancient House almost loved him. He was totally different from all ordinary Housemasters. He was a friend—a regular chum. And to lose him, even for a short time, was something of a disaster.

Of course, fellows like Fullwood and Co. were openly jubilant, because Nelson Lee was stern with regard to smoking and other schoolboy crimes. But the majority of the juniors bemoaned.

"We haven't got much time," I said to the crowd in the lobby. "But we may be able to give Mr. Lee a decent send-off yet. I'm going down with him to the station—"

"We'll all go!" roared Handforth.

"Yes, rather!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Mr. Lee!"

"Hold on!" I shouted. "My idea is for you fellows to be down at the station in advance. You'll line up on the platform, and give the guv'nor some rousing cheers when he appears. It'll be a nice little send-off for him—and it'll show him that we don't want him to go."

"Good!" said Reginald Pitt. "That's the very idea. And you can leave it to me to lead all the cheering—"

"Rot!" roared Handforth. "I'm going to

do that! I'll lead a cheer now, if you like! Let it go, you chaps. Hip--hip--"

"Hurrah!" bellowed the crowd.

Another cheer came from the Triangle—a shrill cheer from the fags. Ten minutes later the Remove fellows had gone, and I think Nelson Lee was rather surprised when he found that he was only accorded a send-off by the fags. The seniors, of course, were too dignified to indulge in cheering.

But a good many seniors were in the Triangle when the guv'nor and I walked out. There was much raising of caps, and Nelson Lee was rather relieved when he and I found ourselves striding down the lane towards the village.

"I am rather sorry to leave you, Nipper," he smiled. "But I console myself by the thought that I shall soon be back with you again. Mind that you behave yourself while I am away."

"I shall be a regular model, sir," I said cheerfully.

Even the village seemed to know that Nelson Lee was leaving, for a good many trades people were at their doors, and they were all unusually polite. But the real surprise came when we arrived at the station.

The platform was simply crowded with juniors, and when Nelson Lee passed out of the booking office he was given a terrific reception. The cheers which rang out were absolutely deafening.

And when the train came in the fellows all tried to crowd round in order to shake hands with the guv'nor—to bid him good-bye, and to urge that he would soon return.

At last we were off, and the guv'nor was rather ruffled as he settled back in his seat. But he did not mind that. There was a warm light in his eyes as he remembered those rousing cheers.

"Yes, Nipper, I must certainly get back as soon as possible," he said quietly.

Arrived in Bannington, we didn't have long to wait. The London express roared in, and Lee took his seat in a first-class compartment. I think my eyes were rather moist as I shook hands.

"Good-bye, guv'nor," I said huskily. "Two months is a long while, you know, and I hope to goodness that you'll get back safe and sound."

"Good-bye, Nipper," said Nelson Lee softly—"good-bye, my boy!"

Just that, and then the train began to move. I waved for a few moments, and then the guv'nor had gone. If I'd only known what was destined to happen before I saw him again, I don't know what I should have done.

I felt like a lost sheep on the platform; I felt a lump in my throat as I waited for the slow old "local" to take me back to Bellton. Perhaps it was silly of me, and perhaps it wasn't. The guv'nor was only going away for a short time, anyhow. But I should miss him tremendously.

I was to realise this more fully later on!

CHAPTER II.

A WAY OF REVENGE.

WALTER STARKE, of the Sixth, was looking thoughtful.

He had been rather thoughtful for a day or two, in fact. Several fellows had noticed it, and had wondered.

Nelson Lee had been gone for just a week. I had heard from him only that morning; he had managed to scribble me a letter from a town in the south of France. I did not even know where he was at the moment—and I don't suppose I would know until he came back.

All sorts of fellows asked me questions regarding the gov'nor's movements, but I was unable to answer them. I could only say that I was in ignorance of Nelson Lee's address.

And Starke knew this. He knew that the gov'nor was away from me, and that I had no means of communicating with him. Kenmore, Starke's study-mate, had noticed a difference, and he remarked upon it that evening at tea-time.

"What's wrong with you, Starke?" asked Kenmore, after Starke had been silent for fully two minutes. "What's the matter?"

"Eh?" said Starke, starting. "Oh, nothing!"

"Yes, there is," went on Kenmore. "You've been looking jolly thoughtful over something for several days, and this evening you're more buried in yourself than ever. Financial difficulties?"

"No!"

"Been having trouble with a bookie?"

"No, you idiot!"

"Bad news from home?"

"Of course not!" said Starke. "As a matter of fact, since you're so curious, I might as well tell you that I've been thinking about Nipper."

"About—about Nipper?" demanded Kenmore, staring.

"Exactly."

"But what the deuce for?" asked the other senior. "Why do you want to bother your head about Nipper? I should think you're pretty sick of the young rotter after that Secret Combine business. The whole thing's dead now, I know, but it's an open secret that Nipper was in full charge."

Walter Starke nodded.

"That's why I was thinking about him," he said. "I haven't forgotten that we suffered defeat at his hands. Oh, you can say what you like—I know; but it's an absolute fact we, the prefects, were beaten at our own game by a party of juniors. I haven't forgotten it, Kenmore, and I'm not likely to forget it. As soon as the chance comes along for me to get even—well, I'm going to lose no time."

"If you take my advice, you'll let the whole thing drop," said Kenmore. "There's no sense in opening old sores—and it doesn't pay to be vindictive. If we start the game again, we shall only revive that Combine——"

"I don't mean to do anything of that sort," interrupted Starke. "As you know,

our beloved Housemaster, Mr. Nelson Lee, has gone away—abroad—and I hope he'll catch malaria or something, and never come back!"

Kenmore grinned.

"I'm with you there, old man," he said. "Lee was all right in the main, but too jolly noseey. He wouldn't let a fellow smoke or play cards in his own study; we were always a bit nervous when he was here. But we can do pretty well as we like with old Crowell."

"With Lee here, Nipper had somebody to run to," continued Starke, helping himself to some jam. "Those two are like father and son, in a way, and Nipper feels rather lost without his gov'nor. What's going to happen if Nipper does something which books him for a public flogging? Why, he'll get it—Lee won't be here to influence the Head."

"That's all rot," said Kenmore. "Nipper isn't that sort of kid; he'll never do anything to get himself flogged——"

"Perhaps not," interrupted Starke calmly; "but there are ways and means, my dear chap. I'd give a fiver to see Nipper flogged before the whole school. Now that Lee isn't here, it ought to be easy for us to work up some scheme—something to discredit him. He's alone, don't forget; he's got nobody to run to, nobody to back him up. And if he only received a birching from the Head he'd be finished in the Remove—they'd chuck him out of the captaincy, and he'd have no more influence."

"Well, I agree with that," said Kenmore, "but I don't see how you're going to work it."

"Neither do I," observed Starke smoothly. "That's why I've been so thoughtful—I've been trying to get hold of a scheme. Leave it to me, and I shall think of something within a day or two."

And the subject was dropped for the time being. Kenmore was inclined to believe that Starke would soon abandon the whole thing. But the bully of the Sixth was determined. And the very next day he learned something which set his cunning wits working.

Teddy Long of the Remove was really responsible.

I had caught the little worm cavedropping, and Master Long had felt the weight of my fist. He had also been bumped by some other juniors, and Long, in consequence, was feeling somewhat sore.

The sneak of the Remove knew better than to take his woes to the prefects, or to complain. But he had no compunction whatever in turning traitor to the Remove if he had been upset. As a rule he was careful, for the punishment for sneaking was severe; but when he thought he was safe, Long would sneak for the mere sake of sneaking.

He happened to meet Starke in the dormitory passage after lessons. They were quite alone, and Teddy Long's little eyes glittered.

"I—I say, Starke," he began.

"Can't stop now, Long——"

"But I've got something to tell you—some—"

thing important," said Long eagerly. "It's about Nipper."

Starke came to a halt.

"About Nipper?" he repeated. "Well, what of him?"

"Of course, I don't mind giving you this tip, Starke, because I know you'll take it in the right spirit," said Teddy Long. "I don't agree with such games, and I think it's only right that—that you should know. I've got rather high ideals, and it's time somebody protested——"

"Cut that stuff out, you little idiot," snapped Starke. "What have you got to tell me about Nipper? If it's nothing important, I'll box your grubby little ears for you. Out with it!"

"Oh, I say, Starke," protested Long. "I—I was only going to say that I don't hold with breaking bounds after lights-out. It's not the thing, you know. And when the Form skipper starts those games, something ought to be done!"

Starke's eyes gleamed.

"Has Nipper been breaking bounds?" he asked sharply.

"Nunno!" stammered Long. "But—but he's going to break bounds to-night—at eleven o'clock, I think. Of course, I'm not supposed to know, and you're not supposed to hear anything. This is on the strict q. t., don't forget. Just between ourselves, old chap."

"Don't 'old chap' me, you little rotter," said Starke sourly. "How do you know that Nipper is planning to break bounds to-night?"

"Oh, I just heard it, you know," said Long truthfully.

"Who else is going?"

"Nobody—Nipper's doing the trick himself."

"What trick?"

"Why, the trick against the River House, of course," said Long impatiently. "You seem jolly dense—I mean, you—you—They're getting up a jape against Brewster and Co.," he went on. "Nipper's the chap for the job, and he's going to steal out to-night after lights-out. Rotten, I call it. He ought to be stopped, Starke. It's disgraceful, you know."

"I didn't know that you were a saint, Long," said the prefect drily. "Well, you can cut along; this information of yours isn't positive enough for me to take any action——"

"But it's true, Starke," protested Long. "I—I heard it all! They didn't know that I'd listened—I—I mean——"

"Yes, I know exactly what you mean," interrupted Starke. "You overheard all this—you were spying. And now you've come to me pretending to be shocked. If you don't cut off at once I'll kick you down the passage!"

"Oh, really, Starke?" said the Removite indignantly. "I—I thought this information would be useful to you. Dash it all, it's worth something, ain't it? I—I was going to ask you to advance me five bob, you know!"

"Oh, were you?" said Starke grimly.

"Well, all right, I'll give you an advance along the passage—with the toe of my boot!"

"He, he, he!" giggled Long nervously. "That's rich, you know! You—you always were good at jokes, Starke."

Starke produced a half-crown from his pocket.

"Look here, I'll lend you this if you like," he said, after a quick glance round. "But you've got to keep your mouth shut—understand? Don't tell anybody you've told me about Nipper's little game. And if it's all a yarn, I'll tan you until you can't sit down for a week!"

And Starke went on his way, highly satisfied.

"We may get our chance to-night Kenmore," he said, as he entered his own study.

And he related what Teddy Long had told him.

"There's no value in that," said Kenmore. "The young spy was collared by Nipper and whopped. That's why he sneaked to you. Nipper won't carry out that plan at all now."

"Yes, he will," said Starke. "He doesn't know how much Long heard, and Nipper isn't the kind of fellow to alter a plan, once he's made one. And we shall be able to get Master Nipper booked for that flogging."

"How?" asked Kenmore curiously.

Starke sank into a chair and lit a cigarette.

"Leave it to me," he said. "I'm going to think the whole thing over now. Nipper is going out alone—at eleven o'clock to-night—and if we can't manage to get him into hot water—well, it'll be a pity."

Starke was not long in thinking out the details of his scheme. Before tea was ready he jumped up and paced the study. After that he sat down again, banged the table with his flat, and chuckled.

"Got it!" he exclaimed briskly.

"Kh?" said Kenmore. "Got what?"

"The idea—the very identical scheme," said Starke. "To-morrow, old man, we shall be gratified by the sight of Nipper being publicly flogged in Big Hall by the Head."

"Shall we?" asked Kenmore doubtfully.

"If that's your opinion, it isn't mine. Nipper isn't an easy Lord to trap, you know. He'll slip out of the noose somehow. Take my advice and drop the whole——"

"Oh, don't be an idiot!" snapped Starke. "Nipper hasn't got Lee behind him now—as I told you before. You wait until you've heard the wheeze. I've thought it all out, and if you're willing to help it can't go wrong."

"I'm not sure that I am willing to help," said Kenmore. "I don't feel inclined to get myself mixed up in some silly business that might go wrong. You're always so jolly confident, Starke—and then you get let down. Why don't you take my advice, and let sleeping dogs lie. We've finished with Nipper now, so let it be a complete finish."

Starke snorted.

"If I expected to get much help from

you, I should be disappointed," he said sourly. "Nipper hasn't been punished for that Secret Combine affair he organised, and I don't see why he should be let off. After lights-out to-night he has planned to break bounds—alone. I don't exactly know what the game is, but it's something to do with those River House kids. That doesn't concern us, anyhow. Nipper will never get to the River House, because my little scheme will prevent him."

"I suppose you're going to surprise him, and haul him up before the Head?" asked Kenmore. "Report him for breaking bounds? He won't be flogged for that—he'll simply be lectured and let off with a caution."

Starke laughed.

"I'm not quite such an idiot as that," he said easily. "My plan is rather more elaborate, Kenny. But, while being elaborate, it's quite simple. That sounds contradictory, but you'll soon understand. To begin with, I'm going to pick a quarrel with Nipper directly after tea."

"You're going to do what?" asked Kenmore deliberately.

"Pick a quarrel with Nipper," said Starke smoothly. "I shall insult him and get him into a terrific temper."

"But what the deuce for?"

"So that the whole school will know that we've had a bust-up, and that we're on very bad terms," replied the bully of the Sixth. "When Nipper breaks bounds I shall be waiting out in the lane. You will be in the Triangle, concealed, and you won't do anything until the right moment arrives."

"I sha'n't be there at all," declared Kenmore.

"Yes, you will—unless you choose to behave nastily," said Starke. "Back me up in this, Kenny, and it'll be all serene."

"But I don't see the idea——"

"And you're not likely to if you keep interrupting," said Starke. "Just listen to my plan. I shall accost Nipper outside the gates. He'll be a bit scared, I expect—or startled, anyway. I shall strike him, and it's a ten-to-one chance that he'll strike back. He won't stand being knocked about by me, and he'll hit out."

"Hard!" said Kenmore. "If that's your idea, old man, it's a rotten one. I don't want to offend you, but it's my opinion that Nipper could lick you. And that would be a fine finish, wouldn't it?"

"Nipper couldn't lick me if I had only one hand," said Starke contemptuously. "But he won't get a chance. When he gets the first punch in, I shall stagger backwards and fall. As I do so I shall yell—and then lie still. In short, I shall pretend to be stunned."

"And when do I come in?"

"Then—at that identical moment," replied Starke. "You'll hear me yell, and you'll hurry up. You'll arrive just in time to get hold of Nipper, and to accuse him of violently striking a prefect. I shall recover, and we'll haul Nipper indoors and take him straight to the Head. See?"

"Yes, I see," said Kenmore slowly.

"Simple, isn't it?"

"It sounds simple, but there might be a hitch."

"Impossible," declared Starke. "It's bound to work out as I've outlined. And we shall have a nice little charge against the cad. Breaking bounds at night and knocking a prefect down. Why, the very least the Head can do is to give the little rotter a public flogging—it's inevitable."

"Perhaps so," remarked Kenmore. "But what shall we say to account for our being out of doors? Have you thought of that?"

"Yes. There's nothing simpler," said Starke easily. "We shall say that we heard Nipper leaving the House, and that we followed him. But that part will be as easy as A B C. Nipper won't have any excuse at all."

"But why the thunder do you want to go to the trouble of having a squabble with the young sweep this evening?" asked Kenmore. "Why not drop that part out altogether? Collaring him after lights-out will be enough."

"You don't seem to grasp the idea," interrupted Starke. "That quarrel with me will weigh heavily against Nipper, because I shall tell the Head that his attack was vindictive and violent. And the Head will easily believe that when he knows that we had a row earlier. Don't you see?"

"I suppose I do," said Kenmore, sitting down. "Mind you, I don't altogether agree with it, but I'll give you a hand if you want me to. The game doesn't seem to be worth the candle, to my mind. Now let's have some tea."

And the two Sixth-Formers commenced their meal, and Starke went into fuller details of his little plot.

Kenmore was not exactly keen, as he had said, but Starke was quite enthusiastic. He was positively sure that his plan would work out satisfactorily.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST MOVE.

"YOU'RE not coming, then?" asked Watson, with his hand on the door knob.

"No," I replied.

"Stop here, then!" said Watson cheerfully. "Come on, Montie."

And Watson and Tregellis-West departed from Study C and made their way to the gymnasium. They wanted me to go with them, but I was intent upon writing a few private letters, and was rather pleased at the prospect of being alone.

Tea was over, and the sunlight of the May evening was still streaming in at the window. Strictly speaking, I ought to have been at cricket practice; but I had been putting off those letters so long that I couldn't put them off another day.

But, as it happened, I was not to have a quiet time, as I had anticipated. For ten minutes after Montie and Tommy had

departed the door burst open and somebody entered.

"Busy!" I said shortly. "Clear!"

"I'll clear when it suits me," said the visitor calmly.

I looked up and found Starke of the Sixth standing in the doorway. A visit from Starke was unusual, and I laid my pen down in surprise. There was a rather curious expression upon Starke's face.

"Well?" I said, without warmth.

"I just want a word with you, youngster," said Starke patronisingly. "You're the captain of the Remove, I believe? Is that right?"

"I don't answer unnecessary questions," I replied, taking up my pen again. "And you'll greatly oblige me by calling some other time, Starke. I'm busy just now. You might close the door after you."

Starke scowled.

"Cheeky young sweep!" he exclaimed. "You're the captain of the Remove, and I just want to warn you that I don't mean to stand any nonsense. You've been getting too big for your boots lately—especially since Mr. Lee went away. And I don't approve of swank in anybody."

"According to that, you don't approve of yourself," I remarked calmly.

"You young boulder!" shouted Starke, with sudden violence. "If you think I'm going to stand cheek like that, you're mistaken——"

"Well, you came here asking for trouble," I interrupted. "I didn't want you to come. The best thing you can do is to clear out. You may be a prefect, Starke, but you needn't think that you're privileged to brow-beat a fellow just because he's a junior. That's all. Good-evening!"

Starke nearly choked.

"Take—take three hundred lines!" he roared.

"I won't take anything of the sort," I replied quietly. "You can't bully me, Starke, and if you care to report me to Mr. Crowell—well, you can report. I sha'n't do any lines, anyhow."

Starke glared at me ferociously. I couldn't quite understand it. I couldn't understand why he was picking a quarrel with me, for it amounted to nothing else. He had flung into a temper with scarcely any provocation.

"If you won't do any lines I'll cane you till you can't stand!" bellowed the prefect. "You're an impudent, good-for-nothing young upstart!"

"Are you trying to have a row with me?" I asked smoothly. "Because, if so, it won't work, Starke. I'm not going to get into a temper—and it takes two to make a quarrel, remember."

Starke was rather taken aback by my calmness.

"No, I'm not trying to have a row," he said savagely. "But I'm quite ready to have one if you give me sufficient cause. The fact of the matter is, since that beastly master of yours went away you've been riding the high horse——"

"Since who went away?" I asked, starting up.

"Since that low-down detective cleared out," said Starke deliberately. "A jolly good thing, too! St. Frank's is only fit for decent men—not boosted-up outsiders who don't know the alphabet—and who aren't fit for anything better than regulating the traffic in Whitechapel!"

All my resolves to remain calm vanished. I simply boiled with fury. For Starke to insult the dear old gov'nor in such a way was outrageous; he only dared to do it because Nelson Lee was absent from St. Frank's.

"You—you insulting brute!" I shouted hotly.

Starke's eyes gleamed.

"And, what's more," he went on, "if Lee comes back he'll find a different spirit in the school; there's no room here for beastly blackmailing detectives! A chap like Lee ought to be in gaol——"

"If you say another word, you cur, I'll knock you down!" I shouted furiously. "One more word, mind!"

I was panting with anger, and my fists were clenched. Starke was much larger than me, but he took a step backwards with haste. At the same time I could see that he was enjoying the scene; his eyes seemed to glitter with triumph.

"If you touch me, you little fool, I'll haul you to the Housemaster," he exclaimed deliberately.

"You can do what you like—I don't care!" I roared. "But if you think I'm going to stand here and listen to a hound of your sort insulting the finest gentleman in the world—well, you've made a little mistake! Why, you're not fit to lick the gov'nor's boots!"

"By George!" snarled Starke, lunging forward.

He didn't hit me, for I dodged quickly. I noticed at the same time that the door stood wide open, and that a crowd of juniors were looking on—Pitt, Grey, Owen major, De Valerie, and some others. They were all looking rather scared, too. But I was not scared in the least.

"I'll give you just ten seconds to get out of this study, Starke," I said grimly. "If you don't shift within that time, I'll kick you out! Understand? I'm not in a mood for any more of your blackguardism!"

"I say, go easy, old man!" murmured Pitt from the doorway.

"Yes, draw it mild!" said Grey seriously.

"Starke's a prefect, remember!" hissed somebody else.

"I don't care if Starke's the Headmaster himself!" I snapped. "Didn't you hear what he said about Mr. Lee just now?"

"No!" said Reginald Pitt.

"Then I might as well tell you!" exclaimed Starke, turning round. "I said that Lee is only fit to regulate traffic in Whitechapel, and that he's a beastly blackmailing outsider—— Yaroooooh!"

My fist had struck Starke squarely on the chin, and he staggered back, howling. The juniors in the doorway looked on with

delight and approval. Starke's words had turned them dead against him in a moment.

"Good for you, Nipper!"

"Give him another!"

"Go it, old man!"

"The rotter ought to be horsewhipped for saying that!"

"Hear, hear!"

Starke looked round venomously.

"I call upon everybody here to act as witnesses!" he snarled. "You all saw Nipper strike me—a prefect——"

"Wrong!" interrupted Pitt. "We all saw Nipper strike the biggest blackguard in St. Frank's!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Take two hundred lines, Pitt!" roared Starke.

"Rats!" said Pitt.

"Why, you—you——"

"Are you going?" I demanded fiercely. "One more word, Starke, and I'll knock you down—and that's not merely a threat. If you like to report me, you can—I don't care a hang! I fancy I can produce plenty of witnesses to prove that I was sufficiently provoked!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Rather!"

"I wouldn't demean myself by stopping another minute in this tainted atmosphere," said Starke contemptuously. "I suppose your manners and language, Nipper, are the result of being in constant contact with a low, ruffianly brute like your beloved Nelson Lee!"

"You cad!" I shouted furiously.

But Starke, having delivered himself, made a hurried exit. He charged through the juniors in the doorway and strode up the passage. I rushed after him, almost mad with righteous anger.

"I'll half smash him for that!" I roared.

But many hands held me back.

"Go easy, old man!" said Pitt quickly.

"You can't fight Starke in the passage—there'd be a fearful bust-up——"

"I don't care!" I shouted. "Didn't you hear what he said about the gov'nor? I'm going to make him eat those words—I'm going to drive them down his beastly throat! Lemme go, you idiots!"

"No; not until you've calmed down," said Grey.

I struggled fiercely.

"Begad! What's all this shockin' disturbance, dear fellows?" inquired Tregellis-West, hurrying along the passage with Watson. "Why, you seem to be in a frightful temper, Nipper!"

"He's blue in the face!" said Watson.

"I'm going to give Starke the hiding of his life." I shouted, struggling again. "You—you rotters! Why can't you yet me go?"

"Because we don't want you to get into trouble, old chap—that's why," said Reginald Pitt calmly. "Starke's a prefect, and if this affair came to the Head's ears, Starke would lie like a trooper—he'd deny having said any insulting words against Mr. Lee——"

"But you all heard him!" I yelled.

"Exactly. But Starke would say that we'd made up a yarn between ourselves—you know what he is," said Pitt. "Starke's a prefect, and the Head would be bound to take his word against ours. My dear old son, there's no sense in making matters worse. Don't take any notice of the beast—we don't."

I took a deep breath, and clenched my fists.

"You may be right, Pitt, but Starke's had a jolly narrow escape!" I said. "If you hadn't stopped me I should have slaughtered him—and that's not boasting, either. I'm quite capable of beating a brute of Starke's calibre!"

"You could lick him with one hand," said Owen major, nodding. "But licking a prefect isn't a wise proceeding. He said some rotten things, I know; but it's better to be careful. Let it drop."

"I'm not going to promise anything," I said grimly. "If Starke runs into me this evening I sha'n't be particular about what I do! But I expect the cad will avoid a meeting."

I re-entered Study C and the crowd melted. To continue my letters was out of the question at the moment. I was too agitated and furious. Tommy and Sir Montie listened with growing indignation as I related what had occurred.

"Dear old boy, it's a frightful pity we weren't out in the open country somewhere," said Tregellis-West. "You could have faced Starke equally then—as man to man, begad! Here you're junior and prefect—an' that makes a difference. It's a shockin' pity—it is, really!"

"I shouldn't worry my head about it," said Watson bluntly. "What's the good? We all know what a beast Starke is, so let's forget the affair. I suppose he's smarting over that Secret Combine business. Cads of his sort generally resort to insults, and——"

Watson suddenly paused, and his eyes gleamed.

"By Jupiter!" he went on. "I've got an idea!"

"What is it, dear old boy?" asked Montie.

"Well, why shouldn't we revive that Combine—just for one occasion?" asked Watson eagerly. "Why shouldn't we collar Starke, and give him the biggest thrashing of his life?"

I shook my head.

"It can't be done," I said irritably.

"Why not?"

"Because the Secret Combine's dead, and we don't want to revive it all again now," I replied. "The bullies have been beaten—this outburst of Starke's was just an isolated case—and it wasn't bullying, either. Starke knows better than to bully me. Besides, the punishment chamber, and all the rest of it, is dismantled. It's not worth the trouble."

"Oh, all right," said Watson. "I only suggested it, that's all. I thought perhaps it would save you from getting into trouble. You might go for Starke in the Triangle."

"You needn't be afraid of that," I inter-

rupted. "I'm going to let the thing drop. It's more dignified."

"Begad! That's the very idea, old boy!" observed Tregellis-West, polishing his pince-nez. "When a frightful bounder like Starke gets gassin', he generally allows himself to say things in order to get a fellow's rag out. It means nothin'. It's only a lot of disgustin' talk, you know. An' it really isn't worth demeanin' one's self to notice such——"

"Very possibly, Montie; but I'm not a saint," I cut in. "Besides, the fellows wouldn't understand it. If I'd allowed Starke to say all those things without retaliating, I should have been set down as a funk."

Tregellis-West sighed.

"I suppose you're right, dear fellow," he observed. "It's a frightfully hard world to live in—it is, really. A fellow never knows how to act for the best, begad! If he doesn't put his foot in one hole, he generally puts it into another. Life consists of gettin' out of one difficulty just in time to tumble into another. It seems wrong, but there it is."

"Well, when you've finished moralising I'll try to continue this letter," I said, now fully calmed down. "If you fellows are going to stay here, please be quiet. I can't think properly if you're talking."

"We'd better clear," said Watson.

They took their departure, and I could tell by their expressions that they were relieved. They were not anxious for me to get into a row because of Starke's blackguardly behaviour.

And I had fully decided to let the matter rest—except, of course, that I should ignore Starke completely in the immediate future. I wouldn't even recognise him if he addressed me in the presence of a master.

Meanwhile, Walter Starke had returned to his own study in the Sixth-Form passage. He was grinning cheerfully as he entered, and Kenmore looked at him curiously.

Starke flung himself into a chair.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I've just had the very deuce of a bust-up with Nipper, and the last thing he said was that he'd smash me. You ought to have been there, Kenmore."

"I'm glad I wasn't," said the other prefect shortly.

He listened with casual interest while Starke described what had happened.

"You seem to have got the young beggar into a temper, anyway," he remarked at length.

"A temper!" echoed Starke. "Why, he was almost foaming at the mouth! I couldn't shift him until I said all that about Lee. But that did the trick! And now he's sworn to have my blood."

"And if you're not jolly careful, he'll have a good flow from your nose," said Kenmore. "Nipper's left is a perfect terror, I understand; and his right is about twice as bad. But that's your business. And I don't think

it was very wise to say all those things about Lee in front of the other kids."

"If it comes out, I shall deny it," said Starke calmly. "You can trust me to bluff the thing through all right. All I've got to do now is to keep out of Nipper's way until bed-time; I mustn't even meet him. So, when we face one another out in the lane after lights-out, it will be the first meeting since this evening. Everybody will be ready to believe that Nipper flew at me. I shall simply aggravate him again, let him get one punch in, and then collapse. You'll arrive on the scene in time to witness the dreadful assault."

And Starke chuckled to himself.

"You know your own business best, I suppose?" said Kenmore. "But it doesn't seem to be worth all this infernal trouble. I didn't think you were such a vindictive beggar, Starke."

"Oh, rot!" said Starke. "Nipper's going to be flogged—that's all I'm after. I'd like to see the young cad sacked, but I don't think that could be managed. We'll see how this affair goes, anyhow."

And the subject was dropped for the time being.

Starke took very good care to avoid coming into contact with me during the evening; I didn't see a sign of him. And towards bed-time I put him out of my mind, because I was busily discussing a projected jape upon the juniors of Dr. Hogge's Academy—the River House School. Brewster and Co. had organised a kind of rivalry between their school and St. Frank's, and we thought it was about time that we showed them their proper place—only in a friendly way, of course.

It isn't necessary for me to go into any details regarding this particular jape. And, as events turned out, it came to nothing. But it was an affair which could only be accomplished single-handed. And, as Remove skipper, I was chosen to perform the work.

After lights-out I settled myself down to sleep, making up my mind to awaken at fifteen minutes to eleven. I should probably open my eyes on the very stroke of the clock. My training with Nelson Lee had allowed me to acquire this convenient habit.

And, while I was sleeping, Starke and Kenmore were preparing to continue their despicable plan. Starke was ready first. By a quarter to eleven he was fully dressed, and Kenmore was just pulling his boots on.

"Mad idea, I call it!" he growled.

"You promised to help me, and you might as well do it cheerfully," said Starke. "I'm going out now—down into the lane. You'd better wait at the window of our study. As soon as you see Nipper creep out, follow him. Don't be in a hurry, but time yourself to arrive at the spot after Nipper and I have had a minute together. There can't be any hitch."

Starke crept downstairs, and he paid a brief visit to the cloakroom in order to get his cap. He struck a match so that he could see, and

his gaze rested upon a curiously knobbed walking-stick which stood in the corner.

"Why, that's Nipper's stick," muttered Starke, with a sudden thought in his mind. "I'll take it with me—and then I can swear that the little beast knocked me down with it. It'll make the case blacker."

Starke chuckled as he took possession of the stick. It was only an afterthought, but that walking-stick was to figure very largely in the events of the immediate future.

Out in the lane all was quiet. The night was fairly mild, but very dark. And Starke took up his position against the hedge, and waited.

But the real drama was to be very different from the one which had been planned!

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST yawned. "Good luck, dear fellow," he murmured. "I hope you won't get into any trouble, you know. Do you think you can manage the job all right?"

I grinned.

"I don't think—I know," I replied. "Those River House chaps will be snugly asleep, and they won't know anything until the morning. Then they'll find it necessary to sing rather small!"

Sir Montie and I were talking in whispers in the Remove dormitory. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and I was feeling quite good-tempered. The short sleep had driven away the last of the irritability which had been brought on by the quarrel with Starke.

"It'll be rather risky, gettin' into the River House grounds," breathed Montie. "If you don't feel up to it, dear fellow, I don't mind goin' instead of you. Just say the word."

"Your intentions may be good, old son, but you can leave this little business to your uncle," I said softly. "Pop off to sleep, and don't worry. I'll be getting along now. Good-bye!"

"Good luck, Nipper, dear fellow!"

I stole from the dormitory. Watson and all the rest of the juniors were fast asleep; Montie had been the only one to awaken. I descended the stairs noiselessly, and made my way to Study C.

Here I donned my cap, and slipped a little electric torch into my pocket. Everything was quiet, and when I pushed up the window-sash the Triangle looked black and deserted.

I reckoned to be away about an hour, so I softly closed the window, and strolled across to the main wall—where it was low. I did not hurry myself, for I was quite certain that my movements were unobserved.

Out in the lane I set off briskly for the village—the River House School being situated in that direction. I seemed to have the whole road and neighbourhood to myself. Everything was astonishingly still.

By this time my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, and I could see the

hedges and the trees fairly distinctly. The dusty road lay white in front of me. But over by the left hedge there seemed to be a kind of black patch.

I didn't take much notice of it as I walked along. I came almost level, and was about to stride past when I checked. I stared at the black patch curiously. Something was lying on the road.

What could it be?

I expect most people have experienced something of the kind; a lonely road in a state of deep gloom, a strange object which excites the curiosity, and an examination which proves that the strange object is nothing more alarming than a patch of grass, or a bunch of hay dropped from a passing cart.

I thought that this was something of the kind, and I laughed to myself and made up my mind to walk on without investigating. But something—instinct, I suppose checked me again.

"Oh, you ass!" I muttered.

I paid this compliment to myself as I turned aside and walked towards the black patch. A moment later I knew that I was not an ass. For I discovered that the object was a human form, lying huddled and motionless.

My pulse quickened as I stood over it. A drunken tramp, perhaps; but I was not convinced. I bent down, and then caught sight of a cap. It was a St. Frank's cap! And the figure, as I saw when I looked closer, was that of Starke, of the Sixth!

"Well I'm bothered!" I murmured.

An explanation instantly flashed into my mind. A visit to the White Harp; a game of cards, and some strong drink. Starke had carried it too far—he was lying here intoxicated!

All my indignation and anger was revived by the sight of the caddish Sixth-Former. But I could see that Starke was in no fit state to participate in a scrap. I caught hold of his shoulder and shook it.

"Get up, you idiot!" I exclaimed softly.

Starke remained silent and still.

"Do you hear me, Starke?" I said in a louder voice.

But still Starke gave no sign. I suspected that he was shamming, and I resolved to put it to the test—in a very reliable fashion. I drew a pin from my waistcoat and jabbed the point of it into Starke's forearm, which lay bare.

He didn't even wince.

"By gum!" I muttered, startled. "He's clean gone, and no mistake!"

Even then I did not suspect anything serious. Knowing Starke's character as I did, it was only natural that I should think of the most likely explanation regarding his present condition.

All this, it must be remembered, only occupied a few seconds of time. I felt inclined to leave the bully where he lay; it was none of my business. If he liked to get drunk—

Then I gave a gasp of horror.

Hending further forward, I reated my hand

upon the ground near Starke's head. My fingers touched something wet and sticky, and I saw that the senior's forehead was bleeding; it was a terrible sight. There was an awful wound there!

"Good heavens!" I gasped.

Starke was not drunk—he was badly injured! He had been struck a violent blow upon the forehead. I saw a stick lying on the ground, and I picked it up mechanically. Even as I touched the heavy knob I recognised the stick.

It was my own!

I dropped the stick at once, for my fingers were still smeared with the blood which I had touched, and the feel was uncomfortable. I wiped my hand in the grass, and then picked the stick up again.

"I'm blessed if I can make it out!" I exclaimed. "Starke! Get up, for goodness' sake! Pull yourself together!"

But I realised that my words were useless. Starke was unconscious, perhaps—But that thought was too awful for contemplation. I did not pause to consider how the prefect had come by his injury. My sole thought at the moment was to find out the extent of his hurt.

Before I could do so, however, I heard a footstep. I straightened up swiftly and looked round. Perhaps the man who had struck Starke down was intent upon attacking me.

"Who's that?" I asked huskily.

"You'll soon find out who it is!" exclaimed the voice of Kenmore. "What have you been up to, you little ass? Breaking bounds at this time of night! And who were you talking to just now? I heard voices—"

"Starke's hurt," I interrupted quickly. "You'll have to lend a hand, Kenmore. It looks pretty serious, too. Have you only just come out?"

"Of course," said Kenmore. "I followed you, my son. This'll mean a report to the Head—"

"Oh, bother that!" I broke in. "Starke's hurt, I tell you!"

Kenmore looked down and concealed a grin.

"Yes, he looks pretty well knocked out," he remarked calmly. "This is your doing, I suppose? You've been fighting, you little ass! Fighting a prefect! You're booked for a public flogging, my lad!"

Kenmore, of course, was labouring under a misapprehension. He fully believed that Starke was shamming—according to the pre-arranged programme. It seemed to Kenmore that everything had gone off smoothly.

"Fighting a prefect!" I echoed, startled. "Don't be silly, Kenmore! I haven't touched him! He was lying on the ground here when I came along, two or three minutes ago—"

"You can tell that to the marines!" interrupted Kenmore. "I heard you talking, the pair of you!"

"You didn't!" I declared. "Starke hasn't uttered a word. I thought he was only shamming at first and I spoke to him."

"Shamming?" repeated Kenmore curiously.

"That's what I thought; but he isn't," I

went on. "Somebody must have been having a quarrel with him."

"Yes—you," said Kenmore grimly.

"Don't talk rot!" I snapped. "Do you think I knocked the chap about like this? He's terribly injured—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Kenmore. "Unless you gave him a whack with that stick that you've got in your hand," he went on, with a sudden note of suspicion in his voice. "Is that what you did, you little ruffian?"

"This stick was lying here," I said, keeping my temper with difficulty. "It's mine, as it happens, and I can only assume that Starke brought it out."

"It's yours, you say?" repeated Kenmore. "And you expect me to believe that Starke brought it here? This'll mean a flogging for you, my son—if not worse. Pull yourself together, Starke," he added, giving the motionless figure a slight touch with his foot.

But Starke did not move.

Kenmore bent down, muttering something. He was rather impatient with Starke for keeping the thing up for so long. It hadn't been arranged that Starke should remain "unconscious" for more than a minute.

"Get up, you ass!" muttered Kenmore.

I could see that he had no suspicion regarding Starke's real condition—although I had told him plainly enough. Of course, I knew nothing of the arrangement between the two prefects at that time. I didn't know about it until weeks later, to be exact.

"I tell you Starke can't get up," I said huskily. "He's been badly injured, and we're wasting time here. We'd better carry him indoors and get somebody to ring up the doctor. It's a serious case."

"Piffle!" said Kenmore curtly. "Why the thunder can't you rouse yourself, Starke? There's no sense in lying there—"

But Kenmore's words faltered. He had dropped on to one knee in the road, and he suddenly caught sight of Starke's forehead. He looked closer, and then recoiled with a gasp of fright and horror.

"He's—he's had a terrible knock on the head!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"I know that," I replied. "He must have a doctor—"

"You little demon!" shouted Kenmore, turning upon me fiercely. "You—you murderous young hound!"

I stared back.

"Don't get into such a state!" I exclaimed sharply. "You don't think I injured Starke like this, do you?"

"You young fool, you know you did it!"

"Starke was like this when I came along," I said. "How he became injured is more than I can imagine; but this isn't the time for making investigations, anyhow. The first thing to be done is to—"

"Give me that stick!" shouted Kenmore suddenly.

He grabbed it out of my hand and held the heavy knob close to his eyes. Then he touched it gingerly.

"There's blood on it!" he said, with a gulp. "You villainous young brute! You

quarrelled with Starke, and hit him on the head with this heavy stick! For all we know, you've killed——"

"That blood on the stick came off my fingers," I exclaimed. "I happened to touch the ground down there and didn't know. But I'm not called upon to explain to you, Kenmore. Even if you suspect me of this awful thing, nobody else will. Help me to carry the poor chap indoors."

Kenmore was almost off his head with alarm and fright. He positively believed that I had committed the assault—I knew that, and the circumstances were certainly rather curious. But I had no doubt whatever that I should be able to clear myself of any possible suspicion.

"Come on!" I said briskly. "Lend a hand."

"Don't you touch him!" shouted Kenmore, half-hysterical. "Don't you lay your confounded fingers upon him again! You'll be sacked for this—and perhaps hanged! You've killed him, you venomous young hound!"

"Oh, don't be idiotic!"

"You've killed him, I say!" roared Kenmore hoarsely.

And at that moment we both heard a footstep. Turning, I saw a figure hurrying towards us from the direction of the school gates. I was rather glad, for Kenmore was getting on my nerves.

"Who is that?" came a sharp inquiry.

"Crowell!" I muttered, under my breath. Kenmore rushed forward.

"Thank heaven you've come, Mr. Crowell!" he panted. "Starke's lying dead on the road, and—and Nipper is the chap who killed him!"

CHAPTER V.

UNDER SUSPICION.

MR. CROWELL, the master of the Remove, and temporary Housemaster of the Ancient House, came to a halt in the road.

"What nonsense are you talking, Kenmore?" he demanded sharply. "And why are you out of doors at this time of night? And who is this? Ah, Nipper, I believe. You must explain——"

"Starke's met with an accident, sir," I began.

"It's a lie!" shouted Kenmore. "This young villain killed him, sir!"

Mr. Crowell looked astonished.

"You are excited, Kenmore," he said. "You do not seem to realise what you are saying. I heard voices out here and I came to investigate. I certainly did not expect to find two Ancient House boys here."

The master suddenly bent forward.

"What—what is that object there?" he asked nervously.

"It's Starke, sir—dead!" muttered Kenmore, shivering.

"Good gracious!"

Mr. Crowell was beginning to realise that something certainly was gravely amiss. He

paced forward quickly, and came to a halt close to Starke's side. Then he bent down.

"Have you got a light there?" he asked quickly.

"A match, sir——" began Kenmore.

"Oh, I've got an electric torch," I said, suddenly remembering it, and fishing it out of my pocket. "Here you are, sir."

I switched it on and played the light over Starke's motionless figure. The Sixth-Former looked awful. His face was pale, and the wound on his forehead seemed twice as bad as it actually was. Blood had been flowing fairly freely. But I had not been permitted an opportunity of making any close examination so far; Kenmore had kept me too busy.

"Heaven help the lad!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell, in a shocked voice. "He—he has had a terrible blow—a ghastly wound, indeed! Is it possible that Starke is dead? This is appalling—truly appalling!"

"He's dead, sir—I know he's dead," said Kenmore hoarsely.

But I pushed forward, knelt down, and made a quick examination; I had had some considerable experience of this sort of thing when engaged with Nelson Lee upon detective cases.

"No, he's not dead, sir," I said quietly. "But this wound is a nasty one, and the doctor must be fetched at once. Starke won't be himself again for weeks, and it's just possible that he'll never recover. I can't imagine how he came by such an awful blow!"

"You confounded little liar!" shouted Kenmore. "You knocked him down yourself—and you daren't deny it, either!"

Mr. Crowell rose to his feet.

"How dare you make such an outrageous statement, Kenmore?" he demanded angrily. "I do not think you are aware of what you say. And this is not the time for delays. Help me to——"

"But Nipper did it, sir—I know he did it," said Kenmore fiercely. "He's fatally injured my chum—my study-mate! He'll go to prison for this, if there's any justice in the land!"

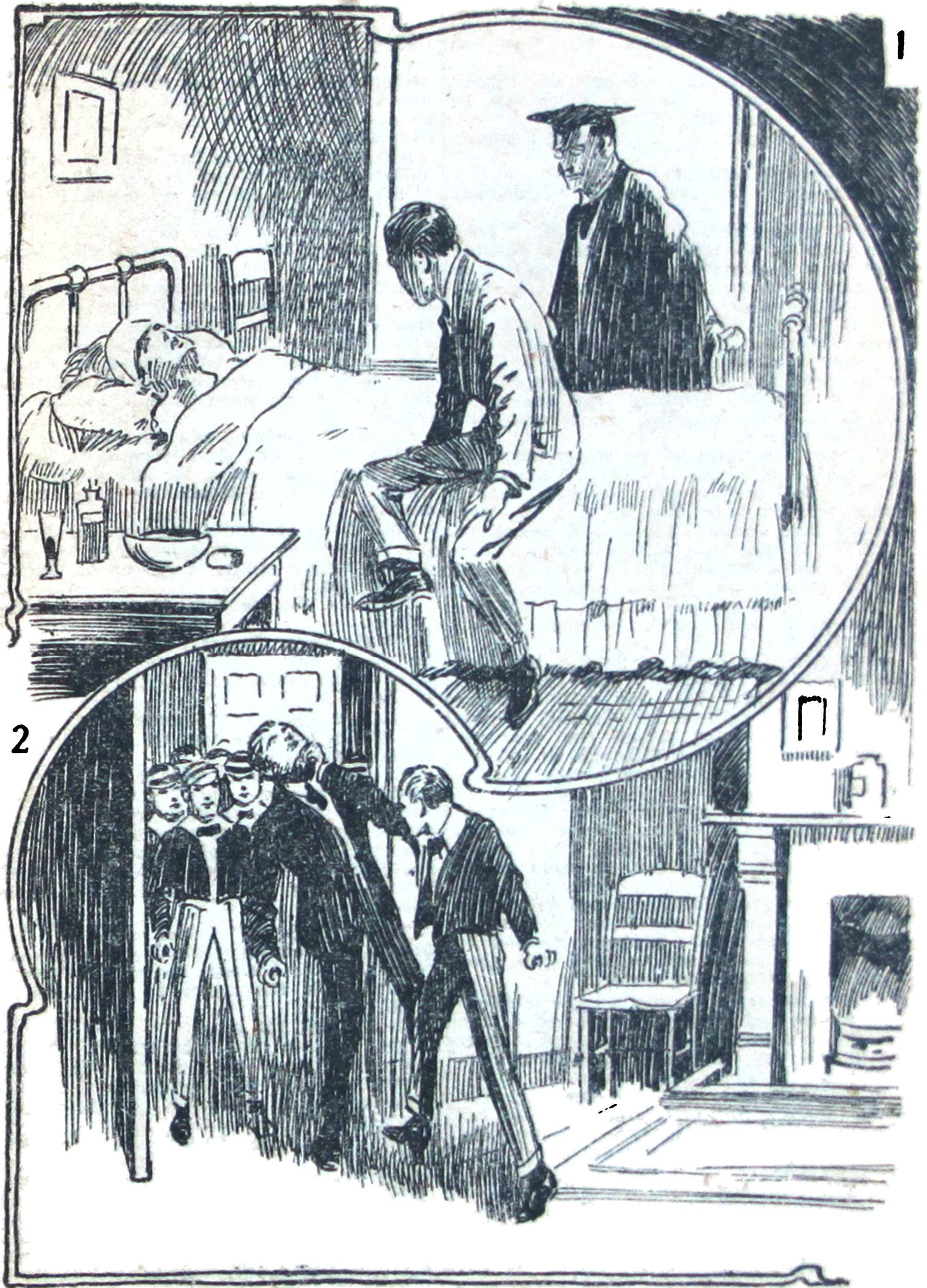
"Do not talk so wildly, Kenmore——"

"But I'm not talking wildly, sir," interrupted the Sixth-Former. "You think I'm unstrung—or something—but I'm not. Starke and Nipper had a quarrel early this evening—everybody knows it—and Nipper threatened to smash Starke. Dozens of fellows will prove that——"

"Is this correct, Nipper?" asked Mr. Crowell sharply.

"Well, it is and it isn't, sir," I replied, rather awkwardly. "Starke and I certainly had a squabble, but it was all his fault. And you don't think I'm capable of taking a revenge of this sort, do you? I'm not the kind of fellow to make a brutal attack——"

"I quite believe you, Nipper—you need say no more," interrupted Mr. Crowell. "Starke himself will be able to tell us what occurred when he recovers the use of his wits, which I sincerely hope will be soon. You have made a mistake, Kenmore, and——"



1. "Come, my boy," urged Dr. Stafford, "tell me the name of your attacker."

2. Nipper's fist had struck the bully full on the chin, and Starke staggered back, howling.

"I haven't, sir," persisted Kenmore. "What about this stick? Look at it, sir—there's blood on the knob. The blow was delivered with this stick!"

"I have no doubt that you are right," said Mr. Crowell. "Indeed, there can be no question regarding that point."

"This is Nipper's stick, sir," said Kenmore fiercely.

Mr. Crowell started.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "I do not believe—"

"It's quite right, sir," I put in. "That stick belongs to me, but I can't possibly guess how it came to be here. I left it in the cloak room two days ago, and I haven't touched it since."

"It is all very extraordinary," said Mr. Crowell grimly. "But I have no doubt that a perfectly straightforward explanation will be forthcoming. You must be more careful in what you say, Kenmore. But enough of this for the moment. Help me to carry the poor lad indoors."

Between the three of us we managed to get Starke into the Ancient House—after his head had been roughly bandaged with a handkerchief. Only the Head and Mrs. Poulter were aroused; the rest of the school remained in ignorance of the drama.

The House-dame was greatly upset, and she hastily prepared a special bedroom in the private portion of the building. Then she attended to the wound, bathing it and bandaging it.

Meanwhile, Dr. Brett, of Bellton, had been summoned by telephone. And the Headmaster had heard the bare outline of the affair from the agitated Mr. Crowell. During this time I waited about the passages. Kenmore did the same, although we did not talk. I fancy that Kenmore was keeping his eye on me.

Starke's pal was greatly upset. He paced up and down the corridor, deep in thought. He was absolutely positive that I had struck the blow; and, in one way, he could hardly be blamed for holding that view.

And he was worried with regard to another point. What about the little plot which Starke had planned? Kenmore decided to keep mum with regard to that. No good would come of revealing the truth.

It would never do to explain to Dr. Stafford that Starke had deliberately quarrelled with me, and that he had further planned to meet me in the lane, with the intention of provoking me to strike him.

It would be far better to keep all that dark to stick to the original plan—to tell the Head that he, Kenmore, had been disturbed, and had followed me out to see what my game was.

Kenmore decided that it would be better if he remained in ignorance of Starke's own movements; he wouldn't explain why Starke had gone out at eleven o'clock. Starke could do that when he recovered.

In any case, Kenmore was very glad of the opportunity to compose his mind. After ten minutes he knew exactly what his story would be, and it was some relief to him to

realise that the bulk of it would be true. As for my own thoughts—well, they were riotous.

I knew very well that I was in a tight corner—but only for the moment. The case would look black against me until Starke himself was able to explain what actually happened.

Knowing that I was innocent, and that my innocence would be proved when Starke was able to speak, I did not get alarmed. I was anxious to get out on to the road again, in order to make a close examination of the road surface before the scene could be disturbed.

But I was not able to go out then. Somebody had brutally struck Starke to the ground. But who could have done it? It was altogether a terrible puzzle—particularly when I brought to mind the fact that my own stick had delivered the violent blow. The night was proving to be a dramatic one indeed.

Dr. Brett arrived, and we saw him pass up the stairs. And then followed an anxious time while we waited for his return. The doctor was with Starke for fully twenty minutes.

Both Kenmore and I were at the foot of the stairs when Brett came down, en route for the Head's study. I ran up to him and grabbed his arm.

"What's the verdict, doctor?" I asked eagerly.

"Why, hallo, Nipper, what on earth are you doing out of your bed at midnight?" asked Brett curiously. "I didn't know that you were up—"

"It was Nipper who knocked Starke down, sir," put in Kenmore harshly. "If he doesn't go to prison—"

"I think I shall find it necessary to examine you, my boy," said Dr. Brett severely. "What rubbish are you talking? Nipper did not deliver that terrible blow, I am sure. I would never believe such a thing, under any circumstances. I think I know you better, eh, my lad?" he added, patting my shoulder.

"Thanks, doctor," I said quietly. "Kenmore is only looking at the bare evidence, and he isn't to be blamed, really. But how is Starke? Will the injury be fatal, do you think?"

Brett shook his head.

"Oh, no—not fatal," he replied. "There is every prospect that Starke will recover consciousness by the morning—and there is really no danger whatever. So you needn't be alarmed."

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Kenmore fervently.

"At the same time, Starke has had a very nasty blow," went on the doctor. "It will be several weeks before he is himself again. Had the blow been slightly more to the left, the skull might well have been fractured. The wound is an ugly one, and it will need very careful attention."

"Do you know how it was caused?" I asked.

"Obviously by some heavy implement,"

replied the doctor. "There is a bruise on the lad's left arm, too—quite a nasty bruise—so I assume that two blows were struck. Possibly Starke dodged, and received a knock on the head which was intended for his body."

"That seems probable, sir," I said slowly.

"You young beggar!" growled Kenmore. "You ought to know all about it, considering that you did it yourself. This pretence on your part won't do you any good at all. And Starke's people will probably prosecute—"

"I think you had better come with me, Kenmore," interrupted Brett curtly. "If you have any accusation to make against Nipper you must make it before the Headmaster. Personally, I think the very idea is preposterous; but it is necessary that the point should be cleared up without delay. The position is very uncomfortable for you, Nipper."

"Yes, sir," I said. "But I've nothing to fear."

"I am sure of that," said Dr. Brett quietly.

We followed him to the Headmaster's study, where we found Mr. Crowell and the Head in earnest conversation. They both looked up anxiously as Dr. Brett entered, but they took no notice of Kenmore and me.

The doctor lost no time in giving his verdict. And the Head was greatly relieved when he learned that Starke's condition was not grave. However, the situation was serious enough, in any case.

"It is a terrible affair, Brett," said the Head. "It seems that Nipper found Starke lying upon the road, and I can only assume that Starke was knocked down by some passing tramp or footpad. Do you know if his watch was missing, or anything of that nature?"

"Nipper wouldn't have stolen his watch, sir," said Kenmore.

"What do you mean?" demanded Dr. Stafford. "It seems, Kenmore, that you have got the mad idea into your head that Nipper committed this terrible assault. Such an idea is utterly preposterous."

"Of course it is," declared Brett, nodding.

"However, it is just as well that we should make a few inquiries," went on Dr. Stafford gravely. "It seems that a walking-stick, identified by Nipper as his own property, was lying at the scene of the affair, and there is no doubt that Starke was injured by means of that stick. Is that your opinion, Brett?"

"I will only say that the injury could have been caused by Nipper's stick," replied the doctor. "At the same time, Starke might easily have been struck down by another stick altogether."

"Were you carrying that stick with you, Nipper?" asked the Head.

"No, sir," I answered. "I expect Starke took it out of the cloakroom when he fetched his cap. That's the most probable explanation, isn't it?"

"Undoubtedly," agreed the Head. "And now we will take your story, Kenmore. Nipper will relate his part of the affair afterwards. Come, Kenmore, tell me exactly what you heard and saw."

Kenmore stepped forward.

"Certainly, sir," he said. "I was not able to sleep when I went to bed, and I heard sounds out in the corridor. So I opened my door a trifle, and saw Nipper, fully dressed, passing towards the staircase—"

"That's rather curious," I interrupted. "When I passed along, the corridor was as black as pitch. How could you see me, Kenmore?"

"Well, I heard you, anyhow—"

"I don't think you did," I said. "I didn't make a sound, and I defy anybody to say that I was in the passage."

"We needn't have any argument with regard to the point now, Nipper," said Dr. Stafford gently. "Please let Kenmore continue."

"I dressed as quickly as possible, sir, guessing that Nipper wasn't up to any good," said Kenmore. "As you can see, I slipped my things on hurriedly—I didn't even trouble about a collar. And when I got outside, the Triangle was all deserted, and I thought I was too late."

"And what did you do then?"

"I stood quiet for a few moments, sir, and I distinctly heard voices," said Kenmore. "They belonged to Nipper and Starke: I heard Nipper's quite plainly, and Starke was speaking, too. They were quarrelling, I judged, and I reckoned Nipper must have struck the blow at that moment, because it was all quiet afterwards."

"Starke didn't speak to me at all, sir," I said firmly. "Kenmore's mistaken; he only heard my voice."

"But how is that, Nipper?" asked the Head. "Why were you talking, since we are asked to believe that Starke was already unconscious?"

"I didn't know he was badly hurt, sir—I thought perhaps he was shamming, and I shouted at him to get up," I replied. "That's all. Kenmore only heard me."

"Well, Kenmore?" said the Head, looking at the prefect.

"I jumped over the wall, sir, and walked down the lane," said Kenmore. "Then I found Nipper standing over Starke. He was holding the stick which Mr. Crowell has now got in his hand."

"Indeed!" said the Head. "The whole affair is certainly most distressing. Did you see anybody else, Kenmore?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"And you maintain that you heard Starke's voice?"

"Yes, sir," said Kenmore grimly. "I heard it plainly. He and Nipper were talking a minute before I arrived on the scene. Nipper must have lunged out with that stick while I was getting over the wall."

"Did Nipper appear guilty?" asked the Head.

"Well, yes, sir," said the Sixth-Former.

"But he tried to brazen it out, although I saw through his dodge——"

"You must allow me to correct you, Kenmore," put in Mr. Crowell. "Nipper remained quite calm, and I saw no sign of guilt whatever. It is my positive opinion that Nipper is absolutely innocent."

"And mine, too," said Dr. Brett.

"I am pleased to say that I agree with you," said the Head gravely. "We all know Nipper quite well—we all know his splendid character. It is practically impossible to imagine that he could have committed such a brutal assault; just as it is impossible to accept the theory that he has been lying to us."

"Thank you, sir," I said quietly.

"You have nothing to thank me for, Nipper," said Dr. Stafford. "This case is a curious one, and you are unfortunately involved rather deeply—or so it appears on the surface. Kenmore is a friend of Starke's, and it is not unnatural that he should assume that you are the guilty party. But Kenmore is hasty in his conclusions. Circumstantial evidence is frequently very misleading."

"I have good reason to know that," put in Dr. Brett, nodding. "I was once arrested for murder on circumstantial evidence—and I might have been hanged by this time if Mr. Nelson Lee hadn't been on the spot. It's rather a pity he isn't here now."

"A great pity, sir," I said heartily.

"Well, Nipper, you had better let me hear your version of the affair," said the Head. "I do not wish you to assume from that remark that I suspect you of giving an untrue version. You must remember that it was totally against the school rules for you to be out of bounds at such an hour. What explanation have you to offer for your presence in the lane at eleven o'clock?"

I smiled slightly.

"I'm willing to take my punishment for that, sir," I said. "It was only a bit of a joke against the River House fellows. I was just off on a little mission, my object being to——"

"You needn't go into any details regarding that point," interrupted the Head drily. "You have shown, at all events, that you broke bounds with a fairly innocent motive. When did you first encounter Starke?"

"Soon after I started walking down the lane, sir," I replied. "I saw a dark patch on the road, and I was on the point of walking straight past. But I changed my mind, and examined it. Then I found that the patch was Starke. I thought he was having a lark at first, and told him to get up—that's when Kenmore heard me talking. Then I bent over him, and found that his head was bleeding. I got some blood on my fingers, too, and I was horrified."

"Quite naturally," said Dr. Stafford. "And then?"

"I noticed the stick, and I picked it up without thinking," I said. "That's why there's some blood on it—unless it was there before, as it might have been. It makes things bad, the stick being mine. There's

nothing to prove that I didn't take it with me, and I oughtn't to be surprised if you think I'm guilty. Everything points to it."

Dr. Stafford shook his head.

"I hardly agree with you, Nipper," he said. "Nobody saw the blow struck. Kenmore arrived too late, and his whole accusation only amounts to an assumption. He can say nothing definite whatever. From what I can judge, Starke had been knocked down some little time before you arrived—and I do not suppose there are any witnesses. We are, therefore, left with only one course."

"And that is to wait until Starke can tell us the true account of what happened," said Mr. Crowell. "Quite so, sir. There is really nothing to be gained by keeping these boys out of their beds. I propose that we adjourn the whole inquiry until to-morrow—until Starke is able to speak."

"A suggestion which meets with my entire approval, Mr. Crowell," said the Head. "I only trust that Starke will be in a position to speak to-morrow."

"Very possibly before," said Brett, rising. "Well, I'll get off now, if you don't mind. The lad has been badly hurt, but there is nothing to cause you anxiety, Dr. Stafford. I don't think I should communicate with his parents until to-morrow evening, at the earliest."

The doctor took his departure, and we all prepared for bed.

"And you believe that I'm innocent, sir?" I asked quietly.

"My dear boy, I am positive of it," said the Head, in a kindly voice. "I am sure that some explanation will be forthcoming very shortly. As for you, Kenmore, I want you to get that foolish notion out of your head. Nipper did not strike the blow—as your better judgment ought to tell you."

Kenmore looked almost sullen.

"I'm sorry I can't share your faith in Nipper, sir," he said. "You weren't on the spot as I was, or you wouldn't be so positive. The evidence is so strong that I think Nipper ought to be locked away for to-night——"

"That is enough, Kenmore," interrupted the Head sternly. "Go to bed at once, and do not talk so foolishly again."

Kenmore took his departure, and very soon after that I made my way to the Remove dormitory. It was a great comfort to me to know that the Head and Mr. Crowell were in my favour. They did not jump to conclusions, as Kenmore had done. And with the Head on my side I had nothing to worry about.

On the morrow, at all events, the truth would be known.

CHAPTER VI.

POPULAR OPINION.

"ROT!" said Handforth, yawning. "Somebody's been dreaming," said Pitt, buttoning his waistcoat. "If you think we're going to believe that yarn, Gulliver——"

"But I tell you it's true!" yelled Gulliver, who had rushed into the Remove dormitory a moment before. "I've just seen Wilson, of the Sixth, in the passage—and Wilson heard all about it from Kenmore."

"And Kenmore heard all about it from some other chap?" suggested Pitt sarcastically. "And some other chap heard all about it from some other chap still. I expect Starke scratched himself, and the rest has been exaggerated!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You needn't believe it unless you like," snapped Gulliver. "But Starke is injured—unconscious. He was bludgeoned out in the lane last night. It's quite possible he'll die!"

"We shouldn't miss him much," said Handforth callously—although he wouldn't have made that remark if he had realised the actual truth. "But I don't believe a word of it. What do you say, Nipper?"

"It's true," I replied quietly.

I had been listening to the conversation without remark, but now I had been obliged to chip in. Everybody stared at me as I passed my opinion, and Handforth gave a sniff.

"I didn't think you were such a simpleton," he said. "You don't catch me believing anything that Gulliver says. Not likely!"

"Well, I shouldn't be ready to believe Gulliver in everything," I said; "but in this case I'll believe him because I was on the spot myself last night. Didn't Wilson mention me, Gully?"

"No," replied Gulliver. "But he made some mysterious remark about a Remove fellow being guilty of the attack. You don't mean to say that you knocked Starke down, do you?"

"No, I don't," I said. "But it's quite true that Starke is badly injured, and that he's unconscious—or he was unconscious last night. He's had a terrible blow on the head, and he's in a bad way."

"Gammon!" said Handforth.

"Oh, draw it mild, Nipper!"

"It's quite true," I went on. "I happened to find Starke in the lane, so I know all about it. Kenmore came up while I was there, and he's got an idea that I committed the awful deed."

"That's just the kind of idea that Kenmore would get," said McClure. "Kenmore's a beast—and he'd like to get you into trouble. But it's a bit of a shock, isn't it? I wonder who the dickens bowled Starke over?"

For several minutes the juniors were not quite ready to believe the story; but I was careful to explain the details, and before long the whole Remove was in a state of excited animation.

I had thought it better to tell the truth straight away. I knew what hasty beggars the juniors were, and I wasn't anxious to be regarded with suspicion by half the Form.

By breakfast-time the whole school was talking about Starke—and me. The fags, the middle school, and the seniors had no other

subject for discussion. Even the servants were talking of nothing else.

And all this talk was bound to lead to a great number of arguments and expressions of opinion. At breakfast-time I noticed that many curious glances were being cast in my direction, and I wasn't altogether comfortable.

"Rotters!" muttered Watson, who sat beside me. "They're looking over here with suspicion! The awful bounders!"

"Oh, never mind!" I said. "They'll all know the truth before long. And if any fellow is willing to suspect me on the evidence which is available at present—well, he can't be worth much. I thought I was trusted more."

"Begad! An' so you are, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie. "No decent chap will think anythin' beastly about you. It wouldn't be possible, you know. But the whole thing is frightfully annoyin'—it is, really."

After breakfast the fellows collected in knots in the passages, in the lobby, and in the Triangle. Both Houses were equally excited, for such an affair as this seldom occurred at St. Frank's.

The very mystery surrounding it gave rise to much discussion. I strolled out into the Triangle with my chums, and found Jack Grey in a state of great indignation on the steps. He was talking with Pitt, and the May sunshine was streaming warmly down upon the old stonework.

"The rotters!" said Grey hotly—"the confounded cads!"

"Eh?" said Watson. "Cads?"

"Those fellows over there—Gulliver and Fullwood and that other crowd," said Grey. "They're all trying to make out that Nipper is guilty. I believe Kenmore started the idea."

"This ought to be interesting," I said grimly. "Suppose we go and listen to the discussion? There's nothing like hearing public opinion."

I spoke lightly, but I was feeling rather upset. I had always prided myself upon being trusted at St. Frank's; I thought my word could be taken without question. But a certain number of juniors were evidently inclined to base their opinion upon appearances.

"What I say is this," Fullwood was shouting, "why was Nipper's stick found by Starke's side?"

"It wasn't," said Gulliver. "It was in Nipper's hand!"

"Well, that makes it worse," went on Fullwood. "There was blood on that stick, too. Do you think I'm going to believe that Nipper smeared that blood on by accident? Not likely! It seems to me that the whole case is as clear as daylight. Nipper hasn't got a leg to stand on!"

"Rot!" bawled Handforth. "If you say that again, Fullwood, I'll slaughter you! Nipper's innocent!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Rather!"

"Good old Nipper!"

"Let's back him up, you chaps—three cheers for our skipper!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the accusers!"

"Wipe up the Triangle with 'em!"

"Good!"

"Hold on!" I shouted. "We don't want to have a row—thanks all the same. And, after all, a fellow is entitled to his own opinion. If they like to think rotten things about me I can't help it!"

"I'm going to punch Fullwood's nose!" roared Handforth. "Nipper's one of the finest chaps who ever breathed—and I'm not praising him up when I say that. Everybody knows it. We've had a few squabbles now and again, but I'd stick by Nipper if the evidence was twice as strong!"

"That's jolly good of you, Handy," I said, smiling.

"Rot!" shouted Handforth. "I wish you wouldn't be such a silly fathead, Nipper! Good be dashed! I can state my opinion, I suppose, without you chipping in? You mind your own giddy business!"

"Sorry!" I murmured.

"And if any fellow stands up to me and says that Nipper's guilty of whopping Starke, I'll smash him!" went on Handforth. "What's the evidence, anyhow? What is it, I ask you? Just tell me?"

"Well, to begin with," said Fullwood, "Nipper was found——"

"Don't interrupt!" bellowed Handforth. "What's the evidence?"

"I was just telling you——"

"I'm going to tell what the evidence is," said Handforth firmly. "Nipper was found by Kenmore standing over Starke. Nipper's stick was there. Poof! I can dispose of that in half a second!"

"Which—the stick?"

"Everything!" said Edward Oswald. "Starke took the stick out—that's just the kind of thing he would do. And Kenmore is one of the worst cads in the school. We can't believe a word he says—and I'm not going to accept his version of the affair. Nipper's innocent!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You're squashed, Fullwood!"

"Flat!" said Pitt.

"I'm not squashed at all," declared Fullwood savagely. "Handforth hasn't disposed of the evidence—and he can't! I suppose you've forgotten that Nipper had a thunderin' row with Starke last night?"

"My hat!"

"And Nipper said he'd smash Starke, too!"

"By jingo! So he did!"

The fellows seemed to just remember the incident.

"It's as clear as daylight that the two met out in the lane, and Starke was attacked by Nipper," continued Fullwood. "That was the first time they'd met since that quarrel. Don't forget that. They were alone, and didn't think that anybody would interfere. And after a bit of a squabble Nipper bashed Starke on the head. It's absolutely evident."

"Of course it is!" said Gulliver and Bell.

"Hear, hear!"

This came from Merrell and one or two others. A number of juniors were silent, and I noticed that they looked at me queerly. This aspect of the case had not struck them before. They suddenly brought to mind the fact that I had threatened to get even with Starke.

And, really, there was a certain amount of excuse for the juniors. I can't possibly deny that the evidence was black against me. And my position was uncomfortable in the extreme.

"Don't worry, dear boy!" murmured Tregellis-West, pinching my arm. "All your pals believe in you. An' when Starke tells us who really knocked him down, Fullwood an' the others will look frightfully small, begad!"

"They'll be ragged, too!" declared Watson.

It was painful to me to know that a considerable number of fellows were ready to believe the worst. They weren't fellows whom I cared about, or who cared about me. So it didn't matter much.

Nevertheless, it wasn't pleasant. All the decent juniors in the Remove were perfectly willing to reserve their judgment until Starke recovered his senses. Not only this, but they proclaimed their faith in me.

But I wanted to get out of the whole atmosphere, and I drew my two chums aside.

"Look here, we've got twenty minutes and more before lessons," I said. "Let's trot out to the road, and I'll show you just where I found Starke. I want to examine the place, too."

"A spankin' idea, dear old chap!" said Sir Montie readily.

We made our way out of the gateway, and were soon on the spot where Starke had been lying. Even now there was a trace of blood on the dusty road. And the dust was also disturbed considerably. The centre of the road was quite hard and firm; Starke had been lying at the side.

"Nobody seems to have been here," I remarked. "That's rather good. I don't expect the chaps know that this is the exact spot—so we'd better not let ourselves be seen."

"Why not?" asked Watson.

"Because it's a curious side of human nature to have a sort of morbid curiosity in places where somebody has been killed or injured," I replied. "We should have a crowd round here in less than five minutes."

"Well, they wouldn't do any harm——"

"Wouldn't they?" I said grimly. "I don't want this place disturbed until I've thoroughly examined it. There might be some clues knocking about."

"Clues?" repeated Watson, staring about him. "I don't see any!"

"Anybody might think you were looking for cricket-balls!" I exclaimed. "Clues don't lie about in full view, Tommy. Unless a fellow is trained for that sort of work he won't find anything at all. Now, if the guv'nor was here, he'd probably find all sorts of signs and footprints. I'm going to try

my hand at the same game, and I don't see why I shouldn't be successful."

"Go ahead, dear old boy!" said Montie. "We'll watch you."

I commenced my examination, but only a few moments had passed before Watson let out a hail.

"Some fags are having a look at us," he said. "I don't suppose it matters, does it?"

"Yes, it does," I replied. "We'll stroll away."

The fags' curiosity was not excited, and they did not approach. But they still hovered about the gateway, and we strolled towards them. Then came the sound of a motor-car from behind, and immediately afterwards Dr. Brett turned up.

"My hat!" I exclaimed. "Let's get inside!"

My object was to be somewhere near the staircase, so that I could catch Brett as he came down from his examination. For I was naturally anxious to learn Starke's condition.

As it turned out, it was not necessary for us to wait long. Dr. Brett came downstairs after ten minutes, and he shook his head as I gazed at him inquiringly.

"Sorry, Nipper!" he said. "My report is not very cheering. Starke is still unconscious."

"Then he's worse than you first thought?" I asked.

"No. It is highly probable that he will come round within an hour or two," said Brett. "Indeed, I am half inclined to believe that he is now merely in a deep sleep; but I did not disturb him. We shall know more at dinner-time, anyhow."

"Well, we couldn't know less, sir," remarked Watson.

The doctor smiled and passed on.

"I am afraid you are havin' a shockin'ly tryin' time, dear boy," said Montie sympathetically. "Just look at the fellows out in the Triangle. Heaps of them are veerin' against you."

And Tregellis-West was quite right.

Not only Removites, but Third-Formers and Fifth-Formers were taking the view that I was the only human being who could have committed the assault. In the Sixth there was a general feeling against me. Starke was a Sixth-Former, of course, and he received much support on that account.

Handforth was as energetic as ever. He had already worked himself up to such a pitch that his face was red and perspiring, his collar limp, and his tie round the corner.

He had had three fights in succession, and the juniors were beginning to realise that Edward Oswald Handforth was a formidable customer to argue with. Handforth's points in an argument were generally rammed home with his fists.

"You can say what you like," he roared. "But it's my opinion that Nipper is innocent! Rate to you!"

"Well, I'm not so sure——" began Owen major.

"Do you want your nose punched, you cad?" demanded Handforth.

"Didn't you just say that we could say what we liked?"

"That doesn't matter," snapped the leader of Study D, waving the point aside. "I won't hear a word against Nipper. I don't want anybody to suppose that I hold a brief for him, or anything of that sort——"

"Oh, no!" sneered Bell. "You're quite disinterested, ain't you?"

"Absolutely!" said Handforth. "Nipper's nothing to me—nothing whatever. I don't care what becomes of him. Not a toss! But if he's flogged or sacked on account of this business, I'll—I'll do terrific damage!"

"And yet you don't care what becomes of him?" grinned Pitt.

"Not a toss!" said De Valerie calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared round him.

"And I don't think this is exactly the time for alleged humour—for flippancy!" he exclaimed severely. "Here we have Nipper, our Form captain, with the Sword of Damocles hovering over his head——"

"The sword of which?"

"I don't suppose you'd understand if I explained," said Handforth witheringly.

"It's not apt, either," chuckled De Valerie.

"We won't pursue the question," said Handforth hastily. "Here's Nipper, I say, with a shadow over him. That's better! A shadow of guilt!"

"How can there be a shadow of guilt if he's not guilty?" asked Pitt mildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It seems to me that some chaps have no hearts at all," said Edward Oswald bitterly. "You make cheap jokes while Nipper remains under a cloud——"

"He was in a shadow just now——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you going to listen to me?" howled Handforth. "Nipper's under a cloud, I say, and it's not right for us to laugh and joke as though nothing had happened. 'Tain't fair! And he'll remain under this cloud until Starke speaks."

"I suppose Starke's breath will blow it away?" asked Pitt.

"Yes, it will!" shouted Handforth. "That was meant to be funny—but it's just the truth! Starke will explain what actually took place, and then the cloud over Nipper will be gone for good."

"Supposing Starke really was attacked by Nipper?" asked Bell. "Supposing it turns out that Nipper committed the assault? Supposing Starke's evidence is all against Nipper? What then?"

"There's too much supposing about it!" snapped Handforth. "But if anything like that does happen—well, it'll be a different matter. But Starke won't accuse Nipper. He can't. Nipper didn't do it, and there's an end of it."

And Handforth, hot and flustered, rushed indoors to have a wash before lessons—which were due to commence in about a minute.

I felt that I was quite assured of Handforth's support. And that energetic youth, in

spite of his failings, was a most reliable fellow. There was nothing much wrong with old Handy. Fellows said that he was an ass, and perhaps he was in certain ways, but he was as true as a die.

And so we went into lessons with the question still undecided. But I was feeling quite comfortable and confident—in spite of the hostile, suspicious glances of many Removites.

But the hour of fate was at hand!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLOW FALLS.

"STARKE, old fellow—wake up!"

It was Kenmore who murmured the words, and he did so eagerly. He was sitting close to the patient's bed, and it happened that he was alone with Starke for the time.

Mrs. Poulter could not be in the sick-room continually, and Dr. Brett had not yet procured a nurse, although one would shortly be arriving. Kenmore had asked permission to watch over his chum, and this permission had been granted.

For Kenmore really liked Starke—although this was curious enough. Starke was one of the most unlikeable fellows imaginable. But there was a kind of bond of union between the two—they were birds of a feather.

"Wake up, old man!" said Kenmore tensely.

A change had come over Starke. Twice he had sighed, and some colour had crept into his cheeks. His eyes had flickered for a moment, but then he seemed to sleep soundly again.

"It's me, Starke—Kenny!" whispered the senior. "I'm jolly anxious about you, you know—"

Kenmore paused as Starke suddenly opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He continued to stare for two or three moments, and then his gaze wandered almost dazedly about until it rested upon Kenmore. Then a light of recognition came into Starke's eyes.

"Hallo, Kenny!" he said in a whisper. "Time to get up yet?"

"By George! I'm jolly glad to hear you speaking again!" exclaimed Kenmore, with relief. "How are you feeling, old man?"

Starke placed a hand to his bandaged head.

"Oh, rotten!" he muttered. "Did we go out last night, Kenny? I don't seem to remember exactly— Oh! Oh, my head!"

Starke had pressed upon the bandage, and he winced visibly.

"Painful, old chap?" asked Kenmore.

"What the thunder's the matter?" groaned Starke. "This isn't an ordinary headache. I must have been bashed— Ah! I seem to remember— Where the deuce am I? What bedroom's this?"

"You're in the Ancient House, and you've been unconscious since last night," replied Kenmore. "About ten or eleven hours. I'm awfully glad that you've recovered your senses."

Starke closed his eyes, and lay motionless for so long that Kenmore thought he had gone to sleep again.

"Would you like anything?" he asked. "Some water, or—"

"No, I don't want anything," said Starke, opening his eyes. "I was just trying to remember what happened. I think I know all right. By George! I'll make the chap pay for this—the murderous cur!"

"So—so it was Nipper, after all?" asked Kenmore eagerly.

"Eh? Nipper?"

"Didn't Nipper knock you down?"

"I—I don't seem to have it all clear yet," said Starke slowly, although his eyes looked quite intelligent. "What do you mean—Nipper? What do you know about it?"

Kenmore took a deep breath.

"Nipper was bending over you when I arrived on the scene last night—as we planned," he whispered. "He'd got his own knobbed stick in his hand, and you were lying at his feet unconscious. I knew well enough that he knocked you down. Isn't that so? Can't you remember?"

A curious light came into Starke's eyes—a queer, intent gleam.

"Nipper," he muttered dreamily. "Nipper was found bending over me, holding a stick—and he's suspected. Gad! That's rather bad for the young bounder! I didn't think he'd be copped. I thought he'd slip away."

"So he did do it, then?" asked Kenmore eagerly.

Starke did not reply for a full minute. He pretended to be still in a state of dreamy dazedness. But, as a matter of fact, Starke had recovered his full wits when he awoke. And Kenmore's words had put an edge to his senses. He was keenly alive to the possibilities.

What a splendid chance! Starke was thinking of that all the time. What an opportunity to get even! He made up his mind very quickly, and slowly nodded as Kenmore watched him.

"Yes!" he said deliberately.

"You—you mean that Nipper bowled you over?"

"Yes, he did—the murderous little dog!" said Starke. "He whirled that stick of his round before I could dodge, and it caught me a terrific crash on the head. That's all I remember."

"By George!" said Kenmore, his eyes glittering. "I knew it all along! And the Head thinks that Nipper's innocent—he thinks that little beast is a kind of saint! He'll be sacked, Starke—kicked out!"

Starke's head was aching severely, and he felt dizzy and ill. But in spite of this he was far more cunning than usual. He had decided to take a terrible revenge for the fancied injuries which had been done him. He told himself that it would make no difference now; he had been injured, and what ever story he told, it wouldn't make him well again. And Starke became cunning. He knew Kenmore's character well, and he also knew that his next move would be quite safe.

"I don't want to be hard on the little beggar," he said. "If the case hasn't been proved against him, Kenny, we'll keep mum. I shouldn't like him to be sacked on my account. Let's keep this to ourselves."

Kenmore stared in amazement.

"Keep it to ourselves!" he echoed. "Do you mean that you're willing to keep quiet about what happened? Do you mean that you won't tell the Head that it was Nipper who knocked you down?"

"I don't want to be vindictive," said Starke. "It won't do me any good, will it? I don't suppose Nipper meant to hash me so hard, anyway. It was a vicious, deliberate attack, I know; but we'll let it drop."

"We won't do anything of the sort!" declared Kenmore grimly. "I'm going to tell the Head everything—even if you don't!"

Starke had known well enough that Kenmore would adopt this attitude; otherwise he wouldn't have pretended to be so generous. For Starke was just as anxious for the "truth" to come out as Kenmore was.

"No, don't be hard on the youngster," said Starke. "He'll be punished by his conscience, I expect——"

"And what are you going to say?" demanded Kenmore. "How are you going to explain that you were knocked down?"

"Oh, I can say that a tramp whacked me——"

"Rot!" said Kenmore. "Nipper did it, and Nipper's going to suffer for it. You've told me the truth, Starke, and I don't mean to see Nipper escape the punishment he deserves. If you don't tell the Head, I shall."

"Oh, well, in that case I suppose I'd better," muttered Starke. "After all, he deserves to be sacked, doesn't he? It was a rotten trick, Kenny. I shall be in bed for weeks, I suppose."

Kenmore rose to his feet.

"I'm going to fetch help now," he said. "You lie quiet, old man, and wait until I come back. Oh, I think somebody's——"

The door opened and Mrs. Poulter entered.

"I believe he's just coming round, Mrs. Poulter," said Kenmore, in a whisper. "He looks a lot better, anyhow. I was just trying to make him speak to me. He'll be all right soon, I'm sure."

"Has Master Starke said anything?" inquired the House dame.

"No," said Kenmore untruthfully.

He escaped from the room, knowing that Starke had heard him, and that he would act accordingly. Kenmore didn't want it to be known that he and Starke had had a private chat. Kenmore had wits enough to realise that some fellows would think that the pair had arranged the story together.

The Sixth-Former hurried to the Head's study and entered. Dr. Stafford looked up sharply as he saw the identity of his visitor.

"Well, Kenmore?" he asked.

"I think that Starke is recovering consciousness, sir," said Kenmore. "Will you please come, sir?"

"Yea, at once!"

The Head bustled out of his study, and he

was followed by Kenmore up to the bedroom. As it happened, Dr. Brett had arrived at practically the same time, and all three entered the sick-room together.

"Hush, sir!" whispered Mrs. Poulter. "He's just a-comin' round!"

Brett went over to the bedside.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed softly. "There is a marked change in the lad's appearance. How are you feeling, Starke?"

Starke opened his eyes dreamily.

"You—you little beggar!" he muttered. "If you dare to touch me with that stick—Eh? Oh, I—I—Hullo, Kenny!"

"Slightly delirious for the first moment," murmured the doctor, turning his head. "Did the lad say anything before we came, Mrs. Poulter?"

"He muttered something, sir, but I couldn't catch it," replied the matron.

"What rot!" said Starke dully. "I'm not delirious. I know what I'm talking about. You're Dr. Brett, and that's Kenmore over there, and the Head. Good morning, sir! Or is it afternoon?"

Starke did it really well, considering his condition.

"Do you think you are well enough to speak for a few moments, my poor lad?" asked the Head softly. "We are very anxious to find out how you came by that terrible blow on your forehead. I want you to tell me exactly how it happened, so that the culprit may be suitably punished."

"I don't want to get him into trouble, sir," murmured Starke. "I don't suppose punishment will do him any good——"

"I admire your generous spirit, Starke, but I insist upon your giving me the name of your attacker," said Dr. Stafford gravely. "Come, my boy!"

"Well, sir, I don't want to displease you," said Starke weakly—and there was no sham about that. "It was Nipper who tried to kill me—because I believe that's what he wanted to do! It was Nipper——"

"Good gracious!" gasped the Head.

He exchanged a quick, incredulous glance with Brett, and they both bent closer over the bed. Kenmore stood motionless, and Mrs. Poulter listened with pain and astonishment.

"Master Nipper!" she murmured. "No, never!"

"Did I understand you to say, Starke, that Nipper delivered the blow which injured you?" said the Head, terribly grave. "Choose your words carefully, my boy. Tell me precisely what occurred."

Starke closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them again.

"I was out after bed-time, sir," he said. "I suppose I'd better confess it now. I—I wanted to find something I'd lost down the lane. And I happened to meet Nipper. He and I had a bit of a row during the evening, you know, and Nipper had threatened to get even with me. I thought it was only a threat at the time—just a bit of bluff."

"And wasn't it?" asked Brett sharply.

"I—I don't think so, sir," muttered Starke, in a weary voice. "Nipper stopped me as I

was walking along, and gave me a bit of a start—because I didn't know he was there. And I noticed that he was carrying that big, knobbed stick of his in his right hand."

Again the Head and Dr. Brett exchanged glances.

"Go on, Starke," said the Head tensely.

"Well, there's not much more, sir," said the patient, continuing his vile string of falsehood with an air of perfect frankness. "Nipper said something about getting even with me for insulting Mr. Lee. He was quite right; I did insult Mr. Lee, and I was sorry for it. I meant to apologise. But before I could say anything Nipper flew at me like a young tiger."

"Good heavens!" breathed the Head.

"He hit me on the arm first," said Starke weakly. "After that I tried to get out of his way, because I could see that he was in a dangerous, beastly temper. But he shouted, and lashed out with all his strength. I felt the blow on my head. I seemed to see a blinding light, and—and that's all I know. But I don't want Nipper to get into trouble over it. I'm not bitter against him, sir. I expect he was in a terrible paddy, you know."

The Head sat for a moment or two without saying a word, and Starke watched him dreamily. Dr. Stafford had turned very pale. So Kenmore's story was perfectly true, after all! Kenmore had not been mistaken!

Starke, by adopting the attitude he had adopted, gained the sympathy of all in the room. He didn't want the culprit punished. He had confessed that he had insulted Nelson Lee, and explained that he had been intent upon apologising. Starke's statement, in fact, had rung absolutely true. It had been straightforward, plain, and without a single contradiction.

It seemed positively genuine, and it was scarcely to be wondered at that the Headmaster of St. Frank's accepted it as such. How, indeed, could he have the slightest doubt?

Dr. Stafford left the room with bowed shoulders. He went straight down to his study and rang the bell. When Tubbs appeared, he ordered the page-boy to fetch Mr. Crowell. And the Remove master arrived within five minutes.

"Mr. Crowell, I have some terrible news," said the Head gravely. "Starke has just recovered, and he has told me the truth concerning the assault. I can scarcely believe that I am in my right senses."

Mr. Crowell was startled.

"It—it cannot be possible that Nipper—" he began.

"It pains me terribly to tell you that Nipper is the guilty party," said the Head, with a break in his voice. "I trusted that lad implicitly; I did so because of his wonderful record—his record with Mr. Nelson Lee and his record at St. Frank's. But Starke has told me that it was Nipper who attacked him—and the attack was a brutal one, Mr. Crowell—a deliberate, fierce assault."

"I cannot credit it, sir," said Mr. Crowell huskily.

"Nevertheless it is perfectly true," went on Dr. Stafford. "Not only that, but we now find that Nipper is guilty of grave falsehood. He swore that he was innocent, while he was actually guilty. In short, Mr. Crowell, we must conclude that Nipper is not only guilty of a villainous attack upon Starke, but that he is guilty of base lying. He is an unmitigated young scoundrel."

"Really, sir, I cannot believe it!" said Mr. Crowell staunchly. "There must be a mistake somewhere—there must be! Starke was delirious, or he did not know what he was saying. And Starke's character is not unblemished, sir. He disliked Nipper. Is it not possible that he manufactured his story—?"

"Absurd, Mr. Crowell—quite absurd," said Dr. Stafford, shaking his head. "Indeed, Starke was reluctant to tell me the truth. And he requested that Nipper should go unpunished. No, there is no shadow of doubt."

"And—and what do you propose?" asked Mr. Crowell slowly.

"There is only one course for me to take," said the Head. "Nipper must leave St. Frank's without delay—he must leave the school this very day. And he will be lucky to escape so lightly!"

Immediately after morning lessons the truth was known to everybody—the truth, that is, concerning Starke's recovery. Everything else that was known was a string of foul, blackguardly lies.

I was called before the Head, and I quietly denied the charge. But Dr. Stafford cut me short, and declared that it was imperative that I should leave St. Frank's before the evening.

At the moment I was in dire trouble, and the outlook was as black as it could possibly be. But I have heard it said that every cloud has a silver lining. Perhaps this cloud had—but there was no trace of the lining so far!

THE END.

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ALAN CARNE, a young Britisher captured by the Germans in East Africa, is cast out at the end of the War, to wander in the jungle. He is joined by a Hottentot servant named

JAN SWART. After a few days of hardship they fall in with

DICK SELBY and his native servants. Alan and Dick become great pals. They witness the death of an old man named John Hammond, who tells them a wonderful story of a house in the jungle, where an English girl is kept captive. The chums determine to find this mysterious house. On the way Dick slips and falls into a river. He floats down stream and manages to make a landing. After walking for some hours he hears voices. He has unwittingly walked into an Arab camp, and the Arab leader is Tib Mohammed, the noted slave dealer. A girl called Lorna has also been captured, and in view of the sentry the two have a talk together. She tells him of a man named Taverner whom her father wished her to marry, against her wish.

(Now read on.)

THE TWO CAPTIVES.

DICK SELBY dared not trust himself to speak. His heart was beating fast, and his eyes were ablaze with wrath. And then and there he registered a vow that nothing should prevent him from penetrating to the hidden valley and denouncing Taverner as the treacherous scoundrel that he was.

But might not Robert Ferguson have connived at the ruthless and murderous pursuit of John Hammond, in spite of Alan Carne's indignant assertion to the contrary? Dick felt that he must get at the truth.

"So this fellow Taverner is still living in the valley?" he said.

"Yes, it is his home," the girl answered. "But he wasn't there when I was caught. Though he made his escape from the Bajangas, he has been on friendly terms with them. He has gone to see them several times, and two or three weeks ago he left the valley again, telling father that he was going to pay another visit to the Bajanga village."

"That was just after my friend Hammond

was sent down the Bana River with the Somalis, wasn't it?"

"Yes Ralph Taverner went away that same evening, I remember."

"And your father believed what he said, Miss Lorna?"

"Of course he did. Why shouldn't he?"

Dick's heart was lighter now. He was sure that Robert Ferguson had not been aware of Ralph Taverner's intention to hound John Hammond to his death. What had been Taverner's object? Merely to prevent Hammond from getting down-country, and disclosing the secret of the hidden valley? No, there had been presumably a stronger motive than that.

"You haven't told me yet how you happened to be caught by the slavers," said the lad.

"It was my own fault," Lorna Ferguson sadly replied. "I had been forbidden to leave the valley, and I disobeyed my father. I wanted to fish in the river, and I thought there wouldn't be any harm in it if I did. So I paddled out through the opening in the

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cliffs in my canoe, and ran straight into three Arabs who were passing in another canoe. They put me into their boat, and brought me down the Bana to Tib Mohanmed's camp, a journey of four or five days."

"That was hard luck for you. They will keep you a prisoner, I am afraid."

"Oh, no! I believe I shall be rescued."

"Why do you think that, Miss Lorna?"

"Because Selim, one of our Somalis, saw me caught by the Arabs from the top of the cliffs. He was sent there by my father, who has now and again had a watch set. He has been uneasy for weeks, having learned that the slavers had heard rumours of the valley, and that they were trying to find it."

"Selim must have hastened to the house with the news, and my father and Chanka, and some of the Somalis, would have started down the river in canoes in pursuit of me as quickly as possible. They couldn't have been far behind. They may come at any minute, and we shall both be rescued."

"By George, that's fine!" exclaimed Dick.

"How many of the Somalis are there in all?"

"There are thirty of them," said the girl.

"And I should think that father would have brought half of them with him."

"Well, that ought to be enough to deal with Tib Mohammed and his band, if they take them by surprise. You've made me feel a lot more cheerful, Miss Lorna. I want badly to get away from here. Alan Carne must be marching in this direction with my safari, and——"

The lad broke off abruptly, and, courageous though he was, a greyish pallor crept into his bronzed cheeks.

"You'll be all right," he said hoarsely; "but I guess if the Somalis don't arrive pretty soon they won't find me alive."

"What do you mean?" Lorna Ferguson asked.

"I've just thought of something I'd forgotten," Dick answered. "It clean slipped my mind. Tib Mohammed swore that he would kill me in the morning, and it's nearly that now."

"Yes, he did say that, in English," the girl assented, in a startled tone. "I had forgotten, too."

"It's a knock-out blow, Miss Lorna. It's hit me hard, though I'm no coward. I reckon I'll never see the hidden valley. Alan Carne and I had meant to push on there."

Lorna Ferguson shook her head gravely.

"You could never have found it," she replied; "and it would have been foolish of you to try. It is a forbidden place. My father won't have strangers come there."

"You needn't worry," muttered the lad. "I'm as good as dead."

"Don't talk like that. Why shouldn't you escape? My hands are free, and I'll untie yours, so that you will be able to slip off while it is still dark."

"I never thought of that, Miss Lorna. Be quick about it. I'll take my chance if I get it and if I escape I'll contrive to set you free, should you not be rescued by the Somalis."

The faint glow of the dawn was now flushing on the horizon. Nestling closer to Dick, the girl thrust her hands behind him, and with nimble fingers tugged guardedly at his fetters. It did not take her long. The loosed cords soon slipped from the lad's wrists, and the next instant Lorna Ferguson clutched his arm.

"Look!" she whispered. "Where is he going?"

THE ATTACK ON THE CAMP.

IT was the Arab sentry who had attracted the girl's attention. He had risen from the log, and was standing in an alert attitude, clutching his long-barrelled gun and gazing towards the river.

Suddenly he glided in that direction, and as he disappeared from their range of vision Lorna Ferguson and the lad crept to the arched doorway of the hut and peered around the side of it.

"What can be the matter?" asked the girl, in a low tone. "He must have seen something, or heard some suspicious noise."

"One or the other, I guess," Dick replied. "He's as jerky as a bunch of live wires."

It was evident that something had startled the Arab. He was standing at the water's edge, crouched like a stalking panther, now craning his neck to right and left, and now putting a hand to his ear.

For a few seconds he remained thus, looking into the jungle growth on both sides of him and out on to the murky current; and then, of a sudden, he threw his big gun to his shoulder and pointed it up the stream.

"He is going to shoot!" gasped Lorna.

The weapon belched a jet of flame. There was a thunderous explosion, and it was followed almost immediately by two sharp, barking reports from a small firearm.

The shots had been aimed at the Arab, and one of them had hit him. He gave a convulsive jump, uttering a screech of agony; and as he pitched headlong on the pebbly shore, a quivering, huddled heap, there was a burst of lusty cheers, mingled with crashing, floundering sounds.

"By Jove, it must be your people!" declared Dick.

"Yes, father and the Somalis!" cried the girl. "The have landed somewhere above, and are coming to rescue us!"

The wiser course would have been for them to stay in their huts; but Lorna, in her joy and excitement, at once darted out, and the lad hastened after her.

By then the slavers had swarmed from their huts, and were gazing around them in panic and confusion. The girl ran blindly in amongst them, and was promptly seized; and Dick, fearing that she would be carried off before she could be rescued, at once dashed with reckless valour to her assistance.

Snatching a pistol from one of the Arabs, he felled him to the ground with a stroke

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)

from the butt of the weapon, and flung himself into the thick of the group.

So desperate was his onset, so effective the blows he dealt with the pistol, that he pressed the slavers back a little, and succeeded in tearing Lorna from their clutches.

He had no more than pushed her behind him, when the rescue-party came rushing from the thickets into the camp, a dusky, seething mass in the grey light of the dawn.

The girl sped towards them, calling to Dick, and he was about to follow her, when one of the Arabs struck him a glancing blow on the head with the stock of a gun.

He staggered, dizzy with pain, and a second blow barely missed him as he toppled into a copse of bushes at the rear of the smouldering fire.

The sheltering foliage closed over him, and as his senses swam Lorna's voice rang faintly to his ears:

"Save him, father! Save the white boy!"

For a short interval the lad lay there stunned, and when at length he scrambled to his feet, still half-dazed, the fight was in full swing in front of him. Yells and shouts, the spluttering of revolvers, and the heavy reports of guns blended in a deafening inferno of noise.

The white-robed Somalis and the Arabs, in their garments of blue cotton, were surging to and fro, hacking and thrusting and shooting.

The girl was invisible, but there was a glimpse of a tall, yellow-bearded man, who was discharging a revolver; and by his side the stalwart Masai warrior, Chanka, wearing a waistcoat of leopard's skin, was attacking his enemies with a great double-bladed spear.

"It's a toss-up who wins," Dick said to himself. "There are as many of one party as the other."

The struggle was soon over. The slavers, finding that they were getting the worst of it, suddenly gave way to their assailants, and took to their heels.

They fled to right and left of the lad, yelling with rage as they scuttled to the east side of the glade, where the ascent to the forest was not so steep as at the rear.

Dick had recovered from the effects of the blow now. Through the wreathing powder-smoke he saw Lorna clasped in her father's arms, and he was about to hurry forward, when, to his consternation, the big Masai charged towards him, shouting his booming war-cry.

Being unable to see the lad clearly, he was under the impression that he was one of the Arabs.

"It's all right!" Dick exclaimed, as loudly as he could. "I'm a friend!"

Either his voice was drowned by the tumult, or Chanka did not understand the words. Still bellowing his blood-curdling war-cry, he charged on, and lunged with his spear at the lad, who felt the point of the weapon prick him as he turned and ran for his life. He had the undischarged pistol he had wrenched from one of the slavers, but he was loth to fire at the Masai.

Having gained a little on his pursuer by prodigious strides, he reached the base of the slope that was at the back of the camp; and, not daring to stop there, he exerted all his strength and bounded to the top of it.

He plunged into the dark, leafy cover beyond him, and floundered through it for a few yards, with the intention of hiding until it would be safe for him to return.

But as he stopped a shadowy form sprang at him. Two muscular arms clasped him around the waist, and the next instant he was lifted off his feet and thrown across the shoulder of Tib Mohammed, whose voice hissed savagely at his ear:

"You white dog! I have you!"

It was the excitement that had sustained Dick's strength. He had eaten nothing since the evening of the Bajanga attack, thirty-six hours ago, and he was now helpless, unable to offer any resistance. Nor could he call for help, for his captor was tightly squeezing his throat with one hand.

On both sides of him he heard guttural voices and the patter of feet. The Arabs who had survived the battle were in flight with their leader, and all was quiet in the rear, save for a vague clamour that was gradually ebbing.

There was not a sound to indicate that Robert Ferguson and his Somalis were in pursuit of the fugitives. The lad was doubtless to be abandoned to his fate, and he knew why.

"I guess there's no chance of my being rescued," he reflected. "Lorna will try to persuade her father to come after me, but he'll refuse, because he doesn't want strangers to learn anything about his hidden valley. I'm mighty glad the girl has been rescued, though."

The band of slavers pushed steadily and rapidly on, penetrating dense and sombre

(Continued overleaf.)



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jungle, and it was not until they had gone for a couple of miles that they halted in an open glade.

The course they had taken was shown by a glimpse of running water through a fringe of foliage to the left. It was the stream that flowed from south to north and emptied into the Bana River.

Dick had meanwhile been put on his feet and dragged along with the party; and now, having emerged from the gloom of the forest into the bright light of the day, he perceived that the Arabs had captured and brought with them one of the Somalis.

There had been fifteen of the slavers in all, and only nine of them were left. They had lost six of their number in the fight, and they had also lost their canoes and their luggage, including the tusks of ivory.

They glared at the lad, whose spirits had risen a little. He was inclined to take a more encouraging view of the situation.

"While there's life there's hope," he said to himself. "Alan Carne and the safari must be marching in this direction in search of me, and if it comes to a fight there will be enough of them to wipe out these devils, I reckon."

His attention was drawn to the other prisoner. Tib Mohammed was questioning the Somali, and evidently trying to extort from him information regarding the hidden valley. Again and again the man obstinately shook his head. He was loyal to his white master.

Threats and persuasion alike failed to induce him to speak, and finally, losing

patience with him, the Arab leader whipped a pistol from his belt and shot the poor fellow dead. Giving the quivering body a vicious kick, he strode over to Dick, and grinned at him ferociously.

"You know something of hidden valley, eh?" he demanded.

"I told you before that I didn't," replied the lad, who could scarcely restrain himself from flying at the murderous scoundrel's throat. "I came from the south."

"Mebbe it is true," snarled Tib Mohammed. "Yes, I think you do not lie. You never been to valley. But my men tell me of the way to it under big cliffs, where they catch the white girl. Some day I go in there and get many diamonds. I kill that Somali because he sullen dog, who not speak, and I kill you, too, by and by. No hurry, though. First we march up the river, and find your safari, and shoot them all. You tell me there be many of them, and mebbe that true also. Yet they mostly black porters, who are cowards, and will not fight."

Dick repressed a smile, and screwed his face into a look of doleful apprehension. He had seen how well the Wakambas and Swahilis could fight, and he believed they would do the same again. He was delighted to hear that the slavers were going to march south to seek for the safari, trusting that it would lead to his being rescued, should his life be spared in the meantime. But it was of food that he was thinking more than of anything else. He was so faint with hunger that he could scarcely stand.

(To be continued.)

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