No. 206.—ENGROSSING SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE YARN!

1½D. THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 1½D.

EXPELLED FROM ST. FRANK'S!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Rascal of the Sixth," "Freed from Bondage" "Faked Evidence," etc., etc.

May 17th, 1919.

Expelled from St. Frank's

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Rascal of the Sixth," "Freed from Bondage," "Faked Evidence," etc., etc.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

UNDER A CLOUD!

ST. FRANK'S was in an uproar.

That, in a way of speaking, is putting it mildly. And all this uproar was mainly on account of the skipper of the Remove Form in the Ancient House. This young gentleman was on the point of being expelled in dire disgrace from the school.

And, as the captain of the Remove happened to be myself, I was not feeling particularly gay. Such an event as this was about the very last thing that one would have expected to happen.

I—Nipper—was shortly to receive the order of the boot.

And why?

Not because I had deserved expulsion, but because Walter Starke, of the Sixth, had deliberately faked up evidence to get me sacked. That was really the long and the short of it.

I knew the evidence was faked because I knew that I hadn't committed the crime with which I was charged. But the other fellows didn't know it. They were compelled to choose between two alternatives. One—to believe my unsupported word; or, two—to accept the long list of evidence which was arrayed against me.

It was asking a lot to expect any sane person to believe in me; it was asking such a lot that I had no hope of retaining the loyalty of any single fellow—with the notable exceptions of Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

These two were my own particular chums—my own study-mates. And they, I knew, would remain staunch, no matter how black the evidence against me happened to be. I was positive of their support.

As for the rest, it was hardly fair for me to expect even an outward show of loyalty.

Morning lessons were over, and I had only just left the Headmaster's study, after hearing the fatal decision Dr. Stafford had decreed that I should leave St. Frank's that very day.

It was a terrible blow to me, and I was almost stunned by it. But I was far more stunned by the shock of hearing that Starke had deliberately lied in order to get me kicked out of the school.

For me to blame the Head would have been unjust. He had believed in me strongly until Starke had told his story. After that it was really impossible for the Head to retain the slightest faith in any utterance of mine. For the whole string of evidence was as black as pitch against me.

I hadn't yet told my two chums. But they knew. The story had got about like wildfire. Before I arrived in Study C, in the Ancient House, practically every senior and junior in the school knew that I was booked for expulsion.

They knew that I had been proved guilty of a brutal assault upon Starke, of the Sixth. For that was the charge. And, so far as I could see, there was no single loophole for me to escape.

I found Tregellis-West and Watson waiting for me in the study, after my interview with the Head. I had passed several other juniors on the way, but they had only stared at me, and I had said nothing.

"Well?" asked Watson hoarsely.

"Don't you know?" I asked. "Everybody else seems to know, anyhow. The Head's told me that I'm going to be sacked. As a matter of fact, I'm sacked already. I've simply got to pack up—that's all."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Watson dazedly.

"Dear old fellow, there must be some frightful bloomer," said Sir Montie. "I can't believe that the Head has given you the order of the boot. It's too shockin'; it's too frightful!"

"And I'm helpless," I said, clenching my fists. "I can't do a single thing. There isn't time to investigate anything—I've got to clear before this evening! Oh, why isn't the guv'nor here?"

"This sort of thing generally happens when a chap's alone," said Watson. "Couldn't you send a wire to Mr. Lee, or something——"

"I don't know where he is," I replied, sinking into a chair.

And that was the literal truth.

Nelson Lee, my guv'nor—the famous criminologist—had left St. Frank's over a week before, bound on a mission to Spain or Italy. I really didn't know where he was, for he had been pledged to secrecy.

But I did know that I was left on my own at St. Frank's. I had nobody to turn to And Walter Starke had seized the opportunity to get his own back. Starke had had his knife into me for some time, because I had organised a stiff resistance against the bullying.

Starke had been the chief culprit, and his defeat had weighed heavily upon him. He and Kenmore had planned a little scheme to get even with me—as they termed it. The idea had been to get me flogged for striking a prefect. But the plot had worked out very differently, and I was in a maze regarding the actual truth.

"Sacked!" I exclaimed bitterly. "If I thought there was the slightest chance, I'd go to the Head again; I'd ask him to give me an opportunity of proving my innocence. But he wouldn't listen. I couldn't expect him to."

"It's a terrible position, dear old boy," said Sir Montie smoothly. "But you'll win through. I haven't the slightest doubt about that—I haven't, really. You generally manage to come out on top, begad!"

I looked up suddenly.

"By the way," I said, "what about you chaps? You've heard the evidence, haven't you? You've heard what Starke's said?"

"Yes," said Watson bluntly.

"Well?"

"What do you mean—'well'?" asked Watson. "It seems jolly rotten to me—not well!"

"I mean, don't you think that I'm guilty?" I asked quietly.

Tregellis-West and Watson gazed at one another. Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez and set his jaw. Tommy Watson slowly pushed back his coat-sleeves.

"Say that again!" he said grimly. "Say it again, you silly ass, and I'll bump you on the floor!"

"An' I'll help you, begad!" said Sir Montie.

"Don't you say anything like that another time!" continued Watson warmly. "Do we think you're guilty! What rot! Do we think the stars are coming down to earth! You thundering ass, we know you're innocent!"

"But the evidence——"

"Hang the evidence—blow the evidence—rats to the evidence!" roared Watson. "What do I care about evidence? Do you think we don't know the stuff you're made of? If we can't be true to our chum, it's time we pegged out!"

"I'm with you all along, Tommy, old boy," said Sir Montie gracefully. "I was goin' to say all that, you know, but not quite so forcibly. However, it's just as well to ram the points home, begad! There's nothin' like showin' the frightful duffer that we won't stand any nonsense!"

I looked at my chums with glowing eyes.

"You're a couple of real pals," I said quietly. "You simply trust in me when the darkness is at its worst stage——"

"Why, you fathead, the sun is shining!" said Watson obtusely.

"Dear old Nipper was speakin' in metaphor," explained Sir Montie, with a smile.

"I don't care how he was speaking," said Watson. "I only know that we've got to stick by him, even if everybody else goes against the three of us. He can always rely on our loyalty."

"Right to the last lap, begad!" said Tregellis-West.

"It's splendid of you——" I began.

"And if you say anything like that again, you'll make me wild," interrupted Watson fiercely. "There's nothing splendid in a couple of chaps sticking up for their pal. So don't make a mountain out of a molehill. It's our duty, if it comes to that. I don't care what Starke says, or what anybody else says. You didn't bash him on the head, and I never will believe that you bashed him on the head!"

And Watson thumped the table to emphasise his words.

"But all this doesn't alter the fact that the position is simply frightful," said Sir Montie. "It's not only frightful, but appallin'. You don't seem to realise, Tommy, that Nipper is leavin' St. Frank's to-day! He's expelled—sacked in disgrace!"

"I don't believe he'll go!" said Watson. "Dash it all, I can't believe it. It's too awful to think about!"

Meanwhile, the other fellows in the Remove were discussing the same subject; and several of them were like Watson. They couldn't believe that I had received my orders to quit.

In the lobby of the Ancient House a group of Removites were talking animatedly. They were discussing the various points in the whole case; they were attempting to find a chance of believing that a mistake had been made. But everything seemed so black.

"We'll go over the thing in detail," said Reginald Pitt firmly. "Personally, I can't believe that Nipper is such a cad—I don't believe it. And if we only discuss everything that's happened, we shall find a weak spot somewhere. Every case of this kind has a weak spot, and we've got to lay our fingers on it."

"That's all very well," said Owen major. "But this isn't an affair where we're asked to believe the bare word of a fellow like Starke. It's everything combined; and everything fits together."

"Just as if it had been manufactured," said Jack Grey.

"Eh? Manufactured!" said Pitt. "H'm! So it does, Jack. I wonder if any part of it was faked up? The beginning of it all was

that Starke and Nipper had a quarrel last night——"

"A quarrel which was manufactured," said Grey.

"Exactly," agreed Pitt. "That's just what I meant. Starke came along and deliberately insulted Nipper, so that the poor chap was enraged so much that he let fly. Starke went off while he was still safe, after uttering a lot of insults, and Nipper threatened to get even."

"That's a point against him," said Hubbard.

"Perhaps it is—or it seems to be," continued Pitt. "The next thing was that Nipper broke bounds after lights-out to go down to the River House School—to work off a jape on Brewster and Co. It's a pity he went alone—but there it is. Nipper found Starke lying unconscious in the road——"

"Rats!" said Hubbard. "Nipper met Starke, and sloshed him over the head with a whacking great stick!"

"I'm relating Nipper's version," said Pitt. "Nipper's account was that he found Starke lying unconscious—battered and badly injured. Nipper's own stick was on the ground, and he picked it up mechanically——"

"A likely yarn!" sneered Gulliver.

"Very likely indeed—quite reasonable, in fact," said Pitt calmly. "Why shouldn't he pick up his own stick? And I should like to know whether it's unreasonable to suppose that Starke should have taken it out with him? That stick was in the cloak-room, and Starke must have gone to the cloak-room to get his cap. But we'll let that point pass. What happened next?"

"Why, Kenmore came along and found Nipper bending over Starke," said Grey. "Isn't it rather queer that both Starke and Kenmore should have been out at the same time? Isn't that a weak spot, Reggie?"

"Hardly," replied Pitt. "They sleep in different bedrooms, and it might have been a coincidence. Kenmore accused Nipper of inflicting a nasty wound on Starke's forehead, and Nipper swore that he was innocent. He was hauled before the Head, and the story was gone into. Dr. Stafford believed in Nipper, and so did most of the chaps here——"

"I didn't," said Gulliver. "I thought he was guilty all along."

"Yes, you would!" said Pitt contemptuously. "Well, we knew nothing more until half an hour ago. Then we learned that Starke had recovered consciousness. Until he spoke there was still a general hope that Nipper's innocence would be proved. But Starke has said it was Nipper who attacked him—that it was Nipper who struck him to the ground."

"And there's no earthly reason why Starke should say a thing like that if it wasn't true," put in Hubbard. "He even said something about it in his delirium, before he actually recovered. And that proves it to the hilt. He couldn't say a thing like that in delirium unless it was true."

"Of course he couldn't," agreed Owen major. "I've always reckoned that Nipper was a fine chap, and I've generally backed him up; but this affair is a bit too thick. He quarrelled with Starke, met Starke in the lane, and whacked him. That's the case in a nutshell. While Starke was unconscious he swore that he was innocent. Perhaps he thought that Starke would remember nothing about it, or something of that sort. But it's all finished with now. Starke was able to tell what happened, and Nipper is going to be sacked."

"And serve him right, too!" declared Hubbard. 'Don't forget that Starke's story of what took place, told the very instant he recovered consciousness, tallies perfectly with the evidence that was obtained beforehand. So there's no giddy possibility of any hitch or mistake."

"That's what it looks like, anyhow," admitted Pitt. "But, as Nipper knows only too well himself, appearances aren't everything. It's my belief that there'll be a surprise in this case before long. Starke's story has made Nipper out to be a liar; but I think it's far more likely that Starke is the liar!"

"Hear, hear!" said Grey.

But he was not echoed by anybody else. The fellows could not quite accept the theory that Starke had lied.

"When you come to analyse the case fully, it becomes more convincing against Nipper than ever," said Owen major. "If we accept the theory that Nipper didn't do it, we've got to bear in mind that somebody else did. And who could that somebody else be? A tramp? Ridiculous, because Starke's money and watch were intact. And there's another point, too—and I don't believe any of you fellows have considered it."

'What point's that?" asked Pitt.

"We'll still assume that Nipper is innocent, as he says he is," continued Owen major, with really astonishing shrewdness. "That means that somebody else bowled Starke over——"

'You said that before," put in Hubbard.

"I know I did; but this is different," continued Owen. "Somebody else knocked Starke down; and it stands to reason that Starke couldn't have known anything about Nipper coming to the spot. Doesn't it?"

"Well, I suppose it does," agreed Pitt. "What of it?"

"That's my point," said Owen. "Don't you understand? Accepting the fact that Nipper's innocent, Starke knew nothing of him coming—he didn't even know that he helped to carry him indoors. Then how do you account for the fact that the very first thing that Starke said, when he regained his wits, was that Nipper was guilty? How could he have said that if Nipper hadn't turned up until after Starke was knocked senseless? Answer me that question?"

It was certainly a poser, and the juniors were struck by the force of Owen major's argument—which was perfectly sound, and which was repeated again and again by other fellows. It was the one positive point which precluded any doubt. It proved beyond question that Starke had spoken the truth.

Perhaps the juniors would have thought differently if they had known of one fact. Starke had recovered consciousness before the Head knew of it. Kenmore had been alone with the patient. Starke had come to himself, and the pair had talked for fully ten minutes. But nobody knew of this—not even the doctor. The doctor and the Head believed that Starke's first conscious words had been uttered in their presence.

If they had known otherwise they would not have been so ready to accept the injured senior's story. But, knowing nothing of that preliminary recovery, so to speak, they were forced to one conclusion, and one conclusion only.

And this, of course, applied to the school at large. All the fellows, against their better judgment, were positively compelled to believe that I was unquestionably guilty.

But I soon learned that Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were not my only supporters.

CHAPTER II.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, of the Remove, was delivering a speech. This meant that a considerable commotion was taking place—quite a common occurrence when Edward Oswald was holding forth. He was standing upon a form in the common-room, shouting at a crowd of fellows, who were not taking much notice of him.

"I maintain that the whole thing is piffle—sheer, unadulterated piffle!" he roared. "That's my opinion, anyway. And my argument is incapable of dispute. It's as sound as any argument can possibly be. And I defy any silly ass here to say a word to the contrary!"

Nobody made any remark.

"Ah! I thought so!" said Handforth. "You've got nothing to say——"

"But you defied any silly ass to dispute your argument," interrupted De Valerie. "You're the only silly ass here, and I don't suppose you'll have an argument with yourself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared.

"This isn't the time for levity!" he shouted warmly. "Can't you chaps understand that Nipper—our captain—is booked to leave St. Frank's to-day? Think what it means! Nipper, the best chap in the Remove, is to be kicked out—kicked out for something he didn't do."

"Oh, you're an ass," said Armstrong. "We all liked Nipper; we thought he was a thundering good sort, and I'll admit that he's the best skipper the Remove ever had. But after that brutal attack on Starke we can't respect him any more. And the case has been proved to the hilt—beyond any doubt."

Handforth laughed harshly.

"Proved to the hilt be blowed!" he roared. "Do you think I take any notice of that rotten evidence? Is Starke's word to be trusted? Doesn't everybody here know that Starke is a beastly, crawling liar?"

"We're ready to admit that," said De Valerie seriously. "But that's not the only point. Starke is an outsider, and he has his knife into Nipper. That's history. And it's a bitter pill for us to swallow—the knowledge that Nipper has done something disgraceful——"

"But he hasn't done it!" shouted Handforth hotly.

"I wish I could share your opinion," said De Valerie. "Perhaps I do share it; but I can't get over the facts—I can't forget the evidence. If there was just the faintest hope, I'd swear by Nipper. But what hope is there?"

"None!"

"Nipper's guilty!"

"Of course he is!"

"The cad deserves to be kicked out!"

Handforth fairly danced.

"You beastly lot of traitors!" he bellowed. "You unfaithful cads! My argument is absolutely sound, as I said before. It's simple, too. As for the evidence, I sweep it aside—I don't take any notice of it at all. My point is this. Nipper is a fine chap, and he's absolutely incapable of performing a rotten act—therefore he couldn't possibly have done it. There's nothing easier. Nipper can't be the culprit, because he hasn't got it in him to do anything rotten. Well, what have you got to say to that?"

"Bosh!"

"Piffle!"

"Rats!"

The juniors were quite forcible in their expressions of opinion.

"That's no argument at all," said Hubbard. "It may be good enough for you, Handy, but it won't satisfy us. How do you know that Nipper's incapable of performing a rotten act?"

"Everybody knows it!" bawled Handforth.

"My dear old chap, it won't do!" said De Valerie, shaking his head. "I'll admit that Nipper's always been a first-class fellow until now. But don't forget that Starke provoked him terrifically. There's really some excuse for Nipper, and he may not have meant to hit Starke very hard. It must have been in a fit of temper, and a thing like that is all over in a tick. Nipper did it, though; and it's only right that he should be punished."

Handforth gazed at De Valerie almost sorrowfully.

"I'm surprised at you, De Valerie," he said grimly. "I didn't think you were capable of anything like this. After all Nipper's done for the Remove, you turn against him at the slightest provocation. You haven't an ounce of faith; you don't trust him. I'm absolutely ashamed of you!"

There was a hush in the common-room. Somehow, the fellows did not laugh at Handforth. He was not such an ass as usual; he was speaking seriously, gravely, and there

was a contempt in his voice which made Cecil De Valerie wince.

"Oh, draw it mild, Handy!" he muttered.

"Draw it mild!" roared Handforth. "I won't do anything of the sort! Has anybody here ever known Nipper to tell a lie? Answer me that!"

Nobody answered.

"Then why should he start lying now?" demanded Handforth. "Why should he have declared that he didn't knock Starke down? I'll tell you why! He made that statement because he was positive that his word would be supported by Starke. The simple truth of the matter is that Starke accused Nipper unjustly. Would Nipper have stuck to his yarn if he had known that he would be given the lie as soon as Starke came to himself? Would Nipper have been such a mad idiot as that? Why can't you use your wits, instead of taking everything for granted?"

De Valerie thumped the table.

"Hang it all, Handy, I believe you were right when you said that I ought to be ashamed of myself. I am! You've converted me. I'll take no notice of all the evidence—I'll simply believe that Nipper's innocent. I'll stick to him, and trust him all along the line!"

"Good man!" said Handforth heartily. "Oh, good man!"

"Silly ass!" said several other fellows.

But Handforth considered that his efforts were well repaid. He had turned one waverer, at all events. And De Valerie himself came to me shortly afterwards and apologised for having lost faith.

"That's all right, old son," I said quietly. "It's good to know that you're on my side—and I haven't the slightest right to claim your support. I'm innocent—and that's all I can say. Perhaps I shall be able to prove it before long."

"I hope you will—by gad, I do!" said De Valerie warmly.

Meanwhile, Handforth was somewhat hoarse. His audience had melted away—much to his indignation—and it was now solely composed of Church and McClure, Handforth's two chums of Study D.

"It's all very well, Handy; but you must admit that the facts——" began Church.

"What's that?" gasped Handforth. "Do—do you mean to tell me that you're wavering, Walter Church?"

"I—I——"

"Do you dare to stand there and express the opinion that Nipper's guilty?" demanded Handforth, peeling off his jacket and hurling it across the room. "Because, if so, I'll just show you how I deal with traitors!"

Handforth was in grim earnest. He was rolling up his sleeves to the elbow, and before Church could back away Handforth grasped him.

Whack!

"Yaroooooh!" howled Church, sitting down on the floor with a terrific bump. "You—you silly ass! 'Ow! I was only——"

"Get up!" roared Handforth. "Now, what's your opinion?"

Church swayed giddily as he stood up.

"I'm blessed if I'm going to be bullied by you!" he said warmly. "I've got a right to my opinion, and I think that the facts are so black that it's asking a lot of us to believe—— Ow-oooooop! Yaroooooh!"

Crash!

Church went to the floor again. But this time he sprang up in a moment, and hurled himself at Handforth with all his strength. It was not often that Handforth's chums so far forgot themselves as to engage in a fistic encounter with their redoubtable leader; but it did happen occasionally—and the result was always the same.

Bang! Slap! Wallop!

The fight was short and sharp. Handforth received several punches, but he hardly noticed them. As McClure had once said, Handforth had no sense and no feeling. He could take punishment with impunity.

Church, on the other hand, was whacked.

"Ease up, Handy!" he gasped, dabbing his nose, and sitting up. "I—I'm with you, old man. I'm sure that Nipper is innocent!"

"And about time, too!" said Handforth, rolling down his sleeves.

He donned his coat again, and then turned upon Church with a sudden glance of suspicion.

"Are you saying that because you're afraid of another hiding?" he demanded. "I don't stand any rot—not even from you! Now then, is Nipper guilty or not guilty?"

"Nun-not guilty, of course!" stammered Church.

Handforth pursed his lips.

"You're afraid of another licking!" he said bitterly. "Look here, if you give me your true opinion, I won't touch a hair of your head—not a hair! Now, out with it, my son!"

Church hesitated for just a second.

"Well, I'll speak the truth," he said. "I was half inclined to believe that Nipper was guilty at first. But it's impossible, Handy! Nipper's too good a sort to be guilty. You can count me on his side—right along!"

"Good!" said Handforth. "It's just as well you said that, too, because I should have knocked the stuffing out of you if you'd said anything else!"

"Why, you rotter, you promised not to touch a hair of my head!" said Church warmly.

Handforth grinned.

"You've got other parts besides your head," he said calmly. "But you've just saved yourself. What about you, Clurey?"

McClure looked rather astonished.

"Me? Why, I'm on your side, of course; I believe in Nipper," he said. "And it wouldn't be a bad idea to get up a little party—a band of supporters, so to speak. We'll stick together, in spite of the others."

"Not a bad wheeze," said Handforth condescendingly. "As a matter of fact, I should have thought of it myself before long."

And while all this discussion was going on—for and against me—I had managed to buttonhole Dr. Brett in the upper corridor. My idea was to see Starke, if it could be managed. But the doctor shook his head when I suggested it.

"I don't know, Nipper," he said. "Starke has been rather delirious, although he is all right again now. No doubt it was the strain of talking—he overdid it. It was only a passing touch."

"He wasn't swanking, I suppose?" I asked.

"Oh, no," smiled Brett. "I don't think Starke is capable of hoodwinking me in that respect, Nipper. But now we are having a word, I should like to tell you that you have my entire sympathy, young 'un."

"Do you believe in me, sir?" I asked quietly.

Dr. Brett patted my shoulder.

"I remember being arrested by the police on a charge of murder," he said smoothly. "I remember that the evidence was overwhelmingly black against me—and I remember that Mr. Nelson Lee and you remained staunch. You believed in my innocence—and you proved my innocence. That case can compare with this one. Why, Nipper, I never for a moment believed that you could be guilty of such a cowardly assault."

"Thank you, doctor," I said.

"Nonsense!" said Brett. "I need no thanks for having faith in you, my lad. There is something in this affair that is very queer, though. I can't quite get the hang of it. Starke was perfectly lucid when he made the accusation against you—but he was lying. Since you are innocent, he must have been lying. I don't think Starke likes you."

"He likes me just about as much as a tramp likes soap!" I replied. "Can't I have a word with him, doctor? You say he's all right now——"

"Well, I'll give you just three minutes," said Brett generously. "Pop along in, and I'll wait outside here for you. You'll find Starke alone at the moment—and I can quite understand that it will suit you better. I presume you want to ask him why he lied?"

"Yes," I said grimly—"I do!"

Leaving Dr. Brett out in the corridor, I passed into the sick-room. Starke was in bed, but he turned over and looked at me as I entered. Then he half-raised himself on one elbow.

"Get out of this room, you little blackguard!" he said thickly.

I approached the bed.

"I shall be out of the school altogether by this evening," I exclaimed. "I suppose you are feeling very pleased with yourself, Starke? Why did you tell the Head that I assaulted you? You can speak freely—we're quite alone. My word carries no weight—now. I should just like to know why you——"

"Clear out, you young worm!" interrupted Starke. "Aren't you satisfied with what you've done? You ought to be sent to prison for half-murdering me like this! You vicious, cowardly little reptile!"

"Keeping it up, eh?" I said grimly. "I thought perhaps you would——"

"I don't know how you dare come here!" interjected Starke. "After trying to kill me, too! I can see you now—I can see the murderous look in your eyes as you whirled that stick round your head! By George! I thought you meant to kill me outright!"

I smiled and shook my head.

"That kind of stuff might convince Dr. Stafford," I said. "But what's the good of trying it on me, Starke? You know well enough that you told a foul, horrible lie against me. You've got me sacked——"

"Good!" said Starke malevolently. "I'd like to see you in gaol!"

I turned, and walked towards the door. My visit was fruitless; there was nothing to be gained by remaining. I had thought that Starke would act differently, perhaps. But he was sticking to his story—even to me. He was not to be tripped.

"You haven't been long," said Dr. Brett, as I entered the passage.

"No, sir. Starke simply sticks to his rotten lie," I replied. "I can't argue with him. If I could only gain a slight clue—something to start on. But there's nothing whatever. It seems hopeless; yet somebody must have delivered that blow."

The doctor nodded gravely.

"Undoubtedly," he replied. "And it is my private belief that the culprit is a tramp who happened to be passing through the village. He encountered Starke in the lane, and knocked him down, intending to rob him."

"But Starke's money wasn't touched," I objected.

"You forget that you arrived on the scene," said Brett. "My theory is that the tramp was about to rob his victim when you appeared. The tramp concealed himself, and you naturally found Starke alone. Then, before the footpad could make any further move, Kenmore appeared—and the fellow simply bolted into the wood, while he was safe."

"It certainly seems probable," I said thoughtfully. "And Starke was slightly delirious, you say? Didn't he say anything? Didn't he mutter something which might serve as a clue?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Brett. "The period of delirium was very brief, and Starke said nothing relevant to the case whatever. He merely muttered a few words about a motor-car."

"Oh!" I said.

"There is nothing in that, of course," went on the doctor. "I forgot the exact words Starke used, but they implied that the car was being recklessly driven. I think Starke went for a motor-ride the other day, and it is evident that his mind was wandering in that direction."

"Yes, I suppose so," I agreed.

"Well, Nipper, I am terribly sorry that this has happened," said Brett. "Be of good

cheer, my boy, and hope for the best. I can assure you that I will do my utmost to influence Dr. Stafford in your favour—although he does not need much influencing. He is sorely troubled even now; he can hardly believe that you are guilty. Cheer up, Nipper. You haven't left St. Frank's yet, and I hope this trouble will blow over."

And Dr. Brett left me. His cheerful words had the effect of lifting the load of worry from my mind for a moment. But I realised that the doctor had been merely comforting me.

As I returned to Study C I thought over what Brett had said. It was nearly dinner-time, and I supposed I was to be allowed to dine with the rest of the fellows. But I didn't feel like eating a morsel.

When I arrived in Study C I found it empty. Montie and Tommy were probably looking for me elsewhere. And I sat down in my favourite chair, with my hands thrust deeply into my trousers pockets.

The great gong sounded for dinner, and the scuffling and scampering of feet out in the passage ceased. The school was in the big dining-hall. I was alone—left isolated.

But this was just what I wanted.

Tregellis-West and Watson were dining, too, of course. I was allowed an opportunity of having a quiet think. Perhaps the fellows would imagine that I was ashamed to go into hall. Well, they were at liberty to think anything they liked. I didn't seem to care much.

It was a pity that Starke had not given the game away in his brief spell of delirium. He had spoken of a motor-car—a motor-car being driven recklessly——

"Great guns!" I gasped.

I sat up in my chair, my eyes gleaming.

"A motor-car!" I muttered. "Is there something in it, after all? A motor-car! Is it possible that——"

But I paused, half afraid to allow my thought to go further. Then I grabbed my cap, left the study, and raced away to the spot in Bellton Lane where Walter Starke had been felled to the ground.

Had I obtained a clue—or was I on the wrong track?

CHAPTER III.

THE HEAD'S SYMPATHY.

THE lane was quite deserted.

It was the dinner-hour. Masters and boys were busily engaged, and the school grounds were utterly deserted. The lane, too, was devoid of life. I had the place absolutely to myself.

The spot where Starke had fallen had been undisturbed. But the centre of the road was hard and stony—there were no impressions. Dust lay thick at the sides, but it had no story to tell.

I examined the ground carefully and thoroughly.

My efforts were fruitless—except for one item. In the centre of the hard road I found a small, dark, oily spot. It was only about an inch in diameter, and I should not have noticed it unless I had been looking carefully. A drop of grease had fallen there—motor-grease.

In short, that spot of grease had been caused by a passing motor-car.

It meant nothing, of course. The car might have passed that very morning, for all I knew. But my mind was set into a train of thought, and the idea grew upon me. I formed a theory.

Starke had not been assaulted at all!

He had been knocked down by a motor-vehicle! He had been bowled over in the dark, and the driver had gone straight on. Cases of that sort are common—one sees them reported frequently in the newspapers.

And Starke, knowing that the real culprit would never be found, had accused me of striking him down. The thing had been worked in some way—I was sure of it. Probably Kenmore and Starke had arranged the plot together; although, somehow, I couldn't quite believe that Kenmore was a party to it. He honestly believed that I was guilty.

But I wanted time—time to make a full investigation.

What could I accomplish by the evening? Nothing. To leave St. Frank's at once would be maddening. But I had been told to go by the Head himself. What could I do?

There was only one course; I should have to appeal to Dr. Stafford to give me at least three days. With three clear days before me I could reasonably hope to solve the mystery.

I was so struck by this idea that I neglected to continue my search. I left the spot, and walked slowly back to the big gateway. Then I wandered about the Triangle, deep in thought.

It only seemed a minute or two, but I must have been walking for some little time, for I suddenly realised that a number of juniors were out. This meant that dinner was over.

Hiss!

The sound made me look round sharply. A number of fags were collected in a group, and they were hissing at me and making grimaces. I regarded them hotly for a moment, but then walked away with set teeth. Perhaps they weren't to be blamed for regarding me as an outsider; they knew that I was as good as sacked from the school.

Tregellis-West and Watson would be looking for me, I knew but I didn't want to meet them just then. My chief object was to see the Headmaster, and to appeal to him. So I walked briskly over to the private door and entered. Within a minute I found myself in the softly carpeted corridor which led to the Head's study.

"Well, my boy?"

I turned with a bit of a start. Dr. Stafford had emerged from another doorway without my being aware of it, and he came up in the rear. He was looking at me with grim, stern eyes.

"Can I have a word with you, sir?" I asked steadily.

"Come into my study," said the Head.

He opened the door and we passed within. The Head seated himself in his desk-chair and adjusted his spectacles.

"What is it you wish to say, Nipper?" he asked quietly. "It is rather strange that you should come to me after what has occurred. I have already told you that you must leave the school to-day, and I cannot depart from that decision. Even as it is, you are being dealt with leniently. I have decided that your expulsion shall not be a public one. You will leave quietly."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "But I was wondering if you would grant me a favour? I know it's rather impudent, but I hope you won't misunderstand. The guv'nor isn't here just now, as you know—Mr. Lee, I mean—and I shall never be able to face him if I don't tell him that I did my best to clear myself before being kicked out."

The Head frowned.

"I don't quite care for that expression, Nipper," he said. "Perhaps you are right, in a way—and I am more grieved than I can tell you. That you could be responsible for such a dastardly act is utterly amazing. I find it almost impossible to credit the affair. You must have been mad, Nipper—quite mad. Why did you do it, my boy? Oh, why did you not control yourself——"

"I expect you'll think I'm lying, sir, but I swear to you that I didn't touch Starke last night," I declared earnestly. "When I arrived on the scene Starke was lying on the road, unconscious."

The Head regarded me with a worried brow.

"I should like to believe you, Nipper—good gracious, boy, I almost find it possible to credit your statement!—in spite of the evidence which is arrayed against you!"

"Do you think I should come here and swear that I'm innocent if I'd really committed the act, sir?" I asked bitterly. "If only Mr. Lee were here, there'd be a difference!"

"You are quite wrong there, Nipper," said the Head. "Even Mr. Lee's presence would not influence my decision. Guilty of such conduct, expulsion from the school is the only punishment possible. It is extremely fortunate that Starke's parents have decided not to prosecute. But really, Nipper, I find it increasingly difficult to resign myself to the fact that you are guilty. Come, my boy, if you have anything to tell me—be brave and speak out. Did you hit Starke in any way last night?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Do you know anything beyond what you have already told me?"

"Nothing whatever, sir," I said. "I have told you the truth, and just the truth. I'm not a saint, and I won't say that I haven't told a little fib now and again, but only of a nature that was of no consequence. Mr. Lee will tell you that I've never deliberately lied to him. And I shouldn't start now, should I? Starke was knocked down by somebody else. He says that I did it. Starke is a liar, sir."

"If Starke has lied, Nipper, it is one of the most villainous falsehoods imaginable," said Dr. Stafford. "But you can prove nothing, Nipper—I can prove nothing. I want to believe you, my boy; I have always had the deepest regard for you."

"Then will you grant me this little favour, sir?" I asked eagerly. "I want to stay at St. Frank's for another three days—just until the end of the week. Will you allow me to stop, sir?"

"I am afraid it is quite impossible——"

"But so much depends upon it," I went on. "I'm pretty sure that I can find out the truth within three days—I shall be able to clear myself. Most of the fellows are jeering at me now, and it's—it's horrible! After being liked and respected, it's hard to leave St. Frank's in dire disgrace!"

The Head regarded me somewhat curiously.

"Such a request on your part is rather enlightening," he said. "If you were guilty, you would hardly dare to make such a proposal. Being innocent, however, it is the first thought that would enter your head. You wish to stay—you wish to clear yourself of the charge?"

"I do, sir."

The Head rose to his feet and paced up and down for a few moments.

"It is a great concession on my part," he said, after a few moments. "In consideration of your unblemished record, Nipper, I will grant this request. You may remain here until Saturday, and I will release you from all duties, so that you may occupy your time fully upon the matter in hand. How will that suit you, my boy?"

"Thanks awfully, sir," I said eagerly. "Oh, it's splendid of you! And do you still think that I'm guilty?"

"I hardly know what to think," replied the Head. "My knowledge of human nature prompts me to set you down as innocent; but then the recollection of all the evidence comes into my mind, and I am troubled with doubts. I would prefer to pass no opinion just now, Nipper. I will see what you can do during these three days. If you are successful, as you hope for, I shall owe you a humble apology. If you have been deceiving me, and if you achieve nothing, I shall be only too pleased to be well rid of you."

"I haven't been deceiving you, sir, and if I can't convince you of my innocence within three days I'll go away willingly," I said. "This chance was all I needed—and I'm very grateful, sir."

"Then go, Nipper, and do your best," said Dr. Stafford, laying a kindly hand upon my shoulder. "And remember that my deep sympathy is with you—for, in spite of what I have just said, I find it hard to think ill of you. I pray that you will be successful."

I went out of the Head's study lightheartedly. I had gained my object; I was to be allowed to stay for three days longer. Quite a lot could be accomplished in that

time; and even if it was impossible to fully establish my innocence, I should at least be able to set the ball rolling.

The Head, I knew, really believed in me; he simply didn't like to say so, because it wouldn't have been quite the thing. And he was only too glad to give me the opportunity I sought for.

"Good news, my sons!" I said cheerfully, as I burst into Study C.

Tregellis-West and Watson were there, both of them looking miserable. But they started up as I entered.

"Begad!" ejaculated Montie. "Good news! You don't mean that——"

"Not yet, you ass!" I interrupted. "Give me a giddy chance! But the Head has told me that I can stay on until the end of the week. I'm freed from all lessons, and I can devote all my energies to solving the mystery!"

"Oh, ripping!" shouted Watson joyously. "Hurrah!"

"Toppin', dear fellow—absolutely toppin'!" declared Montie.

They grabbed hold of me and danced me round the study; and I was perfectly willing to be treated in such a manner. For, to tell the truth, I was feeling so enormously relieved that I felt like shouting on my own account.

"Why, this means that you won't leave St. Frank's at all!" gasped Watson. "Oh, it's fine! You'll do the trick, Nipper! I'll bet my giddy cricket-bat that you'll ferret out the whole truth!"

"I've got to—or else clear for good!" I said. "It's the last chance, and you can reckon that I shall grab hold of it with both fists. I'm going to get to work this very afternoon, and——"

"Hallo! What's the jollity about?"

It was Reginald Pitt who asked that question. He had just put his head in the door, and one or two other juniors were behind him, looking into the study with curious glances.

"You seem pretty merry," went on Pitt. "I thought you were sacked? It's all rot, of course—I think the Head must be dotty—but I understood that you were leaving to-day?"

"The Head's turned up trumps," I replied. "Officially, he believes me guilty, and I'm booked to go. But he's given me three days' grace. I can stay until Saturday—and prove my innocence in the meantime."

"I say, that's fine!" said Pitt warmly. "I wish you luck, old man. It's a pity the Head didn't make it a week; it would give you more chance."

"I think I shall manage it all right," I said. "Don't worry."

There was a growl from the passage.

"Rotten, I call it," exclaimed Gulliver. "The Head ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself! It's like his nerve to give this outsider three days longer at St. Frank's!"

"We won't stand it!" said Bell hotly.

"Rather not!"

Reginald Pitt walked to the door.

"If there is any fellow here on the look-out for a thick ear he'll soon find one!" he said politely. "One more word from you, Gulliver, and I'll make your face look like a door-knocker!"

"It's like one now!" remarked Watson.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can threaten all you like!" roared Gulliver. "But the school isn't going to stand Nipper for three days longer—— Hi! What the dickens—— Leggo! Why, you beast—— Yarooooh!"

Gulliver received Pitt's fist on his left ear—according to Reginald's threat. And Gulliver roared with pain. He scudded down the passage, and the other fellows melted with him. Pitt turned back to the doorway of Study C and grinned.

"We'll soon deal with those rotters," he said calmly

"Dear old boy, I'm not quite so sure about it," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "I don't want to be a croaker, begad! But I'm afraid that some of the fellows will jib—I am, really. It's frightfully rotten; but these bounders are so beastly hasty, you know."

And Tregellis-West was quite right.

The news spread rapidly. It wasn't long before the whole junior school knew that I had been given permission to stay on until the end of the week. A few fellows were honestly pleased; a number of others were indifferent; but the bulk expressed their feelings in no uncertain terms.

"I don't see why we should put up with it!" said Hubbard angrily. "That rotter is allowed to stay here while Starke lies helpless in bed! Starke's a beast, I know, but he's got everybody's sympathy just now. And Nipper oughtn't to be allowed to remain——"

"What's that?"

Edward Oswald Handforth bustled up, and glared round at the crowd of juniors who were collected under the shady elms in the Triangle.

"What's that?" repeated Handforth. "Say it again Hubbard—say it again, and have your nose punched!"

Hubbard turned upon Handforth furiously.

"And we don't want any of your rot, either!" he shouted. "If you interfere in this, Handforth, you'll be wiped up—understand? Take my advice, and clear off while you're safe!"

Handforth nearly fainted. For Hubbard, of the Remove, to speak to him in such a manner was unheard-of. But Hubbard knew that he was backed by the whole crowd, while Handforth was alone. Hence Hubbard's boldness. He was quite a decent fellow, on the whole, but unreliable; he was ready to believe any story that was going the rounds, and scarcely ever relied upon his own judgment.

Handforth, on the other hand, believed nothing unless he saw it. He formed his own opinion about every subject, and no matter how weird that opinion happened to be, he considered it the only one worth anything.

But Handforth, for all his faults, was made of the right stuff at heart.

"Were—were you speaking to me, Arthur Hubbard?" he demanded.

"Yes, I was!" said Arthur Hubbard.

"Then you'd better put up your fists——"

"If you touch him, Handforth, we'll frog-march you!" put in Gulliver. "Why the dickens can't you mind your own business? Clear off, you bounder! Go and bury your ugly face! It worries me!"

Handforth, utterly regardless of the consequences, charged. For these cads to speak to him in that manner was beyond all endurance. And if Handforth got the worst of it, he certainly had the satisfaction of marking both Hubbard and Gulliver very severely.

But he only got in six or seven really good punches. Then he was grasped by a dozen excited fellows, yanked away, and hurled to the ground. He attempted to pick himself up, but he was pounced upon again. And after that Handforth realised that the odds were too great.

He strode away, dusty, torn, but as undaunted as ever. Nothing on earth would ever make him alter his opinion. Opposition, indeed, was something like a red flag to a bull. Handforth was always spoiling for a fight.

"The rotters!" he gasped, as he came across Church and McClure. "The treacherous, mean, contemptible cads! They're getting up an agitation against Nipper staying for three days longer!"

"It won't come to anything," said Church.

"I'm not so sure," growled Handforth. "The chaps seem to have gone dotty! Even decent fellows, who always respected Nipper, are turning against him. There's a wave of madness going round. The babbling idiots! The absolute rotters!"

But Handforth and Co. were not supported by many others. There was no denying the fact that the majority of the juniors were indignant when they heard the news. Not only juniors, but seniors, joined in the demonstrations. A large crowd of Fifth-Formers held a meeting of their own.

"Of course, it's not our business, really," said Chambers, of the Fifth, "but I think we ought to assert ourselves on an occasion like this. Hang it all, there's the honour of the school to think about! It's a positive disgrace to allow that young savage to stay here!"

"Of course it is!"

"He might attack somebody else to-night!"

"The young cad ought to be kicked out!"

"Hear, hear!"

And even the Sixth joined in the chorus. This was really the doing of Kenmore. He was enraged when he heard the news, and went round the Sixth-Form studies urging the fellows to assert themselves—to make a united demand that I should be expelled forthwith.

It was the Remove, however, that created the most noise, ably assisted by a motley crowd of excited fags. The fags didn't particularly care whether I went or remained. There was some excitement brewing, and they wanted to be in it. That was all they thought about.

"The Head has done this without consulting the school," shouted Fullwood, addressing an animated crowd. "The Head doesn't care twopence about us—and we have to have this cad mixing with us. We won't stand it—we won't put up with such rot! I vote for a demonstration!"

"Good!"

"Kick the rotter out!"

"We won't allow him to remain another hour!" roared Fullwood. "After committing that foul act, to allow him to stay is an insult to the lot of us! Who's with me in this movement?"

"All of us!" bawled Hubbard.

He wasn't far wrong. The majority of the boys were quite sincere, and I didn't actually blame them. They accepted the situation as it stood; they believed that I was guilty. Had I really been guilty, the agitation would have been fully justified.

"It looks like trouble, I'm afraid," I said grimly, as I watched the growing commotion from the window of Study C. "The fellows will be out of hand before long, and then—well, I hardly know what to think."

"You'll stay, anyhow," declared Watson. "The Head's promised, and he can't go back on his word. This bit of excitement will soon blow over. Fullwood and Co. are the main cause of it."

This was undoubtedly true. But the affair could be compared to a big industrial strike. It was commenced by a few hot-headed agitators, and it rapidly got beyond their control. They were unable to quell the disturbance they had stirred up.

And it was quite evident that some big trouble was coming.

CHAPTER IV.

BROUGHT TO A HEAD.

"GOOD gracious!"

Mr. Crowell had been to the village, and he turned in at the big gateway and gazed across the Triangle in a state of blank astonishment and indignation. The Triangle presented a most extraordinary appearance.

Juniors and seniors were shouting together in excited groups. And a big crowd had gone over in the direction of the Head's study, and were roaring three words repeatedly, in a kind of chant. Mr. Crowell heard what the words were quite distinctly, and he pursed his lips.

"Nipper must go—Nipper must go—NIPPER MUST GO!"

The shouts grew louder and louder as other fellows took up the chant, and Mr. Crowell strode forward with black brow. A number of fags scattered before him, but the other fellows were too excited to take any notice of the Remove-master's presence. They continued the demonstration as though Mr. Crowell never existed.

"Boys!" shouted the master. "Cease this—this nonsense at once!"

The roar was renewed with greater vigour.

"Nipper must go!"

"Upon my soul!" gasped Mr. Crowell. "This—this is outrageous! This is positively beyond all bounds! Every boy here who disobeys my orders will be placed in detention for the next four half-holidays!"

But nobody seemed to hear Mr. Crowell, for no notice was taken of him. Over by the Ancient House steps a crowd of juniors were watching—Handforth and Co., Pitt, De Valerie, and a good many others, including the two Trotwoods and Yakama, the little Japanese junior.

They were fully in my favour, and regarded this violent agitation as a scandalous outrage. But they were in the minority—a handful against a multitude. They could only stand and watch.

Mr. Crowell strode up to them, red with anger.

"I am glad to see that a few of my boys, at least, have kept their heads," he exclaimed. "Handforth, you have been fighting! You will take two hundred lines. Fighting is not permissible——"

"Sorry, sir," said Handforth. "I meant to have a wash, but I forgot it. You see, sir, I was only trying to keep some of the fellows from joining in this madness. But they were too many for me."

"Oh, in that case, Handforth, I will overlook the matter," said Mr. Crowell. "Your scars are honourable ones, eh?"

The Remove-master passed indoors, and the juniors mentally decided that he was a decent old bird. And, meanwhile, the uproar in the Triangle was increasing. A section of the agitators was becoming violent, and stone-throwing had commenced. Excitement was the cause of half the trouble.

I watched the scene from Study C with my chums.

"Begad! There'll be a riot soon, dear boys!" said Montie, shaking his head. "What a frightful disgrace for St. Frank's!"

"And all on account of me," I said grimly. "Look here, I can't stand this, you know. I'd better go and tell the chaps that I'll keep out of everybody's way during the time I'm here; I'll only show myself in public when everybody is at lessons. Then they can't be contaminated!" I added bitterly.

Watson snorted.

"You won't do anything of the sort!" he snapped. "The Head's given you permission to stay, and you'll jolly well stay!"

"Begad, rather!"

"But those idiots will be doing some damage before long——" I began.

"Let them!" said Watson. "And let them pay for it, too! It's all rot to say that you're responsible."

Crash!

"My hat! What was that?" gasped Tommy.

"Somebody's windows being smashed in," I said grimly.

A stray stone had crashed through the window of Study A, and Watson grinned with joy. It was Fullwood's study, and Fullwood would have to pay the damage. It was rather neat.

But it was quite evident that the demonstrators were getting out of hand. Once the horseplay gained the slightest hold it increased and magnified, as in all such affairs.

As Sir Montie had said, something very akin to a riot was soon raging in the Triangle. Different factions of juniors and seniors fell to quarrelling, and four or five free fights were taking place at the same moment. Other fellows were joining in continually. The scene, to be absolutely truthful, was perfectly disgraceful. And Dr. Stafford was shocked when he went to his window to see what all the noise was about.

He opened his window quickly, and stood there surveying the scene with a black frown on his brow.

"Silence!" he roared. "Silence at once!"

But at that moment a stone, cast by some reckless junior, smashed through the window above Dr. Stafford's head. The glass tinkled down, and there was an instant hush.

"I expect it will be quite useless for me to ask for the name of the boy who threw that stone?" exclaimed the Head angrily. "But if he is found he will receive a severe flogging in public. What is the meaning of this outrageous disturbance? Answer me, Chambers!"

Chambers, of the Fifth, looked rather scared.

"We—we are demanding that Nipper shall be sent away to-day, sir," he shouted nervously. "We won't stand him for another three days!"

"Rather not!"

"Not for another hour!"

"Kick the young savage out!"

"Silence!" shouted Dr. Stafford. "Am I to understand, boys, that you have dared to protest against my authority? I have decided that Nipper shall remain—and I order you to disperse immediately. The ringleaders of this disturbance will be found and punished most severely."

And the Head, with quiet dignity, pulled the window down and disappeared from view. But if he thought he had quelled the uproar he was mistaken. Only for a few minutes was there comparative quiet.

And then the shouting recommenced, the stone-throwing increased in violence, and some of the more reckless fellows looked about them in order to see what damage they could do.

"We're not going to be beaten!" yelled Fullwood. "The Head said that Nipper must stop—and we say that Nipper must go! We're not going to be browbeaten! We'll have our rights!"

"Hear, hear!"

And the disturbance continued with increased violence.

And right in the midst of it, when the Triangle was in a terrible state of confusion, a big motor-car rolled in at the gateway.

Dr. Stafford had been doing his utmost to quell the uprising.

Masters had sallied forth, accompanied by prefects; but the fellows were too excited to take much notice. Authority counted for nothing just then, and even Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster of the College House, was openly defied by his own boys.

And then the motor-car appeared.

It contained two elderly gentlemen and a chauffeur. The two elderly gentlemen gazed about them in sheer amazement, and with a certain amount of alarm. For their car was instantly surrounded by crowds of yelling juniors.

"Good heavens!" gasped one of the visitors. "What—what can the meaning of this be? I am positively shocked, Sir John!"

Sir John Brent was too agitated to reply. He and his companion, Mr. Alexander Stevens, were governors of St. Frank's, and two of the most important governors on the board. It was not surprising that they were amazed to find St. Frank's in such an extraordinary state of uproar.

It was only with difficulty that their car reached the big door of Dr. Stafford's private house. They managed to alight, and were escorted at once to the Head's study.

"Dr. Stafford, what is the meaning of this appalling disturbance?" demanded Sir John angrily. "It is a fine condition to find St. Frank's in when I come here to pay a call!"

"Disgraceful!" grunted Mr. Stevens.

The Head was taken aback; he had not expected a visit from any of the governors on that afternoon. And it was distressing in the extreme that the two old gentlemen should have found such an uproar in progress.

"Have you no explanation, sir?" shouted Sir John.

"The boys are in a state of excitement, and I have no doubt that they will calm down before long," said the Head quietly. "I am even now taking what steps I can to quell the disturbance and to punish the ringleaders."

"But what is the cause of the trouble?" demanded Sir John. "You must tell us at once—at once! I was under the impression, Dr. Stafford, that you were fully capable of maintaining order and authority in this school!"

The Head was not offended. After all, the governors had a good cause to be angry and indignant. And they listened impatiently to the Head's somewhat lengthy explanation.

"The whole trouble has arisen out of the fact that I have permitted Nipper to remain here until the end of the week," concluded Dr. Stafford. "It is only fair, I judge, that the lad should have every opportunity of clearing himself——"

"That would apply if he were innocent," interrupted Sir John. "But it is perfectly obvious that Nipper is guilty. There is no shadow of doubt—not the slightest. What is your opinion, Mr. Stevens?"

"No doubt whatever," said the other governor. "I was always against that boy being at the school. His earlier training was a rough, uncouth one, I understand? And I have constantly feared that he would disgrace the school."

"The truth is exactly the reverse, my dear sir," said the Head grimly. "The Ancient House has never been in a better condition in all its history—and Nipper has been largely responsible for the manly, healthy atmosphere which pervades the junior school. Personally, I am strongly inclined to favour the view that he is innocent, and it would be cruel and harsh to send him away before he has had an opportunity of proving——"

"But, my dear Dr. Stafford, no matter how charitable this view may be, it is impossible for the school to be upset on account of one boy," said Sir John. "It seems to me that the whole disturbance can be quelled by a brief announcement to the effect that Nipper will leave to-day."

"That is undoubtedly true," admitted the Head. "But I am not willing to see my authority set at naught. My orders have been given, and they must be carried out. I have certainly no intention of being dictated to by my boys. Nipper will remain. I am quite firm upon that point."

Crash!

Another stone came through the Head's window, and the two visitors nearly jumped out of their skins. A tremendous roar of voices sounded out in the Triangle, and Sir John Brent jumped to his feet in great agitation.

"This must cease—it must cease at once!" he shouted. "I insist upon you giving way upon the point, Dr. Stafford. Good gracious me! There will be terrible damage wrought unless this riot is quelled at once! It seems to me that all authority is useless!"

"I cannot consent," said the Head quietly. "You will please leave the matter in my hands, Sir John. I am the Headmaster of this school, and if my authority is of no avail, I will resign my appointment."

"Nonsense, sir!" shouted Sir John excitedly.

He strode to the window and threw up the sash.

"Silence!" he shouted, holding up his hand. "Boys, if you will cease this wild demonstration your demand shall be granted. It has been decided that Nipper shall leave the school this evening!"

The effect was electrical.

"Hurrah!"

The cheers went up with a roar, and the disturbance came to a stop at once. The seniors and juniors melted away and collected in small groups, discussing the situation. And the riot was over.

"It was the only way in which to restore order," said Sir John firmly.

The Head was pale with anger.

"Sir John, I shall have great pleasure in handing you my resignation before you leave the school," he exclaimed steadily. "You have seen fit to flout me to my face


At that very moment a stone whizzed through the Head's window.
Bruised and shaken Nipper was pitched headfirst into the carriage.

and that I will not stand. You apparently consider that I am unable to keep order——"

"Nothing of the kind, sir—nothing of the kind!" interrupted Sir John. "But you will admit that some drastic measure was necessary? As for your resignation, I shall refuse to glance at it. Sir Rupert Manderley himself, our chairman, will not accept your resignation."

"But I insist ——"

"It is absurd—paltry," went on Sir John. "The incident is a mere trifle, and we are not going to quarrel on account of it. The boy himself can be compensated later on. But authority is absolutely essential."

Dr. Stafford calmed down after a few moments. His dignity had been injured, but he realised at the same time that the uproar would have been very difficult to settle by all ordinary methods.

"I am sorry that you took the matter out of my hands, Sir John," he said quietly. "However, since you have made the announcement, we cannot go back upon it now. Nipper will be terribly disappointed, and you must allow me to explain to him that this alteration was none of my choosing. I feel very sorry for the lad, and I think his school fellows have acted in the most shameful, disgraceful manner. They have proved themselves to be more like hooligans than gentlemen."

And the Head, highly incensed, strode out of his study.

His authority had been flouted, it is true, but he was not foolish enough to throw up his appointment as Headmaster of St. Frank's over an incident which was, strictly speaking, trifling.

At the same time, Dr. Stafford felt the matter keenly. He came straight to Study C in the Remove passage—a really unheard-of proceeding. For the Head to visit a junior study was somewhat staggering.

At that moment Sir Montie and Tommy and I were discussing the new situation. We had heard the shouts—and we couldn't quite believe them.

"There must be some mistake," I was saying. "The Head would never go back on his word like that. He promised me that I could stay here three days longer, and I shall stay."

"Rather!" said Watson warmly.

"If the Head has gone back on his word, dear old boy, he is not the thorough gentleman I had always taken him to be," said Sir Montie. "But the Head is a rippin' good sort, an' I won't believe—— Begad!"

Sir Montie paused, open-mouthed, for the Head himself stood in the doorway. It was not often that Tregellis-West's serene calmness forsook him; but it did on this occasion.

We all jumped to our feet.

"I—I'm frightfully sorry, sir——" began Montie.

"I am glad, Tregellis-West, that you have such an excellent opinion of me," said Dr. Stafford, with a faint smile. "It was not my intention to play the part of an eavesdropper, but I inadvertently overheard a few of your words. Nipper, my boy, I have some bad news for you."

"Must I go, sir?" I asked huskily.

"Unfortunately—yes," said the Head, nodding gravely.

"But you promised me——"

"It was not my doing, Nipper," interrupted the Head. "Two of the school governors have arrived, and it was Sir John Brent who announced to the boys—entirely without my sanction—that you would leave St. Frank's to-day. Were I to alter that decision now, authority would be at a standstill. I hope you will understand that the fault is not mine."

"Yes, I do, sir," I said quietly. "And I think it's very fine of you to come here and explain to me. It's an awful disappointment, sir, because I was hoping to prove my innocence. But now I'm helpless—I shall leave the school in disgrace, and my name will always be scorned."

"You are making me more than ever convinced that there has been some grave blunder, Nipper," said the Head slowly. "Good gracious! If such turns out to be the case, you will be fully compensated—never fear. You will come back, and every boy who took part in the demonstration will apologise. Well, Nipper, I should advise you to leave as early as possible—if only for your own sake. I am more than grieved that you should leave us in this terrible fashion."

I stood silent; I was too miserable to speak.

"But it's unfair, sir!" burst out Watson passionately. "Nipper's innocent—he didn't touch that cad, Starke! Nipper's as innocent as you are, sir. It's a shame—a crying, rotten shame!"

I expected the Head to be angry at that outburst, but he was not.

"You must calm yourself, Watson," he said quietly. "If Nipper is innocent, it is, indeed, a crying shame that he should go in this manner. And I wish to add that I shall leave no stone unturned to sift the affair to the bottom. The truth is bound to come to light—whichever way it may be."

And the Head prepared to leave the study. He checked himself, however, as he became aware of an uproar out in the passage. Then a voice sounded just outside—the voice of Fullwood.

"You're kicked out, you stinking cad!" he shouted jeeringly. "You're sacked from the school—and good riddance! You thought the Head would let you stop, didn't you?"

"Silly old ass!" came Gulliver's voice.

"The Head wasn't allowed to stick to his dotty idea!" went on Fullwood. "He was shoved in his place by somebody above him—and you've got the kick-out! If you ain't gone within an hour we'll boot you all the way to the village!"

"Yah! Blackguard!"

"Rotter!"

The Head set his teeth grimly, and suddenly flung open the door. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were outside.

"If you touch me, you low-down gutter brat—— Oh-O-Oh!"

Fullwood, who was speaking, came to an abrupt halt, and he gasped with sheer terror. But he was not able to flee, as he desired.

"You three boys will remain still!" thundered Dr. Stafford. "You will come to my study at seven o'clock this evening, Fullwood. Gulliver, you will accompany Fullwood. Bell, you may go!"

"Thank you, sir!" gasped Bell.

"I intend to cane both you boys with the utmost severity," said the Head. "Furthermore, you will be detained for the next four half-holidays——"

"What for, sir?" broke in Fullwood hotly.

"I do not intend to give any explanation——"

"But you weren't supposed to hear what we said, sir," shouted Fullwood. "I apologise for what I said about you, but I didn't know you were in there!"

"I can quite believe that, Fullwood," said the Head grimly. "My intention to punish you, however, is not based upon your insults regarding myself. Since those words were not intended for my ears, I will overlook the matter."

"Then why are we being punished, sir?"

"Because you came here in a mean and despicable spirit to taunt this unfortunate lad who is leaving St. Frank's in disgrace," replied Dr. Stafford, his voice quivering with contempt. "Not satisfied with gaining your ends, you find it necessary to come here and use coarse, insulting language. Nipper is quite capable of taking care of himself, I am aware, but in this instance he will find a champion in me. To hit a boy when he is down is despicable beyond words. And your punishment will be all too light—although I can assure you that the flogging you receive this evening will be as severe as any I have ever inflicted. You may go!"

And Fullwood and Gulliver crawled away. They were simply boiling and bubbling with fury—and they came to the conclusion that I was the sole cause of their woes. And they meant to make me pay!

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACKLEGS!

THERE was general satisfaction in the Remove and throughout the school as a result of the announcement that I was to be hoofed out that day.

It pained me exceedingly to see so many satisfied expressions. Even supposing that I had been guilty, it was heartless of the fellows to be so pleased about the affair.

But boys, as a rule, are heartless. It was surprising how callous really decent fellows could be. In their hearts they were all right, perhaps, but in a case like this they cared nothing. The main point was to get rid of an outsider; and I was regarded as a very contemptible outsider.

It was an awful thing for me to realise. I had been so long at the old school: I had been respected and liked by all the decent fellows ever since I had arrived. And now I was to be kicked out, despised and scorned.

Not only that, but I should have no chance of establishing my innocence, for I was to be sent away at once—that very evening. I felt almost desperate, but knew that nothing could be done.

If only the guv'nor had been on the spot I wouldn't have minded so much. His presence would have made an enormous difference—both to me and to the other fellows. But Nelson Lee was away, far beyond my reach.

The only thought which kept my courage up was the certain conviction that before long Starke would be exposed as the liar he was—that I should be vindicated in full and my name cleared.

The joy of clearing it myself, however, was denied me. I was not to be allowed to make any investigations whatever. And this was not the decree of the Head, but the decree of my schoolfellows.

It was hardly surprising, therefore, that my feelings were somewhat bitter. I felt like rising up and telling the chaps exactly what I thought of them. But what would have been the use?

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were almost stunned by the news. They had looked forward to my being there for that three days; they had confidently reckoned that I should prove my case during the week. And now all that was ended. I had to go!

"It's all mad!" exclaimed Watson, nearly at the point of tears. "It's rotten—it's shameful! Oh, Nipper, you'll have to think of something else! We simply can't let you go, old man!"

"It's jolly decent of you, Tommy, to say that," I exclaimed quietly. "But you'll only make matters worse. You and Montie and a few other fellows don't want me to go, but the crowd does want me to go. It's not a bit of good protesting——"

"Why not?" demanded Watson hotly.

"Because you would only get yourselves into hot water," I said. "The other chaps would send you to Coventry for taking my part."

Tommy Watson thumped the table.

"Do you think I care if I'm sent to Coventry?" he roared. "Do you think Montie cares if he's sent to Coventry? I should consider it an honour to be despised by the other fellows for sticking up for you—a giddy honour!"

"It's jolly decent of you to say that, old man," I exclaimed. "I know you mean it, too. But we've got to look at this thing squarely. We've got to face it in a calm, sensible way. It won't do me any good if you get yourselves into trouble, and it'll do you harm. So if you want to please me you'll just accept the situation as it stands. I'm booked to clear out this evening, and I

must go. There's no help for it—there's no alternative."

"It's frightful to hear you talkin' like that, dear fellow," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "You're usually so cheerful—so optimistic, begad! An' now you accept defeat—well, tamely."

I nodded.

"It can't be helped, Montie," I replied. "If there was the slightest chance of staying I'd grasp it with both fists. But what can I do against the whole school—for that's what it amounts to. What can I do against the combined efforts of public opinion in the Ancient House and the College House? Ninety-five per cent. of the chaps demanded that I should be kicked out. To remain would cause a terrific uproar—and I don't want anything like that. Besides, the Head's told me that I must go—and that ends it."

"The old rotter!" said Watson angrily.

"That's not fair," I put in. "The Head's being driven by the governors and by the feeling in the school; he simply can't help himself. Right from the start Dr. Stafford has been sympathetic—he's been a real brick. So don't accuse him of harshness——"

"You're right, Nipper," interrupted Watson. "I'm sorry. The Head's a good old bird, and he would have helped you no end if he had had the chance."

"Begad! It's my opinion that the Head will help as it is," said Tregellis-West. "Don't you remember what he said? Although you're goin', he intends to make full an' thorough investigations. An' I predict that you'll be back with us before a fortnight has passed. It's a frightful ordeal, dear old boy, but you'll get your vindication sooner or later."

I couldn't help feeling that Montie spoke from his heart—he was not merely trying to cheer me up. It was impossible to believe that I should actually leave St. Frank's in dire disgrace, and that I should never return. I couldn't believe it—I didn't attempt to.

"Well, let's get tea ready," I said briskly.

Tommy Watson stared at me.

"Tea?" he repeated dazedly.

"It's tea-time, isn't it?"

"But—but you're going——"

"Not on an empty stomach," I replied firmly. "We'll have a jolly decent spread, as a kind of farewell feast. And it won't be so very long, perhaps, before we're all squatting down to another feed in these dear old quarters."

I looked round at the study as I spoke. It was not luxurious, but it was very dear to my heart. Watson stood staring at me with a pale, expressionless countenance. He seemed to be almost thunderstruck.

"Tea!" he said dully. "You—you don't mean to say that you can eat anything—that you can drink anything?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"But—but it's impossible!" protested Tommy. "I can't eat a morsel——"

"My dear chap, I've got a journey before me, and there's really no sense in neglecting the inner man," I put in. "I'll admit that I don't feel very hungry, but there are some cases when food is necessary. Besides, we want to have a little celebration—as a wind-up."

I'm afraid the tea was not very successful. The table was spread with plenty of good things, but most of them were left untouched. My chums hardly tasted a morsel. But I was rather astonished to find that I ate quite heartily.

It was getting rather late after that, and I decided to run down to the station in time to catch the early evening train. There were two trains, but the later one did not leave until well after dark. There was really no reason why I should stay until then.

"But look here," I said quietly, as I sipped my second cup of tea. "I don't want to go without confronting all the fellows and telling them to their faces that I'm innocent. There'll be trouble, perhaps, but I don't care. I mean to find out who believes in me, and who doesn't. I want to know the exact truth."

"A jolly good idea," declared Watson. "But the chaps won't listen to you—that's the only trouble."

"They will," I declared grimly. "I'll make them!"

"Begad!" said Montie. "I believe you will, old boy!"

"And when I go, I'll go quietly," I continued. "I don't want you chaps to think that I'm nervous or cowardly, but I don't much care for leaving in the ordinary way, amidst a chorus of hisses. I should just like to diddle the rotters in that way."

"Of course," said Watson heartily. "We'll slip out at the rear, and go across the meadow to the towing-path. Then, if Fullwood and those other cads get up a party to hiss you out, they'll be disappointed."

It was quite likely that Fullwood and Co. would attempt something of that sort; we couldn't expect anything else from the Nuts.

I had not shown myself much, and the majority of the juniors had had the decency to steer clear of Study C. Perhaps they had heard of the fate which had befallen Fullwood and Co.!

At all events, when I emerged into the Triangle an hour later—after packing all my things—I found a great many fellows gathered there. I had no doubt whatever that the idea was to see me take my departure.

"Not going yet?" inquired Pitt sympathetically. "I notice you haven't got any bags or parcels——"

"The train doesn't leave for another hour," I put in. "I say, Pitt, I should just like you to tell me——"

"Yah, cad!"

"Don't speak to that outsider, Pitt!"

"Let's kick him out!"

"Can't you keep quiet, you rotters?" shouted Pitt wrathfully.

"Don't you speak to that beast, then!"

"I shall speak to him as much as I choose!" roared Pitt. "It would be a pity if Nipper didn't have a few pals to stick up for

him! As I've said all along, I believe the whole plot was worked up, and Nipper's as innocent as I am——"

"Rats!"

"Boo-booh!"

"Ssss-s-ssh!"

There was a considerable commotion in a moment, and a big crowd of juniors surrounded me. The Remove was largely represented, and the sprinkling of fags dodged about the outskirts of the crowd.

"It's a wonder you've got the cheek to appear in public!" sneered Merrell. "Why can't you clear out of it, you disgraceful bounder? I suggest that we frogs-march the cad down to the village——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Collar him!"

"Stand back, confound you!" roared Pitt. "If there's any game of that sort tried on you'll be sorry for it! Nipper's going to leave quietly, and there's enough fellows who believe in him to put up a fight!"

Handforth yelled his approval.

"Who wants a punched nose?" he bellowed, glaring round.

"You mind your own business, Handy!" snapped Hubbard.

"Oh, you want one, do you?" said Handforth grimly. "Well, there you are—take it!"

Biff!

Hubbard took it before he could dodge, and he went over backwards, howling with pain. But I didn't quite like this disturbance—it was not what I had intended. So I jumped up on to one of the square stone pillars at the bottom of the Ancient House steps, and faced the crowd from that elevated position.

"I should just like to say a few words——" I began.

"Get down, you cad!"

"Yah!"

"Don't let him speak!"

"Boob!"

"Rotter!"

I faced the yelling juniors calmly, and waited for the uproar to subside.

"I thought you were rather keen on fair play!" I continued, taking advantage of a short lull. "I only want you to give me a couple of minutes—no more. And after that I shall clear off. But if you're not sportsmanlike enough to listen——"

"Give him a hearing, you rotters!" yelled McClure.

"Let Nipper speak!"

"Go it, old man!"

"Speech—speech!"

"No—no!" bawled a dozen voices. "Don't let him speak!"

"We don't want to hear him!"

"You—you miserable cads!" exclaimed Morrow, of the Sixth, who had paused to listen. "You contemptible little sweeps!"

All eyes were turned on the prefect.

"Are you sticking up for the outsider?" sneered Gulliver.

"No," replied Morrow quietly. "But I'm sticking up for fair play. Nipper's going this evening for good, and he's asked you to listen to him for a few minutes. If you had a spark of decency in you, there'd be none of this uproar. But you seem to have forgotten that there's a distinction between sportsmanship and hooliganism! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

There was a silence, and Morrow nodded to me.

"Carry on, Nipper!" he said briskly.

"I don't want to say anything if these chaps aren't willing to listen," I said. "Thanks for backing me up, Morrow——"

"Get on with your speech," interrupted Morrow.

I faced the hostile crowd grimly.

"You won't believe me, I know," I said, "but I just want to make the statement before leaving that I am positively innocent of striking Starke down. I didn't touch him. There has been some misunderstanding——"

"Rot!"

"Liar!"

"I don't think you've ever found me out in a lie yet—simply because I've never told one," I continued.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors were vastly amused at the statement.

"I don't pretend to be a second George Washington," I continued, "but I do say that I've never made a deliberate misstatement to any of you fellows. And before I go I'd like to ask plainly who in this throng believes that I'm guilty——"

"We all do!" shouted a dozen voices.

"Hands up those who believe he's guilty!" yelled Fullwood.

A regular forest of hands rose.

"Thank you!" I said grimly. "I thought the majority of you fellows had more faith in me. But it's just as well to know the truth. And now I'd like my supporters to put their hands up—those fellows who are still loyal."

A sprinkling of hands shot up at once—nine or ten. Tregellis-West and Watson had their hands up, of course, and the others included Handforth, McClure, Church, Pitt, Grey, De Valerie, the Trotwood twins, and Yakama, the little Jap. After a moment or two Somerton and Christine raised their hands, too.

"What about you, Owen major?" demanded Handforth. "And you, Armstrong? Ain't you going to put your hands up? And what about you, Clapson——"

"Oh, leave us out," said Clapson gruffly. "We're neutral. We didn't vote against him, and we're not going to vote for him."

A good many fellows shared Clapson's opinion. They were not actually against me, but they had been deceived by the overwhelming evidence, and really thought me guilty. They were decent enough, however, to refrain from voting against me.

"Thanks," I said quietly. "That's all I wanted—just to discover how many chaps have sufficient faith in me to trust my honour. I'm very grateful to all of you who have done me the honour——"

"Rot!" shouted Handforth. "There's no honour about it—we're sticking up for a pal, that's all! And we'll stick up for you until you come back, too!"

"He'll never come back, you ass!" said Gulliver.

"Won't he?" bellowed Handforth. "You wait, my son—I mean, you cad! You wait a few weeks! If Nipper isn't back by the end of this term I'll clear out of the giddy school myself!"

"Let's hope Nipper doesn't come back!" grinned Hubbard.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you'd like to get rid of me, too, I dare say!" snorted Handforth. "You'd like to get rid of all the decent chaps. But you mark my words—Nipper isn't the chap to take defeat lying down. And I've got sufficient faith in him to be confident that he'll come out on top in the finish."

"Good old Nipper!" shouted Grey.

"Three cheers for Nipper!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The cheer was rather weak, and it was partially drowned by a roar of booing. But I was extremely pleased to find that all the fellows I really cared about were on my side. The others didn't matter.

And I got down from the pillar and went indoors. I knew that I could rely upon fourteen or fifteen staunch supporters in any acute crisis. But, of course, I didn't overlook the fact that opposed to those supporters were two or three hundred enemies. They were a mere handful. It was useless denying the fact that the bulk of the fellows were against me.

"Well, I suppose I'd better be off now," I said, as I entered Study C with Montie and Tommy. "That train goes in less than an hour, and we want to have a little time to ourselves, don't we?"

"Rather, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie. "An' the journey will be rather roundabout, you know. We simply can't go out by the main way, begad! I thought somethin' of the kind was brewin'!"

He had strolled over to the window, and Tommy and I joined him.

Pullwood and Co. were collected round the gates, and a great many other fellows were with them. I needed no telling that that gathering was at the gateway for a set purpose—to give me a good ragging on my way down to the station.

"Dash it all, I feel like facing the cads!" I said grimly. "I've a good mind to march out in the ordinary way, after all——"

"And have your clothes stripped off your back and your bags torn open?" demanded Watson warmly. "Don't be an ass, Nipper! You'll be a wreck when you get to the station if you let that crowd get hold of you. Come with us—we want to have a few quiet words before you get on the train."

I was persuaded to do as my chums requested, and we slipped out by one of the rear doorways and cut across the courtyard to a meadow at the rear. Nobody saw us go, and we finally arrived on the towing-path without having attracted any attention.

On the way down to the village I tried to cheer my chums up; but my efforts were not of much avail. They were gloomy and despondent, and Tommy seemed to imagine that the end of all things had come.

I was rather bucked up by an unexpected meeting with Brewster and Co., of the River House. Those three cheerful juniors—Hal Brewster, Glynn, and Ascott—were the leading lights of Dr. Hogg's Academy, and they expressed deep sympathy with me in my trouble, and gave me their full support.

"Well, it's jolly decent to know that everybody isn't against me," I said, as I neared the station with Montie and Tommy. "It gives me a bit of courage, you know. And you fellows mustn't be gloomy——"

"Oh, that's rot!" interrupted Watson. "How can we help being gloomy? You're sacked, Nipper—expelled in disgrace! I can't believe it even now—it's too awful for words!"

"An' I notice a few frightfully black looks from people in the village," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "Dear old boy, I'm afraid you're surrounded by enemies at present. People who honoured you a week ago are scornin' you at the present time. It's shockin'—it is, really!"

"And yet it's only to be expected," I said quietly. "You mustn't forget that most people are always ready to believe the worst—they accept any old evidence that is placed before them. The evidence in this case is black, and I'm rather surprised that so many chaps are willing to stick up for me."

"Oh, rot!" growled Watson. "The evidence is all piffle!"

But he knew well enough that the evidence was not piffle. He and Sir Montie only stuck up for me because they were my staunch chums. The facts in the case were all against me, and I had no loophole whatever.

I don't think I'll describe what happened on the platform, or at the doorway of an empty compartment when the train pulled in. We were all feeling pretty bad, and the parting was hard.

There was no telling whether I should return, or whether this was the last glimpse of Bellton that I should see. Sir Montie seemed to be almost as urbane as ever; his smiling face was quite serene. But I could tell that his attitude was forced; inwardly he was suffering considerably.

Tommy Watson, who was not such a master of his feelings, was nearly on the point of blubbing when the train at length started off.

"Good-bye, old chaps!" I said warmly, leaning out of the window. "And don't forget that you'll see me again before long. I'm not going to take this blow lying down—there's some fight in me yet!"

"Good man!" exclaimed Montie. "We'll be lookin' out for you, dear fellow—we'll be lookin' out every day, begad!"

"Rather!" said Watson unsteadily. "Good-bye, Nipper!"

The train gathered speed, and the last glimpse I had of my chums was one which remained in my memory for a long time. They stood alone on the platform, waving their caps to me. And then a curve in the line hid them from view. I sat down on the cushions somewhat heavily.

I had been sacked!

It seemed too awful to be true.

CHAPTER VI.

NOT BEATEN YET!

BANNINGTON was only a short distance off, and it was the first stop. It would be necessary for me to change there in order to board the London express, for I had naturally booked to London. I had made no plans whatever—I had not even sent a telegram to Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper at Gray's Inn Road.

As a matter of fact, I had never given the matter a thought. I had been so full up with things that day that I didn't realise, until I was actually in the train, that I had probably left St. Frank's for good.

I was more angry than miserable.

The injustice of the whole thing made me flush with impatience and rage. I couldn't blame the Headmaster, for he had acted like a brick throughout. And, strictly speaking, I couldn't blame the boys.

The evidence of my guilt had seemed insuperable, and it was not the fault of the fellows if they believed facts—or what seemed to be facts.

The whole affair was unfortunate—wretched. And its wretchedness was aggravated by the fact that Nelson Lee was far away, beyond my reach. If the guv'nor had been at St. Frank's I shouldn't have left—I was quite sure of that.

But Nelson Lee knew nothing of this disaster, and he was unable to help me. I was absolutely alone—but I wasn't beaten!

I paced the compartment impatiently as the train bowled along towards Bannington. For the first time I seemed to realise that some action on my part was vitally necessary.

And here I was, running away—going off to London! I was not even attempting to make a fight for it! And what about my investigation? It had fallen through, and, once in London, it would be too late to do anything at all.

I seemed to realise, all in a flash, that I was doing the wrong thing. It was sheer madness to leave St. Frank's in such a hurry. I had been sacked, it is true, but I was at liberty to walk about the roads as freely as any other person. As long as I kept away from the school itself I was safe.

And before the train drew in at the junction I had formed a plan. A great determination had come over me. I would return that very evening—I would make an examination of the spot where Starke had been felled to the ground.

I had already been on that spot once or twice, but I had never really given it the full attention it demanded. And it would be quite possible for me to catch the last train from Bellton, if necessary.

The prospect of some action bucked me up quite a lot. I had to rely upon my own resources—and it was just as well not to overlook that fact. And if I couldn't manage to do something it would be a pity.

Of course, it would be quite impossible for me to see Montie or Tommy, or any of the other fellows. I figured out that I should arrive in the dusk, just before locking-up. But the lane would be deserted by that time, for most of the boys would be engaged on their prep.

"By George! I'm not whacked yet!" I told myself grimly.

And at Bannington I marched straight out of the station and allowed the London train to go on without me. I thought about hiring a bicycle, but changed my mind. I should attract less attention walking, for on foot I could cut across the moor, and then proceed straight through Bellton Wood. By taking this short cut I should arrive almost as soon as going by bicycle.

The evening was rather gloomy, and I thought there was every prospect of a thunderstorm later in the night. For the air was quite still, and dense masses of black clouds were gathering, making the evening prematurely dark. But this suited me admirably.

I hurried across the moor, and didn't meet a soul during the whole distance. The journey through Bellton Wood was short, for I knew the way exactly. And when at last I arrived in the lane, I came out exactly opposite the spot I desired to examine.

Nobody had had a chance of spotting me, and I noticed with satisfaction that the lane was deserted. And the gloom of the evening had almost become darkness. I could just see what I was doing.

I went down upon my knees in the grass, and proceeded to examine the ground inch by inch. I didn't know what I was looking for; I only thought that a thorough search might reveal something of importance.

The road itself was quite out of the question, for the hard, dusty surface told nothing.

And my efforts were rewarded in a manner which filled me with intense excitement and hope. What I found was insignificant, but it would probably prove to be of enormous value—if I was only allowed to carry my investigations through.

I held in my fingers a flake of enamel, about three-quarters of an inch square, with rough edges. It was merely a chip, but I knew well enough that it could only have come from some part of a motor-car.

"One of the mudguards—one of the giddy wings!" I muttered. "By jingo! That's it! Starke was hit by the wing, and bowled over. And the force of the impact bent the

metal, and this flake of enamel flew off. I'll bet ten pounds to a penny that that deduction is correct!"

I was further elated by the very nature of the enamel itself. Had it been black, it would have been valueless--for it would have been a hopeless task to find the car. But this enamel was a distinctive blue-grey, with a red line. A portion of the line was quite visible on the flake which I held. In fact, the little chip was a splendid clue, and I felt more hopeful than I had ever felt before.

Very carefully I wrapped the enamel up in a piece of paper and placed it in a stiff compartment of my pocket-wallet. It would not break there, and it would be quite safe.

This success urged me on to other efforts, and I proceeded with my investigation eagerly and intently. And I became so engrossed that I did not notice the approach of two bicycles from the direction of the village. They came up noiselessly, and I only saw them when they were actually upon me.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed an angry voice. "What's this young cad doing here?"

I started to my feet, and found that Kenmore and Jesson, of the Sixth, had dismounted from their bicycles. The two bullying prefects placed their machines against the hedge and came over to me.

"I thought you were kicked out?" said Kenmore harshly.

"It's none of my business what you think," I said, without moving. "You might do me the favour of minding your own business, Kenmore."

"You cheeky young hound!" shouted Kenmore, grabbing my arm. "Hold him, Jesson! We'll show the little cad—— Yaroooooh!"

I was feeling angry, and I hit out at Kenmore with force. He received the blow on his ear, and staggered away.

"Don't you lay your confounded fingers on me!" I shouted. "Yes, I've been kicked out—and you've got no authority over me now! If you feel in the mood, Kenmore, I'll fight you on the spot!"

"By gad!" said Jesson wonderingly.

But he and his companion grasped me, and held me tight. And while I stood there, struggling to get free, Ralph Leslie Fullwood appeared from the direction of the gateway. He approached, gave a gasp, and then rushed back at full speed into the Triangle.

"Look here, what's the idea of this?" I demanded warmly. "If you don't let me go, you cads——"

"We mean to give you a lesson, you little brat!" snarled Kenmore. "You half killed poor Starke, and you'd like to half kill me, I expect! Well, we're going to give you a sound thrashing. Pull one of those long sticks out of the hedge, Jesson!"

"Right!" said Jesson heartily.

I attempted to get free while the stick was being obtained, but Kenmore had got my hands locked behind my back, and I was powerless. And just at that moment a fresh development took place.

A surging crowd of juniors, headed by Fullwood, rushed out into the lane and bore down upon me. They were yelling with excitement, and Kenmore and Jesson looked round with some alarm.

But they felt easier when they saw who the juniors were. The two Sixth-Formers were quite prepared to see me ragged unmercifully by the mob. It would be an even better punishment than a swishing with a stick.

CHAPTER VII.

KICKED OUT!

"ON him!"

"Don't let the cad escape!"

Before I could even attempt to get free from Kenmore and Jesson, the surging crowd of juniors surrounded me. The prefects retired, grinning, and I was left to the mercy of Fullwood and his supporters. Any attempt to get away on my part would have been utterly fruitless.

"Like the rotter's cheek, coming back!" shouted Hubbard warmly. "Let's give the beastly cad a lesson!"

"We'll half slaughter the beast!"

I was yanked along forcibly until we reached a spot some distance down the dark lane. I suspected that Fullwood and Co. were afraid of the hubbub being heard by a master. Any interruption at this point would have been most unfortunate—from Fullwood's point of view. For the cad of the Remove was intent upon carrying out the plan he had formulated earlier—the plan he had been unable to execute.

I won't deny that I was feeling pretty rotten, for I had never intended that I should be seen. My object had been to come back secretly and to make my investigations on the quiet.

Yet here I was in the hands of an excited mob of juniors—a mob which represented all the worst spirits in the Remove. A good few ordinarily decent fellows were there, too.

Just for a short while I had a little hope. For the news of my return had been carried into the Triangle, and it reached the ears of my sorrowing chums. Sir Montie and Tommy couldn't believe it at first, and Handforth was quite convinced that somebody had been talking out of his hat.

"Nipper's outside, according to what I can hear," exclaimed Watson—"right out in the lane. I think it's all rot——"

"Of course it's rot!" snorted Handforth. "Didn't you chaps see him off at the station? You're not going to tell me that he's come back, I suppose? The poor old chap's in London by this time."

"Hadn't we better go an' see what's doin', dear boys?" suggested Montie mildly.

They went, and as soon as they got out of the gates they knew that something unusual was occurring, at all events. In the gloom of the late evening a surging crowd of fellows could be faintly seen. A good deal of subdued shouting was going on, too.

"My hat! There's something up down there!" exclaimed Handforth quickly.

"How can it be up if it's down?" asked McClure.

"Oh, don't joke now, for goodness' sake!" snapped Handforth. "Let's get down the road. Buck up, my sons!"

They hurried down, and arrived on the spot while Fullwood and Co. and the other crowd was engaged in a short consultation. I was being tightly held by half a dozen determined juniors.

"Great Scott!" shouted Watson suddenly. "It is Nipper! Look!"

"Begad!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" gasped Handforth. "Rescue, you chaps! Lend me a hand! We'll soon get him away from this beastly gang!"

And Handforth, careless of the odds, sailed in with all his customary recklessness. His chums were compelled to back him up. And Tregellis-West and Watson, of course, were eager enough to help.

"Don't try it, you asses!" I shouted. "You'll only be whacked!"

"Rot!" roared Handforth. "Take that, Merrell, you cad!"

Whack!

Merrell took it, and went over, roaring with pain. Bell also took something he didn't want, and Hubbard retired from the fight with a bleeding nose. But my captors were in great strength.

Valiant as the attempted rescue was, it was quite hopeless from the start. Montie, Tommy, and Handforth and Co. fought gamely and desperately. But after a short fight they were defeated.

They were a mere handful, while the crowd round me numbered anything from twenty to thirty. It was quite impossible for my chums to collect a force of anything like the same strength.

"We'd better get rid of the outsider before we're interrupted," said Fullwood sharply. "I vote we kick him out literally! We'll kick him down to the village, through the village, and to the station. Then we'll kick him on to the last train. If we buck up we shall just catch it!"

"Good egg!"

"That's the stuff to give him!"

"Kick him out of the district, the bounder!"

"Good!"

For the first few moments I attempted to resist. But after having delivered one or two black eyes I gave up the game. Because, for every punch I got home, I received five or six in return. And that game wasn't worth the candle! I was in the hands of a mob.

The fellows were too excited to realise what they were doing. The whole thing was merely a "rag" to them. I had read about such brutal affairs at other big public schools, but I had never dreamed that I should be the victim of such an adventure.

The journey started, and it proved to be the most painful ordeal I had ever passed through.

"Don't spare him, the rotter!" yelled Fullwood viciously.

Ralph Leslie was in his element. He had been longing for such a moment as this for months. I was defeated—I was beaten to the wide—I had fallen from my elevated position as Remove skipper into the dust.

And Fullwood enjoyed my humiliation as a miser gloats over his gold. The other juniors who took part in the "rag" were actuated more by desires of seeing justice done than by thoughts of revenge, for it was their quaint idea of justice that I should be treated in a manner worse than a criminal.

I don't think I can describe that journey to the station very well. I don't remember all of it. I was dazed a good deal of the time—choked with dust and reeling with pain and exhaustion.

The boys did not actually mean to hurt me; perhaps they didn't realise the severity of the treatment they were meting out. As for myself, resistance was quite out of the question. A fellow can't fight a whole mob.

The kicks I received were too numerous to mention. A good many juniors knotted their handkerchiefs, and slashed out at me as I staggered along in the midst of the surging, yelling crowd.

Some distance in the rear my chums were following, furious, alarmed, but quite helpless. And the procession went on. The village was quiet, all the shops being closed.

But a few people were about. These, needless to say, only stood by and stared. It was none of their business; and it is quite probable that they agreed with my persecutors. For the story of the attack upon Starke had spread all over the district, and I was regarded as a kind of budding Jack the Ripper by the rustics.

"That's the way, boys—gi' it to 'im!" shouted one farm labourer thunderously.

He had just emerged from the George Tavern, and it was highly probable that he had imbibed somewhat freely. And in that condition a fight was just the thing that pleased his heart.

By the time the station came in sight I was practically spent; I could hardly drag one foot after the other. My head was swimming, and a thousand lights danced before my eyes.

Fate had played me a scurvy trick this time, in all conscience!

Just outside the entrance of the station yard I collapsed upon the road; I can only dimly remember lying there, but I was quite conscious. I heard the shouts and jeers of the crowd.

"He's shamming!"

"Get up, you worm!"

"Kick him until he moves!" roared Gulliver.

Thump! Thump!

I was kicked again and again by Fullwood and Co., but I was unable to rise.

"I say, stop that, you rotter!" shouted Armstrong hotly. "This is a 'rag,' Fullwood—not a brutal assault. You'll turn out

to be as bad as Nipper himself, at this rate! No kicking when he's down!"

"Mind your own business!" snarled Fullwood. "Get up, you shammin' hog!"

I raised myself on my elbow.

"I'll make you pay for this, Fullwood!" I panted hoarsely. "By Jove! I'll make you suffer for what you've done to-night! I should just like to ask you one question."

"What is it?" snapped Fullwood.

"Is your father a Prussian?" I said grimly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Several fellows laughed in spite of themselves.

"Look out! The train's coming in!" shouted Hubbard suddenly. "Make the rotter get up, or else carry him bodily."

"Yes, carry him!" shouted Armstrong. "I think we've gone a bit too far, you know—he's bowled over. Perhaps we ought to have a look at him, and bind up some of his bruises before——"

But Armstrong was thrust aside by the excited crowd. I felt myself raised into the air, and then I was rushed across the station yard, face downwards. Every motion of that mad rush pained me terribly.

And as we reached the booking office the train came in.

"Young gentlemen! What is the meaning of this?" demanded the stationmaster, bustling up. "Good gracious! What on earth——"

He was pushed aside without compunction. The fellows were not likely to take any notice of a railway official at that moment. They carried me through the booking office, on to the platform, and the door of an empty third-class compartment was yanked open.

"In with him! Head first!"

"One, two, three—go!"

I was hurled into the compartment with tremendous force, and I sprawled upon the floor and lay in a heap at the far end.

Then the door slammed, and I was dimly conscious of a crowd of faces at the window. The guard was not able to get near—although he was assured that it was just a bit of fun.

"We've got rid of you at last!" exclaimed Fullwood from the door, his voice shaking with vicious triumph. "You've been chucked out on your neck, you cad. You've left St. Frank's with your name stinkin'!"

"H-s-ssss!"

"Boooooh!"

The hissing and booing on the platform sang in my ears, but I did not move. I felt that it would be more dignified for me to remain as I lay. The jeering would only increase if I showed my grimy, blood-smeared face.

"An' if you ever dare to show your beastly face in the vicinity of St. Frank's again we'll give you another dose like this—only worse," went on Fullwood. "But I don't fancy you'll come again, you worm!"

"Of course he won't—he daren't!" jeered Gulliver.

All my instincts told me to spring up and to let fly at these young scoundrels as they deserved. But I was incapable of the effort at that moment, and a weak, half-hearted attempt would have been worse than nothing at all.

So I remained still, with set teeth and clenched fists.

"Stand away there, my fine fellers!" shouted the guard. "Stand clear o' the footboards, ye young himps!"

"Keep your hair on!" said Gulliver.

The whistle blew, and with a sense of intense relief I felt the train beginning to move. A perfect roar of hisses and jeers arose, and they were the last sounds of St. Frank's in my ears as I left Bellton.

Well, that was how I was expelled from St. Frank's—that was how I was kicked out. I don't think any other fellow in the history of the school had received such a humiliating send-off.

But for the malicious efforts of Fullwood and Co. the "rag" would have been a comparatively mild affair. It was the Nuts of the Remove whom I had to thank for the brutal treatment.

And I resolved, then and there, that one day before long the cads would suffer for their Hunnish behaviour. But just now I had to occupy myself with other thoughts and other actions.

Before the train got to Bannington I had made myself look slightly presentable. Sore in every limb, dizzy, I climbed into the London train at the junction, and I was thankful that I secured an empty compartment.

I was booked for London this time.

I came to the conclusion that it was impossible for me to carry out my programme of investigating the mystery of Starke's injury. But I had that flake of enamel quite safely, and I had an idea that it would come in useful one day.

And what was to happen next?

Was I to return to London, to idle my time away there until Nelson Lee returned from the Continent? I couldn't quite picture myself doing that. My blood was up, and my chief desire was to establish to the whole universe that I was absolutely innocent of the charge preferred against me.

I wasn't beaten, although some people might have thought that I was completely knocked out of time. Somehow or other, by hook or by crook, I meant to turn the tables.

The affair was not ended by any means!

* * * * * *

"Poor old son!" said Watson huskily.

"I wonder where he is now, dear fellow? In London, I suppose," murmured Tregellis-West. "Ain't it simply appallin', Tommy boy?"

Tommy Watson groaned.

"And we shall never see him again—not at St. Frank's, anyhow," he said miserably. "Oh, I feel like kicking everything and everybody. I feel like committing murder, or something!"

"Pray refrain from such exaggerated re-

marks, dear fellow," said Sir Montie. "An' don't be quite so sure about not seeing Nipper at St. Frank's again. Some very queer things happen in this world, begad!"

"What do you mean?" whispered Watson.

"Oh, nothin'. But I've got a kind of notion that Nipper won't accept such a shockin' humiliation lying down," whispered Montie. "It ain't his nature, old boy—it ain't, really!"

The two juniors were sitting up in their beds in the Remove dormitory at St. Frank's. All the other fellows were asleep. But Montie and Tommy were unable to close their eyes as yet; they were too worried and troubled..

"But he can't come back," said Watson gloomily. "Remember what happened to-night. Oh, those cads—those rotten, bullying cowards! Handforth's going to smash Fullwood to bits to-morrow, I believe—unless I get there first!"

"I really don't know what we're goin' to do without dear old Nipper in Study C," said Sir Montie. "But I don't think we shall have to be alone for long, dear fellow. You may think I'm talking in a frightfully queer manner, but somethin' tells me that Nipper will come back."

"Yes, in years to come!" said Watson miserably.

"Begad! No! I mean soon," said Montie —"I mean almost at once, Tommy boy. But let's get to sleep now, and hope for the best. Worryin' won't help us at all; worryin' never did anybody any good."

But Tregellis-West, notwithstanding his light words, probably worried to a greater extent than Tommy Watson. But he managed to keep his feelings to himself; he presented an urbane appearance to the outward world.

And those two faithful chums of mine waited.

They waited for something to happen—something which they couldn't even guess at, but something which they were positive was coming.

And, as it happened, they were not to wait very long!

THE END.

GRIPPING NEW SERIAL.

THE HOUSE IN THE JUNGLE;
OR, JOHN HAMMOND'S DELUSION.

A Tale of the Adventures of an English Lad and a Young American in the Wild Heart of Africa in Quest of a Mysterious Valley.

By ALFRED ARMITAGE.

Author of "Red Rose and White," "Cavalier and Roundhead," etc., etc.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

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. Later on she is rescued, but Dick is recaptured.

(Now read on.)

ON THE MARCH.

"YOU can do what you like," Dick Selby said. "It doesn't matter to me. Only give me something to eat. I am simply starving."

"Very well," grunted Tib Mohammed. "I feed you, dog, so you can walk with us."

To the lad's relief his request was granted. He was given half a dozen maize-cakes and a handful of dried antelope meat, which he ravenously devoured. The Arabs also satisfied their hunger, and then, allured by the prospect of attacking the safari and enriching themselves with plunder, they all set off to the south along the bank of the river, Dick trudging by the side of Tib Mohammed.

As the jungle closed around him he felt a chilling sense of despondency. He had no doubt that by now Robert Ferguson and his daughter and servants were on their way back to the hidden valley, hundreds of miles up the Bana River. And he judged it likely that Ralph Taverner, the evil white man of whom the girl was in dread, was also returning with his friends, the Bajangas.

"I hate to think that I may never see Lorna Ferguson again," he reflected sadly. "It will be a beastly shame if she is forced to marry that fellow Taverner. I wish I had told her what a scoundrel he is! I would risk anything to save her from such a fate; but there won't be any chance of it unless Alan Carne rescues me from the slavers, and I guess I can't count on that. There is murder in Tib Mohammed's eyes."

The sun was above the horizon, but its scorching rays could not penetrate the matted fastnesses of the jungle. The slavers pressed on at a rapid pace through the morning, making another halt at noon for a short rest; and towards the close of the day, as the air was turning cool, something occurred which added to the depression that had kept a grip of the lad.

Tib Mohammed gave instructions in his own tongue to one of the party, and the Arab, a lean, wiry fellow, loped ahead of his companions at the jog-trot of a Zulu post-runner, and was soon out of sight. With a gloomy countenance Dick saw him disappear, surmising what his instructions were. He was tapped on the shoulder by Tib Mohammed, who leered at him malevolently.

"You do not like what I do—eh?" he chuckled. "Mebbe your safari not far off. My man try to find it, and bring word back."

It was as the lad had supposed. What hope of rescue he had been clinging to had now ebbed low indeed.

"If that chap stumbles on Alan and the natives, and returns without being discovered," he said to himself, "the attack on the safari will be a complete surprise, and the Arabs will have it all their own way. The Wakambas and Swahilis will be too frightened to show fight. They will bolt like jackals."

The march was continued for another hour or so, while the daylight lasted; and the

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

shadows of evening were falling, and a crescent moon was low in the sky, when, at a word from the leader, the band stopped for the night.

It was a suitable place that had been chosen—a semicircular stretch of open sward that sloped on the left to the margin of the river. To the right was dense forest, that mounted upward, and in front, to the south, the glade reached to the mouth of a narrow gorge that was very similar to the canyons of Western America. It was bounded on one side by a range of cliffs that rose flush from the edge of the stream, and on the other side were broken kopjes of granite that were split into fantastic shapes.

The wild beasts were already on the prowl. A lion roared in the distance, and a hyena uttered a mournful wail. Wood was hastily gathered, and a blazing fire was built. Dick was hungry again, and was hoping that more food would be given to him. But when he asked for it his request was curtly denied by Tib Mohammed, in whose eyes was a menacing glitter.

"You no need to eat," he said, in a mocking tone. "Your time now to die, you dog! Too much trouble to take you farther."

It was a shock to the lad. He drew a startled breath, and an icy shiver coursed through his veins. In his anxiety regarding the safari and his chances of being rescued, he had almost forgotten the Arab's threat to kill him.

"Yes, you die now," Tib Mohammed went on. "You be tied to tree yonder in jungle, and soon hungry lions come and devour you. That be your fate."

He repeated the last words, his brutal features aglow with passion. And then, with a grim laugh, he turned to speak to his companions.

THE DEATH OF THE WAKAMBA.

IN the dusk of the evening, while the band of slavers were preparing to spend the night in the forest, Alan Carne and his party came to a halt at a spot that was a little less than two miles from Tib Mohammed's camp, and was in the sombre, granite-walled gorge that stretched to the south of it.

They had been compelled to enter it, as there was no way round to right or left. To one side of them was the low barrier of cliffs that separated them from the river and rose sheer from the water. On the other side were high kopjes of split rocks ranged in close formation, above which a dense jungle ascended steeply; and between them and the cliffs was a space that was no more than thirty yards in width, and was clothed with thickets and stunted timber.

It was the end of the second day after Dick Selby had been carried off by the flooded stream, and during those two days the safari had held to the north as fast as they could travel, from sunrise to sunset. The natives had kept their word, though they had been in a sullen mood from the start. They had promised to go as far as the Bana River, which Alan judged to be within another day's march.

Alan and Jan sat in silence, listening to the howling of wild beasts that floated faintly from the depths of the forest.

"Baas, I think your heart is heavy for your friend," said the Hottentot presently.

"Yes, it is very heavy," Alan assented. "I don't believe I'll ever see Dick Selby again. He was probably drowned that night. Or if he was washed ashore he has been killed by lions."

"Surely, baas, he is dead. So do we still go north to-morrow?"

"Still northward until we get to the Bana River. And should my men then insist on turning back, Jan, there will be for me a lonely journey to a far distance."

"To the hidden valley of which you have spoken, baas?"

"Even so, Jan. To the valley where dwell the white people of much mystery who are of my own race. Would you be willing to come with me?"

"I would come whether you wanted me or not," Jan declared.

"It would be a perilous journey," said Alan, "and there might be danger at the end of it."

"The baas is my master, and I am his slave. Where you go I will go. If you die, I, too, will die. I have spoken."

"I knew I could rely on you, Jan. You have been a trusty friend to me, and if we live to get down-country I'll reward your devotion by giving you——"

Alan paused as a shadow danced in front

(Continued overleaf.)

of him, and looked up to see one of the Wakambas, who had noiselessly approached. He was Kalulu, a young man who was superior in courage and intellect to the rest of the porters. He had been a gun-bearer to Dick Selby, and could speak English.

"Bhagwan, there has been a spy here," he said in a whisper.

"A spy?" Alan echoed in consternation, as he sprang to his feet.

"Yes, only a moment ago," Kalulu replied. "I awoke suddenly, and saw a black face and two evil eyes gazing at me from the thickets yonder to the north. It was a black, wicked face, shining in the firelight. It vanished at once, and I came quietly to tell you, so that I should not alarm the others."

"Was it a Bajanga warrior, do you think?"

"No, Bhagwan, it was a man with a black beard."

"That is very strange, Kalulu. Of what race could he be?"

"I do not know; but I may be able to find out for you. I will follow the man if I can, Bhagwan, and see if there are more of them near to us."

The Wakamba did not wait for consent. He darted forward, his gun in his hand, and disappeared into the dark cover. Alan's face was clouded with apprehension.

"I am worried Jan," he said. "That a savage should be prowling about at this hour of the night means mischief."

He stood by the tent with the Hottentot, peering into the gloom. A short interval elapsed, and then the hushed silence was shattered by a shrill cry and the report of a firearm. Roused from slumber by the report, Rembo and the porters jumped up in alarm, and without an instant's delay Alan snatched a lighted lantern that hung from the tent-pole and dashed into the forest to the north. Jan ran after him, and all of the natives, who were too frightened to stay in the camp, trailed behind the Hottentot.

Alan kept the lead, the lantern in one hand and his revolver in the other. Guided by a scuffling, floundering noise, he sped through the tangled cover for thirty or forty yards, and burst from it into an open space, at the farther end of which he saw the Wakamba engaged in a desperate struggle with a stalwart negro, who wore a white turban and a belted gown of blue cotton.

As the lad hastened on there was a quick flash of steel, and the two combatants broke apart. Kalulu reeled and fell, and as the negro plunged into the jungle, with a yell of defiance, Alan fired at him and missed.

Having pursued the fugitive for a short distance, and lost sight of him in the darkness, he returned to the glade. The glow of the lantern revealed a tragic sight. The natives were gathered around the unfortunate Wakamba, who was lying unconscious on the ground, with a big, double-edged knife buried in his chest. Close by him was his gun, which had been discharged.

"Baas, he has been stabbed!" exclaimed the Hottentot. "He must have fired at that savage, who turned and attacked him!"

"Poor fellow!" said Alan. "He is dying! I wish I hadn't let him go!"

(To be continued.)

Printed and Published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4. Advertisement Offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad (except South Africa and Australasia), 8s. 10d. per annum; 4s. 5d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Company, Limited.