No. 207.—ABSORBING SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE YARN

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The New Boy arrives at St. Frank's!

UNDER FALSE COLOURS!

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," "Faked Evidence," "Expelled from St. Frank's," etc., etc.

May 24, 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I

SACKED FROM ST. FRANK'S.

EXPELLED!

Kicked out of St. Frank's, kicked to the village, and kicked into the train!

That had been my cheerful experience only an hour or so earlier. I was now nearing London, and the train was rattling over the numerous points of the suburban metals.

The time was not late—only just after ten—but I had formed no plan in my mind as to what I should do when I arrived at Victoria. My thoughts had been too busily engaged in recalling all the events that had recently taken place at St. Frank's.

In a nutshell, I, Nipper, had been expelled from St. Frank's for a crime which had been committed by somebody elee. Disaster had befallen me—disaster, complete and overpowering.

And it was the irony of fate that this should take place at a time when Nelson Lee was away from St. Frank's. The guv'nor had gone to the Continent on a special mission, and he was far away.

Indeed, it was his very absence that had brought about the whole catastrophe. Starke, of the Sixth, had made use of Nelson Lee's absence to get his own back upon me.

Starke's plan had gone wrong, and there was a mystery somewhere. For Starke himself had been struck down during the night, and all the evidence pointed to the fact that I had committed the deed.

Starke had had his knife into me for quite a long while. He was a prefect, and a bully, and I had been a thorn in his side for some little time. His scheme, I think, had been merely to get me flogged, and he had faked up a certain amount of evidence to incriminate me.

But the plan had miscarried, and I had found Starke lying unconscious on the roadside, suffering from a severe wound on the head. And there had been a terrible misunderstanding, for it was assumed that I had delivered the blow which had felled Starke to the ground.

There had been considerable excitement when the news got about, but the majority of the fellows had laughed at the very idea of my being implicated. The real trouble had not commenced until Starke regained consciousness.

And then the blow fell.

For Walter Starke, on his sick-bed, stated positively that I had committed a brutal assault—that I had struck him down. It was a deliberate lie—a deliberate, malicious lie—invented solely for the purpose of getting me into terrible trouble and disgrace.

But Starke's evidence, coupled with the circumstantial evidence which had been gained earlier, proved too much. I was unable to establish my innocence. The Head had been a brick; he had sympathised with me from the first, and it was my private opinion that he believed me innocent.

And he had granted me three days' grace—three days in which I could remain at St. Frank's and make an attempt to prove that I was not guilty. If only I had been allowed that period, I felt sure that I could have produced convincing evidence in my favour.

But here, again, luck was against me.

A big feeling had arisen in the school concerning the affair. It was taken for granted by most of the fellows that I was guilty. And my enemies—such as Fullwood and Co.—had seized their chance.

I recalled with a feeling of bitterness all that had passed.

Fullwood and Co., and their supporters, had got up a big agitation, an agitation which had almost resulted in a riot. The general demand was that I should be sacked off at once.

And the disturbance had been so great that my presence at St. Frank's was almost a danger, for the school had almost got out of hand. And so I had taken my departure—heavy-hearted and miserable.

Before leaving, however, I had come to one positive conclusion: I was convinced that Starke had been struck down by a passing motor-car, the driver of which had continued on his way without stopping.

And Starke, guessing that the culprit would never be found, had put the blame on to me, knowing well enough that it was almost impossible for me to refute the lying statement.

My examination of the spot where the prefect had been found had proved fruitless, except for one item: I had discovered a flake of enamel, which had obviously peeled from a bent motor-car mudguard.

It was the only clue I possessed. On the spot I might have been able to make use of it, but in London it would be no good to me whatever. Thus, when I left St. Frank's in the evening, I had returned after dark, for the sole purpose of making a few investigations alone.

Unfortunately, however, I had been surprised, and an angry mob of juniors, led by Fullwood and Co., had seized me. The "rag" which followed was one which was a positive disgrace, for I had been handled in the most brutal manner. I had been kicked through the village by my persecutors, and dumped into the evening train for London. Dazed, bruised in every limb, I had commenced my journey. Even now I was not feeling at all myself. After changing into the express at Bannington I had found a compartment to myself. It was a corridor coach, and I was very glad of this, for I had been enabled to have a thorough wash while travelling.

And now, nearing London, I was just beginning to feel easier and less bewildered and dizzy. I'm a hardy sort of beggar, and I knew that I should get over the effects of my experience in a day or two.

I glanced at my watch as we passed swiftly through a suburban station. The time was later than I had thought, being much nearer eleven than ten, and I realised that I should have to make some sort of plan.

Strictly speaking, I had been expelled from St. Frank's without warning, and I had had no time to communicate with anybody. I had no luggage, and not a very large supply of cash in my pocket.

My best course, I decided, would be to make straight for Gray's Inn Road, for the comfortable dwelling which Nelson Lee and I had used almost as long as I could remember.

And, although we had been at St. Frank's for some time, the guv'nor had kept everything in readiness at Gray's Inn Road. Our housekeeper, Mrs. Jones, had been given very strict instructions on that point.

But just now she had no idea that I would be coming. Nelson Lee was out of the country, and I ought to have been at St. Frank's. The worthy Mrs. Jones would receive something of a surprise when I walked in.

I won't pretend that I was feeling contented when the train pulled up at the terminus—Victoria. I was heavy-hearted and miserable. I seemed so utterly alone, so isolated from everybody I knew.

My two particular chums at St. Frank's, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, would be worrying about me. I knew that. And I had left them behind. There was no telling when I should see them again.

"Good old London!" I said to myself, as I bustled out of the station. "I'm not going to say that I'm glad to see you, because I'm not. I didn't want to come just yet; but one can't always do as one would like."

I climbed on to a motor-'bus in the station yard, and was soon bowling towards Holborn. Under ordinary circumstances I should have enjoyed that ride, for the night was mild and star-lit. The streets were brilliant with light, and everything was bustling and busy. The load on my mind was so great, however, that I hardly knew which direction we were taking.

To have left St. Frank's in such a way was the worst blow of all. What Nelson Lee would say when he returned I hardly dared imagine. Not that I thought for a moment that he would misunderstand the affair; the guv'nor would know at once that I had been the victim of some cunning plot.

What made the position altogether worse was that I had nobody to turn to. With Nelson Lee away I was almost like a lost sheep. But home was my natural destination.

I jumped off the 'bus at the corner of Gray's Inn Road and walked briskly down that busy, noisy thoroughfare. I had shaken off some of the feeling of despair, and determined that I would not reveal my true state of mind to Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper.

The familiar scene cheered me up, although one would scarcely call Gray's Inn Road a cheerful neighbourhood. But Nelson Lee had occupied his house there for many years, and it was comfortable, roomy, and homelike. I preferred it to any place in the heart of the West End.

I still had my latch-key—I had pocketed it before leaving St. Frank's. And I let myself in, and was about to mount the stairs, when the door of the lower sitting-room opened and the portly figure of Mrs. Jones appeared.

She switched on the electric-light, and stared at me half bewildered for a moment. Then her face broke into a smile of welcome.

"Lawks, Master Nipper, how you startled me!" she exclaimed, hurrying forward up the hall. "I never had no idea that you were coming to-night. How long will you be staying?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Jones," I replied, trying to speak cheerfully. "But I shall probably be in London for several days, any-

low. I meant to wire you, but I wasn't able to."

"Not that it matters, Master Nipper," said Mrs. Jones. "The beds is all aired, an' ready for you to slip into. An' I'll bring ye up some supper in less than a jiffy. Will the master be with you?"

I shook my head.

"Didn't you know?" I said. "The guv'nor's in Italy just at present, Mrs. Jones. There's no telling when he'll be back."

"The master always was a one for dodgin' off to some wild corner of the earth," said the housekeeper, lifting her hands. "But there! I'll make you nice an' comfortable, Master Nipper."

"Thanks," I said. "But you needn't bother about any supper, Mrs. Jones. I'm rather tired; I'll nip straight into bed."

She eyed me suspiciously.

"Have ye had something at a restaurant?" she inquired.

"Er—no," I admitted.

"You ain't yourself, Master Nipper," said Mrs. Jones critically. "I declare you're lookin' quite pale. Lor' sakes! An' just look at them bruises on your face—an' your lips are swollen! You've been fightin', Master Nipper!"

"That's all right, Mrs. Jones," I grinned. "Don't you worry about me. And don't bother about the supper."

"I don't take no heed of ye," said the housekeeper firmly. "Bless the boy! Do you think I'm goin' to let you go to bed without supper? You go upstairs, Master Nipper, an' have a wash. I'll bring a nice little supper up within five minutes."

I felt that I couldn't eat a morsel, but I didn't want to offend the old girl. So I consented to the arrangement, and went upstairs. The consulting-room was looking just the same as ever; the cosy dining-room was as clean as a new pin, and neat and tidy.

I felt much better after a look round; I wasn't half so lonely as I thought I should have been, and after a good wash in the bathroom I felt so much better that I was almost cheerful.

"There you are, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, bustling in.

She brought a well-filled tray, and she fussed about and laid the table with all her customary neatness and daintiness. But although the supper was a favourite one with me, I didn't eye it favourably. The salad looked perfect, and the coffee was steaming invitingly.

"Sit ye down, Master Nipper, and enjoy your supper," ordered Mrs. Jones, pulling a chair out ready for me. "And don't forget to ring if you want anything else. I'll come in a jiffy!"

I sat down at the table, and felt compelled to eat a morsel, at all events, if only to please the old girl's heart. She would be mortally offended if I left the supper untouched.

The first mouthful seemed to choke me, the second mouthful went down more easily, and the third mouthful made me want some more. To my surprise, I discovered that I wanted the supper, after all. I suddenly became aware of the fact that I was famished, and I sailed in with a will.

By the time I had finished I had cleared the board, and I felt so much better for the food that I didn't go to bed immediately. I lounged about the consulting-room, examining old familiar articles and glancing at books and papers.

But there wasn't much fun in it, and the depression soon began to cast its spell over me again. So, at the first yawn, I retired into the bedroom, and was soon between the sheets.

I'm not ashamed to say that I felt like blubbing. I was sick at heart, and the prospect before me seemed black and hopeless. Had I only known it, the prospect was exactly the reverse.

But I fell asleep with a kind of lump in my throat, and wished with all my heart that I was back in the Remove dormitory at dear old St. Frank's. That wish was to be granted before so very long, and in a manner which would have made me gasp with amazement if I could have known of it then.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THE STORM.

"OH, it's rotten!" said Tommy Watson miserably. "It's too rotten for words, Montie. What the dickens we shall do without Nipper is more than I can imagine. Life ain't worth living now!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West shook his head. "I am willin' to agree, dear old boy, that existence is shockin'ly gloomy without Nipper's smilin' face about the place," he observed. "But have patience; be confident. Nipper will come back."

"Oh, rats!" growled Watson. "You keep on saying that, Montie. But what's the good? You know jolly well that Nipper's gone for good. We shan't see him again until the end of the term—until the holidays. By gum! Won't we have a good old time then!"

The two Remove juniors were chatting in Study C, in the Ancient House of St. Frank's. That famous apartment was looking rather bare and forlorn. It had not been tidied up, and everything was neglected.

It was the morning after I had been booted out of the school. Starke was still helpless in bed, of course, and there was not much prospect of him getting about until a week or two had elapsed.

And the storm which had arisen on the previous afternoon had not quite blown over. Most of the fellows were ready to let the matter drop, to accept my expulsion as an ordinary event. But there were some other juniors who were still furious and indignant.

Montie and Tommy were included among these, and the others were Handforth and Co., of Study D, Pitt, Grey, De Valerie, and

one or two kindred spirits. These staunch juniors believed in my innocence blindly. They waved aside the evidence, and accepted the fact that I was not guilty.

But they were not ready to let matters rest.

Edward Oswald Handforth, at least, was fully determined to make things hum. He came down that morning with his rugged face looking grim and set. It was obvious to everybody that Handforth was on the warpath.

"Seen Fullwood?" he demanded, as he entered the lobby.

"Out in the Triangle, I think," replied Owen major, who was examining the notice-board. "What's up, Handy? Looking for trouble?"

"No!" said Handforth, "but Fullwood's going to find some! The cad took jolly good care to clear out of the dormitory before I got up. But he won't escape me for long, the contemptible cur!"

"What's the idea?" inquired Owen major. "You're not wild about that affair of last night, I suppose?"

Handforth stared.

"Not wild? Oh, no!" he said bitingly. "A fellow isn't wild when he sees one helpless chap being set upon by a horde of uncivilised savages! Fullwood incited the chaps to attack Nipper last night—and Fullwood's got to pay!"

"Oh, let it drop," said Owen. "What's the good of raking it all up again, Handy? Nipper's gone now, and the whole trouble's finished. Besides, he deserved something hot——"

"Do you believe that he was guilty?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, come off it!" grinned Owen. "I suppose the Head would have sacked him for being innocent, wouldn't he? Of course Nipper was guilty; everybody knows it!"

"You—you traitor!" exclaimed Handforth fiercely. "Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to get up a petition to the Headmaster, and I'm going to punch every fellow who says a word against Nipper. Understand?"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"Of course, I expect that kind of rot from you, Charles Owen!" bellowed Handforth. "You've got no more sense than a—a grub!"

"Why, you—you——"

"No more sense than a giddy worm!" roared Handforth. "You know as well as I do that Nipper was the best chap in the Remove—a fine, upright, honourable fellow. And just because he's the victim of circumstantial evidence you turn against him. Ain't you ashamed of yourself?" he shouted scathingly. "Ain't you feeling as mean as any human being can feel?"

Owen major looked rather wrathful.

"Look here, Handforth, you've got it all wrong——" he began.

"I don't want to say another word to you!" roared Handforth bitterly. "I don't want to look at your ugly face! The very sight of you disgusts me! I'm not going to say another word to you until you stick up for Nipper."

"Thank goodness!" said Owen major, with relief.

"And I'm not going to stand any rot, either," went on Edward Oswald. "You've got an idea that I shall be soft—that you can trifle with me——"

"But I thought you weren't going to speak to me any more?" asked Owen major blandly.

"No, I won't!" exclaimed Handforth. "It's a waste of breath! I'll punch your silly nose instead. Take that, you traitor!"

Biff!

Owen major took it before he could dodge, and he collapsed to the floor with a howl of pain. The redoubtable leader of Study D, much relieved, stalked out into the Triangle, and glared round him for further victims.

His eyes gleamed as he caught sight of Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell. The Nuts of the Remove were standing in the shade of the old elms, and were looking more than usually pleased with themselves.

"I'll change their beastly expressions!" growled Handforth under his breath.

He marched across the Triangle, and Owen major stood in the doorway of the Ancient House. At that moment Owen major would have given a week's pocket-money to see the Nuts fall upon Handforth and slaughter him on the spot.

"I want a word with you, Fullwood," said Handforth grimly.

"Sorry," said Ralph Leslie Fullwood, without turning his head. "I can't spare any time to talk with you, Handforth. I'm busy. You might oblige me by addressing your remarks to——"

"I'm going to make you pay for what you did last night," interrupted Handforth, rolling up his sleeves. "You maliciously set the fellows on to Nipper; you incited them to kick the poor chap from the school to the village. You behaved like a Billingsgate hooligan——"

"What!" shouted Fullwood.

"A hooligan—a blackguard!" roared Handforth, warming to his work "Put up your hands, you contemptible cad! I'm going to fight you until you can't stand—and then I'm going to fight Gulliver—and then I'm going to fight Bell!"

"Really?" sneered Fullwood. "That's quite a tall order. An' what are you goin' to do if we refuse to fight? Personally, I wouldn't soil my fingers by touchin' your beastly person!"

"Neither would I!" said Gulliver.

"Same here!" agreed Bell.

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Then I'll fight the three of you at once!" he shouted. "I'm going to make you pay for being cads! Take that, Fullwood—to start with!"

And Handforth hurled himself forward at the Nuts. They had never dreamed that he would be soo rash as to fight them in the open Triangle, and they were unprepared for the onslaught.

Handforth got in several hefty blows before Fullwood and Co. realised that they would have to fight—or flee. To fight was out of the question, and to flee would be undignified.

So the Nuts were in a bit of a quandary.

Fate came to their assistance in the person of Mr. Crowell. The master of the Remove was astounded on emerging from the Ancient House to see Handforth violently attacking three juniors, who made no attempt to return his blows.

"Take that, you rotter!" shouted Handforth, delivering a punch which sent Gulliver sprawling. "Fight, you cads! Ain't you going to punch back? How the dickens do you think I can have a decent scrap when you won't shove up your hands?"

Mr. Crowell strode forward.

"Handforth!" he rapped out sharply.

Handforth turned, rather taken aback.

"Just a minute, sir!" he gasped. "I—I'm dealing with these cads! If you'll wait half a minute——"

"Cease this at once!" ordered Mr. Crowell. "How dare you engage in a fight in the Triangle, Handforth? Are you mad, boy?"

"But I'm only punishing these chaps for being cads, sir!" said Handforth, evidently under the impression that that excuse was quite sufficient. "They think that Nipper was guilty—and I'm going to fight every fellow who talks rot like that!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Crowell coldly. "By what I can see, you attacked these three boys without provocation. You will leave them alone at once, Handforth, and you will write three hundred lines."

Handforth stared.

"Three—three hundred lines for teaching these rotters a lesson?" he asked dazedly. "But—but you don't seem to understand, sir! Fullwood is an awful bounder, and Gulliver and Bell are just as bad! A hiding every now and again does them good!"

"And I have no doubt that a hiding will do you good, Handforth," said the Remove master curtly. "Perhaps your motives are quite good, and I will be lenient with you. You need only write me two hundred lines. But you must not get so excited, and you must accept the fact that Nipper has left St. Frank's for good; he left in disgrace, and your belief in his innocence is quite misplaced."

"Do—do you think he was guilty, sir?" demanded Handforth hotly.

The juniors who had collected round watched with scared faces; for a moment they believed that the impulsive Handforth was about to punch the nose of Mr. Crowell himself! But he held himself in check by a masterly effort.

"Nipper has been expelled, and I do not intend to discuss the subject," said Mr. Crowell. "Go indoors, Handforth, and calm down. Go at once!"

Handforth went, and when he arrived in the lobby there was an expression of blank bewilderment in his eyes. Church and McClure met him, and took his arms with gentle care.

"Come along to the study, old man," said McClure softly.

"And that's what old Crowsfeet calls being lenient!" exclaimed Handforth, taking a deep breath. "Two hundred lines, and ordered to go indoors! Justice! Is there any such thing in this world?"

"Well, it was your own fault, old son," said Church gently.

"My fault?" shouted his leader, stopping abruptly.

"You went for Fullwood and Co. in full view of——"

"Well, what of it?" demanded Handforth. "Don't they deserve a licking? If Crowell had any sense he would have allowed me to go on with the job." And Handforth laughed bitterly. "But I'm not beaten yet," he added. "Crowell doesn't scare me. I'm going to fight every cad who talks against poor old Nipper."

Church and McClure looked at one another rather hopelessly, but they said nothing. Talking would only make matters worse. And when the trio arrived in Study D, Handforth shut the door and flung his cap upon the table.

"Yes, that's the idea," he said slowly. "By George! It's the wheeze of the term! And it can't fail, either! They didn't know what they were doing when they sent Nipper away—when they got my back up!"

"I say, Handy, you'd better go easy——"

"A petition," said Handforth absent-mindedly. "Yes, that's it! A petition to the Head, signed by everybody in the school. He simply can't ignore it—it would be as much as his job's worth. And within a week we shall have Nipper back in the Remove. A great idea!"

Church looked doubtful.

"What sort of a petition?" he asked.

"Why, a petition demanding that Nipper shall be pardoned and reinstated," said Handforth. "Everybody's got to sign it—but, naturally, my name will be at the top. It's the finest idea I ever thought of."

"Oh, it's simply staggering!" said McClure admiringly. "But there are one or two points I'd like you to make clear, Handy. For example, how are you going to make the fellows sign?"

"Why, with a pen, you ass!"

"But most of the chaps think Nipper's guilty!" exclaimed McClure. "They won't sign a petition demanding that Nipper shall be pardoned! You can't expect it, Handy. You'll only get about fifteen signatures."

Handforth smiled in a superior kind of way.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said calmly. "I'm prepared for opposition."

"Oh!"

"I'm going round to everybody singly," went on the great Handforth. "I shall have a fountain-pen with me, and I shall request the chaps to sign. If they refuse it's my plan to punch them until they agree—to

punch their noses until they beg on their knees to be allowed to sign!"

Church and McClure gasped

"Is—is this a joke?" asked Church dazedly.

"A joke!" roared Handforth. "Do you want a thick ear, Walter Church?"

"But—but you're dotty!" panted Church. "You'll have to fight three or four hundred fellows if you mean to carry that game through!"

"I'm prepared for it."

"Seniors, as well!"

"I don't care!"

"And—and prefects," said McClure.

"I'll fight everybody, if necessary," said Handforth firmly. "But they've got to sign my petition—that's settled."

"Oh, it's settled, is it?" asked Church faintly.

"Absolutely!"

And Handforth sat down to prepare the petition. Church and McClure looked on as though in a dream. They were not capable of rising to such great heights as Handforth soared to. Their enthusiasm could never lead them to think that the scheme was likely to succeed. They knew quite positively that it would be a dismal failure. But to suggest this to Handforth would be disastrous. It was always safer to let Handy find these things out for himself.

And as it was nearly breakfast-time Church and McClure sneaked silently out of Study D and prayed that their leader would soon come to his senses. Meanwhile, Handforth was quite unaware of the fact that his chums had deserted him.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "I think that'll do all right. 'We, the scholars of St. Frank's, demand that Nipper shall be reinstated without a stain upon his character. We further demand that Nipper shall be pardoned. We further demand that Starke shall be sacked.' How does that go? We all sign our names at the bottom—see?"

No reply.

"Are you asses dumb?" demanded Handforth warmly. "I suppose you think you could do it better? Come and sign this and get it done with."

The petition was written on the first page of a new exercise book, Handforth's idea being that there would be plenty of space for all the names. He proceeded to sign the effusion himself—and succeeded in filling the remainder of the first page. A few blots were ignored.

"You first, Church," he said briskly.

There was a deadly silence.

"Can't you come—— Great pip!" gasped Handforth, turning and finding that he was alone. "Well, of all the rotters! I'll jolly well scalp them for this! Deserting me in the hour of need!"

Handforth tucked the petition under his arm and charged out into the passage. It was deserted. He blundered into three studies in succession. They were all empty. He strode along the passage into the lobby. Not a soul was to be seen. Then Handforth went to the door and discovered that the Triangle was bare.

Just for a moment Handforth thought that he was dreaming. Then he faintly heard a clatter of crockery; and it dawned upon his mighty brain that everybody was partaking of breakfast. He had quite overlooked the fact; he hadn't even heard the gong sound.

It was obvious that there could be nothing doing in the petition line until after breakfast. So Handforth strode along to the dining hall, and was not exactly cheered by Mr. Crowell's caustic remarks concerning late-comers. However, Handforth's appetite did not seem to be impaired.

His troubles were just commencing. The first five attempts to gain signatures were ghastly failures. Handforth put his great idea into execution; he punched the obstinate juniors until they agreed to sign. At least, that is what he intended doing, but he found, to his indignation and dismay, that the fellows punched back. And some of them were quite in earnest about it, too.

By the time morning lessons were due to commence Handforth was more or less of a wreck, and he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that the man who invented petitions was absolutely mad.

But when the Remove was dismissed Handforth's determination was as strong as ever. He continued his efforts with renewed vigour—and the same may be said of the other fellows.

Edward Oswald Handforth, in short, was completely defeated. By dinner-time he realised that the game was not worth the candle. With two thick ears, a swollen nose, and several loose teeth, he trembled to think what would be left of him if he continued his scheme.

And so it was dropped. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West sympathised with Handforth, because they knew that his motives were excellent. But, as Watson pointed out, with nine-tenths of the school against them, it was sheer waste of time to attempt any petition-signing. If Handforth had only listened to his own chums at the start, all would have been well. But Handforth only listened to the voice of stern experience

There was another matter which attracted the attention of the juniors, too. This was the election of a new Form captain. There were three candidates—De Valerie, Pitt, and Handforth. He didn't see why he shouldn't put up for election, because Handforth had an idea that he was the best man for the job. How the election would go was a bit of a problem, and nobody seemed particularly interested.

The Remove, in short, was unusually dull and listless. My departure had left a kind of reaction after it. And the fellows didn't seem to care how things went.

Meanwhile I was at Gray's Inn Road—but I wasn't half so miserable as I had expected I should be.

And I'll just explain why.

CHAPTER III.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

BREAKFAST was not a cheerful meal, I'll admit. I had not slept very well, and I got up comparatively early. A march along Holborn had made me feel slightly better, but the gloom returned when I arrived back home.

I kept thinking all the time how wretched the affair was. To leave St. Frank's at all was bad; but to leave it with my name dishonoured was something which had never entered into my calculations.

And it had all come about because of Starke's vicious lie. Starke had stated that I attacked him; yet Starke knew well enough that I had done nothing of the sort.

It was my positive opinion that the bullying Sixth-Former had been knocked down by a passing motor-car. And as my thoughts roved in this direction I mechanically took out my pocket-book and extracted the flake of hard enamel which I had found in the grass at the scene of the "assault."

It was not a positive clue, but quite good enough for me—particularly when it was coupled with the unconscious evidence which Starke had himself given. In a few moments of delirium the injured prefect had mumbled some words about a speeding motor-car.

But how was I to prove that Starke had been lying?

How could I establish the fact that a motor-car was responsible for the crime which I had presumably committed? The driver of the car was obviously one of those contemptible beings one sometimes reads about. He had driven straight on after the accident, without even pausing to see what damage he had caused.

And having discovered that the affair was not serious—he could easily have found that out by cautious inquiry—he remained quiet and said nothing. But did Starke know anything? Did Starke know what car it was?

Even if he did Starke would say nothing—for to breathe a word would be to give himself away. He had accused me, and he would have to stick to that yarn. Meanwhile I was in dire disgrace.

The chip of enamel was worth no more than a speck of dust—while I remained in London. And I realised that it was up to me to think of some scheme—some plan to get at the truth.

For I was by no means resigned to my fate. I wanted to get back to the scene; I wanted to make careful investigations. But I couldn't go back to the school, and to take lodgings in the village would be uncomfortable. I was known everywhere in the district, and even the countryfolk were against me.

For a long time after breakfast I wandered about the house—into the consulting-room, through the laboratory, back to the consulting-room again, and so on. I had never felt the absence of the guv'nor so keenly before.

It was the height of misfortune that this disaster should have come about during Nelson Lee's absence. But, of course, it had been planned that way. Starke had taken advantage of the opportunity. The bully had got his own back on me now—with a vengeance.

And I was still mooning about when I heard the powerful throb of a racing motor-car. It seemed to come to a stop just outside, and I moved listlessly across to the window.

And there, in the bright sunshine, I saw a low-built, wicked-looking automobile, and a figure in the act of climbing out. There was something familiar about that figure. The man was clad in a dust coat and a check cap, with goggles artistically decorating the front.

I opened the window and leaned out, and at that moment the man glanced up, caught my eye, and waved.

"Dorrie!" I gasped breathlessly.

The next second I withdrew my head, bumping it against the sash violently, but didn't care a jot. I charged across the consulting-room, blundered down the stairs, and literally tore open the front door.

Lord Dorrimore was waiting on the step, smiling and cheerful. He was an old friend of Nelson Lee's, and I regarded him as a sort of uncle—as a real pal. Dorrie was really one of the most lovable men in creation.

"Still alive an' kickin', young 'un," he said cheerily. "Didn't you think I'd pegged out? You haven't seen anythin' of me for months——"

"Oh, Dorrie, come in!" I panted. "I've never wanted you so much as I want you just now! Haven't you heard? Don't you know?"

Lord Dorrimore allowed me to drag him upstairs

"Haven't I heard what?" he asked mildly. "Be lucid, you young bounder. Don't I know what? Where's Lee—where's your bally old sleuth?"

"Never mind about the guv'nor—he's in Italy somewhere," I said quickly.

"Ye gods! An' I've just come from the Continent myself!" exclaimed Dorrie. "Why didn't you tell me? I might have run across him somewhere. I'm all at sea here, don't forget—I haven't the faintest idea of what's been happenin'. I didn't expect to find anybody at home."

"Well, you found me," I said.

"But, my dear kid, what about St. Frank's?" asked his lordship. "I thought you were still at that famous seat of learnin'? I came here to make inquiries of your excellent housekeeper. What do I find? I find you in sole possession, an' Lee in Italy! Somethin' must have happened!"

Lord Dorrimore sat down and helped himself to a cigarette from his gold case. Then he looked up at me with an amused light in his twinkling eyes.

"I'm waitin'," he said. "Go ahead, my son. Don't keep me on edge, by gad! I know well enough that somethin' startlin' has taken place. You don't seem yourself—there are rings round your eyes."

"I don't wonder at it," I said keenly.

"Look here, Dorrie, you'd better prepare yourself for a bit of a shock——"

"I'm used to 'em," interrupted Dorrie complacently. "Shocks have no effect on me whatever. After livin' in the jungle with old Umlosi as a companion for months on end, nothin' will upset my nerves. You remember Umlosi? I've left the old beggar in Africa."

"Of course I remember Umlosi," I exclaimed. "Didn't we have some fine times during that trip to the South Seas with Captain Burton? But this isn't the time to talk over past events, Dorrie. I'm worried almost out of my life——"

"You look it," said Dorrie calmly.

"But I am—really," I insisted. "I'd better tell you the truth straight out. I've been expelled from St. Frank's—sacked—kicked out!"

Lord Dorrimore didn't move a hair.

"That's frightfully excitin'," he observed. "But don't you think you'd better try another one, Nipper? I'm not likely to be caught with——"

"But it's true—absolutely true!" I shouted. "Good heavens! Do you think I'd joke on a subject like that? I've been expelled, I tell you—sacked in disgrace. I came home last night."

Dorrie still smiled, but his eyes were serious.

"What were you sacked for?" he asked bluntly.

"For brutally assaulting a prefect," I replied.

"An' who really did it?" inquired his lordship calmly.

"It's jolly decent of you to ask that, Dorrie," I said with feeling. "It proves that you don't think I'm guilty—— Hi! Look out! What the thunder——"

Dorrimore had delivered a sounding thump on my back which sent me reeling. He took the cigarette from his mouth and eyed me sternly.

"Don't talk like that again, you young ass!" he said, in as severe a voice as he could manage. "Don't you think I know you? Are you the kind of chap to get expelled from St. Frank's for doin' somethin' disgraceful? Get ahead with the yarn, an' let me know all about it. I'm all ears."

Without stinting myself for words, I explained to his lordship exactly what had occurred. He listened almost without comment until I had completely finished. Then he lit a fresh cigarette and blew out a cloud of blue smoke.

"That fellow—Bark, or Starke, or Sharke—or whatever his bally name is—seems to be an awfully pleasant sort of fellow," he observed smoothly. "I should think his nature must be perfectly sweet. What a rippin' thing to do—to say that you bowled him over when he woke up."

"But look here, Dorrie, you believe what I've told you, don't you?" I asked anxiously. "You believe that I'm innocent?"

Lord Dorrimore rose to his feet and placed a hand over my shoulders.

"Poor youngster!" he exclaimed kindly. "You've been goin' through the very deuce of a time. Of course you're innocent. The evidence is all against you, but that's nothin'. An' that idea of yours about a car is right on the nail. You've hit it, young 'un. But there's somethin' else."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"You can't kid me that the fellow thought of accusin' you on the spur of the moment," said Dorrie. "It was a put-up job, Nipper—a plot. Starke has hated you for months, hasn't he?"

"Like poison."

"Well, he planned this thing—an' it went wrong," said Dorrie sagely. "That's how I look at it. Starke didn't mean to get bowled out of time—that part was not in the programme at all. But it was an arranged scheme. An' what you've got to do is to get busy an' disarrange it."

"But how?" I asked helplessly. "What can I do?"

Dorrie stroked his chin.

"Yes, that's the rub," he said slowly. "What can you do? Or, in other words, what can we do?"

"'We'?" I repeated.

"You bet your life!" said his lordship. "I'm in this affair, Nipper—an' don't you forget it! You're in a hole, an' at your wits' end. I'm messin' about, with nothin' to do. If I can't help you in a time like this—well, I'm fit for nothin'! We've got to concentrate."

"The only possible plan, to my mind, is for me to go down to Bellton," I said. "That's the village near the school, you know. On the spot I might be able to make a few investigations; but I should be hampered tremendously. Everybody would know that I was there——"

"Oh, no, they wouldn't," put in Dorrie, grinning.

"But they'd see me!"

"I dare say they would—most people can see in this world," observed his lordship. "But you wouldn't be hampered in the least—an' I'll tell you why. You'll go down there, but you won't go down there. You'll be right on the spot, makin' your investigations, but you'll really be in London. Is that clear?"

"Oh, quite!" I said. "As clear as mud!"

Dorrie sighed.

"I'm no good at explainin' things," he said. "I'll say it in another way. You will pretend to be in London—that's better. You'll pretend to be here, but you'll go down to Bellton in disguise——"

"In disguise!" I echoed, with a start.

"Exactly!" said Dorrimore. "Rippin'—what? You can dress up as somebody—a bricklayer or somethin'. You can prowl about without a soul suspectin' your real identity. An' within a fortnight you'll have the whole thing cleared up, an' that Starke fellow will receive a boot on the seat of his trousers!"

"What an ass—what a fatheaded idiot!" I gasped.

Lord Dorrimore beamed.

"Thanks awfully!" he said. "But I didn't

quite expect such a flow of elegant compliments——"

"I was talking about myself, you old donkey!" I shouted. "I've been an ass not to think of that before. In disguise! That's the very wheeze—and the most obvious one, too. But I've been so worried that I couldn't think properly."

Lord Dorrimore grinned. He didn't mind being called a donkey by me—for he was one of the most free-and-easy men imaginable. I was full of enthusiasm over the plan—and so was Dorrie.

"I can be down there, and I can tell Montie and Tommy all about it," I exclaimed. "Won't they be surprised! And they can help me, too——"

"Steady!" interrupted his lordship. "I shouldn't have anybody else in it, young 'un. You keep to yourself until the thing's through. That's my advice. Boys are liable to talk—even boys like those rippin' chums of yours. An' if they didn't talk they'd give the show away by their faces."

"Perhaps you're right, Dorrie," I said, after a moment. "Well, we'll get ahead with this idea at once—I'll go down to Bellton to-morrow. The sooner I can get there the better."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"That's my opinion, too," he agreed. "Don't you worry your head, old son. You'll come through this ordeal with flyin' colours. An' all those young rufflans who handled you so brutally last night will have to beg your pardon. And take my advice, an' don't let them off too easy!"

"I'll wait till I prove my innocence first, Dorrie," I said. "I don't know what I should have done without you. You've bucked me up, and made me feel absolutely lighthearted again. You're a splendid sort!"

"Rot!" said his lordship, preparing to go. "Now, look here. You be ready—disguised an' all that—by ten o'clock to-morrow mornin'. I'll happen along at that time, an' run you down to Bellton in the car—— No, that wouldn't do!"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"I'm known down there—my past record is famous," said Dorrie. "It wouldn't be good policy. But I'll take you as far as Bannin'ton, anyhow. So be ready at ten o'clock."

CHAPTER IV.

A LITTLE ALTERATION.

TEN o'clock chimed musically from the mantelpiece in the consulting-room.

I was ready. As a matter of fact I had been ready for ten minutes, and was waiting for Lord Dorrimore to arrive. And I was quite certain that his lordship would not recognise me.

I had already deceived Mrs. Jones, and the worthy old soul was wondering what on earth I was doing—for I had explained nothing of my predicament to her. There was no reason for her to be worried.

I gazed at myself in the glass; or, to be more exact, I gazed at a short, square shouldered man of quite thirty. His face was bronzed, and he wore a small, dark moustache. On his right cheek a scar was visible. His hair was rather long, and he wore a flowing tie and a black velours hat of a wide-brimmed pattern.

"Ripping!" I exclaimed softly. "No, that won't do—that's my voice. Splendid! Quite a remarkable transformation!" I added, in a deeper tone.

I had considered everything thoroughly, and had decided that I should cause no suspicion by staying in Bellton in the guise of an amateur landscape painter. It was just the right weather, and I could sally out and be absent most of the day without creating attention.

And I could approach the school during lessons. Of course, I couldn't paint—but that was merely a detail. I was capable of dauhing oil-colours on to a canvas and making some kind of a blotch. And quite a few artists do no better.

"Here he is!" I muttered eagerly.

The throb of the racing car sounded, and I arrived at the window just in time to see Lord Dorrimore taking a flying leap to the pavement. He must have found the front door open, for he came thundering up the stairs before I could even reach the door of the consulting-room.

Then he burst in, with flushed face and gleaming eyes.

"Ready, Nipper?" he shouted. "I've got—— Good lor'! I really beg your pardon, sir! I had no idea that——"

"And who may you be, sir?" I demanded sternly. "By what right do you come thundering into this private apartment as though you owned it? Nipper is not available at the moment, and you will oblige me by retiring!"

Dorrimore bowed.

"Certainly," he agreed. "Please accept my apologies for behavin' like a bull instead of a human bein'. But I get these fits sometimes, an'——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" I roared.

Dorrie stared at me wrathfully for a moment, then he advanced with a black brow. But by the time he reached me he was grinning all over his face.

"By jingo, young 'un, you took me in properly!" he declared. "Splendid! Top hole! You look just like my long-lost brother! What an infernal pity you took all that trouble, though—I hate wasted labour!"

"Wasted labour!" I echoed.

"Exactly! Rip all that rubbish off," ordered Dorrie briskly. "Take the whole bally outfit away an' bury it! You look a man to the life; but it's not good enough!"

I was somewhat dismayed.

"Why, I thought you'd like it!" I protested. "I've been working on this disguise since seven o'clock this morning! And it's what the guv'nor and I call a 'permanent' disguise. It can be maintained for weeks, if necessary."

"You won't maintain it for five minutes," said his lordship firmly.

"But why not? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothin'—except that it's about sixteen years too old!" exclaimed my visitor calmly. "The fact is, my son, I've got an idea worth fifty-five of the original scheme! It's a first-class, gilt-edged, number one stunt—an' that's puttin' it mildly. I thought about it while I was lyin' in bed this mornin', wonderin' how much longer I could laze between the sheets. It came to me all of a rush, an' I gave such a yell that Dennis nearly had a fit—that's my valet, you know."

I was somewhat taken aback, and looked it.

"I don't see how you can have an idea that's worth fifty-five of the other," I said. "And if I've got to look sixteen years younger than I do now, I needn't wear any disguise at all!"

"That's the trouble," said Dorrie. "Can it be done? That's the point that's worryin' me. Can you disguise yourself as a boy of fifteen, an' yet conceal your own identity?"

"I've done it more than once," I replied promptly. "I did it when I first went to St. Frank's, as a matter of fact——"

"Of course you did!" said Dorrie. "That's when you were known as Bennett, wasn't it? What a memory I've got! Well, what I want to know is this—as we're goin' to work this thing together, why shouldn't you go back to St. Frank's?"

"To—to St. Frank's?"

"Why shouldn't you go back into the Remove?" asked Dorrie coolly.

"The—the Remove!" I yelled.

"In the character of a new boy," explained his lordship. "That's the whole idea in a nutshell."

I sat down and gasped. I was really incapable of anything else at the moment. Dorrie's suggestion had completely taken the breath out of me. It was so staggering that I could scarcely realise what it exactly meant.

"It would be the biggest joke of the century," went on Dorrie enthusiastically. "You get expelled from the school for somethin' you didn't do, an' within a week you're back again—as large as life, but under false colours. Just think of the rippin' times you'll have, bluffin' all the fellows! You can do it all right—when it comes to actin' you're absolutely on your hind legs. An' in the school itself you'll have double the chances."

At the end of a minute I had gained a clear view of things, and I shook my head gloomily.

"It couldn't be worked," I said.

"Why not?"

"It's the finest idea in the world, but there are insuperable difficulties in the way," I went on. "To begin with, how am I to get into the school? A fellow can't go down and arrange a thing like that himself, Dorrie. His father, or guardian, must go—and it costs a frightful amount, although that's nothing. The real difficulty is getting introduced."

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"I've thought of all that," he said calmly. "I'm your guardian, an' I'll run down to St. Frank's to-day, while you're gettin' ready. I'll spin the Head a lovely yarn, an' take full responsibility. There must be an openin' in the Remove—because you've just left it. Nothin' could be better."

"Why, I should simply step into my own shoes again," I said, breathing hard. "But it's asking too much of you, Dorrie. There'll be a terrific commotion if the truth comes out, you know, and you might find yourself in serious trouble for taking any part in the deception."

"I can look after myself," replied Dorrimore complacently. "That's what I've been doin' for as long as I can remember. And it ain't a deception, you young ass—at least, not a wicked one. You're goin' back to St. Frank's to clear your name. It's the only way it can be managed. Well, what do you think of the idea? Is it a go?"

I grasped Dorrie's hand.

"It's the finest idea you ever thought of," I exclaimed heartily. "And I don't know how to thank you, Dorrie, for taking so much trouble over me. I'm sure I can keep up the game all right."

"Well, that's the main thing," said his lordship. "If I were you I should make up as a kind of duffer. Pretend to be a bit silly, you know. Then you won't be suspected; nobody will take any notice of you."

I paced up and down the consulting-room, trembling with excitement.

"Dash it all, I think I'm glad I was sacked now!" I exclaimed. "This will be the greatest joke on record! I shall be down there, among all the fellows, and I can get endless fun out of it. And I can find out the truth about Starke, too. As soon as I've learned the truth I'll reveal my identity."

"That's the exact idea," said my companion. "I s'pose you couldn't manage to disguise me as a boy? I'd love to be with you!"

But Dorrimore was only joking—although I could quite believe that he would welcome the chance of going to St. Frank's with me. He was no better than a junior schoolboy himself.

And he entered into this scheme with tremendous enthusiasm. Together, we arranged all the details—and there were a good few to think of—and after that Dorrie took his departure for St. Frank's.

I sat down in the big armchair and stared before me unseeingly.

I was thinking. If everything went all right, I should be back in the Remove within a day or two—back amongst the fellows who believed in me, and amongst those who held my name in contempt.

I should, at all events, hear some true opinions concerning myself! And the very thought of bluffing Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West made me chuckle with delighted anticipation.

It would be hard to begin with—tremendously hard.

I knew everybody by sight and by name. But in my new character I should have to know nothing. Unless I remained on the alert

the whole time I should easily give myself away.

An absent-minded remark—quite easily made—would bring suspicion upon me at once. But I had sufficient confidence in myself to be sure that I could carry the game of bluff through successfully.

And to be down at the old school, and to probe the mystery to the bottom, was all that I desired. Owing to Lord Dorrimore's help it seemed that my wish would come true.

I should never be able to thank his lordship for the service if he succeeded in getting me "placed" in the Ancient House Remove. And, somehow, I felt that old Dorrie would be completely successful.

He wasn't the kind of man to be beaten once he had made up his mind!

CHAPTER V.

UNDER FALSE COLOURS

"LORD who?" asked Handforth.

"Dorrimore—don't you remember him, you ass?" said McClure. "Wasn't he with us when we went on that trip to the South Sea Islands with Nipper and Mr. Lee and the rest of the crowd?"

"By George, yes!" said Handforth. "What the dickens is he doing down here?"

"Blessed if I know," replied McClure. "He only arrived about ten minutes ago, and he's jawing with the Head now, I think. I say, that's a spanking fine car of his, isn't it?"

Quite a number of juniors were standing about the Triangle, examining Lord Dorrimore's racing motor-car. Afternoon lessons had not yet commenced, and the fellows were naturally interested in the visitor.

Dorrie had succeeded in getting indoors without being stopped by anybody. He wasn't anxious to be questioned by Handforth, or any of the other juniors he knew. For such questions would probably be awkward—and his lordship would never consent to telling falsehoods.

He was in the Head's study, looking very grave, for Dr. Stafford had just told him of my awful wickedness, and how I had been sent out of the school, disgraced and scorned by nearly all.

"A terrible affair, indeed!" concluded the Head. "Mr. Lee will be shocked when he returns from abroad. But it was really impossible for the lad to remain here, Lord Dorrimore."

"I hope I'm not goin' to offend you, Dr. Stafford," said Dorrie deliberately, "but I don't believe that Nipper was guilty. I've known him for years, and he couldn't have performed that act of violence—it wasn't in him."

Dr. Stafford shook his head.

"I thought the same," he said slowly. "Indeed, I find myself thinking it even now. The whole case was particularly distressing. I did my utmost for Nipper, but my efforts were useless. It was really the boys themselves who decreed that he should go."

"The young beggars!" growled Dorrimore.

"I was prepared to give Nipper three days grace—not that I hoped for much result," went on the Head. "However, it is idle to talk about the matter now. Nipper has gone, and the school has settled down to its usual routine."

"And what of Starke?"

"I am very pleased to say that Starke is mending rapidly—far more rapidly than Dr. Brett hoped for," said the Head. "He is already out of bed, and within a day or two he will be able to resume his studies. But that, of course, makes no difference to Nipper's crime. It was a brutal assault, and might well have been fatal. Poor lad! I don't think he meant to strike hard."

"He didn't strike at all," growled Dorrie. "But, as you say, we needn't discuss the subject. Nipper's gone, an' there's an end of it. What I want to know is, have you room in the Remove for this ward of mine?"

"As it happens, Nipper's departure makes it easy for you," said the Head, smiling slightly. "There is a vacancy in the Ancient House at the moment, which can be filled by this lad you speak of—providing, naturally, that everything is in order. But I am quite sure, Lord Dorrimore, that there will be no hitch. The lad is fitted for the Remove, I presume?"

"Oh, quite!" said Dorrie. "His name is Algernon Clarence D'Albert, and I am afraid you will find him somewhat meek in his manner. But you will have no trouble with him—take my word for it."

And in the end Lord Dorrimore took his departure from St. Frank's with the knowledge that Algernon Clarence D'Albert would find a place in the Remove—providing the governors approved.

Dorrimore knew well enough that he would have to wait for several days to get a reply through in the ordinary way. So after leaving St. Frank's—which he did without being stopped by anybody—he returned straight to London, and had two or three interviews right off the reel.

How he actually managed it, I don't know, but he 'phoned me up in the late evening, and made the gleeful announcement that everything was prepared—fees paid in advance, into the bargain.

It was not even necessary for me to wait until the half term to take my place in the Remove; I was at liberty to go down on the morrow. Dorrie, being a Peer of the Realm, was able to wield power and influence.

It was decided that I should go down so that I could arrive the following evening—the sooner I got there the better. Dorrie promised to send a wire to the Head, and to call for me at Gray's Inn Road at midday.

I was to be all ready.

And while I was preparing myself that morning, the fellows at St. Frank's were discussing an announcement which the Head

had made after prayers. A new boy was due to arrive in the evening.

"What did the Head say his name was?" asked Tommy Watson. "Aubrey Augustus, or something——"

"No, dear old fellow," interrupted Sir Montie. "Judgin' by the name, I should say the new fellow will be quite select. It is Algernon Clarence D'Albert. An' he is comin' into our House."

"We don't want him!" said Handforth gruffly. "We want Nipper back!"

"Well, there's no reason why a new fellow shouldn't come," said Watson. "But he's jolly well not going to butt into Study C! That place is going to be left open for Nipper—when he comes back. No outsiders allowed—especially a chap with a name like that!"

"I suppose Mr. Crowell will decide the point," remarked McClure. "He'll be shoved into a study where there are only two fellows—and that might be yours, Watson. It's rot to talk about Nipper coming back——"

"Oh, is it?" said Watson. "You wait!"

"Have you heard from him?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"Not a word."

"I suppose the poor chap's too miserable," said Handforth. "We shall be hearing before long. I don't know what the dickens he'll say when he knows that De Valerie has been elected skipper. Idiotic, I call it!"

"I suppose you consider that Pitt was the best man?" asked Watson.

"Pitt!" snorted Handforth. "Rather not!"

"But you were the only other candidate, and you can't possibly suggest that you ought to be skipper," grinned Watson. "Things would be awful indeed if we had to be skippered by a silly duffer like——Yaroooh!"

Watson backed away as Handforth's fist lunged out.

"I shall be skipper some day!" said Handforth darkly. "And when that day comes, you'll all know it!"

"Begad! I believe we shall!" murmured Sir Montie.

"You'll all know it!" repeated Handforth. "I shall rule with a rod of iron, and there'll be no slacking or blagging at all! Fullwood and Co. will cease to exist as soon as I become skipper!"

And Handforth, having made that dire threat, marched away. Sir Montie and Tommy strolled into Study C, and looked at one another.

"I hope that new kid won't be shoved in here," said Tommy. "It'll spoil everything if he is."

"He may be quite a decent sort," said Tregellis-West thoughtfully. "I really think it's up to somebody to go to the station this evenin' to meet him. What do you say, dear boy?"

"I shall be on Little Side," said Watson. "You'll be there, too!"

"Really, I'm not quite so sure about that," exclaimed Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "Cricket practice is necessary, I will admit, but there is such a thing as noblesse oblige."

"Such a thing as what?"

"Noblesse oblige, dear fellow," said Sir Montie calmly. "That means to say that we ought to conduct ourselves nobly, you know, an' it would be only doin' the decent thing to meet this new chap at the station. A new kid feels frightfully at sea unless he's got somebody to support him."

"Well, you can go, if you like," said Watson. "But don't forget that De Valerie is keen on the cricket. Now that Nipper's gone we shall have to buck up no end—or find ourselves whacked in every match. And how do you know the time of the new kid's arrival?"

"I don't know, but he's comin' by train this evenin', an' there are only two from London," said Sir Montie. "If he isn't on one, he'll be on the other. Yes, I shall certainly give the new fellow the benefit of my companionship. An' if he's a decent sort we'll invite him in here."

"Oh, I don't care!" said Watson miserably. "I don't much care what happens nowadays. Everything's been rotten since Nipper went."

And while my chums were discussing the "new fellow" that imaginary individual was being manufactured in Nelson Lee's consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road. The disguise was far more difficult to don than the "artist" make up. For I had to remain boyish but alter my appearance.

At first I thought I shouldn't succeed, but by the afternoon I was satisfied that my disguise was impenetrable. I found it necessary to dye my hair, and to slightly alter the colour of my skin.

I also made use of a little article which Nelson Lee himself had invented—a small thing made of platinum, which fitted between the upper lip and the gums. One's appearance was totally altered by the use of this. It was a fixture, and was extremely uncomfortable—for the first day or two. But after that, as the guv'nor had often proved, the thing couldn't be felt at all. It only needed getting used to.

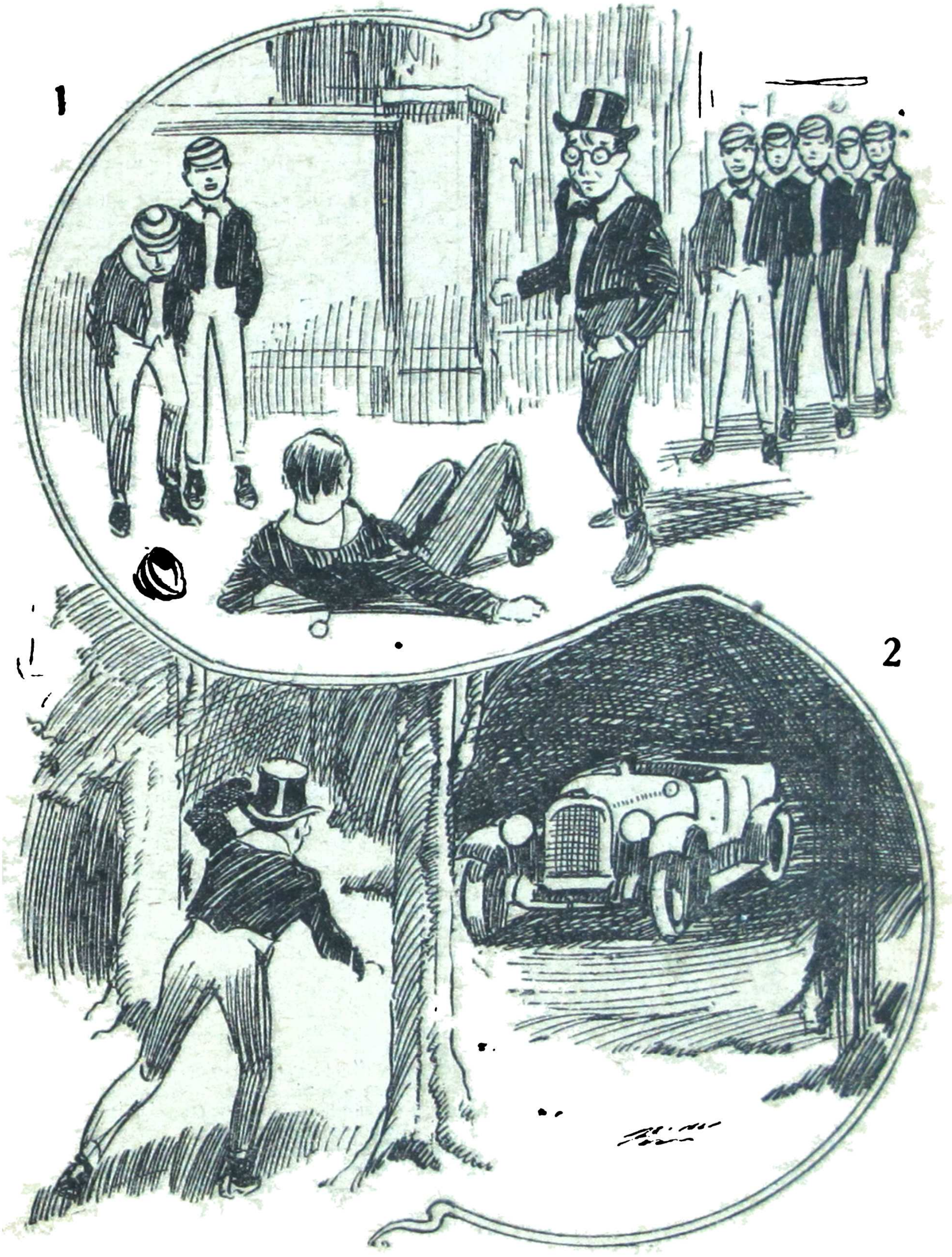
I used false eyebrows, too, and several other details completed the disguise. By the time I had finished, Nipper had vanished. In his place stood a lanky-looking youth in tight-fitting Etons, with big feet. He made some pretence of being a dandy, but he looked a real noodle.

Red hair and spectacles helped a lot, and with a change of voice, a change of manner, and a different walk, I reckoned that I should easily pass muster. I could not disguise my eyes, but the spectacles assisted in that direction.

By midday I was ready—or, at least, by lunch-time, which was in the early afternoon. Mrs. Jones was again mystified, but I didn't explain matters to her. It was better that she should not know.

When Dorrie turned up he was simply bursting with admiration.

"Why, my dear kid, you couldn't have done it better!" he declared. "This beats



1. The absurd-looking new boy scarcely seemed to move, but the next moment Fullwood's back came into hard contact with the triangle.

2. Nipper strode quickly forward, and there under the trees stood a big car.

the artist into a cocked hat. Your own chums won't know you—especially if you keep up that mild, hesitatin' kind of voice. You'll pass muster just as though you were another fellow!"

"Let's hope so, anyhow," I said. "It'll be an ordeal at first, but I shall soon get used to it. Thanks awfully, Dorrie, for going to all the trouble——"

"I've been to no trouble at all, you young ass," interrupted his lordship. "It's been a sheer pleasure—one of the best games I've ever played. An' don't forget that you've got to keep me posted up with all information. I shall be in London for weeks yet."

I made a solemn promise, and shortly after that we started. My outfit was new, even to a set of collar studs. I had two brand-new trunks, and a neat handbag. Nothing was being taken to St. Frank's which would provide the slightest clue.

And Dorrie and I started off in the car, and were soon speeding out of London towards Sussex. The day was fine, and I was feeling light-hearted and happy. As I told Dorrie, I was almost glad that I had been expelled.

I love excitement, and this adventure was providing me with a chance of getting a big heap of novelty. And the very thought of blinding the whole school was a sheer joy to me.

They had kicked me out—but I had come back! And I was determined to prove that Walter Starke had performed a vile act by faking the evidence against me. It is little wonder that I revelled in the prospect.

And an incident which occurred near Bannington proved how essential it was that I should be near the spot. For, to be quite truthful, I obtained a clue to the mystery even before I arrived at St. Frank's.

Dorrie and I were nearly at the end of our journey—for he intended to drop me at Bannington station. I should then get into the local train, and arrive at Bellton as though I had come by rail all the way.

I had suggested being taken by car right to St. Frank's—because it didn't matter now that Dorrie was supposed to be my guardian. But he didn't want to invite a lot of questions from inquisitive juniors.

"The less I'm seen there the better," he said, shaking his head. "Everything's all serene now, my son, and we don't want to have any hitch. You'd better go by train over the last lap. An' don't forget to remind me that I'll need some juice in Bannington."

"Running short?" I asked.

"I'm not sure that we shall get as far as the station," said his lordship. "I meant to bring some spare tins with me, but I remembered that your trunks had to be carried along, an' left the petrol behind. We can easily get some at the next garage."

And shortly after that we rolled into the familiar High Street of Bannington. It was early evening, and I reckoned that the Removites at St. Frank's were just on the point of preparing tea. I shouldn't arrive until later; but Dorrie and I could have a snack in a restaurant before the train went.

We were running smoothly down the High Street, when I found myself looking idly at a large touring-car which was approaching us. And as it was actually passing I gave a little jump, and gasped.

"Look, Dorrie—look!" I exclaimed excitedly.

But he was too late to see the car. He pulled up, and I turned in my seat and stared up the road.

"What's wrong, Algy?" asked his lordship, with a grin.

"Didn't you see that car?" I hissed. "It was painted blue-grey—quite a distinctive colour—with red lines. That flake of enamel I found at the spot where Starke was knocked down was just the same colour!"

"By gad!"

"That was the car that bowled Starke over!" I said tensely. "I noticed that one of the front mudguards was bent, too! There's no doubt about it, Dorrie. If we can only catch up with that car——"

"Hold tight, young 'un!" rapped out his lordship.

We turned round in the road by a series of quick manœuvres, and were soon racing up the High Street, sending clouds of dust behind us. I was excited, for it would mean a lot if we could only overtake the blue-grey car.

We simply roared out of Bannington, and within a couple of miles we caught sight of our quarry, climbing a hill in the distance. Dorrie opened the throttle, and we went like the wind.

By leaps and bounds we overtook the other car—until at last we were speeding along only fifty yards in the rear.

"Take the number!" snapped Dorrie, turning his head.

"I've already taken it," I replied grimly. "Shoot past the car, Dorrie, and order the driver to stop. We'll try to get at the truth even now——"

"Oh, by gad!" exclaimed his lordship, in dismay.

He pushed the throttle open wide, but the engine only spluttered in return. And after a few erratic bursts the car came to a standstill. Lord Dorrimore looked at me with absolute disgust.

"Juice!" he exclaimed bitterly.

Our car had run out of petrol—and we were compelled to sit there and to see our quarry vanish rapidly into the distance. It was galling in the extreme; but it was really wonderful that we had travelled so far. In the excitement of the chase we had both forgotten about the shortage of "juice."

"Just like one of those bally dramas you see in a cinema!" snapped Dorrie. "In a motor-car chase on the pictures they usually run short of petrol, or a wheel drops off, or the gearbox is left behind! But I never thought we'd experience the same sort of thing ourselves! Rough luck—that's what it is!"

"And it'll be useless continuing the chase later on," I said. "This road is as hard as iron, and doesn't take any impression. But we've progressed a step, Dorrie—and a big

step, too. I've got the number of that car, and I can find out who owns it, and then prowl about."

"Yes, perhaps it's just as well we didn't go any further," said Dorrie thoughtfully. "You'll be able to investigate in secret, young 'un. An' the car is a local one, I should say."

"It is, according to the lettering and the number," I said. "By jingo! It was a piece of real luck, seeing that car. I've got a definite clue, Dorrie, and it won't be so long before Starke is bowled out. But what are we going to do about getting to Bannington? We can't walk!

Dorrie was unable to answer. But after a wait of ten minutes we were gratified to see a big commercial car bowling along. The driver of this vehicle was willing to oblige us with a supply of spirit, and we arrived in Bannington with plenty of time to spare for the train.

My luggage was stowed in the guard's van, and I got into an empty first-class compartment and leaned out of the window.

"Well, you'll be in the thick of it soon, my boy, so be careful," said Dorrimore warningly. "One slip, an' you'll be bowled out."

"That'll mean trouble for the two of us," I said. "I think you can trust me, Dorrie. And please don't interrupt me now. I want to tell you how grateful I am for your advice and help. I don't know what I should have done without you, Dorrie. You've saved the situation. You've given me the chance I was longing to obtain. You're a brick!"

Dorrie grinned.

"I was expectin' it," he said. "If you've finished talkin' rot I'll give you a few words of advice. Mention me as little as possible, an' if anybody wants to know who your people are, be silly."

"I've got that all mapped out," I said. "I'm going to St. Frank's in another character—for the time being Nipper has vanished. It won't take me long to become Algernon Clarence D'Albert. And in that identity I'm going to prove the innocence of Nipper."

"By gad!" said Lord Dorrimore. "An' you'll do it, too!"

CHAPTER VI.

BACK ONCE MORE.

BELLTON!

A thrill went through me as the little local train pulled to a standstill in the station I knew so well. I had returned to St. Frank's, but yet I was not there at all.

It was Algernon Clarence D'Albert who had arrived.

I stepped out gingerly on to the platform, and then hurried with short footsteps towards the guard's van. But I was intercepted by no less a person than Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

I paused, rather taken aback. The test had come sooner than I had anticipated. Montie was about the keenest fellow of all, and if I passed muster with him I was sure that I should be safe with the others.

"Pardon me, dear fellow, but can I be of assistance?" asked Tregellis-West, in his most polite manner. "I think I am makin no mistake in assumin' that you are D'Albert, the new fellow for St. Frank's?"

I looked at him squarely, but with a nervous manner, and nodded.

"You are quite right, thank you," I said, in a hesitating voice. "I—I really don't know what you can do. But—but my luggage will shortly be taken from the van, and——"

"Begad! We mustn't forget that, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "It would never do to have your things taken on to Caistowe!"

The trunks were soon out of the guard's van, and the train proceeded on its way. So far, Montie had suspected nothing, and he was regarding me with polite interest and curiosity.

"You'll find it necessary to leave your trunks here, you know," said my noble chum. "They'll be taken up by the carrier later on. I thought I would come down to meet you, just to give you an idea of the bearin's, so to speak."

"It is very kind of you, I am sure," I said. "Thank you enormously, er—er—— I don't think I quite caught your name?"

"Oh, my name is Tregellis-West," replied Sir Montie. "I belong to the Remove, an' I understand that you will be placed in the Ancient House."

"I have been given that impression myself," I replied. "Is the school quite near, Tregennis-West?"

Montie was about to correct the mistake I had made in the name, but he apparently thought it too trivial.

"The school?" he said. "Oh, no! It's quite a mile from here, you know. An' if you like we'll walk there along the towin' path, or through the village. I'll leave it to you, dear boy."

"It seems an awfully long way," I said, frowning. "I cannot understand why a carriage was not awaiting me?"

Montie repressed a smile with difficulty.

"Frightfully thoughtless of the Head, wasn't it?" he observed calmly. "Perhaps you had better mention the matter to him, dear fellow, although I should strongly advise you not to do so. The Head's ideas might not coincide with yours, begad!"

We left the station and walked through the village. My disguise was safe, I was quite certain of that now. I had been in Montie's company for over ten minutes, and he had seen nothing which aroused any suspicion in his mind. It was the first ordeal which meant everything. Once safely through that, I should have nothing to fear.

For, accepted by the school as D'Albert, the school would never dream of connecting me with Nipper. My object was to make myself out to be a mild, meek, tame kind of noodle. At the same time, I was fully

determined to show the fellows that I could use my fists if any occasion demanded their use.

Montie very kindly gave me hosts of useful information on the way up to the school. He pointed out many landmarks which I knew better than he did, and gave me a general idea of the manner in which I was expected to comport myself.

"And here is the Triangle," observed Montie, as we turned into it. "Begad! There are quite a number of fellows about, I notice. Pray let me warn you to be careful in the nature of your replies. New fellows are generally treated with scant ceremony, I grieve to say. You will have all manner of impertinent questions put to you, but you must not mind that."

"Really, I shall answer them as I think fit, my dear Tregellis-West," I said loftily. "I could not allow any impertinence to pass unnoticed. You, I rejoice to say, have been the acme of courtesy."

"Begad! I'm awfully pleased to hear that," said Tregellis-West, with relief.

Before he could say any more several fellows came crowding round. Handforth and Co. were there, and the great Handforth proceeded to eye me up and down with a very critical eye.

"So you're the new kid?" he said grimly.

"I—I believe so."

"You believe so?" said Handforth. "Well, I can't say that I'm particularly impressed by your appearance. Don't forget that you'll have to sing small here. New kids are just like dirt."

"Really, I am surprised to hear that," I said mildly. "Am I not entitled to the same privileges as any other member of the Remove? And when it comes to a question of dirt, surely I observe several most prominent specks of mud upon your collar?"

There were several chuckles, and Handforth turned red.

"You've got a lot to say for a new kid!" he snapped, holding his hand in front of my face. "Do you see that fist?" he added.

I smiled.

"Really, I could not fail to do so," I said blandly. "I have seen many fists, but surely this is the most unique specimen imaginable? It appears to be of enormous size, and it is apparently coated with some dark material——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dirt!" roared Watson. "That's one for you, Handy!"

"Why, you—you cheeky little whippersnapper!" roared Handforth. "If it wasn't my rule not to punch new kids on their first day, I'd wipe up the gravel with you! I don't suppose you know any better, so I'll let you off!"

"I am deeply obliged," I said smoothly. "And will you be good enough to answer me a question? May I inquire why that youth standing a few yards away is so curiously attired?"

I indicated Fullwood, who was wearing a startling fancy vest.

Handforth chuckled.

"Oh, that?" he said. "That thing? About here it's known as Fullwood, and it's a worm. Of course, there are several kinds of worms, but this particular type is quite unspeakable——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Very funny, isn't it?" sneered Fullwood angrily. "And if you grin, you silly red-haired fool, I'll knock you over!"

"Not while I'm here!" interrupted Handforth.

"You clear out of it, Handy!" shouted Owen major. "The new kid started the thing himself, anyhow—let's see what he's made of! If he can't punch Fullwood, he's no good!"

Fullwood scowled.

"Get indoors!" he ordered harshly. "And if you don't run I'll kick you all the way! I don't stand back answers from new kids—understand? The first word you utter will be the signal for a punch on that big nose of yours!"

"Really, I am inclined to believe that the boy with the big fists was quite correct in his description of this—this worm, was it?" I said, looking round. "Is he the owner of the school, by any chance?"

"I warned you!" roared Fullwood savagely. "Take that!"

Whizz.

His fist flew past my head, having missed its mark somehow, and Fullwood sprawled forward. By an unfortunate chance my knuckles were in the way, and he ran right on to them with his mouth.

"Yaroooh!" he howled, sitting in the Triangle abruptly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How unfortunate!" I exclaimed mildly. "My knuckles are quite hurt!"

"They're not hurt so much as Fullwood's teeth!" yelled Handforth. "Talk about a fluke! I can see murder being done in a minute!"

"Cut off, kid!" advised De Valerie quickly.

I shook my head.

"I really see no reason why I should run away," I said. "Have I not a perfect right to——"

"You infernal little brat!" shouted Fullwood, jumping to his feet and rushing at me with his fists waving. "I'll show you something!"

"Mind his glasses, you ass!" shouted Watson. "You might blind him!"

"It'll be his own fault!" snarled Fullwood.

But, although the cad of the Remove tried repeatedly, he could not get his fists anywhere near my face. And he was quite startled to find that his own elegant countenance received several vigorous blows. The crowd stood looking on in a state of wonder.

"The new kid's getting the best of it!" yelled Handforth delightedly. "Go it, Ginger! That's the way to hit!"

"Blessed if I can understand it!" said Watson. "He seems to be all at sea, and yet Fullwood can't get a giddy blow in!

There's more in this kid than meets the eye! He's hot stuff!"

"Can't you give a hand, you fools?" raved Fullwood, backing away at last.

Gulliver and Bell stepped forward, but they soon stepped back again when Handforth and Co and several others interwned.

"None of that," said De Valerie sharply. "Fair play's a jewel. I'm not going to see the kid set on by a crowd!"

"You mind your own business, confound you!" snapped Fullwood. "Just because you've been elected skipper in place of that cad Nipper, you think you can boss the whole show!"

"I shall never succeed in captaining the Remove as Nipper did," said De Valerie quietly. "And if you call him a cad again, Fullwood, I'll make you feel the weight of my fists. Nipper's the best chap who was ever in the Remove!"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Handforth.

I was naturally pleased to hear this, but I pretended to be ignorant.

"Who is this Nipper you are referring to?" I inquired mildly.

"Oh, he's a fellow who used to be the captain of the Remove," said De Valerie. "He left a few days ago."

"He was kicked out," said Fullwood viciously.

"Let me give you a word of advice, you new kid," said Handforth, pushing forward. "You see these three chaps? That one is Fullwood, the one with the big nose is Gulliver, and the one with a dirty neck is Bell! Take my advice, and steer clear of the three, they're young blackguards!"

"You confounded rotter!" shouted Gulliver hotly. "If you say that I've got a big nose——"

"What about my dirty neck?" howled Bell.

"You'd better wash it, surely?" I suggested calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood and Co., finding the position too much for them, marched away in a great fury. It had been their genial intention to rag me unmercifully, but,—somehow, everything had gone wrong.

I had deliberately allowed myself to be the centre of the crowd—I had drawn attention with a purpose. It was far better to be bowled out at the commencement, than to be lulled into a sense of false security.

But none of the juniors seemed to have the faintest suspicion. My disguise was not capable of being penetrated. And I was feeling extremely pleased with myself and everything in general.

I had everything to be delighted about. I was back at St. Frank's, back in the Ancient House. True, I would not have the privileges which had been Nipper's, but it wouldn't take me long to make my mark, although I realized that I should have to be cautious in that direction. I wanted most of the fellows to take me for a soft simpleton.

"There's nothing much wrong with that kid," said McClure critically. "He's an ass, I dare say, but he knows what he's doing. What's his name?"

"D'Albert, ain't it?" said Handforth. "Algernon Augustus Aubrey Archibald D'Albert, I believe. He ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself, coming to St. Frank's with a name like that!"

"You will pardon me, I'm sure," I said gently.

"Oh, certainly," said Handforth, bowing. "Go ahead!"

"My name is D'Albert, certainly," I said, "but you have the rest quite wrong. I have two first names only—Algernon Clarence."

"Go hon!" grinned Handforth. "Look out, you chaps! Algernon Clarence is just coming in!"

I smiled without taking offence, and walked over to Sir Montie, who was chatting with Tommy Watson.

"Am I right in believing that this boy is a friend of yours, my dear Tregellis-West?" I inquired.

"Quite right, dear boy."

"I should like to be introduced——"

"That's all right," said Tommy. "My name's Watson. I share Study C with Tregellis-West. We used to have Nipper with us, but the poor chap's gone now. You'll never have a chance of seeing what St. Frank's was really like. It ain't the same place without Nipper."

I looked mildly interested.

"There seems to be a little mystery concerning the unfortunate boy I have heard referred to," I said. "Nipper! What a quaint name!"

"Haven't you ever heard of Mr. Nelson Lee?" growled Watson. "Nelson Lee, the famous detective? Nipper is his assistant, and he was in the Remove here until a day or two ago."

"Oh!" I said. "Quite so."

"You don't understand, do you?" said Watson. "I can see that you don't know much about life, my son. Nipper was sacked because he was accused of knocking one of our prefects down. But it was all a rotten plot—Nipper's as innocent as I am, and one day he'll come back!"

"Perhaps it will be sooner than you expect," I said, smiling.

"What the dickens do you know about it?" said Watson. "And what study are you going into? Has that been settled?"

"Really, I don't know," I said. "I should like to be with you two boys, since you seem to be so well-mannered."

"Listen to him!" said Watson gruffly. "I'm sorry, D'Albert, but Study C is being reserved for Nipper."

"But couldn't I be with you until Nipper returns?" I asked. "I give you my word of honour that I will retire in his favour when the right moment arrives. Is it an agreement?"

It was a very safe arrangement on my part and I waited rather anxiously for my two unconscious chums to reply. I could have imagined their attitude had they known the actual truth.

"Begad! It's rather a difficult matter to decide, it is, really," said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "We would like to have ——"

"There's old Crowell looking on," interrupted Watson. "This new kid had better go and speak to him at once."

"But why should I speak to old Crowell?" I inquired.

"Shut up, you chump!" hissed Wason. "Don't speak in that loud voice! Mr. Crowell is our Housemaster. He's really the master of the Remove, but during Mr. Lee's absence, he's Housemaster as well."

"Oh, I understand," I said, nodding.

And, seeing that Mr. Crowell was walking in our direction, I went to meet him. He regarded me with a critical eye.

"You are D'Albert, I presume?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, D'Albert, I should like you to come to my study some time within an hour," said Mr. Crowell. "I will then give you a brief examination, and tell you what place you are to take in the school, although I understand from the Headmaster that you will probably go into the Remove. Any boy will tell you where my study is."

"Thank you, sir," I said meekly.

Montie and Tommy took me indoors, and very kindly showed me where the common-room was, and where I could find Mr. Crowell's study. I allowed myself to be led about just as they willed, and chuckled to myself when I realised how much good time was being wasted.

"We'll take you up into the dormitory after you've seen Crowell," said Watson. "You'd better buzz along to his study now. And mind how you go. Unless you're careful, you'll be shoved into the Third, and then you'll be a fag!"

"Really, that would be dreadful," I said. "I will indeed be careful."

My interview with Mr. Crowell was brief. I made him understand fully that the only place in the school for me was the Remove, and I hoped that he would leave the selection of a study to my Form-fellows. But this was not to be. Just as I was leaving, Mr. Crowell called me back.

"By the way, D'Albert," he said, "you will find room in Study M. There are only two boys there at present—De Valerie and Somerton—and I think you will get on very well with them. They are excellent boys, and you will do well to behave yourself. You may go now."

"Thank you, sir," I said slowly. "I—I was thinking that I'd like to be put into the study with a boy named Tregellis-West. He met me at the station, and was very courteous——"

"Yes, to be sure," said Mr. Crowell. "But Tregellis-West and Watson are not quite themselves just now. They have recently lost a companion who was very dear to them, I believe, and I wish to consider them. Without casting any reflection upon you, D'Albert, I think they would prefer to have their study to themselves."

And so I was compelled to accept a place in Study M with De Valerie and the Duke of Somerton. They were two of the best, but not my own chums. However, I might have done a deal worse, and I vowed to myself that I would be back in Study C within a week.

I had much to be thankful for. I was in St. Frank's again; the deception had been carried off without a hitch. And Nipper, the outcast, had returned to the Remove under false colours.

The situation was altogether novel, and, to be quite truthful, I was enjoying myself immensely.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

WHEN I got back into the junior quarters I found that Tregellis-West and Watson had gone out to the playing-fields. I didn't know where these were—in my identity as D'Albert—and I decided to stroll about the grounds aimlessly.

This was what new boys usually did, and I thought it better to follow the fashion. I was supposed to be like a lost sheep, and although I felt like dashing away to Little Side, I restrained my feelings.

So I lounged about the triangle, became very interested in the architecture of the old gateway, and then roamed up and down the lane. There was nobody about, and I was glad of the short period of solitude to get my thoughts together.

I knew that I should have to be very careful. I wasn't quite sure that I had started right; perhaps I ought to have let Fullwood bully me. But that sort of thing went against the grain.

It was nearly dark out in the lane. The evening was well advanced, and the great trees of Bellton Wood overhung the road heavily. The gloom was thick, and everything was very still on that quiet May evening.

I could distinctly hear the sounds of the cricketers on Little Side, and I was rather worried because I couldn't go. I had serious matters to think of, however, and a little quietness was what I needed.

I glanced at the number of the blue-grey motor-car; I had taken it down in pencil on my shirt-cuff. I looked at it for a minute, and memorised it. It was just as well that this should be done.

How was I to get on the track of that car? Perhaps I should be able to find out at the Town Hall in Bannington; at all events, I would try my luck at the first opportunity.

It seemed that this would be the most direct method of getting to work: find the car, discover the man who was driving it on the night when Starke was knocked over,

and to get the truth from him—after guaranteeing that he would come to no harm.

If I could only get that driver to come forward and state that his car had knocked Starke over, the rest would be simple. It seemed easy enough, but I had an idea that it would be very difficult.

And while I was thinking in this way, I happened to turn rather abruptly. And I was somewhat startled to see the figure of a man standing between two big trees on the edge of the wood a little distance from me.

He must have been watching me, for he at once shifted his position. But he did so gradually, in order not to attract my attention. I pretended to take no notice, and strolled on carelessly.

When I passed the spot I seemed quite unconscious of any other presence. But I knew that the man was behind the tree. Who was he, and what was he doing there? I was rather curious.

If the fellow had been ill-dressed I should have mistaken him for a tramp. But he was attired in a light tweed suit and wore a motoring-cap. For such a man to be watching the lane was rather unusual.

"Great Scott!" I muttered suddenly.

Had I stumbled upon another clue? Could it be possible that this man was the driver of that car? It was just on the cards that the fellow was anxious about the boy he had knocked down, and had come prowling about in order to satisfy his conscience.

I resolved to find out what the man's name was, at all events. And so I carelessly strolled back into the Triangle, and vanished behind the wall. One glance showed me that nobody was about, and the lights were beginning to gleam in the windows of both Houses.

I ran quickly along the wall until I arrived at a spot where it was fairly low. Then I scrambled lightly over, crossed the road like a shadow, and dived into the wood. I was confident that my movements had not been seen.

In the wood safely, I stole forward as silently as an Indian. Nelson Lee had taught me a good deal about woodcraft, and I fancied that I was pretty keen as a shadower.

To my great satisfaction, I caught sight of my quarry after I had crept along for a period of about four minutes. He was still standing behind the trees, and the glow of a cigarette showed occasionally.

"That fellow can't be up to any good," I told myself. "What's his object in standing there? What's he waiting for, anyhow? I think this little business needs investigating."

I had not been long in getting to work, at all events!

I realised that I was probably on the wrong track altogether, but it was just as well to be on the safe side. I had come back to St. Frank's to prove my innocence, and it was my duty to seize every opportunity.

I saw the man fairly distinctly once—when he pulled at his cigarette very vigorously. The red glow revealed his face to me. He wore a neatly trimmed moustache and beard, and his nose was somewhat prominent. More than that it was impossible to distinguish.

A minute or two later he threw his cigarette down and moved away through the wood in a manner which he probably thought noiseless. But he cracked the twigs beneath his feet continuously.

I had no difficulty in following him, and even found it possible to keep him in view; he did not seem to have the faintest suspicion that he was being shadowed. He kept straight on.

And at last he cleared the belt of woodland and passed out upon the moor. Here he paused in order to light another cigarette, and then continued on his way. There had been nothing out of the way in the fellow's movements so far, and I began to think that I was making an ass of myself.

The man was making for another clump of trees which grew quite by themselves and were isolated from the rest of the wood. It was curious that he should go there, for the road was in the opposite direction.

That clump of trees was quaintly formed, as I knew. It looked solid from a distance, tance, but were really a ring of trees, with a bare space in the centre. I had once picnicked there with my chums.

My quarry made his way through the outer trees, and I hurried my steps somewhat, for I had been lagging behind.

And when I had only covered half the distance I came to a halt, my heart beating rapidly. Quite distinctly to my ears came the purr of an engine. Then, in a flash, I understood.

A motor-car!

The man had left his motor-car concealed amongst those trees while he had gone on his secret visit to St. Frank's. And it seemed absolutely certain that my surmise was correct.

The car in those trees was the car which had injured Starke, and the man I was following was the man who had driven off after the accident! If I could only follow up the advantage I now possessed I might be able to——

But there was no sense in raising my hopes in that way. A cool head was necessary, and I stole forward to the edge of the trees, making for the same opening which my quarry had passed through.

Then I received a bit of a shock.

Without the slightest warning I tripped headlong over a stretched cord—a rope which was fixed between two trees, about a foot from the ground. I pitched over, and before I could rise a black object was upon me.

In a flash my ankles were bound, and the next moment I was turned face to the ground and my wrists were secured by my own handkerchief.

"So you thought you would do something clever—eh?" whispered a taunting voice. "You needn't think that I was unaware of your little attentions. You were clever—but not clever enough for me."

I could only gasp.

I had been kidding myself that the man had known nothing of my presence, and yet he must have seen me from the very start. He had allowed me to follow him right to this spot, and had then sprung his surprise.

"Take this warning from me," said the man in a low voice: "Be very careful in what you do, and on no account interfere in anything which is no concern of yours. On this occasion I will let you off."

The man left me, and a moment later I heard the engine of the car accelerate. While I was trying to free myself the mysterious stranger got his car out of the little spinney and ran it towards the road. There were no lights showing, and I could only distinguish a dull patch in the deep gloom.

By the time I had freed my hands the car was on the road, and when I ran forward over the moor I saw that my late quarry was speeding away into the darkness. I had lost him beyond hope, and I was feeling fairly wild with myself. Owing to my rashness and over-confidence I had revealed my hand.

The car, I had no doubt, was the blue-grey one, and the man who had tied me up was now aware of the fact that I—D'Albert, the new boy—was interested in his movements. It was most unfortunate, but it could not be helped.

And, at all events, the incident served to show me that this mystery was deeper than I had thought. It was essential that I should display the greatest possible caution in the future.

To remain on the spot would have been fruitless, and it was highly important that I should get back to the school with as little delay as possible. So I went through the wood at the double, and I had plenty to think about on the way. This mystery was not at all distasteful to me. It attracted me, and gave the whole adventure a spice which had hitherto been lacking.

Something queer was afoot, and I could hardly credit that the actual facts were as simple as I had at first believed. Was there some added mystery here—something which I had not suspected at the beginning?

In any case, it behoved me to be particularly alert.

Fortunately I arrived back at St. Frank's before old Warren locked the gates, and my entry caused no comment. I was walking sedately towards the Ancient House, when a figure loomed up before me.

It was the figure of a senior, and I saw that his head was thickly swathed in bandages. And in a second I realised the truth, and my feelings were cold within me.

The senior was Walter Starke, of the Sixth.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY OF STUDY C.

STARKE intercepted me as I made for the Ancient House doorway.

"Hold on, kid!" he said sharply.

I came to a halt, and waited. Starke's voice was not so powerful as usual, but it contained the same harsh note as of old. He was not himself, but I could readily understand that within a few days he would be fit enough to go about as usual. He had been taking a stroll in the mild evening.

"Do—do you want to speak to me?" I asked, speaking nervously.

"Yes, I do!" said Starke. "You're the new kid in the Remove, I believe? I'm a prefect, and my name's Starke. You'd better realise that you've got to treat me as you'd treat a master. Juniors in this school take orders from the prefects—without question."

The bully of the Sixth was quite unchanged!

"Yes, thank you," I said meekly.

"What's your name?"

"D'Albert, please, sir!"

Starke grinned.

"That's right," he said. "If you always call me 'sir' you won't get into any trouble. All the juniors ought to be compelled to do it. It won't be long before I'm back in the Sixth, and if I have any of your cheek I'll half skin you!"

"But I've done nothing," I said mildly. "And I'm never cheeky, Shark!"

"Shark!" snapped the prefect. "I said Starke, you little fool!"

"Oh!" I said. "I must apologise, then. I wouldn't dream of cheeking a boy like you, Starke."

"Boy!" snorted the Sixth-Former angrily.

He was eighteen, and to be called a boy by a mere Removite was something novel.

"If you call me a boy again I'll box your ears!" he exclaimed. "It strikes me that you're cheeky already, you little worm!"

"But I can't say anything right, it seems!" I protested. "What must I say, Starke, please? And have you been ill? Or do you always go about like this?"

"I've been in a sanatorium, because one of your confounded Form Fellows tried to kill me!" said Starke viciously. "He's been sacked now—and good riddance to him! If you ever hear any talk about Nipper, you take it for granted that he was the most worthless young brat in the Remove."

"But I've been told that Nipper was innocent," I said mildly. "It is not for me to state my opinion, Shark—I mean Starke—but some of the boys give Nipper quite a good character. But it is only right that I should believe you, since you are a prefect. It is my place to respect a prefect, isn't it?"

Starke looked at me suspiciously.

"You'll soon find out what you've got to do," he said. "It's a pity you weren't shoved into the Third; I could just do with a kid of your stamp to fag for me. You're a little fool, and a fag's no good if he knows too much."

"Is it an honour, please, to fag for a prefect?" I asked.

"A big honour," said Starke.

"Then—then why can't I become your fag?" I inquired meekly. "Or a helper? If it's not right for a Remove boy to be a fag, it isn't against the rules for him to help a prefect, is it? It would please me a lot if you allowed me to be in your study, Starke. I'd be very useful, and I should feel that I was doing something that might lead to big results."

I meant every word of what I said, although Starke put quite a different construction upon my meaning. I didn't want to fag for him, but if I could only have free access to his study whenever I liked, the advantage might be very useful. My object was to trap Starke at the earliest possible moment.

I should have many more opportunities if I could only be with him fairly frequently—in the character of a fool. An incautious word spoken in my hearing might be of great value.

The idea of working for Starke was detestable in the extreme. But in a case like this it was necessary for me to conceal my own feelings. When I had regained my own identity I could make up for lost time in the Remove.

"A helper?" said Starke slowly. "Well, I'll think about it. You won't be a fag, remember; it's not the thing for a Remove fellow to do fagging. Although, of course, there's no set rule about it. I shan't be using my study until next week, so you needn't go there until Monday. Come to me on Monday, and I'll tell you what I mean to do. Now you can cut off!"

"Thank you, Starke," I said eagerly. "I do hope you'll let me help you!"

And I was quite certain that he would. It was another step forward in the right direction. I should easily be able to find things out. I went indoors feeling fairly light-hearted, and made my way to Study M.

I tapped upon the door, and then entered. The study was in darkness, and I switched the lights on and looked round. It was quite a nice little room, and I was not at all displeased with Mr. Crowell's choice. But it wasn't like Study C.

I had noticed that that famous apartment was in darkness, too, for the door had stood ajar, and a sudden idea came into my head. I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't create a little mystery, and there was no possibility of the new boy being suspected.

I quickly found a small piece of smooth, clean paper. I wrote a few words in pencil upon this, and then left the study. Two minutes later I was back, and I was looking round with an air of polite curiosity when De Valerie appeared.

"So you've found your way here?" he asked. "I understand that you've been planted in this study?"

"Yes, I think so," I replied. "Do you mind?"

"It doesn't matter whether I mind or not," replied De Valerie drily. "Still, you seem to be a harmless little beggar. If you behave yourself properly, Somerton and I will stand you."

"You are very kind," I said meekly.

De Valerie looked at me in a curious way. Perhaps he suspected that I was partially sarcastic. Plainly he didn't exactly know how to take me, and I think most of the other fellows felt the same way. This was exactly what I required.

"Come down to the common-room," said De Valerie. "You might as well get a bit acquainted with the geography of the place."

We passed out of the study, and were soon in the common-room. Nobody took much notice of me—I was not considered worthy of it. And I smiled to myself as I saw Tregellis-West and Watson leave a few minutes later.

They went straight to Study C, and Watson switched the light on and closed the door. He sat down at the table rather heavily.

"What do you think of that new chap, Montie?" he asked.

"Dear fellow, to tell the truth, I'm rather puzzled about him," said Tregellis-West. "He seems a frightful duffer, but he isn't! Begad! I've got a kind of idea that D'Albert will surprise everybody before long."

Tommy Watson grunted.

"Well, he's a poor substitute for Nipper!" he exclaimed. "We've lost the best chap in the Remove, and we've got this freak! And I can't understand why the dickens we haven't heard from Nipper!"

"I suppose he's been too miserable——"

"That's no excuse," said Tommy. "He ought to have written, the careless bounder! We don't know what's become of him, or—or anything! And I don't believe that we shall ever see him again—at St. Frank's, I mean."

"Nonsense, dear old boy," said Montie. "It is my opinion that Nipper will soon give some sign—— Begad! What—what is this piece of paper? Upon my word! This is frightfully curious, Tommy boy!"

Tregellis-West stared at the paper he had picked up from the table; his face had become slightly flushed—a most unusual event. The urbane Montie very seldom revealed any emotion.

"What is it?" asked Watson quickly.

He took the little slip of paper, and then gave a gasp. For written upon it, in a handwriting well known to the two juniors, was the message:

"Don't worry, old sons! It won't be long before I'm back in this study. Keep your pecker up, and hope for the best.

"NIPPER."

"Great pip!" panted Watson. "This—this is Nipper's writing, Montie! Look at it——"

"I was lookin' at it for quite a long time," interrupted Montie. "It is amazin'ly curious, begad! How did it get here? I'm afraid some misguided fellow has been playin' a trick."

"Rot!" shouted Watson. "This is Nipper's handwriting I'd know it in a second!

Nobody could forge it like this! Besides, what would be the object? Nipper put this here."

"I really cannot believe that," said Tregellis-West firmly. "It is quite possible that somebody brought it from Nipper, but he couldn't have been here himself. It's really a mystery, you know."

"I'm going to the common-room!" said Watson excitedly. "Good old Nipper! I feel wonderfully bucked now! Just look what he says—it won't be long before he's back here, and we've got to hope for the best!"

Sir Montie smiled.

"You seem to have forgotten, old boy, that I have been sayin' the same thing ever since Nipper left," he observed. "An' I don't know that it would be wise to tell the other fellows——"

"Rats!" said Watson.

And he dived out of the doorway and raced along the passage to the common-room. I had been expecting something of the sort, but I took no notice as my chums burst into the common-room.

"Look at this, you chaps!" yelled Watson. "I say, Handy! Here's a message from Nipper—and it didn't come by post, either! I found it on the table of Study C—lying right in the middle!"

Handforth grabbed the paper, and gave a roar.

"What did I say?" he bellowed. "That bounder is as keen as mustard! I shouldn't be surprised if he's in this very district tonight! It won't be long before he bowls Starke out!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Hubbard. "Nipper was guilty, and if he's prowling about St. Frank's he'll soon be kicked out of the district again. We don't want the cad here any more!"

"And we don't want this cad here any more!" exclaimed Handforth fiercely. "Get out of this common-room, Arthur Hubbard!"

"I'm not going to shift for you——"

"Ain't you?" roared Handforth. "Don't you call this shifting?"

He took a run at Hubbard, and sent the junior staggering across the floor. Reginald Pitt very thoughtfully had the door open in readiness, and Hubbard was pitched out with great violence.

"And I'll treat anybody else the same way who asks for it!" said Handforth fiercely. "I'm fed-up with all this talk against Nipper. Even if a lot of you do think he was guilty, that's no reason why you should always run him down. He's gone, and you ought to be satisfied with your dirty work!"

There were one or two growls, but no lucid replies. Handforth's hot taunt had gone home. And those fellows who felt glad that I had been sacked kept their views to themselves.

Watson was tremendously excited over that message I had placed in the study. I was forgotten—nobody had anything to say to the meek new fellow. I was not considered worthy of any attention.

And so my movements were not watched. I left the common-room, and returned to it without anybody being the wiser. Indeed, I think most of the juniors would have been willing to swear that I had been present all the time.

"It's my belief that the bounder is nearer than we think, said Pitt, after he had examined the note. "He must have dodged in by the window, out of the darkness. Or he got somebody to put this message in your study, Watson. In any case, it's cheerful to know that the old chap's keeping his spirits up."

"I'd like him to come back," said De Valerie earnestly.

"You'd lose the captaincy in a minute if he did," sneered Gulliver.

"Nothing would suit me better," replied De Valerie promptly. "The very instant Nipper comes back to St. Frank's I'll resign the captaincy of the Remove. It's Nipper's job, and he's the best man for it."

I felt warmed towards De Valerie for that tribute. It was a fine thing for him to say, for the captaincy of a Form was an honour which few fellows received. And for De Valerie to speak in such a manner was a splendid proof of his loyalty and friendship. I was more than ever pleased that I'd come back to St. Frank's in another identity.

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West retired to Study C after their excitement was slightly subdued. Watson was still full of the little mystery; he had no idea that it was to be deepened almost at once.

For the pair had hardly got inside the door when Watson came to an abrupt halt. He was staring fixedly at the table.

"Look!" he muttered tensely.

Montie looked, and there he saw a small, plain visiting-card. There was some pencilling on it, and both juniors grabbed for the card at once. They read the words together:

"Thursday, 8.30 p.m. Look out for a big surprise before long—but keep this dark.—Your old pal,

"NIPPER."

Tregellis-West and Watson stared at one another dumbly for a moment. Then Sir Montie closed the door, and his face broke into a smile.

"This is really amazin'ly entertainin'," he observed calmly.

"8.30" exclaimed Watson breathlessly. "My only Aunt Jane! That was less than a quarter of an hour ago! Nipper's been here—right in this study—within the last ten minutes!"

"While we were in the common-room, dear fellow."

"But it seems impossible—out of the question!" gasped Watson. "I say, do you think the bounder is hanging about——"

Watson dashed to the window, parted the curtains, and nearly thrust his head through the glass—being under the impression that the lower sash was wide open. By a miracle he saved himself, and flung the window up.

"Are you here, you bounder?" he said softly.

But Watson was on the wrong track, There was no reply, and after a moment or two Tommy withdrew his head, and his face was flushed with excitement. He was simply quivering with his emotion.

"We'll see what the chaps have got to say about this!" he exclaimed, making a move for the door. "We'll see——"

"You are really shockin'ly thoughtless, Tommy," said Montie severely.

"What do you mean?"

"Read that card again—doesn't Nipper expressly tell us to keep it dark?" asked Montie. "We must say nothin'. Let us be content with the knowledge that Nipper is close at hand. It won't be long before he makes another sign, an' he might even contrive to see us to-morrow. Be patient, dear boy, an' hold yourself in check."

Tommy Watson sat down heavily in a chair.

"You're right, old son," he said. "We've got to keep it dark. But I wish the awful bounder had shown himself, instead of sending these messages! I wonder where the dickens he can be? I wonder where he is now?"

But although my excited chum wondered, he certainly did not arrive at the conclusion that I was at no greater distance off than a few studies! Astute as Sir Montie was, it had never entered his shrewd head that Nipper and Algernon Clarence D'Albert were one and the same person.

To tell the truth, I was resolved to take my chums into the secret at the first opportunity. I knew that they could be trusted—in spite of Lord Dorrimore's well-meant warning to trust nobody.

And so, when I went to bed that night, I slept soundly and peacefully. And my chums went to sleep feeling more content than they had felt for many days past. But we did not know that some very dramatic and exciting events were destined to take place before success came to my efforts—before Algernon Clarence D'Albert disappeared and I came back to the fold.

My career as a new boy had commenced—but how long would it continue?

THE END.

(NEXT WEEK'S STORY—*See p. iv of cover.*)

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. Meanwhile Alan and his safari are resting, when they are disturbed by a spy. They shoot, but he gets away.

(Now read on.)

ALAN MAKES ARRANGEMENTS.

AS Alan was in chase of the negro he had perceived, at a brief glimpse, that his arm appeared to be bleeding. He retraced his steps, with the lantern, to the edge of the thickets, and here, a yard or so beyond the scene of the struggle, he discovered drops of blood on the grass.

"The scoundrel was slightly wounded," he declared. "Kalulu's shot hit him. But he was able to run, and it would be useless for us to go after him. He is a long way off by now."

All was quiet, which was an indication that there were no other savages in the immediate vicinity. The stricken man, who was still alive, was carried back to the camp by a couple of the porters. But the knife had penetrated to his heart, and he breathed his last as he was put down by the fire.

"The poor fellow is dead," Alan murmured sadly.

"And who killed him?" said Rembo, in a hushed voice. "Did you see that negro, Bhagwan? Did you see what he wore?"

"Yes, a turban and a blue gown. I have seen none like him before. Of what tribe could he have been?"

"Bhagwan, I will tell you. He was an Arab."

"An Arab?" Alan repeated incredulously.

"Such, indeed, he was," asserted the headman. "You saw his beard and his dress. He must have been one of Tib Mohammed's band."

"You mean the slave-dealer, Rembo? I have heard him spoken of as the worst ruffian in Africa."

"You may soon see him, Bhagwan, for in very truth he is somewhere near by with many of his men. It was he who sent that black dog to spy on our camp."

Alan was startled by what he had been told, not doubting that it was true. It was evident that there was going to be trouble. The headman held an earnest discussion with the Swahilis and Wakambas, and turned from them to the English lad.

"Bhagwan, the porters are afraid to stay here," he said. "They wish to march to the south at once."

"It cannot be," Alan calmly replied. "They have promised to travel as far as the Bana River."

"They fear for their lives, Bhagwan, knowing that Tib Mohammed and his band will surely make an attack."

"There are many of us, Rembo, and we can fight."

"There will be more of the Arabs, and we could not stand against them. We must take to flight, Bhagwan."

Alan shook his head, and a stubborn gleam crept into his eyes as he drew his revolver from his belt.

"You talk with a foolish tongue, Rembo," he cried angrily. "I have no patience with

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

you. I will reply with words of wisdom, and you will give heed to them. Do you forget the Bajangas? It is very likely that they are behind us, having followed our trail. If we go to the south we may meet with them, so it will be better if we remain where we are and prepare to fight the Arabs, who will be beaten off if they attack us. It shall be as I desire, for I am your master.

"Now let the men fetch loose stones from the kopjes yonder and build a parapet half way around the camp. It must be done quickly, for if there is danger it may come in the hours of darkness, and not in the morning. So we must be ready."

Rembo did not further argue the point. He interpreted what he had been told to the men, who, when they had listened to him, held another discussion amongst themselves, talking rapidly and with ominous gestures.

For a little time it looked as if Alan and Jan were going to be abandoned by their companions. But the allusion to the Bajangas must have prevailed with the porters, for at length they signified their assent to the headman, and with sullen faces set about obeying their orders.

THE ROGUE ELEPHANT.

TO be bound to a tree in the black fastnesses of the jungle, and left there to be devoured by prowling lions! Such was the cheerful prospect that was in store for Dick Selby, and it may be imagined what his feelings were as he thought of it.

Might he not be able to escape? His hands had not been tied, and his captors were guarding him none too closely. A ray of hope brightened his despair, and he was about to make a dash for freedom when, at the bidding of Tib Mohammed, he was seized by three of the slavers.

He struggled with them desperately for a few moments, while they dragged him across the camp; and then, as luck would have it, an unexpected diversion occurred.

Suddenly there rang out a shrill sound that was like the blare of many bugles blended in one screaming note. At the same instant the earth seemed to shake to a heavy tread, and almost immediately, while yet the Arabs were too frightened to move, there rushed from the sloping forest to the west a gigantic bull-elephant.

It was probably what is known as a "rogue" elephant, meaning one that, owing to some slight indisposition, is constantly in a state of vicious temper.

It must have been lurking close by, and the scent of the human beings had roused its animosity instead of putting it to flight. Trumpeting with rage, its wicked little eyes blazing, it charged forward at the slavers, who scattered and ran in terror. Dick, released by those with whom he had been struggling, darted to a tree, and crouched in the shelter of it. This was the first elephant he had seen since he had been in Africa, and he was so thrilled by the spectacle that he forgot all else.

"By George, wouldn't I like to shoot it!" he muttered.

What took place before his eyes was swift and tragic. Swerving towards the mouth of the gorge, the huge animal trampled one of the fleeing men to a shapeless mass, and with its trunk lifted another in the air and hurled him to the ground.

It then swung round and dashed at Tib Mohammed who, less panic-stricken than his comrades, had just levelled the rifle with which he was armed, a double-barrelled one, with a large bore.

The gun roared, and the bullet hit the elephant, but not in a vital part. It thundered on, and Tib Mohammed did not fire again. He dropped the gun and ran for his life in the direction of the river, but he tripped in the tangled grass and fell.

And it was now that Dick Selby intervened, on an impulse which he could not resist. He was not concerned for the Arab chief. His sole thought was to slay this monarch of the jungles.

Heedless of the opportunity he had of escaping from his captors, he sped to the middle of the camp and picked up Tib Mohammed's abandoned rifle, then sank to one knee, and, with the weapon at his shoulder, confronted the enraged beast, which was rushing straight at him, and to his excited imagination looked twice as big as it really was.

But the lad's nerves were as firm as steel in this crisis. Knowing where to plant the bullet if it was to take effect, he aimed quickly and steadily, and pulled the trigger of the undischarged barrel.

The weapon spat a jet of flame, and, as Dick sprang convulsively to one side, he was grazed by the elephant, which staggered as it charged past him. It stopped short, swayed to and fro for a moment, and crashed

(Continued overleaf.)

heavily to earth. It was dead, killed by a shot that had penetrated to its brain through the middle of the forehead.

"Hurrah!" cried the elated lad. "That's my first!"

Tib Mohammed had been in imminent peril for a few seconds. As he rose to his feet the other Arabs hastened out into the open, and in a trice they were all gathered around Dick, who now realised, when it was too late, what a chance of escape he had lost.

There were more elephants, and many of them, in the vicinity. From the high forest to the west, and from no great distance, could be heard shrill, confused trumpeting. But the elephants were not drawing near, and the sounds presently ceased, to the obvious relief of the slavers.

Tib Mohammed glanced at the two men who had been killed by the animal, and turned to the lad, patting him on the shoulder. His brutal features had softened a little, and showed what gratitude he was capable of feeling.

"You brave boy, fine sportsman," he said. "I spare your life. No put you to feed the lions now. But you no try to get away, else I shoot you. Mind that!"

The lad nodded, his heart throbbing with joy. He had nothing to fear now, at least for a time. His courage had saved him from a more terrible fate than to have been pounded to death by the infuriated elephant, which would have been inevitable had his shot missed. He was hopeful of gaining his freedom during the night, but there was no opportunity of doing so now.

Fresh wood was heaped on the fire, and the whole party squatted around the flames, which threw a ruddy glow on the slain beast and on the mutilated bodies of the two Arabs. Dick was in cheerful spirits. Something seemed to tell him that he and Alan Carne would meet again, and that some day they would see the hidden valley.

He was given a share of the food that was divided amongst the men, and while he ate Tib Mohammed sat by his side with a pistol in his hand, as if he suspected that the lad was thinking of escape.

The slavers had no intention of going to sleep. They were evidently waiting for the return of the scout who had been sent to the south that day, and at length, when a couple of hours had elapsed, the man came back.

A rustling tread gave warning of his approach, and when he appeared from the dense cover and strode forward to the fire, his companions jumped to their feet and stared at him in consternation. His face was drawn with pain, and a blood-stained bandage, torn from his robe, was tied around his left arm. At the sight of him Dick furtively smiled.

"By George, Carne isn't far off!" he said to himself. "This fellow has stumbled on the safari, and they have put a bullet into him! I wonder what the band will do now? There are only seven of them, and with such a small force they will hardly venture to attack Alan Carne and a score of armed porters."

The story told by the returned scout was, of course, quite unintelligible to the lad, as was the animated discussion that ensued. Once or twice Tib Mohammed shook his head gravely. It was disturbing news that the scout had brought to him, it seemed.

(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.

No. 207. D *May 24th, 1919.*