No. 208.—GRAND SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE STORY!

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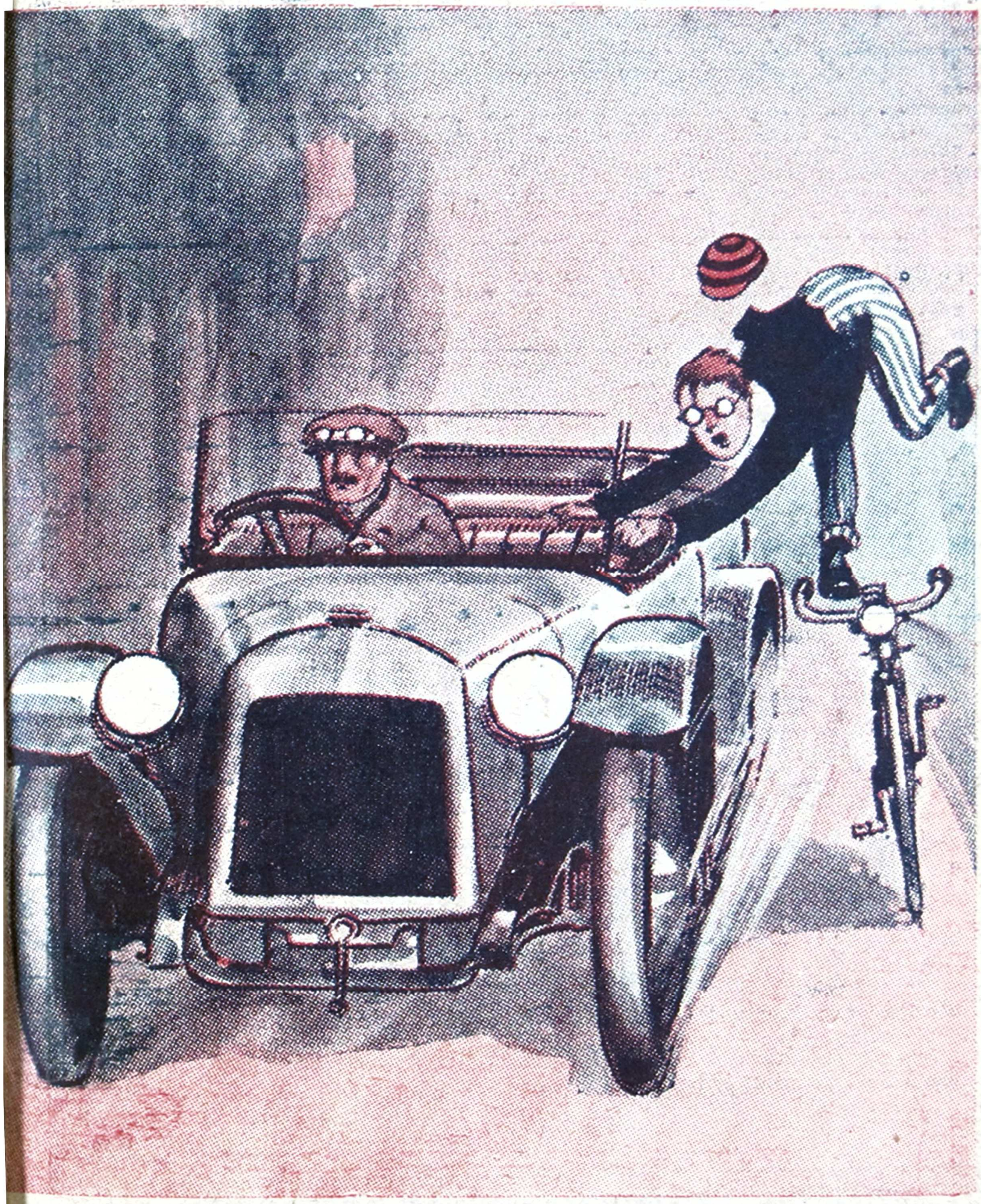

For a second, bicycle and car ran level; it was then the new boy leapt.

THE MYSTERY OF THE BLUE-GREY CAR!

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," "Expelled from St. Frank's," "Under False Colours."

May 31, 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

CHANGING STUDIES.

ALGERNON CLARENCE D'ALBERT, the new fellow in the Remove Form at St. Frank's, walked gingerly out of the Ancient House. He peered through his big spectacles in a curious, inquiring kind of a way, and he looked absurdly meek.

Perhaps it would be as well for me to explain that Algernon Clarence D'Albert and myself were one and the same person. Just for the present I was no longer Nipper; I had dropped my own identity.

Nipper had been expelled, but Algernon Clarence D'Albert had returned. In other words, I had tricked the powers that were; although sacked from the school, I had come back, as bold as brass, in another identity.

Such a move required nerve; but I don't think I've ever been accused of lacking that necessary article. The rich part of it was, not a soul in the whole school, from the Head down to the smallest fag, suspected a thing.

I had bluffed everybody!

And, to tell the honest truth, I was enjoying the experience hugely. It was novel—and it was rather exciting. But for the cloud which was hanging over my own name, I should have revelled in the whole adventure.

But as Nipper I was in dire disgrace.

I had been expelled for the crime of assaulting a prefect. Walter Starke, of the Sixth, had been found lying in the road unconscious. He had been badly battered about the head. And I, unfortunately, had been the first fellow to find him.

Although the facts had been rather suspicious, nobody actually thought that I was the culprit, until Starke himself, upon recovery, stated that I had felled him to the ground.

This, of course, was a wicked, malicious falsehood. Starke was the bully of the Sixth, and he hated me. He knew that I was innocent, but he swore false evidence against me, and I had been sacked.

Nelson Lee was absent from St. Frank's at the time. To the best of my belief the guv'nor was on the Continent. And there was I, utterly alone, disgraced and dishonoured.

I had journeyed miserably to London, after having been literally kicked out of the school. My misery was terrible at first, and then Lord Dorrimore had paid a call. Dorrie was a splendid sort—a great pal of the guv'nor's.

And his lordship had put me up to the idea of returning to St. Frank's, in another identity, in order to establish my own innocence. I had gasped at the first suggestion of the idea. But we had worked it together, and the concrete result of our plotting was the arrival at St. Frank's of Algernon Clarence D'Albert.

I don't mind admitting that I had been a bit nervous at first. I feared that my disguise would be penetrated. But I had passed through the ordeal with flying colours.

And now after two days at the old school I was accepted as A. C. D'A. without a single suspicion. I was regarded as a simpleton who occasionally made brilliant remarks by accident. And I was tolerated with amusement.

So far, of course, I had had no chance at cricket. I was generally regarded to be a hopeless duffer in that respect, but I was fully determined to show the fellows that cricket was second nature to me.

Even my own two particular chums, Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, had no idea that I was back in the fold. Yet I had given them one or two plain hints, without actually giving the game away.

They did not take much notice of me, for it never entered their heads that I was anybody of importance. In fact, from being the captain of the Remove, I was placed amongst those fellows who had no voice whatever.

This, of course, would have to be altered.

I had come to St. Frank's as a simpleton, but that was no reason why I should remain

one. Once established, so to speak, I was safe. Now that the fellows had got used to me they would never connect me with Nipper.

Unfortunately I had been placed in Study M by Mr. Crowell—with De Valerie and the Duke of Somerton. They were splendid fellows, but I had been hoping that I should get back into Study C, with Tommy and Montie.

It would be easy enough to change, but I thought it better not to be in any hurry. And now this evening I made up my mind to try it on in earnest.

For there was really no reason why Watson and Tregellis-West should not share my secret. They were to be fully trusted, and they would keep it absolutely dark. And they had been going about with such long faces that I was rather touched. I hadn't known that they cared for me quite so much.

And I was here with them again. Why shouldn't I give them a big surprise and make them happy? For I was sure that they would be happy when they knew the truth. The moment for action had arrived.

But I was supposed to be an ass, and it was therefore necessary for me to act up to the character.

I wandered aimlessly along the Remove passage, peering at the doors as I passed. Tea was over, and some of the fellows were out on the playing-fields. But I had an idea that Montie and Tommy were in their study.

Hearing voices next door, however, I turned into that apartment and stood beaming on the threshold.

"Er—may I enter?" I inquired mildly.

I knew very well that the occupants of the study were Handforth and McClure. Church was not there—although this was rather remarkable. Handforth and Co. were nearly always together. Some fellows had been heard to say that the inseparable three were glued in one piece.

"May you come in?" repeated Handforth, in his blunt way. "No, you ass, you may not! Skid!"

"No need to bark at the chap!" murmured McClure.

"I'll bark at anybody I like!" roared Handforth, jumping up. "Don't forget that when I bark, I bark. And I'm not going to have you interfering——"

"Oh, bark as much as you like!" said McClure, with a sigh. "But if somebody comes along and calls you a dog, don't blame me!"

"How very humorous!" I remarked, chuckling.

"Is that humorous?" bawled Handforth.

He hurled a book at me. I caught it deftly, and returned it with such precision that it struck Handforth forcibly upon the side of his head.

"Yes, very," I said sweetly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared McClure.

Edward Oswald Handforth rolled up his sleeves.

"This chap is going to be slaughtered on the spot!" he exclaimed grimly. "He's been asking for trouble for days—ever since he came. I'm an obliging chap, and I'm going to give this ass what he asks for!"

"That is extremely kind of you, Watson," I said mildly. "But I was not aware that I had made any request. And, really, I must remark that your voice seems much louder than usual——"

"And my fist will be heavier than usual, too!" snapped Handforth.

"Really, Watson——"

"Watson!" yelled Handforth. "I'm not Watson!"

"But surely this is Study C?" I asked, peering round.

"Oh, take it away and drown it!" said Handforth, sitting down. "'Surely this is Study C!' And I'm supposed to stand insults like this!"

"Insults?" asked McClure.

"Didn't he mistake me for Watson?"

"Why, you ass, that was a compliment!"

"If you think it's a compliment, I don't!" said Handforth grimly. "I'm myself, and nobody else. I don't like to be mistaken for other asses. If that chap doesn't buzz off I'll wipe the floor up with him!"

"Perhaps you will explain this little mystery to me, Tregellis-West," I said, gazing at McClure. "I am somewhat puzzled——"

"I'm not Tregellis-West, you short-sighted fathead!" said McClure, with a grin. "You've come to the wrong study. Go next door and you'll be on the right track. The first door to the left."

"Oh, thank you!" I said, beaming. "It is so very refreshing to be answered politely after the somewhat violent behaviour of this unfortunate boy who barks. Thank you!"

I departed before Handforth could reach me. I grinned as I heard an argument proceeding within Study D. Handforth was always ready to commence an argument. It was his favourite occupation.

I entered Study C, and looked round. The apartment was empty, and I felt somewhat disappointed. But I closed the door and gazed fondly at the familiar surroundings.

"I simply must get back in here," I told myself.

I noticed that one or two of my belongings were carefully stowed away in the bookcase, and I was about to open the glass doors when I happened to glance out of the window. Tregellis-West and Watson were just coming in. And an idea came to me on the spur of the moment.

I tore a piece of blank paper from a sheet, scrawled a few words upon it, and placed the paper beneath a book. Then I seated myself elegantly in the easy chair, and waited.

A minute later the door opened, and Tommy Watson charged in.

"It's no good, Montie, I don't feel like cricket this evening," he growled. "I think I shall write to Nipper again—— Hallo! What the dickens do you think you're doing in this study, you cheeky ass?"

Watson glared at me with some warmth, and he was still glaring when Sir Montie Tregellis-West strolled elegantly into the study. He adjusted his pince-nez and eyed me urbanely.

"I don't want to be rude," said Watson, "but I'm not feeling in the mood to entertain visitors just now, D'Albert. Be a good chap and buzz off."

"Begad! Perhaps the dear fellow was waitin' for us, Tommy boy," said Sir Montie. "Perhaps he has somethin' to say."

"Have you?" demanded Watson, looking at me.

"Indeed, yes," I replied. "I find that this study is really wonderfully comfortable."

"Oh, do you?" said Watson. "Anything else?"

"I also find that you and your well-dressed friend are both amiable companions—although I must be allowed to say that at the present moment you are somewhat short of temper, Watson," I said mildly. "However, that is a detail. I should very much like to come into this study, if you will permit it."

Watson stared.

"You'd like to come in!" he shouted. "Why, you silly ass, you're in, ain't you?"

"Really, I mean I would like to be here always," I exclaimed. "Study M is quite nice, and the two boys with me are splendid. But nothing would please me better than to transfer to this study. May I?"

"No," said Watson firmly—"you may not!"

"You see, dear old boy, it's frightfully difficult," apologised Montie. "We are half expectin' a great pal of ours to come back, and we are reservin' this place for him—keepin' it warm, begad. An' it wouldn't be quite nice if he came back an' turned you out."

"I'm sure that would never happen," I said, chuckling inwardly.

"It won't get a chance to happen," declared Watson.

"We would have you in a minute, dear fellow——"

"No, we wouldn't," interrupted Tommy, who was certainly in an irritable mood. "I don't want this funny fathead dodging in and out of the study all day. It's off, D'Albert Please close the door after you."

"I am sorry," I said, moving to the door. "Perhaps you will alter your minds later. I sincerely hope so."

And I went along to Study M, sat down, and waited for developments.

Meanwhile, my two chums had a little argument. Montie declared that a little politeness costs nothing, and Watson replied that politeness was only wasted upon silly asses. Then somehow the book on the table became moved, and the little slip of paper was revealed.

"What's this?" said Watson. "I suppose you've been littering the table—— Why, what the—— Great pip! It's another message from Nipper!" he yelled. "Look at this, Montie!"

Tregellis-West examined the paper with great interest. It simply contained the scrawled words: "Do as the new fellow asks, you silly asses—Nipper." I had guessed what the result of my request would be, and had prepared the message accordingly.

"Begad! This is really most remarkable," said Sir Montie, reading the message again. "It is astounding, in fact!"

"It's uncanny," said Watson, in a startled voice. "How could Nipper have placed this here? That chap only asked us about changing studies a few minutes ago, and we've been here all the time."

"I really don't pretend to fathom the mystery—I don't, really," said Sir Montie. "But this quite settles the matter, Tommy."

"I don't think we'd better have D'Albert here——"

"Begad! What are you thinkin' about?" asked Tregellis-West severely. "Nipper has suggested that we should do as the new fellow asks. I am goin' straight to D'Albert, and I shall request him to change over into our study."

Watson said nothing; as Sir Montie left the study he was still staring at the paper I had left. Tregellis-West tapped upon the door of Study M, and entered. He beamed at me.

"Oh, here you are, dear fellow," he said. "Watson and I have been thinkin' things over, an' we shall take it as a great honour if you will grace our study with your constant presence."

"You wish me to come?" I inquired, almost eagerly.

"Yes."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I'm there!"

Sir Montie was rather surprised at the change in my method of speech, but he said nothing. He waited politely while I collected my books—all new ones, of course—and prepared for the change of address.

"Somerton and De Valerie will not mind, I am sure," I observed. "But is it not advisable to obtain the Housemaster's permission?"

"It really doesn't matter," said Montie. "Fellows often change their studies, and if all parties agree, there's nothin' to go to the Housemaster about. Pray come along, old boy."

I went along and arrived triumphantly in the dear old quarters. Watson did not eye me very favourably as I closed the door. He eyed me even more unfavourably as I proceeded to close the window.

"Leave that up, you ass!" he exclaimed. "We're not going to be stuffed up on an evening like this——"

"I am merely doing it for privacy," I put in. "My dear friends, I am about to impart a very close secret to you—a secret which must be kept absolutely close in your bosoms."

"He's mad!" growled Watson.

"Wait, dear boy—wait!" exclaimed Montie, his eyes gleaming. "I am beginnin' to suspect that D'Albert has a message for us from Nipper——"

"What?" shouted Watson excitedly.

"It is even better than that," I said mysteriously. "But you must be patient for just one moment. I wish to make certain that we are quite alone. You will pray excuse me!"

I opened the door and looked out into the passage. There was not a soul in sight, and even Handforth and Co. had cleared off from Study D. There was not much fear of any eavesdropper overhearing the secret.

I closed the door carefully, and then faced my puzzled chums with a beaming face. They regarded me in a manner which nearly made me yell. Even now they suspected nothing.

"Lend me your ears," I said, drawing them to me. And when I had their faces quite close to my own I gave vent to a chuckle—in my own voice. I dropped the manner of Algernon Clarence D'Albert completely.

"Now, you silly, fatheaded bounders, don't you know what the game is?" I whispered. "Haven't you got sense enough to freeze on to the giddy idea?"

Tregellis-West and Watson stared at me in blank amazement.

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "I—I could swear that your voice is exactly like—— Oh, begad!"

"It's Nipper's voice—it's Nipper himself!" gasped Watson faintly.

"The one and only!" I grinned. "Don't faint, for goodness' sake!"

But Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West looked very much as though they would faint at that particular moment.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST MOVE IN THE GAME.

"NIPPER!" said Watson, in a weak voice

"Begad! But it can't be true—it can't be, really!" exclaimed Tregellis-West, removing his pince-nez in his agitation. "This is simply staggerin', you know—it is so staggerin' that I am quite bowled over!"

My two chums were staring at me, still half dazed. I could see well enough that there was no sign of recognition in their eyes. They knew my voice alone—they could not fathom my disguise.

Watson was not inclined to believe even the truth.

"This is some silly trick!" he said suddenly. "This chap has simply been imitating Nipper's voice——"

"This chap is Nipper himself, you funny ass!" I interrupted. "Don't you believe me? Don't you know that I'm pretty good at disguises? And can't you believe me when I tell you that I'm Nipper?"

"No, I'm blowed if I can!" said Watson grimly.

"Begad! It is certainly somewhat difficult, dear boy," observed Sir Montie. "It would be frightfully rude of me to doubt your word, but you must really pardon me for suspectin' that there is some trick about it. You don't look like Nipper—you don't, really."

"Nipper couldn't have disguised himself like this," said Watson. "This chap ain't Nipper at all—although his voice is exactly the same. I'm blessed if I know whether I'm dreaming or awake!"

I grinned.

"Do you remember that Nipper cut the third finger of his left hand two or three weeks ago?" I asked. "Do you remember that a scar was left—a scar looking just like the letter C? You mentioned the resemblance, Watson——"

"Of course I remember it," growled Tommy.

"Well, look at this," I said calmly.

And I held out the third finger of my left hand for my chums to inspect. They both examined the scar with almost awed expressions. Then they gazed at me as they might have gazed at a spectre.

"It's him—it's him!" gasped Watson.

"This is the final proof, begad!" said Tregellis-West. "Nipper, my dear old chap, I'm delighted to see you again—although, begad, I can't see you at all! That sounds frightfully Irish, but I mean it!"

I chuckled.

"I'm overwhelmed by these compliments," I said.

"Compliments?"

"You keep on admiring my disguise, anyhow," I said. "I was a bit nervous on the first day—but it seems that I needn't have been. I was afraid that I should be spotted and bowled out."

"Why you—you silly ass, you don't look like Nipper at all—I mean, you don't look like yourself," said Watson breathlessly. "I can't get quite used to it even now. And what's the idea, you deep bounder?"

I sat down.

"The idea," I said, "is that I am back."

"Begad! An' it's simply splendid," said Sir Montie, nodding.

"I'm back, and I mean to stick here now," I went on. "If I can throw this disguise off in a week—all the better. But if it can't be managed, I'll remain Algernon Clarence D'Albert for the rest of the giddy term. You're glad to see me again, I suppose?"

"Glad!" said Tommy huskily. "We're only just beginning to realise it—and glad ain't the word! It's the finest thing that ever happened! You're the most cunning beggar I've ever seen!"

"Thanks!" I said drily.

"And what are you going to do now?" went on Watson. "If the Head gets to know you're here he'll boot you out——"

"But the Head won't get to know," I said. "I'm D'Albert—a fat-headed simpleton—and I shall retain that identity until I've established the innocence of Nipper. See? I've come back so that I can be on the scene—so that I can bowl Starke out and expose the truth."

Sir Montie grabbed my hand.

"Great, old boy!" he declared enthusiasti-

cally. "Simply great! How you thought of the idea is beyond me!"

"As it happens, I didn't think of it," I said. "You remember Lord Dorrimore?"

"He brought you down here—at least, he came to see the Head," said Watson. "Why, of course! That explains——"

"Just beginning to realise, eh?" I grinned. "It explains everything, my son. I was as miserable as sin in London—didn't know what the dickens to do—and then old Dorrie blew in like a summer breeze. And he worked out this whole idea. He's been an absolute pal. I couldn't have worked the thing without his help. I should have been in London still."

"And now you're here, on the giddy spot," said Watson, with sparkling eyes. "Good old Dorrie! He was always a sport. But won't he get into trouble if you get found out?"

"Serious trouble, I expect; but he's risking it, and I'm not going to be found out," I said grimly. "I haven't been able to do much since I arrived, but there's no telling. Let's just review the facts of the case, so that we can have it fresh in our minds."

"Good idea," said Montie.

"Well, Starke was found in the lane, wounded on the head," I said. "When he came to himself he accused me; and I was in such a queer position that I was trapped. I couldn't extricate myself."

"It was really shockin', dear boy!"

"It was," I agreed grimly. "I was only able to spend a few minutes on an investigation, but I found a flake of blue-grey enamel in the road, and I'm pretty sure that Starke was really bowled over by a motor-car."

"Begad!"

"But why didn't the chap stop?"

"Because he was like others of his kind, I suppose," I replied. "Perhaps he thought he'd killed Starke, and got into a panic. Anyhow, he buzzed straight on and vanished."

"But do you know who the car belongs to?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I don't suppose it'll take me long to find out—that's what I'm down here for. The man probably found out the next day that Starke wasn't much hurt, and so he decided to say nothing."

"And to let you be expelled?" asked Watson warmly.

"If he was capable of the first act, he could easily be capable of leaving me to my fate," I replied. "But perhaps he didn't know anything about my position. But I've got to tell you something else about that car."

"Somethin' important, dear boy?"

"It might be," I replied. "When Dorrie and I were coming down here—he brought me as far as Bannington by car, you know—we caught sight of a blue-grey four-seater in the High Street. We tried to follow it, but our petrol gave out."

"Hard lines!" said Watson.

"It was beastly exasperating," I said, with a frown. "Still, we got near enough to take the number—I've got it in my mind now, and written down, too. If I can find out where the car belongs, and who owns it, I shall be well on the road to complete success."

"How do you make that out?"

"My dear chap, I can confront the man and tell him the whole situation," I said. "Starke isn't hurt much, and the chap won't be afraid of a prosecution. So there's no reason why he shouldn't come forward and tell the Head that it was his car that caused Starke's injury. If that's proved—well, my innocence is proved, too. The Head will be only too glad to have me back."

"And so shall we be," said Watson feelingly. "I don't regard it as that yet. You're not you—if you know what I mean. You're somebody else, and I shan't be satisfied until you're walking about looking like yourself—and not like a giddy freak!"

I grinned.

"Patience, my son," I said. "I'm enjoying the game, as a matter of fact, but it may not last longer than a week. It all depends. Anyhow, I'm determined to go through with it until the very end."

"An' we're with you, dear fellow—right along the line!"

"Thanks, old chap," I said quietly. "It's fine to know that the best chaps here stick up for me—even when they think I've gone. Old Handforth's a good un'—he's a champion."

"An' I met you at the station, begad!" said Sir Montie, breathing hard. "I brought you up to the school, an' pointed out the objects of interest. You frightful spoofer!"

I chuckled.

"Well, I couldn't do anything else," I said. "You came to meet me, and I had to be polite—and I had to pretend to be a greenhorn. I mean to begin my inquiries to-morrow afternoon."

"How?" asked Watson.

"I'm going to Bannington—to the Town Hall—and I'm going to ask about that car number," I said grimly. "They ought to be able to tell me everything there."

"An' shall we be able to come with you, dear fellow?" asked Montie.

I stroked my chin.

"Well, I don't know," I answered. "We mustn't be too pally straight off. The fellows would begin to wonder and take notice. You've practically ignored me so far——"

"But we didn't know," protested Tommy.

"Of course you didn't," I agreed. "But I couldn't keep you out of the secret any longer. But now you're 'wise,' as Farman would say, you must act as you acted before. In the Triangle, and in the common-room, you'd better ignore me—or, at least, pay me very small attention."

"You're quite right, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "But we should very much like to go to Bannington with you."

"I'm afraid it can't be did," I said. "I'd love you to come, but we've got to think of appearances. In a day or two it'll be all right. I'm in this study now, and it won't be noticeable if we soon get pally. But we must be very careful not to give the fellows a hint—— It is really very nice of you, my dear friends," I added, changing my

voice abruptly. "I am quite sure that I shall be most comfortable in this study. I am deeply grateful."

Tregellis-West and Watson stared at me; and I dare say the change in my voice and manner was somewhat startling. But I had heard footsteps in the passage, and I was taking no risks.

"It's marvellous," said Watson—"simply marvellous!"

"I must really request you to be cautious, my good Watson," I said mildly, with a nod towards the door.

Caution was necessary, for a moment later the door opened, and De Valerie looked in. During my "absence" De Valerie was the Remove skipper, and he filled the post admirably.

"Hallo!" he said, glancing at me. "I wondered where you'd got to, D'Albert. What the deuce have you taken all your books away for?"

"I hope you will forgive me, De Valerie, but I have left Study M," I said softly. "These splendid boys have agreed to accept me as a study mate, and the arrangement is most gratifying to myself. But it would pain me exceedingly if you took my action as a slight upon yourself and Somerton."

"Don't mention it," grinned De Valerie. "We don't mind!"

"Thank you ever so much," I said gratefully.

De Valerie regarded Watson and Tregellis-West curiously.

"Changed your plans, haven't you?" he asked. "I thought you were hoping that Nipper would come back? I thought it was your idea to keep this vacancy open for a week or two."

"Well, you see, the fact is—— I mean, we thought—— That is to say, Montie and I decided—— Or, at least——"

Watson paused, somewhat involved.

"Very lucid!" said De Valerie. "As clear as mud, in fact!"

Tommy turned red.

"Montie and I thought that it would be better to have somebody with us," he said, trying to hide his confusion. "So—we asked D'Albert—or, rather, D'Albert asked us—— Anyhow, it's arranged," concluded Watson bluntly.

"Exactly, dear fellow," said Sir Montie. "You must quite understand that D'Albert was very delighted with Study M. But I was the first fellow to see the new chap, an' he decided comin' in here. So—there you are."

"Of course, I shall be most delighted to retire in favour of your dear friend when he returns," I said meekly. "It will give me much pleasure to make myself scarce in order to allow Kipper——"

"Nipper, you ass!" grinned De Valerie.

"Really, I become somewhat confused with all these names," I apologised. "Nipper, of course—how stupid of me. When he returns I shall retire. And, really, I hope that his return will be in the near future."

"You're a queer card," said De Valerie, staring at me. "Still, it's your business, and I won't interfere. But don't forget that you'll be quite welcome in Study M, if you change your mind."

"Thank you most awfully!" I said.

De Valerie retired, and Watson took a deep breath.

"That was a near shave!" he murmured.

"You nearly put your foot in it, you ass!" I whispered. "Still, no harm was done. And now everything's settled. Good! We can go right ahead from this minute—and may Algernon Clarence D'Albert soon be a name of the past!"

"Hear, hear!" said my chums.

Established once more in Study C, I felt far more at home. But it was not like the old times. It was a novel experience for me to be almost ignored by the bulk of the Removites. As my own self I should have been the centre of any crowd discussing cricket, for example; but as D'Albert it was as much as I could do to get a look in on the outskirts. And even then I was not listened to if I ventured a remark.

I was determined to alter all this as soon as possible. I had come to St. Frank's as a simpleton mainly to deceive the school. But, once firmly entrenched, so to speak, I could safely reveal myself as somebody who was not to be lightly ignored.

Business first, however.

And the following afternoon I borrowed Tommy Watson's bicycle and rode over to Bannington. It was quite a lovely day, and I longed to be on Little Side with the other fellows.

But it was more important that I should get on the track of the blue-grey car. And my inquiries, I may say at once, were not fruitless. As a matter of fact, they were highly satisfactory—so far as they went.

I had no difficulty in learning, at the Bannington Town Hall, that the car whose number I gave was owned by a man named Henry Millford; and, further, that Mr. Millford lived in the village of Midshott.

This place was fairly large, and it was situated five miles beyond Bannington, on the way to Helmford and London. The next step was to pay a visit to Midshott, and to attempt to identify the car beyond all shadow of doubt.

For, of course, I was not exactly certain that I was on the right trail.

I had seen the car in Bannington that day, and had assumed that it was the automobile which had knocked Starke down. Possibly I was wrong; but it was far more probable that I was right.

And the question had to be decided at once.

So, after leaving the Town Hall, I jumped upon my machine and started off for Midshott.

CHAPTER III.

TROUBLE IN THE AIR.

I WAS very thoughtful as I rode along the dusty lanes. My return to St. Frank's in another character had been more or less of an experiment. It had succeeded, but I knew that I should have to

go very cautiously if I was to keep the deception up.

Once a suspicion was started I should be bowled out. I could trust Sir Montie and Tommy to keep the truth dark. But they were the only fellows who could be given the secret.

Much as I liked Handforth and De Valerie and Pitt—and a good few others—I did not feel justified in saying anything to them. Silence is golden, it is said, and I could not be given away if nobody knew the secret.

I wondered who Mr. Henry Millford was, and whether he was actually the man who was responsible for Starke's injury. If he would only turn up trumps I could return to St. Frank's and become Nipper again within a day. But I had an instinctive feeling that my task would not be quite so easy as that.

And so it turned out.

I found Midshott to be a large, straggling village with a long main street. Mr. Millford resided in a roomy house called Hazeldene, just on the outskirts. The house was well kept, and the gardens were in splendid condition.

When I dismounted from my bicycle I noticed that a gardener—an elderly man—was sweeping the gravel near the gate. I mopped my brow, and nodded to him as he looked up.

"Warm this afternoon," I remarked chattily.

"You're right, young sir," said the gardener. "I reckon that must be as warm ridin' that there bike as wot it is sweepin' this 'ere gravel. It's reg'lar sultry to-day."

"This is Mr. Millford's place, isn't it?" I asked.

"That's right, master," said the old man. "But Mr. Millford ain't here at present. He's away, an' I don't know when he'll be comin' back agin. Gone to the seaside, mebbe."

"I think I've noticed his car about," I observed.

"That's likely enough," agreed the gardener.

"Blue-grey, isn't it?" I asked.

"I dessay that could be called blue-grey," said my elderly friend. "A fine car, too. I reckon that must 'ave cost close upon a thousand when that was noo. Leastways, that's wot Beckett tells me."

"I expect he's right," I said. "Beckett ought to know all about cars, anyhow."

I hadn't the slightest idea who Beckett was, but my object was to draw the old man on to further conversation. And I was successful, too.

"Yes," said the gardener, leaning on the gate. "Beckett ought to know all about them cars, as you say. Bein' a driver—or shuffer—or whatever they calls 'em, 'e's 'ad a deal to do with cars. But Beckett is a rare speedy one—'e do rush about the roads!"

"A bit reckless, perhaps?" I suggested.

"That's wot I allus think," said the old man, shaking his head. "But Beckett only laughs when I ses a word. But he'll come by a accident one o' these fine days if 'e ain't careful—an' 'e can't say as I 'aven't warned 'im."

I was getting right on the trail. If this wasn't the car that had knocked Starke down—well, there was a queer coincidence here. That car had been driven by a reckless driver—and Beckett answered to the description. It wasn't feasible to suppose that Mr. Millford himself would have ignored such an accident. But it was highly probable that a chauffeur would attempt to escape the consequences of his recklessness.

"Didn't he have an accident the other day?" I asked casually.

The old man shook his head.

"Not as I know on," he said.

"It must have been somebody else's car, then," I remarked. "But I thought it might have been Beckett. Didn't he come home one night with something bent?"

"You must be mistaken, young gent," said the other. "I'll ask him——"

"No, you'd better not do that," I said quickly. "I don't suppose Beckett had any accident at all, and he'd be wild if you told him that I'd said such a thing. I suppose he's with Mr. Millford?"

"No, he's still here," replied the gardener. "But the car's gone. Repairs, or sommat, I s'pose. That's been gone a day or two, an' I don't know when it'll come back. Well, young sir, I must git on wi' my work. Good-arternoon to ye!"

He turned away, and I slowly pedalled on.

My inquiry, so far, had been satisfactory, but it was disappointing, all the same. My suspicions were still suspicions. I had found out nothing definitely. And there was really no telling when I should get right on the track.

Until I saw that car at close quarters I could do nothing. Everything led to the belief that I was on the scent. But I required concrete proof. And that proof could only be obtained by comparing the flake of enamel I possessed with Mr. Millford's car.

If it tallied I should be all right—I could go ahead. If it didn't tally, I should have to start right at the beginning again. There was no sense in finding Beckett and questioning him until I had established the other fact.

And the car was away. There was no telling when it would be back. I felt rather downhearted, for I knew that nothing much could be done during the present week. Haste would only make matters worse. It was my duty to be patient and to wait for my chance.

No other course was open to me. The blue-grey car was my sole and only hope. I hung about Midshott for over an hour, talking to several people. I visited a local garage and bought some lubricating oil; and I tried to get information concerning the blue-grey car from the dealer.

But he could tell me nothing, and when I finally decided to return to St. Frank's I knew no more than I had known when I bade the old gardener good-afternoon. It is not my way to be glum, however.

I was quite cheerful as I rode homewards.

Success would come sooner or later—I was certain of it. And, to be quite honest, I

didn't want success to come immediately. I was anxious to remain D'Albert until I had surprised the junior school in several ways. There were many openings for good fun.

And before I reached St. Frank's an incident occurred which was rather good in its way.

I happened to run into three delightful youths belonging to the River House School—in short, the Honourables. They were the most insufferable cads in Dr. Hogge's Academy, and by nature they were absolutely the reverse of honourable. Wellborne and Co. were really the limit.

They sat on a stile, indulging in cigarette smoking. This appealed to their "manly" natures to a far greater extent than cricket, or sport of any kind. The Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne was probably the worst of the trio; his affected drawl was ludicrous—although he fondly believed that it was extremely classy. And his monocle was never missing.

The Hon. Cyril Coates and the Hon. Bertram Carstairs were birds of a feather, but their plumage was not so gay as that of their leader. But the three, taking them as a whole, were a very bright collection.

They sat on the stile, attempting to kid themselves that they were enjoying their smokes. It always surprised me how such fellows could possibly imagine that it looked "big" to have a cigarette in one's mouth. A boy with a cigarette always looks silly, to my mind.

"It's a rippin' afternoon, you know," said Carstairs. "It wouldn't be a bad idea if we went for a bathe."

"Too bally faggin', don't you know," said Wellborne languidly. "Bathin' is all right, but there's the dressin' aftahwards. An' dressin' bores me to death, by gad!"

"But the bathe is worth it," said the Hon. Bertram. "The only thing is there might be some of those rotten Commoners about, and that would be too beastly. We can't go in the same water as them, you know!"

"We'd better get a river to ourselves," suggested Coates, with a touch of sarcasm; he was not quite such a snob as the others. "Or perhaps we'd better go to a place hundreds of miles from civilisation—we sha'n't be contaminated then!"

"You silly fool!" said Wellborne elegantly.

"Well, dear boy, don't talk such rot!" exclaimed Coates. "Dash it all, there's plenty of room in the river—— But what's this, by Jove? What's this queer-lookin' article?"

The queer-looking article in question was myself. I had just come into view, riding up a slope on my bicycle. And the Honourables were to be excused, perhaps, for regarding me with unusual interest. I did not look a particularly brilliant specimen of humanity.

"Oh, that must be the new kid at St. Frank's," said Carstairs. "Fallwood was tellin' me all about him—a regular little idiot, you know. As simple as a bally baby!"

The Hon. Aubrey grinned.

"By gad! He's just our mark!" he exclaimed calmly.

"Eh?"

"We have nothin' to do, an' this article blows up," said Wellborne. "We simply couldn't allow it to escape us, deah boys. We're always lookin' out for somethin' to rag, an' heah it is!"

"Oh, good!" said Carstairs, yawning. "I'm game!"

If they had known my real identity they would have ignored me completely, for the Honourables had a very great respect for anybody who could use his fists. But they never lost an opportunity of bullying a fellow who was not capable of standing up for himself.

It was the favourite pastime of these cads, and they made ready to attack me, although they attempted to appear quite unconcerned. I knew what their game was, and I was secretly amused.

My afternoon was not to be wasted, after all.

If I had liked, I could have eluded the prigs easily. But it amused me to hoodwink them. And as I approached I very thoughtfully kept my gaze fixed upon the ground. I pretended to ignore the River House trio.

"On him, by gad!" said Wellborne.

The three cads barred the path, and the next minute I was hauled from my machine. I stood in the road, looking nervous and shaky. But I nearly forgot myself when Carstairs picked up Tommy's bicycle and threw it into the ditch. I resolved that Carstairs should pay for that action very shortly.

"Really, I do not quite understand what this means," I said meekly. "Pray allow me to continue my journey——"

"By Jove, it talks!" said Coates wonderingly. "Didn't you hear, dear boys? It actually talks!"

"Amazin'!" grinned Wellborne.

I peered at them nervously through my big spectacles, shrinking away as though very frightened. And such an action was, of course, a direct encouragement to the Honourables.

Resistance on my part would have weakened the cads. But, as it was, they were all the more determined to put me through the mill; they told themselves that they had found a very easy victim in me.

And I was dragged from the road by the grinning Wellborne and Co. and taken into a neighbouring meadow, free from observation. The river lay just beyond, but it was quiet.

But somehow I had an idea in the back of my head that, although trouble was brewing, the trouble would not be mine!

CHAPTER IV.

SURPRISING THE NATIVES.

WELLBORNE grasped my ear and twisted it severely.

"Now then, kid, what's your beastly name?" he asked.

I felt inclined to punch his aristocratic nose on the spot. But the time had scarcely

arrived for the surprise, and I held myself in check. I gave a squeal, and shrank back.

"Oh! Pup-please don't do that!" I exclaimed.

"Your name, you little insect?" said Wellborne languidly.

"It's D'Albert, please," I said meekly. "Algernon Clarence D'Albert."

The Honourables looked at me with some indignation.

"Oh, is it?" said Carstairs. "An' what the dooce do you mean by havin' a swanky name like that? Like your bally nerve!"

"Yes, please!" I said, getting ready for the fray.

"Who's your father??" asked Coates.

"Oh, my father never existed," I said—"at least, not as far as I know. I never saw him. But will you please let me go? It is my wish to return to St. Frank's in time for tea, and I really cannot stay here."

"That's awkward," said Wellborne—"dooced awkward, by gad! Because you're goin' to stay heah, my little worm! An', what's more, you're goin' to have a really rippin' time Through the hoop, by jove—that's where you're goin'!"

I looked round mildly

"But I can see no hoop," I observed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As innocent as a newly-hatched chicken—what?" grinned Carstairs. "It is our duty to show this—this thing somethin' of the world. He ain't born yet, it seems. What shall we do first?"

"Take all his clothes off, turn them inside out, an' make him dress again," suggested Wellborne cheerfully. "Aftah that we'll duck him in the bally river, an' then tie him on his bicycle."

"Rippin'!" said Coates. "What a brainy chap you are, Welly!"

"I'm rathah good at ideahs," said the Hon. Aubrey modestly.

He grabbed my shoulder and spun me round.

"Undress!" he commanded harshly.

I backed away, protesting.

"But, really, I cannot!" I said. "The very thought is horrifying! To undress in public like this——"

"Nobody will see you, you young lunatic!" said Carstairs. "An' I don't care tuppence if anybody does. Undress, you little fool!"

I shook my head firmly.

"Really, I refuse," I said. "And will you allow me to warn you that violence on your part will drive me to blows? I have no wish to become ungentlemanly, and you will save yourself pain if you allow me to go."

"It's threatenin' us!" grinned Coates. "Ye gods! Hark at it!"

"I'll give you just ten seconds to start, you young cub!" said Wellborne. "If you haven't peeled your beastly coat off by that time, I'll smash those bally spectacles of yours!"

A threat of that kind was characteristic. I pretended to be alarmed and hastily removed my spectacles—being glad of the opportunity, in fact. Then I pulled myself up and held up my hand.

"I must warn you again!" I said. "Touch me, and I shall strike! I am not inclined to put up with nonsense—really, I am not!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wellborne and Co. roared.

Such a threat from me sounded ludicrous. I looked the most harmless creature on the face of the earth. And for me to suggest that I should strike three of them was extremely funny.

"Time's up!" said Wellborne calmly. "Grab him, deah boys!"

"Remember!" I said shrilly. "Remember my warning!"

"Oh, we'll remember it all right" grinned the Hon. Bertram. "It's amazin' that they allow a dangerous chap like you to be out alone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the other two.

"I am quite safe if I am left alone—believe me!" I said. "But if you touch me I shall certainly become dangerous. Indeed, I shall hurt you most severely. For I shall strike hard."

Wellborne and Co. shrieked, and the three of them charged at me at the same moment. It was their intention to wipe me up in about two seconds. And they thought they had the easiest job before them that they had ever attempted.

"We'll strip the beast an' tan him!" shouted Carstairs.

But the next moment something happened which was most disconcerting—from the point of view of the Honourables.

One of my fists came round, and it struck Carstairs fully upon his elegant nose. And there was such driving power behind the punch that the Hon. Bertram staggered over backwards with a fiendish yell.

My left caught Wellborne on his ear, and he reeled. Coates, a second later, wondered if an earthquake had happened. At all events, something which felt like a sledge-hammer caught him between the eyes.

"Yarooooh!" howled Carstairs, his nose streaming red.

"Oooooop!" yelled Wellborne, nursing his ear. "What the dooce—— Ow!"

"I—I'm stunned!" moaned Coates drunkenly.

I regarded the trio with pretended alarm—but with real joy inwardly. This was worth a month's pocket-money.

"You cannot say that I did not warn you in advance!" I exclaimed nervously. "If you will only allow me to go there will be no further trouble. Do you not realise that it is most unfair for three boys to attack another boy single-handed? Have you no gentlemanly instincts?"

Wellborne scowled furiously.

"You—you little brat!" he snarled. "We weren't prepared for you—that's all! But we're goin' to half kill you now!"

"I'll smash his face to a pulp!" panted Carstairs, whose own face was considerably damaged. "Hold him down, you chaps, an' I'll kick him till he howls for mercy!"

I looked horrified.

"But kicking is hooliganism!" I exclaimed. "You must not——"

But Wellborne and Co. rushed at me again.

This time they were more on their guard; but they still thought they had an easy victim. They imagined that my first blows had been mere flukes, because they had made no attempt to guard themselves.

And now I sailed in in earnest.

"Very well," I shouted. "If you wish to be hurt, I will oblige you!"

I met them squarely, never moving an inch.

Smack! Crash! Biff!

I don't profess to be a champion boxer, but I'm not boasting when I say that I can use my fists fairly decently. Wellborne and Co. found this out somewhat too late. Every punch went home.

In less than two minutes the Honourables were demoralised. All thoughts of attack had vanished, and they only wanted to flee. But I had them well in hand, and I meant to give them a good lesson.

If one of them turned to escape I dodged round and landed a telling blow. It was warm work, but I enjoyed it. And at last the three cads sprawled on the grass, beaten to the wide.

I was not even scratched.

Wellborne's left eye was already closing up, and his mouth was bleeding. Carstairs's nose was nearly double its normal size, and he, too, had a black eye—he had been well paid for his treatment of Tommy's bicycle. The Hon. Cyril Coates lay moaning on the grass, suffering from two very thick ears and a black eye. I had treated them all alike in that respect.

"Perhaps you will now understand that it does not always pay to attack a seemingly helpless boy," I said mildly. "You asked for this punishment, and it has given me pleasure to administer it."

"You—you infernal beast!" snarled Wellborne. "We'll make you pay for this before long! By gad! You wait!"

"I have been waiting for quite a long time," I retorted. "But if you are anxious to demonstrate——"

"Great pip!"

I turned quickly, and was somewhat astonished to find Handforth and Church and McClure striding on to the scene. They had just come from a boat which was moored against the river bank, and I had not heard their approach.

"Great pip!" repeated Handforth, in amazement. "What's this?"

"It looks to me as if the new kid has been handing out trouble in big chunks!" said McClure. "Did you do this, D'Albert?"

"Impossible!" said Handforth, before I could reply. "There must have been some others here——"

"Oh, don't be silly!" put in Church. "Didn't we see D'Albert knocking lumps off these rotters? We saw it from the river, minutes ago. My hat! I never thought the chap could fight like this!"

"We'd better kick these cads off the field," suggested Handforth. "Not literally, of course, but we can chuck 'em into the road!"

"Really, my dear Beerfroth, I cannot allow you to touch these wretched boys again," I said quickly. "They have suffered enough——"

Handforth gulped hard.

"BEERFROTH!" he roared violently.

"Ha, ha ha!" yelled Church and McClure.

"I really see no reason for such violent vocal efforts——" I began.

"You—you blithering ass!" howled Handforth. "Don't you know my name yet? My name's Handforth—not Beerfroth! I believe you did it on purpose!"

"Oh, really, how could you think such a thing?" I said. "Handforth—of course! Perhaps it was your face which suggested beer to my mind——"

"What!" gulped Edward Oswald.

Church and McClure shrieked again, and during this interlude Wellborne and Co. seized the opportunity to make themselves scarce. They breathed vengeance as they went—not that I took any notice of that.

"Look here, you funny ass!" said Handforth, rolling up his sleeves. "If you don't apologise on the spot, I'll knock you to Timbuctoo!"

"Better be careful, Handy!" grinned McClure. "D'Albert can use his fists, and you'll have a stiff job if you take him on. Don't forget how those cads looked just now!"

Handforth was no coward, but he rolled down his sleeves somewhat hurriedly. He had overlooked the point.

"I suppose he can't help it!" he growled. "And I must say that I admire the way the idiot welted into those bounders. It was worth quids; but I wish I'd been on the scene a minute earlier."

"D'Albert was quite capable of dealing with the situation himself," said Church. "How did it start, old son?" he added, turning to me.

"Those overdressed youths seized me as I was riding past," I explained. "They dragged me from my machine, and were about to rag me. But I really could not allow such a thing to happen—so I resisted."

"Yes, we noticed that!" said McClure. "But why didn't you resist at the start? Why did you allow Wellborne and Co. to drag you off your jigger?"

I smiled.

"I thought it somewhat hasty," I said. "I wished to give the boys a chance to prove what their intentions were. Finding that they were inclined to hooliganism, I ended the episode."

"You did," agreed Handforth. "Those cads will get into a frightful row when they show themselves at the River House in that condition—and serve 'em right! D'Albert, my son, I'm proud of you!"

"Really, I am overwhelmed," I said meekly.

"Any chap who can fight like you can is a pal of mine!" said Handforth.

"It's safer to be a pal!" observed Church, sotto voce.

"Yes, of course—— I mean, don't be an ass!" roared Handforth. "I'm not scared of D'Albert, anyway. He's not such a duffer as

he looks, though. Half the fellows won't believe this when we tell them."

I had an idea that Handforth was right. And, later on, it was proved to be so. Nobody would credit that I had fought Wellborne and Co. single-handed, and that I had beaten them into mincemeat. The story was regarded as one of Handforth's gross exaggerations.

But Sir Montie and Tommy, of course, knew the truth—and they believed it all right. They chuckled hugely as I recounted the incident during tea.

"Great!" grinned Watson. "It won't be long before you get right to the top again——"

"Don't forget that I'm D'Albert!" I put in. "It'll be safer to take that for granted always. Anybody might be listening, and one incautious word would give the whole game away."

"Keep your hair on," said Watson. "You haven't told us how you managed this afternoon. What did you find out?"

"Nothing," I replied—"at least, nothing important."

And I told my chums of my somewhat futile journey. But I also told them that a little patience would bring its own reward. There was plenty of time before me, and I was in no particular hurry.

"In the meantime," I went on, "what about the cricket?"

"We're doing well," said Watson. "We've whacked Bannington Grammar School and Barcliffe, and we shall probably whack Helmford next week. But they're rather hot, and we shall miss you in the eleven."

"That's just it," I said thoughtfully. "I want to get a chance in the cricket, if it can be managed. But I'm afraid De Valerie won't look at me—I seem to be too much of a duffer."

"He'll give you a trial, anyhow, old boy," said Sir Montie. "That's only fair. An' you can soon show him what you can do once you get really goin'. It's only the start you need."

"And I'm afraid it's the start that'll be hard to obtain," I said grimly. "But I'm not going to be swindled out of the cricket! Not likely, my sons! I'll ask De Valerie this evening—and insist upon a trial."

"That's just it," said Tommy. "You can't very well insist, old man. You've taken up this character of a meek simpleton, and you'll have to stick to it. And you'll only be laughed at if you insist."

There was a great deal of truth in what Watson said, but I was fully determined to make the cricket committee listen to me. If I failed on the first occasion, I would persist until I gained my way. But I knew well enough that it would be a difficult task.

For a raw new fellow to ask to take a hand in the cricket was a piece of pure nerve; and for such a hopeless specimen as I appeared to be to ask would savour of sheer lunacy. Still, I was firm.

In the evening, when it was beginning to get dusk, I borrowed Watson's bicycle once again in order to run down to the post-office. I had decided not to broach the subject of the cricket until later on, in the common-room.

I went down to the village easily. The evening was mild and quite warm, and I free-wheeled down the slope most of the way. When I emerged from the post-office I re-mounted my machine and slowly pedalled back.

My thoughts were not dwelling upon the mystery of the blue-grey car at present. I was thinking about the cricket.

My great ambition was to play in the match against Helmford College—one of the most important matches of the term. And I may as well admit that I did not feel very hopeful.

I realised that there were some drawbacks to the whole position. But there was a spice of excitement in the situation, too. It would be quite a fight, and success would be all the sweeter when it came.

Thinking in this strain, I pedalled on, and scarcely noticed the loud snort of a motor car horn in the rear. But I instinctively drew to the near side, and the car rolled past me at an even speed.

Deep in thought, I looked at it absent-mindedly.

But a change came suddenly. Cricket and everything else left my mind in a flash. For the car was painted blue-grey! In fact it was the very four-seater which Lord Dorrie-more and I had seen in Helmford.

It was the car belonging to Mr. Henry Millford!

"Great Scott!" I muttered.

I was galvanised into instant action, and I put pressure on the pedals so abruptly that I nearly broke the chain. For the idea had suddenly come into my mind of giving chase.

If possible, I would overtake the car and stop it—anything to get a word with the driver, who might even be Beckett himself. The car was only rolling along at a sedate eighteen or twenty miles an hour; and I hoped, by scorching, to overtake it. At least, the game was worth trying.

The car took the road straight past the school, and it was evidently the driver's intention to go down the long hill on to the moor. Shortly after passing the school I was only two or three hundred yards in the rear, and I saw that I was gaining.

But I failed to see something else.

All my attention was given to the chase, and I did not observe three figures standing by the hedge, behind a bush. Those three figures belonged to Wellborne and Co., of the River House.

"That's the cad!" exclaimed Coates quickly. "He's on his beastly bicycle again scorchin', too. Tryin' to race that car, I believe."

Wellborne's eyes glittered.

"He's bound to come back this way," he declared. "It's seven or eight miles, if he goes round the Bannin'ton road—an' there ain't time before lockin'-up. He's bound to come this way."

"Supposin' he does?" asked Carstairs.

"Haven't we been prowlin' about heah, waitin' for a chance to get our own back on the beast?" demanded the Hon. Aubrey. "Fate's played into our bally hands, don't you know. We can collah the worm, deah boys!"

"We've got ropes with us this time," said Coates savagely. "By Jove! We'll teach the silly-looking cad a lesson!"

And the Honourables of the River House decided to wait by the roadside for my return. And I was quite unconscious—at the time—of their vindictive intentions.

CHAPTER V.

A DRAMATIC ADVENTURE!

WHIZZ!

I shot down the hill at almost breakneck speed, regardless of the loose stones which lay on the path. The blue-grey car was only a little distance ahead of me, for the driver was taking the hill cautiously. That is to say, he was not exceeding the speed of twenty-five miles an hour.

A big car seems to be going quite slowly at that speed; but twenty-five miles an hour on a bicycle is very different. I was going even faster, because I was overtaking him.

And as I shot along I suddenly came to a decision.

There was really no time to hesitate. It was necessary to fix upon one plan, and to carry that plan out. Nelson Lee had always taught me to stick to a decision, once I arrived at it.

And my present scheme was somewhat perilous.

But I was reckless in my anxiety to stop the car and to discover—finally—if it was the automobile which had injured Starke that night. The very success of my future investigations depended upon my success now.

Foot by foot I drew nearer to the speeding car. At last I was only just behind. The road was narrow, and there was barely room for me to forge past—if I desired to do so.

As it happened, I did not.

My idea was to fling myself aboard the car as I drew level, and to let poor Tommy's bicycle take care of itself. A somewhat hare-brained scheme, perhaps, but I didn't count the odds at that moment.

With the car swaying and jolting beside me, I shot along until I was dead level with the tonneau. The next moment might bring success, or it might bring serious injury.

I risked it.

Suddenly flinging my hands up, I grabbed the bodywork of the car. I clung there, and the bicycle clattered away into the hedge. Just for a moment I thought that I was going to be wrenched from my hold.

But, with a terrific effort, I lurched head first into the tonneau, and gasped with triumphant relief as I picked myself up. The driver apparently knew nothing of what had occurred, for he sat behind the wheel quite unmoved.

He seemed to be a man of about forty, and he was attired in a leather driving-coat and a tweed cap. A bushy black moustache adorned his upper lip, and his face was tanned until it was the colour of mahogany.

"Pull up!" I shouted.

The driver turned his head with a start, and stared at me in blank amazement through his goggles.

"Great sparking-plugs!" he ejaculated.

His hand went to the brake, and a moment or two later the car came to a standstill in the shadow of some overhanging trees. The driver turned in his seat and regarded me deliberately.

"How in the name of thunder did you get in there?" he demanded.

"I jumped in, please," I replied meekly.

"None o' them lies!" said the man. "I ain't stopped since I left Caistowe—an' you wasn't in then, I'll swear—unless you was hidin' under them rugs. You little rascal——"

"I jumped in not two minutes ago," I put in. "I was riding on my bicycle, you see."

"You ought to be locked up," said the man severely, but not unkindly. "A danger to humanity, that's what you are. But boys will be boys, I s'pose—although you don't look the sort that takes risks in a hurry."

"I wanted to speak to you, and I thought this would be the best way of getting you to stop," I said. "Are you Beckett?"

The man started, paused for a moment, and then shook his head.

"No," he said, "I'm not. Beckett? What made you think that was my name, youngster?"

"I thought it was—that's all," I replied.

I still thought so, too; for I believed that the man had deliberately lied to me. I was sure that he was Beckett, Mr. Millford's chauffeur.

"The best thing you can do is to get out of this car and to run home," said the man. "I ought to give you a good spankin'—but that's not my way. Hop it, my lad; hop it while you're safe!"

I shook my head.

"Not just yet," I replied. "I want to know if this car belongs to Mr. Henry Millford, of Midshott?"

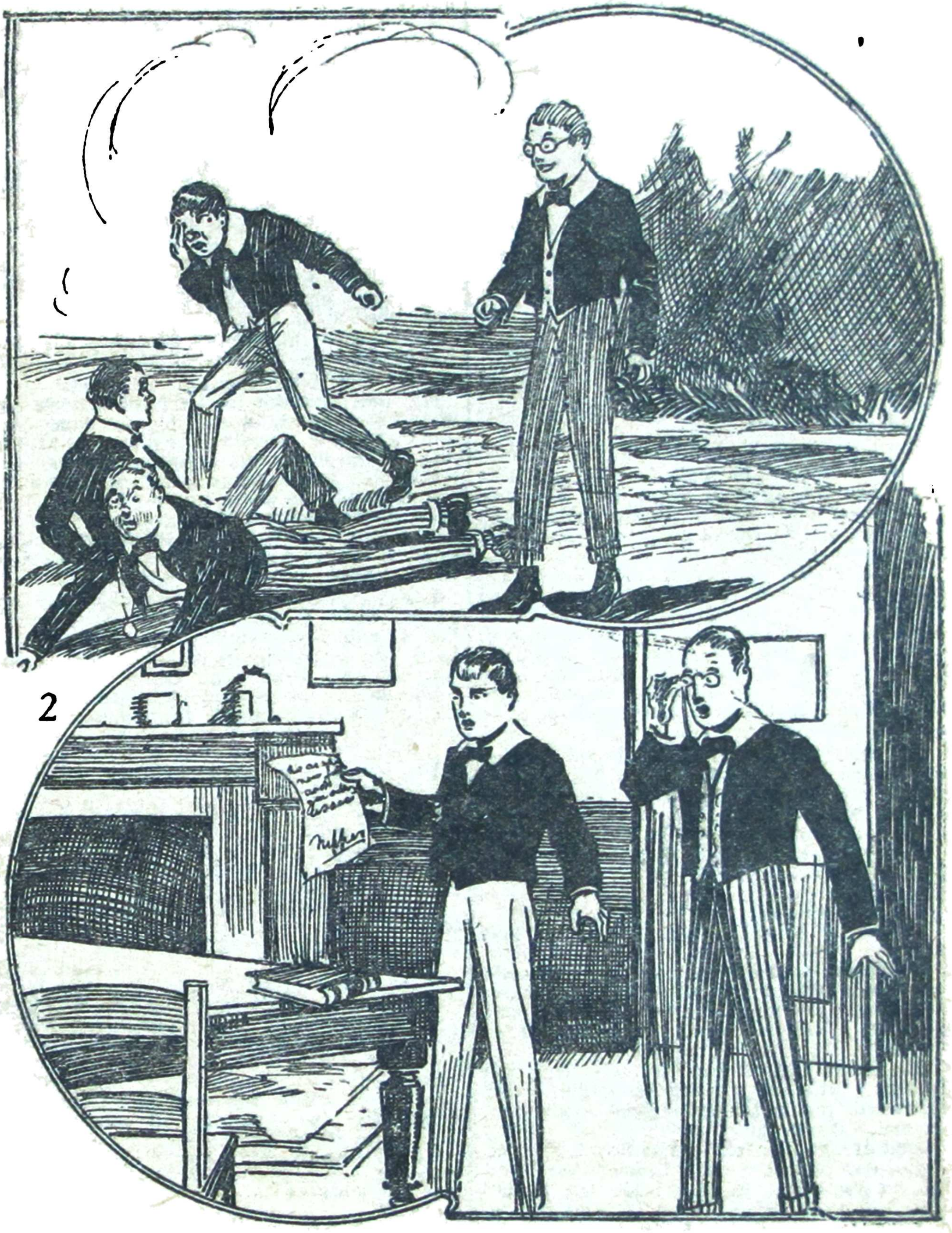
My companion smiled.

"What you want to know, and what I'll tell you, are two different things, I reckon," he said. "I'm not obliged to answer any questions, young man. And let me tell you that it's like your nerve to question me at all. So far as I know, we've never been introduced!"

"Really, we needn't be formal," I said. "And it may interest you to know that I am quite prepared to pay for any information you can give me. Do we understand one another?"

"I don't understand your game," replied the man. "And I don't take no payments from a schoolboy. Look here, kid, leave this thing to me. Don't you butt into anything that doesn't affect you. Stick to your school."

I looked at the man curiously.



1. "Perhaps you will now understand it is not always advisable to attack a seemingly helpless boy," said Algernon Clarence D'Albert.—(*See p.* 10.)

2. "Great Pip!" shouted Watson. "It's another message from Nipper!"—(*See p.* 3.)

"What do you mean—leave it to you?" I asked.

"You can think what you like—but leave me to get on with my journey," replied my companion. "That's all. If you don't ask me any questions I can't tell you any lies. Savvy?"

"But why should you tell me lies?" I asked. "I only want to get some information about an incident that happened two or three weeks ago. There was an accident near St. Frank's—a senior was bowled over by this car."

"Really?" said the man calmly. "You surprise me, my lad. An accident? A senior was bowled over? Nonsense! Don't get such silly ideas into that head of yours."

"But, look here——'

"Take my advice, and leave this matter alone," interrupted the stranger.

"That's all very well," I said grimly. "Why can't we be frank? I'm trying to find something out to—to help somebody. Did you knock anybody down with this car recently?"

The man shook his head decidedly.

"Not recently," he replied. "In fact, I've never knocked anybody down with this car. And if you don't like to believe that, young man, you can do the other thing. That's all I've got to say."

I was rather disappointed, for it seemed quite evident that the man was determined to give me no satisfaction. The offering of financial reward was quite useless, it seemed.

However, I had not committed myself to anything, and he would be able to come to no conclusion on his own account. He would think, perhaps, that my questions had been prompted by an idle curiosity.

"Well, I'll be going, then," I said, getting out of the car. "If you won't tell me anything, you won't. Oh, there's something I wanted to say."

"Say it as soon as you like."

"Do you know that your rear lamp is loose?" I asked. "If you're not careful, it'll jerk off."

The man nodded.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll just have a look at it."

He passed round to the rear of the car—which was what I had aimed at. But I had not misled the man; the lamp was actually loose, as I had seen when I was riding down the hill.

The very instant the fellow's back was turned I whipped out my pocket-book and extracted from it the small flake of blue-grey enamel. Then, alert and eager, I quickly looked at the two front mudguards.

One was perfectly whole and unscratched—the off-side wing. But the other one, on the near side, was slightly bent at the front, as though it had received a blow. I bent over it closely.

Several flakes of enamel were missing—just where the metal had been bent. And it did not take me ten seconds to establish the fact that the flake of enamel I held in my hand compared precisely with a small blank space near the bend in the metal. This was the actual car which had caused Starke's injury.

I had been on the right track all along.

But, while I had been merely suspicious before, I now had positive proof. It was only necessary for me to get the driver to acknowledge his guilt, and all would be well.

But there seemed to be something mysterious about the driver—something which made me feel that my task would not be easy. It was only natural that the fellow would shrink from admitting the truth. He would not care to confess that he knocked somebody down and continued his way without even offering aid.

And there would be no means of forcing the man to speak. My task would have to be accomplished by some stratagem or other. I should have to go to work very carefully, and I knew that nothing further could be done on this particular evening.

My only feasible method of getting to work, it seemed, would be to think out some carefully devised scheme—so that the man could be trapped into admitting the truth. He would never admit it otherwise.

And so it was sheer waste of time to remain on the scene any longer. It would be better to clear off and to think out a little plot. I felt that I was capable of tackling the problem; but I needed time.

I was just stowing the pocket-book away again, when I received a bit of a start. For I suddenly observed that the driver's head was projecting round the back of the car. He was looking at me.

Had he seen anything? Even so, it would not matter so very much, for he must already have suspected that I knew a lot.

"Well, I'll say good evening," I exclaimed. "I'm sorry you can't tell me anything important——"

"No, sonny; but perhaps you can tell me something important," said the man, walking round the car and confronting me. "Don't go yet I'd just like to know what you've got in your pocket?"

"My—my pocket?" I repeated, pretending to be silly.

"That's what I said."

"Which pocket?"

"The one in your jacket; but you knew that all the time," said the driver. "Now then, youngster, none of your larks. Choke up the truth right away. What's that you've got in your pocket?"

I smiled.

"If you don't ask any questions, you won't hear any lies," I said calmly. "Is that quite clear?"

"Pretty smart, ain't you?" said the man. "But it won't do for me, Master Cunning. You put a wallet into your pocket just now, an' you put something into the wallet. I want to see what it is."

"Sorry," I said, "but it can't be done."

And, as I spoke, I dodged rapidly away. The thing had become rather too warm for me; the man had seen me comparing the enamel, and that was what I had wished to avoid.

Quickly as I dodged, however, I was just a shade too late.

Before I could get clear a hand grabbed my shoulder, and I was pulled up with a jar.

"Let me go!" I panted hotly.

"There's no hurry, my lad," said the driver. "You can save yourself any further trouble by handing me that wallet at once. Is it a go?"

"No, it isn't!" I snapped.

"That's a pity, because I shall have to use force."

I struggled fiercely, being quite sure that I could extricate myself from the man's grip. But I had made a mistake. The hold upon me was painless, but absolutely secure.

I couldn't free myself, no matter how much I tried.

And two or three seconds later I was lying on my back in the grass beside the road. The man held me down with ease, and dived a hand into my breast-pocket. He took out the wallet, opened it, and looked inside.

"Very interesting," he said calmly.

I was simply boiling with alarm and fury.

"You—you scoundrel! Don't you dare to touch anything in that pocket-book! If you do I'll inform the police——"

"Not you!" interrupted the other. "That wouldn't suit your book at all, young shaver. But this piece of enamel will come in handy for me. It's just what I'm wanting."

"It's mine!" I panted angrily.

"Not now," said the man. "I'll take charge of it, if you don't mind—and I'll take charge of it even if you do mind. And don't get scared, my lad. Leave this to me, and you'll come out on top."

"You—you rotter!"

"That's what you think now. But I'm not so black as you paint me," said the driver pleasantly. "I'm stealing this piece of enamel, I'll admit—but it doesn't matter much. It's no further use to you, and it may help me a lot. You trust in your luck."

The man's words seemed ridiculous to me. He was taking my precious flake of enamel, and he could afford to be pleasant in his manner. But that flake was the only positive clue I possessed.

Without it I should be unable to prove a thing, and the fellow knew it. It pleased him to talk banteringly, but his words did not deceive me. I glared at him with helpless rage.

"You—you thief!" I exclaimed huskily. "If you take that——"

"Keep your hair on, youngster: I've taken it already," interrupted my captor. "And, as I told you before, there's no need for you to worry. Not a bit. If I've hurt you, I'm sorry."

The fellow sprang up, and I scrambled to my feet.

I was wild with rage, and I simply threw myself at him with a kind of mad desire to beat him until he returned my property. But he swept my hands aside, took hold of me, and lifted me in his arms.

In spite of my struggles and kicks, he carried me to the side of the road and pitched me neatly over the low hedge. I struck the bank, and rolled down. Before I could scramble back I heard the car's engine start with a roar. And when I reached the top of the bank I saw the automobile gliding off.

"Good night, my bonnie lad!" called the man, waving his hand. "We may meet again before long. And don't be downhearted!"

My feelings were too deep for words as I saw the car speeding away into the gloomy dusk.

It turned a bend, and I was left alone in the lane. I had not only met with failure, but my precious clue had been taken from me. Certainly I had proved my suspicions to be correct, but to lose that piece of enamel was galling in the extreme.

I felt that I had blundered somehow; but yet I didn't see how I could have acted otherwise. My sole object had been to get at the truth. I had done so to a certain extent.

But it didn't go far enough. All I knew for certain was that the car was the identical one. All my other suspicions were still suspicions. I was sure that the man was Beckett, and that he had lied to me.

But I could prove nothing, and a further interview with him would be just as blank. He had evidently made up his mind to say nothing. But why had he said so many curious things?

His attitude puzzled me.

He had certainly been hostile, but, at the same time, his manner had been decidedly friendly. And, although he had handled me roughly, I was not hurt in the slightest degree.

My thoughts were somewhat bitter as I slowly walked along up the slope. But this set-back only made me all the more determined and grim. And I was not at all sure that it had been a set-back.

In fact, reviewing the matter more calmly, I came to the conclusion that I had advanced somewhat in my investigation. But the mystery of the blue-grey car was still somewhat obscure.

The whole position needed careful thought, and as I walked towards St. Frank's I decided to stew over it before going to bed. Then I came to the spot where the bicycle had plunged into the hedge.

I expected to find it a wreck, and found it quite the opposite. Things generally happen that way, I notice.

The only damage was to one of the pedals, which was slightly bent, and refused to revolve easily. This, however, was a detail. I mounted the machine, and rode slowly homewards.

I should have been somewhat surprised, perhaps, if I could have seen my late adversary at that moment. He had stopped his car on the moor, and was comparing my flake of enamel with the damaged part of the front near-side mudguard.

When he looked up there was a twinkle in his eyes, and he chuckled.

"The young 'un's cute!" he murmured to

himself. "H'm! I'm not at all sure if I'm safe, but I shall have to risk it."

And the mysterious individual climbed back into the driver's seat and was soon speeding away into the gathering night.

Who was he?

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CHAPTER VI.

THE HONOURABLES' REVENGE.

"BY gad! Here he comes!"

It was the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne who whispered the words.

"About time, too!" growled Carstairs. "I'm just about fed up with waiting; we shall be late for callin'-over, too!"

"Well, it'll be worth it," said Wellborne. "Get ready!"

For the second time that day they prepared to capture Algernon Clarence D'Albert. On the first occasion they had known nothing of my capabilities, and they had regarded it as a mere ill-natured jape.

But on this occasion their intentions were vicious and vindictive. I had delivered severe punishment, and they meant to make me suffer a punishment far more painful and cruel.

It was Wellborne's idea of getting his own back.

"Naturally, I was quite unprepared for anything of the sort. My thoughts were busy on other matters, and I was not in my usual condition of alertness. Therefore the Honourables had the advantage.

"On him!"

That low shout was the first intimation I received of an impending attack. Before I could even jam the brakes on, or think clearly at all, the Honourables were upon me.

"Hold his legs!" snapped Wellborne. "The ropes—quick!"

Hampered by my bicycle, I was in rather a bad position. And while I was hitting out with all my might and main, Coates slipped a rope round my ankles and drew it tight with a jerk.

Then he pulled upon the rope with all his strength.

Crash!

I was yanked over with great violence, my feet being pulled from beneath me. The back of my head hit the hard road with a thud, and I saw quite a large assortment of stars.

Half dazed, I was helpless for half a minute. And during that time other ropes were placed round my wrists. The River House cads had made sure of me this time! There was no escape.

I was dragged rather than carried through a gap in the hedge, and deposited in a small clearing in the wood, just off the road.

"Fetch his bike!" suggested Coates. "We don't want anybody to see that!"

Carstairs hurried away, but returned within a few moments. Then my bonds were drawn cruelly tight. Unless help came, I should be victimised by these revengeful young rotters.

They had been prompt in seeking their vengeance.

"Really, this is very foolish of you," I said mildly. "I can assure you that your victory will be very brief. If you bully me while I'm helpless like this, your sufferings will be extremely acute in the near future. for retribution will come."

"Retribution has come already—for you," exclaimed Wellborne harshly. "You're goin' to be half skinned, you young hound! When you crawl back to that barn you call a school, they won't know you!"

"You are extremely cheerful, really," I remarked calmly.

"The beast doesn't seem to be scared at all!" snapped Carstairs. "I thought he'd beg for mercy."

Wellborne laughed nastily.

"He'll beg for mercy before long!" he exclaimed, dropping his affected drawl in his anger. "By gad! The chap won't be able to have a second's ease for a week after we've done with him!"

Wellborne bent over me.

"Do you see this black eye?" he demanded harshly.

"Really, I could not fail to observe it," I replied. "It must be extremely painful, Wellborne. I only regret that I did not black the other eye as well!"

"You—you fool!" shouted the Hon. Aubrey.

He kicked me viciously as he spoke. Fortunately, he was wearing tennis shoes, or my ribs would have been badly bruised. But Wellborne's action was just as vindictive and cowardly, for all that."

"For this black eye you're going to receive fifty slashes with the cane!" he exclaimed tensely.

"And fifty more for my black eye!" snapped Carstairs.

"And fifty more for mine!" put in Coates.

I could quite believe that the young scoundrels were capable of carrying out the threat. They were in such a condition that they would knock me about until I fainted from sheer exhaustion.

They had me helpless and at their mercy, and would make their revenge a terrible one. They would not realise the extremity of their violence until it was too late.

And for me to beg for mercy was utterly impossible. Moreover, it would have been futile, even if I had been funky enough to resort to such a measure.

I knew that I should have to go through with the business, and I steeled myself. Any prospect of help was almost out of the question. Nobody knew that I had come along this road, and the spot was still and deserted.

"You'll get more than a swishing, too," said Wellborne. "I mean to raise weals on your skin three inches high! An' both your beastly eyes are goin' to be blacked! An' we'll make your confounded nose bleed!"

I couldn't refrain from a remark.

"You don't happen to be Chinese torturers, by any chance?" I asked bitterly.

"We'll be worse this evenin'," said Car-

stairs. "You smashed us up, an' we're goin' to smash you up. An' if you sneak, we'll collar you again—an' give it to you worse!"

I said nothing. It made me sick to talk to these maddened young hooligans. For, in spite of their noble birth, they were no better.

"Turn him over!" ordered Wellborne curtly.

I was turned upon my face, and I knew that the punishment was about to commence. The spot was very quiet, being almost surrounded by trees, and the shadows were deep—so deep that it was rather difficult to see.

Swish!

Wellborne tested the cane with all his strength. It was a long, thin one, and calculated to give the maximum amount of pain. I did not flinch, but simply waited for the worst.

"I'll take my fifty first," said Wellborne. "You count, Bertie."

The Hon. Bertram nodded, and his leader commenced.

Slash!

The first blow struck me across the shoulders, and the pain stung me enormously. I dreaded to think of my condition if these young ruffians carried out their threat and delivered a hundred and fifty cuts. I should certainly be more dead than alive at the end of the ordeal.

"Boys! Cease this at once!"

The voice was stern and harsh, and it came from behind a tree just near by. Wellborne and Co. started as if they had been stung. They glanced at one another in terror, and then looked round them.

"Who—who was that?" gasped the Hon. Aubrey.

"Somebody behind that tree, you ass!" hissed Coates.

They all stared at the tree apprehensively. I stared, too, but my feelings were of a different nature.

Who was it who had spoken? Who had given voice to the utterance without showing himself? Wellborne and Co. remained quite still for a full minute. There was no other sound, and no sign of movement.

At last Wellborne walked gingerly forward, and disappeared into the gloom. He returned after a few moments, looking almost scared.

"There's nobody there!" he exclaimed huskily.

"Must have been our fancy, then," said Coates. "But I can swear I heard a voice behind that tree."

"Let's all search," said Carstairs.

They did so, but returned very shortly.

"Not a soul here, except us," said Carstairs. "Why, by Jove! I've got it! It must have been this D'Albert cad; he said those words, and it sounded as if his voice came from behind that tree."

Wellborne scowled.

"We'll lay it on all the thicker!" he snapped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good—good heavens!" panted the Hon. Cyril.

The laugh which rang out sounded hollow and ghostly. And it came from a spot immediately behind the Honourables. Under no circumstances could I have uttered it; they knew that.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Wellborne.

"The—the wood's haunted!" said Coates, shivering.

And then a groan sounded—a groan which even made me feel somewhat queer. I was as mystified as the Honourables were, but I was intensely relieved. Uncanny laughs and weird groans did not hurt me.

But this groan came from the upper air—right up above the heads of Wellborne and Co. They gazed up with pale, drawn faces. But there was nothing to be seen except the branches of the trees.

To them it seemed that the very spot had become sinister in aspect. And Carstairs and Coates would have fled helter-skelter but for Wellborne's presence. He managed to keep his head, although he was badly scared.

"I believe it's this beast after all!" he said viciously. "It must be him; there's nobody else here! I expect the trees cause an echo. We'll gag the blighter, anyhow!"

"Good idea!" said Coates.

A scarf was produced, and a minute later I was very securely bound round the mouth. I knew, of course, that I was not responsible for the mysterious sounds. And I waited with some curiosity for the next development.

Wellborne and Co. waited, too.

But nothing further happened. Everything in the wood was perfectly still and silent. The air was motionless, and it was almost impossible that anybody could be prowling near by.

"There you are—there you are! It must have been this cad!" said Coates. "He's deeper than he bally well looks! But he can't play any more tricks now! Get that cane ready, Welly!"

The Hon. Aubrey swished the cane through the air.

"Strike, and you are doomed!" The voice was hollow and spectral, and the words were followed by an awful cackle.

"Oh, good heavens!"

"I—I'm going!"

Coates and Carstairs were absolutely shivering. But the Hon. Aubrey was made of slightly sterner stuff, and he did not budge. But perhaps he was reluctant to leave his victim behind—untouched.

"There's no hurry," he said hoarsely. "I mean to find out what all this means. If you chaps desert me——"

"The place is haunted, you fool!" panted the Hon. Cyril.

"Haunted, you fool!" came a ghostly echo.

"Oh, I'm off!"

"Off!" said the ghost.

"Did—did you hear that?" whispered Carstairs.

"Hear that?" came a faint voice from behind the trees.

Wellborne gave a harsh laugh.

"Just what I said!" he exclaimed. "It's only an echo! These trees are placed curiously—that's all. Don't be such scared babies!"

"Scared babies!" came the hollow voice. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"That—that wasn't an echo!" hissed Carstairs. "You didn't laugh, Wellborne! The rotten place is haunted!"

The three River House cads looked at one another with pale faces.

"I'm not going to let this beast off, anyhow!" shouted Wellbourne violently. "I'm goin' to give him my whack!"

And the Hon. Aubrey, regardless of the ghosts, swished the cane through the air and commenced slashing me with an almost mad violence. Coates and Carstairs stood looking on nervously.

And then a change came.

"Down with the River House!" exclaimed a boyish voice. "Rescue!"

"Go for the cads!"

"On 'em!"

"Rescue, Remove!"

"Don't let the rotters escape!"

"Hurrah!"

The shouts came from all sides, and Wellborne ceased his labours as though petrified.

"Remove chaps!" gasped Coates. "We're surrounded!"

The fear of being compelled to suffer drastic punishment was more than sufficient for the Hon. Aubrey. He dropped his cane, and the next second he and his companions were fleeing as though a thousand demons were after them.

"After 'em!" came a roar. "St. Frank's for ever!"

"Hurrah!"

Wellborne and Co. crashed through the hedge and fled down the road into the gloom. And I was left lying upon the grass, as helpless as ever. I fondly expected to see a dozen Remove fellows crowding out of the trees.

They had been responsible for the ghostly voices, but as these had failed to drive the River House cads off, other measures had been taken. But why had Wellborne and Co. been allowed to escape?

I heard a chuckle, and then footsteps came to hearing.

But I saw nobody as yet. And I had to wait a full minute before I knew the truth. And then a slim junior with a shock head bent over me with a smiling visage.

"I trust you are quite all right, my good D'Albert?" he inquired.

"Really, where are the others?" I inquired. "Thank you exceedingly for coming to my assistance, Blotwood!"

Nicodemus Trotwood beamed upon me.

And I knew the whole truth in a moment, although it was not wise for me to reveal that fact. Trotwood was a ventriloquist of astonishing ability, and I knew that my rescue was due solely to Nicodemus's astonishing powers.

"There are no others, my good D'Albert," said Trotwood smilingly. "I saw that you were in the hands of the Philistines, shall we say, and it was my duty to extricate you."

"You have really earned my gratitude," I said earnestly. "But I am still greatly puzzled. If you can please untie these ropes I shall be more obliged than ever."

And Nicodemus proceeded to free me.

"I happened to be taking a stroll," he explained, when I stood beside him. "By chance I saw those cads spring upon you. There was no time to fetch assistance, and I decided upon a little ruse."

"But the voices?" I asked. "There were many."

Nicodemus grinned.

"It was one voice only—mine," he said apologetically. "I have a facility for throwing my voice, my good friend—do you understand? And I played quite a neat trick upon those young ruffians. At all events, they were frightened away. It was impossible for me to fight them single-handed—a stratagem was necessary."

I took Trotwood's hand.

"Really, I hope that I shall be granted an opportunity of paying my debt in the near future," I said. "Thank you, Trotwood. You have undoubtedly saved me from a terrible ordeal. I am grateful."

"Rats!" said Nicodemus calmly. "If we don't hurry, we shall be late for locking up!"

CHAPTER VII.

EXCEEDINGLY HUMOROUS.

TOMMY WATSON grinned.

"Well, you seem to be having enough excitement, you bounder!" he exclaimed. "That was a near squeak from Wellborne and Co., though. Nicky was a real brick to go to your assistance like that."

"He thought he was doing a good turn to a raw new fellow!" I exclaimed. "I shall certainly have to bear it in mind, because he saved me from a rotten bullying. But I haven't told you about my other adventure yet."

And I recounted to my chums the incidents concerning the blue-grey car and my tussle with the driver.

"Dear fellow, that was a shockin'ly risky thing to do," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "You might have been killed, jumpin' into that car like that."

"I've taken greater risks than that in my time," I said calmly. "And I've proved my case about the car, anyhow. What I'm going to do as the next move, though, I don't know."

"Get that enamel back," suggested Watson.

"That won't be much good," I said. "I can't prove my innocence until I make that fellow talk. If we can only trick him into revealing the truth—in the presence of witnesses—we shall be all right."

Watson shook his head.

"You've got a stiff problem in front of you," he said. "It seems to me that you might start at the other end."

"The other end?"

"With Starke, I mean," said Tommy. "Couldn't you compel Starke to confess?"

"I think there's more chance of succeeding by going on as I'm going now," I said. "If Starke confessed he would stamp himself as a liar, and he would get himself kicked out of St. Frank's."

"I am afraid Starke is quite hopeless," said Sir Montie gravely.

"At the same time, I'll give Starke a look up," I said. "I forgot to tell you fellows, but I promised Starke to go to his study occasionally, to do any little odd jobs that he required."

"Odd jobs!" ejaculated Watson. "But—that'll be fagging!"

"In a way, yes!"

"And that's what all the fuss was about, to start with!" went on Tommy. "Starke hated you because you put down the fagging and the bullying. And now I'm jiggered if you're not encouraging the beast again!"

"You don't understand, old son," I said. "I like to have as many strings to my bow as possible. All I want is an excuse to go into Starke's study whenever I fancy. If I pretend to fag for him I shall have free access to his study, and I might pick up something of value at any minute. Stark is the chap mainly concerned in this plot against me, don't forget."

Sir Montie nodded wisely.

"Your idea is perfectly sound, dear old boy," he agreed. "In a matter of this sort you have to sacrifice your personal feelin's an' do the thing that is best. I'm afraid you won't discover much from Starke, though."

"One never knows," I said lightly.

And the wisdom of that remark was to be proved that very evening. Before trotting down to the common-room—to interview De Valerie about the cricket—I meekly entered the Sixth-Form passage and approached Starke's study.

Starke was back in the school. His sojourn in the sanatorium had not been a long one. His head was still plastered, but he was practically himself again. And I soon knew this for a fact.

I tapped gingerly at the study door and waited.

"Who's that?" came a sharp inquiry.

"Please, it's me, Starke," I said timidly.

The door was flung open, and Walter Starke gazed out at me.

"Oh, you!" he exclaimed. "I told you to come to my study, didn't I?"

"Yes, thank you, Starke," I said. "I—I've come."

"Well, don't stand there, come inside."

I entered the prefect's study and closed the door. The air was somewhat heavy with cigarette smoke, and Starke picked up a half-smoked cigarette from the fender. He puffed away as he regarded me.

"Don't forget that I'm a prefect," he said. "If you see me smoking, you mustn't take any notice; it's not exactly allowed, but I make my own rules—understand? If you sneak you'll be half skinned!"

"Really, Starke, I am not in the habit of sneaking," I said. "I was wondering if I could do anything for you, any little odd job? I shall be most pleased to give you my services——"

"For five bob a week—eh?" suggested Starke.

"Oh, no!" I replied. "I could not dream of taking money from you, Starke! What I do will be because I wish to do it. I shall come to your study because it is my desire to do so."

"You're about the queerest fag I've struck, then," said Starke. "If you're particularly anxious to make yourself useful, you can clear up the litter out of this fireplace."

"I'll make it look quite neat, Starke," I said eagerly.

"Mind that you do," said the prefect. "That's the worst of the summer months. There's no fire going, and papers like this collect instead of being burnt. Get busy, kid. I'll come back soon and see how you've done the job."

He strolled out of the study, and I was left alone, which was just what I required. Starke would have received several shocks rolled into one if he had known that he had been talking with the very fellow whose name he had besmirched.

I wanted to examine the study, for this was the first time I had been left in it alone. But before doing so I decided to clear up the fireplace. It would not do for Starke to come after five minutes and to find that I had been doing nothing at all.

So I went down upon my knees and commenced collecting all the little of paper. There were all sorts of oddments, including scraps of letters, postcards, and sporting papers.

They did not interest me in the slightest. If they were of any importance, Starke would not have left them lying about so openly. I noticed, however, that something had been burnt in the grate recently, some papers.

"Letters from racing bounders, I expect," I told myself. "Starke doesn't like to leave them lying about openly."

More by instinct than curiosity I bent over the fireplace and peered into the grate. A correspondence card was one of the burnt articles—one of those cards that are generally enclosed within an envelope—and it was quite intact. The stiff pasteboard was all crinkled and curled, but the black ash was fairly strong, by the look of it.

I don't suppose I should have taken any notice of the thing at all, but for one fact. I saw a few written letters as I glanced into the grate: "kett." They were the letters that I saw, and I did not realise the coincidence until a moment afterwards.

Then I suddenly became excited.

"My hat!" I exclaimed.

Very gingerly I took the burnt postcard out of the grate and held it so that the electric light fell full upon its surface.

The writing was still faintly visible, grey upon the black background. Some people imagine that a letter is destroyed once it is burnt, but this is not always the case. It is not actually destroyed until the ashes are split up into fragments.

The words were distinct, and I read them with growing excitement. For this is what I read:

"Dear Mr. Starke,—Sorry I couldn't see you this week. But if you can come to me next Tuesday evening, the 3rd, I shall be most pleased to have a chat about the matter.—Yours truly,

"JOE BECKETT."

I smashed the black ash to smithereens a moment later. And I continued clearing up the hearth in a state of great mental agitation. That card meant a tremendous lot, and I realised that Fate, in some way or other, must have sent me into Starke's study on this particular evening.

Just as I had finished the task Starke came in and declared that I had done well. He invited me to come again on the morrow, when he would have further jobs for me to do.

"It is very good of you, Starke," I said. "Thank you. I like coming to your study very much indeed."

And I departed, having convinced Starke that I was certainly several kinds of a duffer. I returned to Study C to find it empty, and I was rather glad of this, for I could think.

"Beckett!" I murmured to myself. "Beckett has written to Starke, and a meeting is arranged for next Tuesday evening! Great Scott! This is more important than I dreamed of."

For it really was important. Beckett was the chauffeur. According to my theory, it was Beckett who had knocked Starke down that night. And the two were in communication with one another!

Did Starke know that Beckett was the culprit? It seemed highly probable. I didn't know where the meeting was to take place, but I had the information stored in my memory.

What would be easier than to follow Starke on the Tuesday evening? I could follow him, see where he met Beckett, and, if luck was with me, I might be able to overhear the conversation.

I was wonderfully elated, and I decided that, upon the whole, my case was going well. Before long I should be able to expose the wily Starke in his true colours, and my name would be cleared of the black cloud which at present enshrouded it.

My luck, I told myself, was not altogether bad. I had lost the flake of enamel, but I had gained something of far greater importance. And when I left Study C I was quite cheerful in mind.

Before long the mystery would be cleared up, and it is not necessary for me to add that my name actually was cleared, and the whole wretched truth exposed. But I was destined to pass through many adventures before the affair came to an end.

In the meantime, I was concerned about the cricket, and I decided to approach De Valerie on the subject at once—before bedtime. A meeting of the cricket committee was taking place in the common-room, and when I arrived in that famous apartment, I found the juniors rather excited.

"I mean to have my rights!" Handforth was declaring. "Everybody knows what my bowling is like!"

"Quite so," said De Valerie. "It's like nothing else on earth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"When you send the leather down to the wicket you manage to hit one of the fieldsmen," went on De Valerie. "And sometimes you seem to imagine that the wicket is up in the sky!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"When it comes to jealousy of this kind I'm done!" he said bitterly. "The whole school knows that I can bowl as good as a member of the first eleven, and yet I'm held back. All right! You'll suffer for it in the big matches! Don't blame me when you lose!"

And Handforth retired with some heat.

"We only want men who are tried and tested," said De Valerie. "The Remove eleven was one of the finest junior cricket teams in England, under Nipper's guidance. I'm going to do my best to carry on, although we shall miss good old Nipper's batting. He was a mountain of strength to any eleven. The best man we had."

"Perhaps we shall be able to find a substitute?" suggested Watson.

"Pitt's coming on well—splendidly, in fact," said De Valerie. "His batting is miles better than it used to be."

"Thanks," said Pitt.

"That's not necessary," said De Valerie. "I'm not praising you up, Pitt. There's Grey, too. He can bowl like a demon this term, an' I'm relying on him for the Helmford match next week. But what we require mainly is a fellow who can go to the wicket and pile up the runs like clockwork—a fellow of the same stamp as Nipper."

I walked forward and adjusted my spectacles.

"Might I suggest——" I began.

"No, you might not!" interrupted De Valerie briskly. "You don't appear in this act, D'Albert. We're talking cricket, not marbles!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I was not particularly offended. They had all been paying me some excellent compliments, and they were not to be blamed for regarding me, in my present guise, as a hopeless simpleton.

"But, really, I wanted to ask——" I began again.

"Go away, there's a good fellow," said Owen major. "We can't talk about cricket when silly asses keep interrupting Now look here, De Valerie, you must admit that I'm pretty good at bowling, and I ought to be given a chance."

"You've had several chances," said De Valerie. "You can bowl well, Owen—regularly and steady—but you're not brilliant. And that's what we want—somebody who simply sparkles."

"You don't want anything of the sort," snapped Handforth. "You refused me just now, anyhow!"

"Poor old Handy!" grinned Watson.

"May I say that I should very much like to have a hand in this game of cricket!" I exclaimed timidly. "I have no wish to push myself forward, but I really believe that I could handle a bat with agility."

De Valerie grinned.

"You?" he exclaimed. "Oh, don't be funny!"

"But really, I am not funny."

"You're a scream," said De Valerie. "If I put you into the field, D'Albert, the whole school would cackle."

"Rather!"

"Go away and smother yourself, you new kid!"

"Go and play marbles!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I was becoming somewhat exasperated.

"But is it not fair that I should be given a trial at the nets?" I asked. "Surely I have a right to demand that?"

"Demand—eh?" said De Valerie sharply. "That's rich! You can't demand anything, my son. And we're so busy at the nets at present with fellows who can play, that we've no room for fellows that can't. You're not built for cricket, D'Albert."

"He's a hopeless ass!"

"Why doesn't somebody keep him quiet?"

"Dry up, D'Albert!"

I had no intention of drying up, and I looked round at the crowd with a show of spirit. It was rather rough not to be given a hearing of any sort. And I didn't like it.

"I shall not dry up until I receive a satisfactory answer," I said firmly. "As a member of the Remove, I think I have some right to suggest that my prowess should be put to the test."

De Valerie sighed.

"My dear imbecile, why should we waste time?" he asked patiently. "If I thought there was anything in you, I'd give you a chance. But I can't be bothered with fatheads——"

"But I'm not a fathead, really!" I said quickly.

"No, give the chap a chance!" put in Watson. "I think you ought to give him a trial at the nets to-morrow, De Valerie."

"Why, you silly ass!" snapped the skipper. "Do you think this new kid can play cricket? Look at him! He's more cut out for—for croquet! Cricket's too complicated for his mighty brain!"

I felt like punching De Valerie's nose. But he meant well enough, and did not really intend to insult me. He was doing his utmost to get the Remove eleven into perfect trim, and it exasperated him to be bothered with somebody who was obviously a hopeless case.

That's how De Valerie looked at it. I thought I should be able to force a promise from him, and I believe I should have succeeded in spite of his convictions concerning me.

But the other juniors wouldn't have it.

"Are you going to keep quiet, D'Albert, or would you prefer to leave the common-room on your neck?" demanded Owen major warmly. "We can't talk of a giddy thing with this ass here!"

"Smother him!"

"I refuse to be smothered!" I shouted. "Cricket is a good game, and I want a chance. That is only fair. I will attend at the nets to-morrow, and will do my best with a bat."

"If you attend at the nets to-morrow you'll be kicked off the field!" shouted Armstrong. "We can't waste time on lunatics!"

"Of course not!"

"Besides, he's only a new kid, and new kids never even expect to play cricket or footer until their second term," said Owen major. "It's like this idiot's sauce to demand a trial. Demand, mind you!"

"Oh, he doesn't know any better," said De Valerie. "Leave him alone. You can't play cricket, D'Albert, and it's no good thinking you can. Dry up, there's a good chap!"

"That is really rather splendid," I said. "You declare that I cannot play cricket, and yet you have never seen me on the field. You will not even give me a trial. Surely that is not fair play?"

"You don't seem to understand that a trial would be worse than useless. I know a cricketer when I see one, and you couldn't play cricket if you learned for twenty years. You're not built for it, old man. Do go away!"

"I refuse to go away, until——"

"Shut up!" howled a dozen voices.

"I insist——"

"Clear off!"

"I have a perfect right to——"

"Kill the idiot!"

"Chuck him outside!"

I was hustled across the common-room by a crowd of indignant juniors. Tregellis-West and Watson attempted to come to my aid, but they could not reach me. And I was hurled through the doorway out into the corridor. The door slammed, and I found myself alone.

"Oh, the idiots, the rotters!" I snapped furiously.

I was not even to be allowed a hearing. De Valerie himself, sensible enough in most matters, was so firmly convinced of my uselessness that he would not even consent to a trial at the nets.

It was exasperating in the extreme, because I could play cricket as well as any fellow in the Remove, and a great deal better than

most. For me to be treated in this manner was a novel experience, and I didn't like it. I didn't like it in the slightest degree.

I opened the door of the common-room.

"I just want to say——" I began.

Whizz.

Half a dozen articles came shooting across at me. And I only just dodged in time.

"Scat!" roared a dozen voices.

I could see that it was quite hopeless, and I was filled with a grim determination to show these sceptical asses that I wasn't such a duffer as I looked. Montie and Tommy joined me just before supper-time, and they, too, were highly indignant.

"We've been arguing with De Valerie," said Watson warmly. "But the silly ass won't listen to us. He says that you're a new kid, an' that you can't be expected to know anything about cricket."

I smiled rather bitterly.

"This is rather more than I bargained for," I said, "but you needn't get into a stew, Tommy. If De Valerie won't give me a look in, I'll take it myself. I mean to play cricket, anyhow."

Sir Montie was gravely troubled.

"It is easy enough to say that, dear old boy," he said. "But supposin' they won't let you play? You'll be pitched off the field, begad! The fellows regard it as pure nerve for you to shove yourself forward—they don't realise the importance of the matter—they don't, really!"

"Perhaps they're not to be blamed," I said grimly. "I do look a hopeless jackass in this get-up. But that'll make the surprise all the greater when it does come, and I can give you my word that I'm going to surprise St. Frank's before very long!"

"But how?" asked Watson.

"I don't know how—I'm going to do it, that's all!" I exclaimed with determination. "Don't try to argue with De Valerie any more, my sons, he might think it queer. You leave this matter in the hands of your uncle!"

"Begad, that's all we can do, dear old fellow," said Tregellis-West, shaking his head somewhat sadly.

But if my chums were uncertain, I was not.

If a chance didn't come along within a day or two, I would make one. But as it happened, my chance was to arrive in the most unexpected manner, and I was certainly destined to provide a surprise for St. Frank's!

THE END.

GRIPPING NEW SERIAL.

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

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

By ALFRED ARMITAGE.

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

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

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

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

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

(Now read on.)

DICK'S ESCAPE.

IN the midst of the palaver, however, Tib Mohammed's face brightened, and, raising his arm, he pointed to the forest to the westward. Having held further talk with his men, and apparently decided on some plan of action, he spoke to Dick with a gleam of malice in his eyes.

"Your friends close by, mile or so," he said. "They soon all be dead, though. I have them killed to-morrow."

"I guess you won't," the lad replied. "There are a lot of them."

"Soon they all be dead," Tib Mohammed repeated, with a sinister grin.

Dick wasn't worried, believing the words to be an empty boast. The discussion was at an end now, and at a sign from the chief the lad stretched himself on the ground. He meant to feign to be asleep, and stay awake. But he was so tired that drowsiness stole upon him, and he could not fight it off.

He fell into a heavy slumber, and it must have lasted for several hours, for when he opened his eyes, roused by some noise, there was a glimmer of grey light on the horizon.

He saw Tib Mohammed and three of the slavers still squatted on the opposite side of the smouldering fire, and had a glimpse of the other three men gliding into the jungle to the north.

As they vanished a trumpet-like sound floated from the west, telling that the elephants had spent the night in the neighbourhood. Puzzled by what he had observed, Dick shut his eyes again, and lay perfectly still.

"That's mighty queer," he reflected. "The safari is to the south, so why have those fellows gone north? It can't be because they are afraid of being attacked, else they would all trek in that direction."

What could it mean? Was Tib Mohammed's stronghold at a comparatively short distance, and had the three Arabs been sent there to fetch a large force of men? Why three? But one might have been killed by wild beasts, so two others had been sent with him.

"I guess that's the explanation," the lad said to himself. "They'll come back with a big enough crowd to wipe out Alan Carne and his party."

He judged that he was right, and now, as the thought of the peril that threatened the safari, he resolved that he would attempt to escape. It was not likely that he would get a better chance if he waited.

For a few seconds he furtively watched Tib Mohammed and his companions, who were to the north of the fire; and then, leaping to his feet, he whipped round and dashed across the camp.

Savage shouts rang in his ears, and, as he dived into the dark, sheltering cover to the south, a couple of shots were fired at him,

one bullet whistling past his head and the other grazing his arm.

The worst was over now, he felt. The shouting had ceased, and he could hear no rapid footsteps behind him. He ran for two or three hundred yards, and stopped to listen. All was quiet. Was his escape a matter of indifference to the Arabs, or were they in stealthy, noiseless pursuit of him? No; if they were coming their approach would be audible in the dry, parched undergrowth.

"That's rather queer," Dick murmured. "It looks as if they weren't bothering their heads about me."

But he dared not take any chances. The privations of the last couple of days had severely taxed his strength, and only by desperate efforts would he be able to hold his own in a race with his enemies.

He hastened on in the darkness, traversing the wild gorge as fast as he could, while venomous snakes hissed at him as his crashing tread startled them from his course, and wild beasts, slinking to their lairs at the end of the night, howled up in the forest beyond the granite kopjes.

And still there was the strange silence in the direction of Tib Mohammed's camp.

. . . . . .

There had been no sleep for any of the safari that night. Through the long hours of darkness they had remained awake and alert, lying with their weapons by their sides behind the parapet of loose stones that stretched roughly in a half-circle between the cliffs and the kopjes. And the chill, grey dawn found them still at their posts, cramped and hungry and drowsy.

As the light of day flushed brighter, birds of brilliant plumage soared in the foliage, and a troop of apes, seeking for their breakfast, stopped on the crest of the kopjes to chatter angrily at the occupants of the camp. Alan got to his feet, and exercised his stiff limbs. The Hottentot rose, too, and Rembo sat up and put a hand to his ear.

"Bhagwan, if the Arabs are coming it will be soon," he said.

Alan shook his head cheerfully.

"I'm not so much worried now," he replied. "I believe we'll be able to dodge Tib Mohammed's slavers by trekking to the west. Either there were so few of them in the neighbourhood that they were afraid of us, or else that rascal who spied on us last night was many miles from the rest of the band. Otherwise they would have made an attack just before the dawn, hoping to take us by surprise."

"It may be so," admitted the headman. "Your talk is good. Yet I think that it will not be long until——"

Jan raised his arm in a warning gesture.

"Listen, baas!" he whispered. "What was that? I heard something!"

A twig snapped. Bushes were swaying and rustling to the north. Were the Arabs approaching?

"Be ready, men," bade Alan. "If we are attacked you must be as brave as when you fought the Bajangas."

He and the Hottentot dropped flat again and seized their rifles, as did the others. And as they lay there in tense suspense, with the muzzles of their weapons at the crevices of the parapet, the thickets at the edge of the jungle were thrust apart, and out into the open staggered Dick Selby, panting for breath, and so tired that he could scarcely stand. His face was haggard, and bleeding from the scratches of prickly thorns.

"It is the Bhagwan!" exclaimed Rembo. "My own Bhagwan!"

Dick had not known that he was so near to the safari. He stared joyously for an instant, and reeled forward; and as he scrambled over the parapet Alan sprang to his feet and gripped his hand.

"Selby!" he cried. "By Jove, how glad I am!"

"I guess I'm mighty glad to see you, Carne!" panted the young American. "I couldn't have gone another yard! I was ready to drop! By George, the time I've had!"

Their hands clasped, the two lads gazed at each other in silence for a few seconds, their feelings two deep for words, while Jan danced with glee, and the Wakambas and Swahilis cheered loudly. Tottering to the heap of luggage, Dick opened a medicine-case, and took from it a flask of brandy, which he held to his lips. The fiery spirit trickled down his throat, putting new life into him. His dull eyes brightened, and a tinge of colour flushed into his pale cheeks.

"The time I've had, Carne!" he repeated. "Talk about adventures!"

"You must have had the worst kind of a time, without food or a weapon," said Alan. "How far did the flood carry you?"

"All the way to the Bana River. And there I stumbled on a bunch of Arab slavers, and was caught by them."

"Where are they, Selby? Anywhere near?"

"A couple of miles behind me, plotting mischief. Oh, it's too long a yarn to spin now. It'll have to wait. But I'll tell you one thing. I've seen that white girl."

"You—you have?" Alan exclaimed in amazement. "The daughter of the mysterious Englishman?"

"Yes, I've seen her and talked to her," Dick declared.

"And her name, Selby? I mean her surname? Did you learn what it was?"

"Yes, her full name is Lorna Ferguson."

"You are sure of that? You can't be mistaken?"

"No, Carne: I had it from her own lips."

Alan shook his head, and a shadow of disappointment crept into his eyes.

"Was the girl a prisoner of the Arabs, too?" he asked.

"She was; but she isn't now," Dick replied, with a curious glance at his friend. "She was rescued by her father and a lot of Somalis, and they are taking her back to the hidden valley, up the Bana River. That was the night before last. Tib Mohammed and

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

his slavers got the worst of the fight. They had to take to flight, and all of yesterday they marched to the south, bringing me with them. They were searching for the safari, and they know that you're here. A scout discovered that. There are only seven of them, though, and they didn't dare attack you with such a small force. So they sent three of their number to the Arab stronghold to fetch help, and——"

The lad paused as his attention was drawn to Rembo, who was gazing to the north in obvious fright and agitation.

"Bhagwan, there is a big noise yonder!" he cried. "Do you hear?"

THE CHARGE OF THE ELEPHANTS.

"I CAN hear only the wind," said Alan, shaking his head. "Nothing else, Rembo."

"There is a big noise yonder," the headman repeated. "It is not the wind, Bhagwan."

He was right. He had keener ears than the rest. All listened intently for a short interval, and then every one of them heard what had startled Rembo. It would have been audible to them sooner but for the sullen roar of the stream as it surged amongst outcropping boulders and sandbars.

The lads looked at each other anxiously. From the north, somewhere in the rock-walled valley and at no great distance, floated faint shouting and the spluttering of guns, and crashing, trumpeting sounds.

The firing ceased, and in the space of a few seconds the shrill trumpeting and the heavy, muffled crashes swelled rapidly louder and nearer, until the very earth seemed to quake.

And now, as Dick remembered the mysterious events of the night, the alarming truth flashed suddenly to his mind.

"I can tell you what it means!" he declared. "What a fiendish trick! I know why those three Arabs slipped off! They weren't going to fetch help, as I supposed! There was a whole herd of elephants close to Tib Mohammed's camp, and he and his men have rounded them up and headed them into the gorge, and driven them this way!"

"A herd of maddened elephants!" exclaimed Alan. "And coming this way! What are we to do?"

"We've got to find shelter if we can, Carne, and mighty quick!"

"But the luggage, Selby?"

"Never mind about that! We've no time to spare."

The panic-stricken elephants had been rushing on at tremendous speed, ploughing a way through timber and scrub, and the noise of their approach was now like the sound of forest trees toppling and creaking to the force of a hurricane.

"We'll be killed!" wailed the headman, his teeth chattering. "Oh, Bhagwan, we'll all be killed!"

"Don't stand there!" Dick shouted at him. "Scoot! Run for your life!"

The Hottentot had grasped Alan by the arm, and was tugging at him as hard as he could.

"Come, baas!" he urged. "Be quick! Death is very near! Come out of the way of the big animals!"

But where was refuge to be sought for in this narrow ravine shut in by ramparts of granite? The herd was thundering through it from the north, and it would have been folly to flee in front of them.

The panic that had seized upon Rembo had spread to the rest of the natives. Some of them, losing their heads, ran to and fro in terror and bewilderment, like rats seeking an outlet from a trap.

One mounted, with the agility of a cat, a sapling, that bent with his weight, and others darted to the sheer cliff on the river side of the valley and crouched at the base of it.

The rocks on the other side, split by ragged fissures that were only several inches in width, were scarcely less sheer than the opposite rampart. But in the midst of the confusion Jan hastened to the nearest of them and nimbly scaled the rough surface of it; and, having gained the flat top in a trice, he tore off his waistcloth and lowered it, and called to the two lads:

"Come, baas, come! You and the other baas!"

Alan and Dick did not hesitate. They had been trying in vain to allay the panic, and now, shouting again to the porters to take shelter, they sped over to the rock.

The dangling garment was within their reach. Alan clutched it, and, by digging his toes in the crannies of the rock, while the Hottentot hauled on him from above, he easily reached the lofty perch. The waistcloth was then lowered to Dick, and he, too, climbed quickly up to his companions. He nestled close to them on the cramped space, panting for breath.

"By George, just in time!" he gasped. "We're all right here! But look at those fool niggers jumping about!"

"They've gone daft," said Alan. "If they had the sense to do what we've done——"

"They are coming!" Jan broke in. "Here they are, baas!"

As he spoke, the foremost of the elephants burst from the fringe of the jungle, and behind it came the rest of the herd in swift succession, bunched closely together, no less than twenty of them in all.

It was a horrid, blood-curdling sight that the lads and the Hottentot witnessed from their refuge, and a brief one. They gazed at it spellbound, seeing the camp invaded in the twinkling of an eye, and the yelling natives scattering right and left as the peril surged upon them.

The monstrous brutes were in full flight, mad with terror. They choked the gorge from side to side, and as they swept across

(Continued overleaf.)

the open glade, with shrill trumpeting, and with swaying trunks and uplifted tusks, some of the fleeing porters went down before them. Tent and parapet vanished, and boxes and cases were shivered to splinters. The sapling melted into the heaving, jostling mass, and there was a shriek of anguish from the man who was clinging to it. A sound of crunching bones was heard above the thunderous padding.

"Great Scott, what a sight!" Dick said hoarsely. "I'll never forget this, Carne!"

It was over in a very few seconds. The frenzied herd disappeared as suddenly as they had come, rushing on to the south in their wild flight, levelling the jungle as they went, and leaving behind them a wake of death and ruin.

The crashing noise gradually ebbed, and it was fading in the distance when Jan and the lads descended from the crest of the rock. And as they stood in the camp, surveying the destruction that had been wrought by the elephants, they were joined by the trembling, pallid survivors of the safari, who had saved their lives by squeezing into the fringe of thickets at the base of the cliff.

"It looks as if a lot of tanks had gone by here," Alan declared bitterly.

"Yes, I guess those brutes have pretty well cleaned us out," Dick assented.

It was not so bad as that, however. A large part of the luggage had escaped destruction, having been protected by the strewn and scattered stones from the parapet.

But a number of the cases had been crushed to fragments, and some of the guns had been rendered useless, their stocks and barrels wrenched asunder.

And amidst the debris, beaten into the soft earth, lay the mangled, trampled bodies of no less than seven of the Wakambas and Swahilis. Twelve had been left alive, including Rembo.

"I'll have a reckoning with Tib Mohammed one of these days," Dick vowed savagely, "if ever I get the chance! It was his brain that hatched the scheme for wiping us out! The cowardly ruffian! He was afraid to attack us!"

"He'll be having a reckoning with us, if we stay here," Alan replied. "The Arab must be pushing on to see what damage the elephants have done to us."

"I dare say they are. We'll make tracks at once. Which direction? Not to the south—eh?"

"Not for me, Selby. I'm for the hidden valley."

"And so am I, Carne. That white girl needs us. We've got to save her from a black-hearted villain by showing him up to her father. I'll tell you about it later, while we are on trek. And now, let us be off! We'll travel westward for a day or so, and then strike north towards the Bana River."

(To be continued.)

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