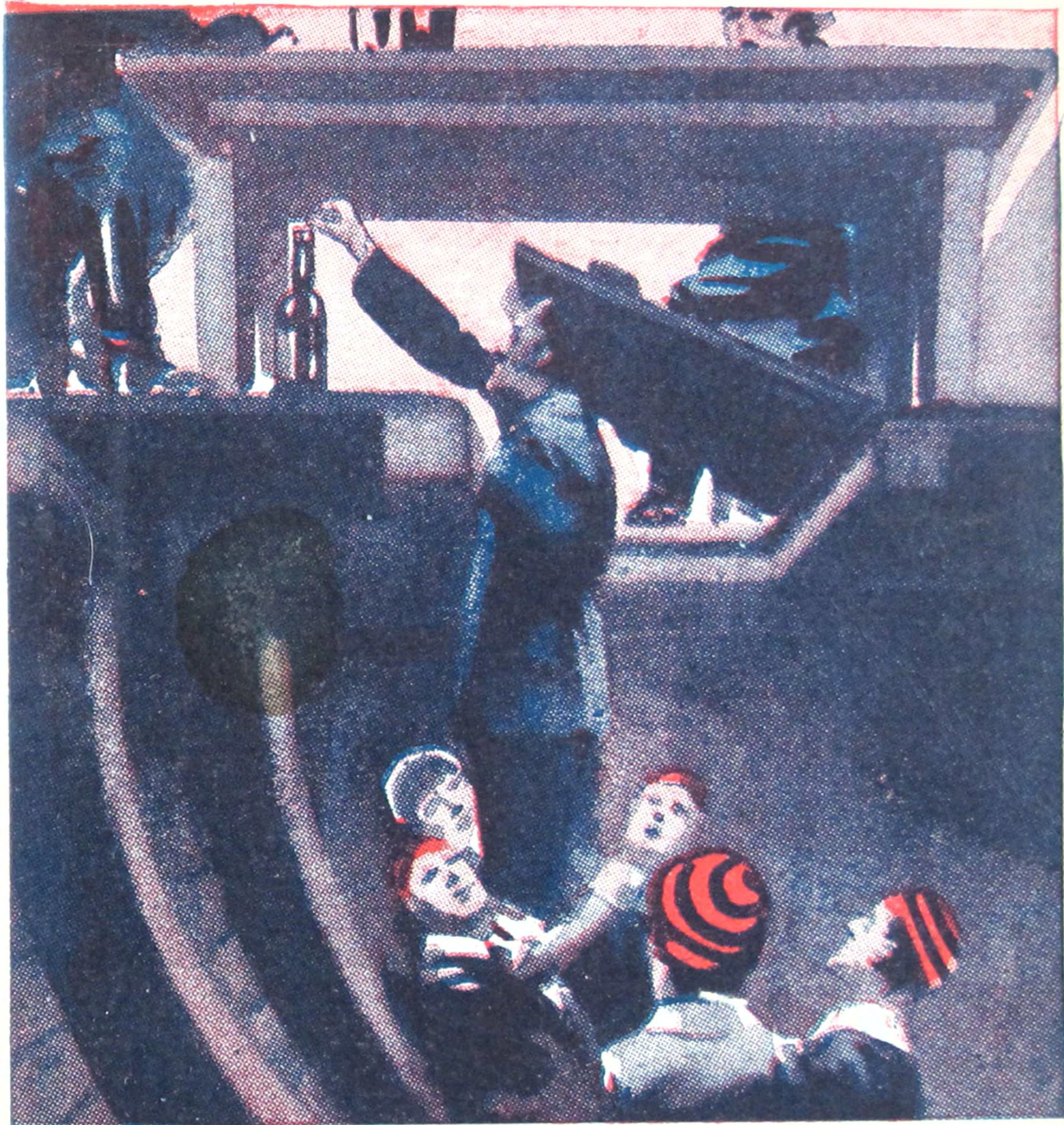


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LOST AT SEA;

Or, PLOTTERS OUTWITTED!

An Exciting Story of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S.
Prepared for Publication by the Author of "The Secret Menace,"
"The Bo'sun's' Predicament," etc.

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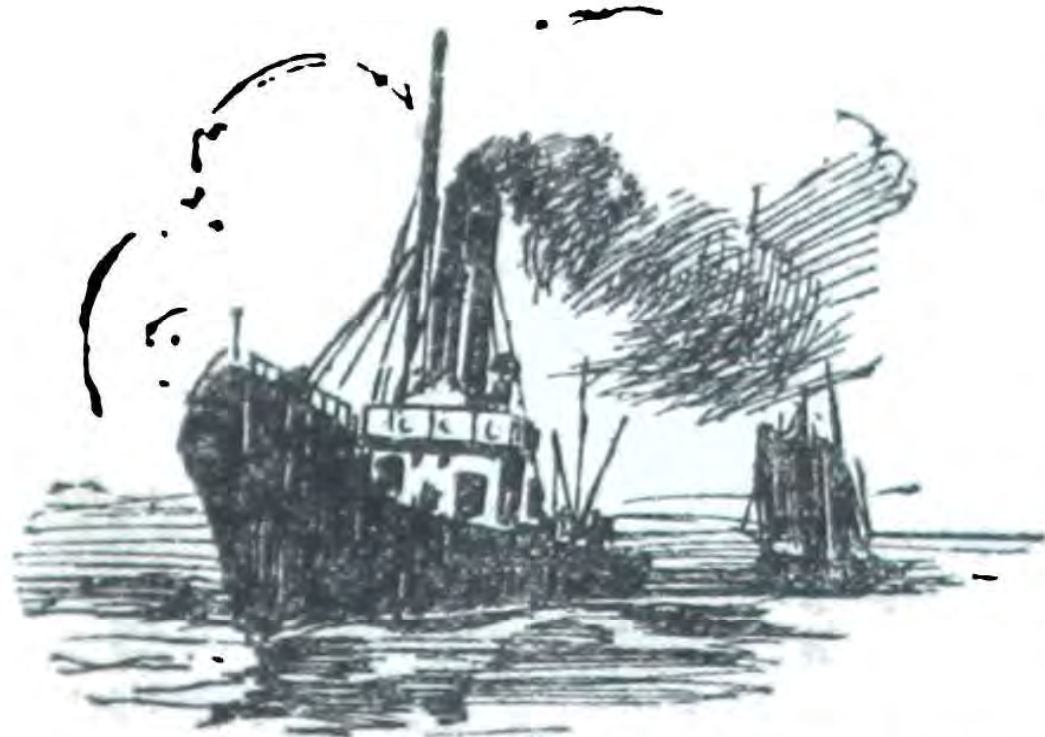
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Another Exciting Story of **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE**. Prepared for Publication by the Author of "**The Secret Menace**," "**The Bo'sun's' Predicament**," etc., etc.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the school in the characters of master and pupil, Nelson Lee and Nipper, nevertheless, find many opportunities to utilise their unique detective ability in various mysterious and adventurous cases.

CHAPTER I.

A DIFFICULT POSITION—THE ARRIVAL OF CAPTAIN BURTON—THE PLOT.

DR. MALCOLM STAFFORD, the reverend Head of St. Frank's, sat back in his chair with an expression of deep concern upon his kindly features, and with his fingertips pressed together.

"And can nothing be done, Mr Lee?" he asked anxiously.

"The question requires deep consideration, Dr. Stafford," said Nelson Lee, thoughtfully fingering an unlighted cigarette. "It is only a few hours since the boy left the school. We shall probably be able to get him back before long. It will be a day or two before the schooner reaches the open Atlantic, and it is quite possible that she will call at Falmouth."

"Cannot you make sure of that possibility?"

"As you know, I have already rung up several people, and I hope to obtain definite information before another hour has passed," replied Nelson Lee. "The situation is not so very acute, doctor. It will be quite possible to have the schooner intercepted before she leaves home waters—if such a course is considered advisable. Our great difficulty lies in the fact that Burton was not

actually kidnapped. He left the school of his own free will, and boarded the schooner willingly, and at his own request."

The Head nodded.

"The position is, as you say, very difficult, Mr. Lee," he agreed.

"Under all the circumstances, I think we shall be wise to await the arrival of Captain Burton before taking any further action," said the schoolmaster-detective. "He will be here in less than half an hour, according to his telegram," added Lee, glancing at the clock.

He lit his cigarette, and smoked for some minutes in silence.

It was evening, and the whole of St. Frank's was in a subdued buzz of excitement. There had been some strange happenings at the old school that day. The boys did not know all the particulars, but they knew quite a lot.

The occupants of Study C, in the Remove passage, were aware of all the circumstances, of course. Nipper and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were privileged persons. It was only a short while since they had returned from Caistowe Bay, with Nelson Lee.

In brief, all the trouble concerned Tom Burton, of the Remove—the new boy who was known as "The Bo'sun."

Dire disgrace had fallen upon him; not because of his own actions, but owing to the malicious activities of Cecil de Valerie and Ralph Leslie Fullwood, also of the Remove.

These two precious "Nuts" had played an ill-natured joke upon the Bo'sun by introducing two blackguardly sailors to the school. Captain Jelks and Bill Larson had claimed Burton as a former friend. Seeing that they were drunken scoundrels, this had been a deliberate insult. Burton, justly incensed, had thrashed Fullwood and De Valerie until the cads could scarcely stand.

This had led to a mean plot. Bent on vengeance, Fullwood and De Valerie had told their woes to Captain Jelks. This disgrace to the British Mercantile Marine had at once suggested a cunning plot—professing to act solely in the interests of the Removites. In strict truth, Captain Jelks had an axe of his own to grind. But nobody knew of this.

The Bo'sun had been drugged, and swamped with whisky. Found in this condition, it had been naturally assumed by the Head that he was really disgustingly intoxicated. The poor lad had been sent to the punishment-room, booked for a flogging and expulsion on the morrow.

And then De Valerie had tricked the Bo'sun into running away from school; and the unfortunate boy had been forced to believe that he really had partaken of the whisky. In his fuddled state, he could think nothing else.

He had hurried to the village, where Jelks was awaiting him, and had requested the skipper to take him aboard the latter's schooner. Nelson Lee and Nipper and Co., hot on the track, had arrived at Caistowe Bay too late to prevent the Bo'sun's departure. And Nelson Lee had only been back a short while.

That was the position. It was known that De Valerie had taken part in the plot, but the young scamp had not been questioned as yet. Owing to Nipper's activities, it had also been proved that Tom Burton had been made the victim of a plot to get him away from St. Frank's.

"What do you think is the actual truth, Mr. Lee?" asked Dr. Stafford, after a while.

"I am afraid I cannot form any settled opinion," replied the detective.

"There has been trickery, as we know, and I am fairly certain that Fullwood and De Valerie are the culprits. They had their knife into poor Burton, and schemed to get rid of him. They learned, probably, that Captain Jelks was in need of a boy, and so they tricked Burton into going to sea. I fancy, however, that Captain Jelks himself suggested the actual plot. Being a rough man of the sea, the whole affair seems quite a trifle to him—a good joke. He may have done it for the mere sport of it. Or, possibly, Fullwood and De Valerie bribed him. Our chief difficulty is, as I said a moment ago, the fact that Burton went on board the schooner willingly, and of his own accord."

The Head rose to his feet restlessly.

"I am more pained than I can say, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "That poor boy! I feel that I have been terribly unjust. It was solely owing to my hastiness that these events took place. I condemned him unheard—I believed the worst of him before making inquiries. And, believing that expulsion was inevitable, he ran away to sea. But, really, I could not know that a drug had been used. The whole thing is simply scandalous! Cannot this villainous captain be called to book for drugging the boy in that fashion?"

"Certainly—if we had the necessary proof," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "A few words, overheard by Nipper, are sufficient to convince us, Dr. Stafford. But would the police take action? I think not. No, we must pursue this matter ourselves. And, if you will allow me to advise you, I should not interfere with Fullwood and De Valerie just now. Questioning them would serve no good purpose, for they would certainly lie. We can deal with them afterwards, when we hear Burton's own story."

The Head nodded.

"You are quite right, Mr. Lee," he agreed. "But, upon my soul, those wretched boys shall pay dearly for their wicked actions. I should never have believed it possible. They shall certainly be expelled from the school without compunction. But, as you say, it will be better to let the matter rest for the moment."

Nelson Lee was rather worried. He was anxious to get ahead with his work, and waited impatiently for Captain Burton's arrival. The Bo'sun's father

had been wired to so that he could come and take the boy away. Now, of course, the situation had altered.

The Headmaster was well aware of the fact that "Mr. Alvington," the Housemaster of the Ancient House, was Nelson Lee; and, in the privacy of his own study, he addressed the detective by his own name. In Captain Burton's presence, of course, Nelson Lee would have to be "Mr. Alvington."

The Captain arrived very shortly afterwards. He proved to be a big, bluff old gentleman with a full beard. His face was weather beaten and tanned to the colour of mahogany. At a glance, however, it could be seen that he was a gentleman. He was dressed in a warm tweed suit and a fur-lined coat.

"What does this mean, Dr. Stafford?" he asked, in a deep, rumbling voice, as he shook hands with the Head, and then with Nelson Lee. "What can be the explanation of this extraordinary telegram?"

He plunked down a crumpled pink form upon the Head's desk.

"You requested me to come here to fetch my boy away from the school," he went on angrily, before the Head could speak. "Why? I'll swear that Tom has been up to no mischief. He is one of the finest fellows——"

"My dear sir—my dear sir!" gasped the Head. "Will you please calm yourself? There has been a grave misunderstanding, and I have some painful news for you."

Captain Thomas Joseph Burton took a quick breath.

"Some painful news?" he repeated. "Please explain!"

Dr. Stafford looked rather awed. He had been accustomed to quelling boys at a glance. And here he was, in his own study, quailing before the angry glance of the huge man who stood over him in a most towering fashion.

"Please—please take a seat, sir," said the Head nervously.

Captain Burton remained standing.

"What has happened to Tom?" he asked angrily.

Nelson Lee thought that he would be justified in intervening. He stepped up to the enraged captain, and looked him squarely in the eye.

"You will pardon me, Captain Burton, but this matter is really serious," he

said quietly. "You will make things very much easier for us if you will calm yourself. Your son has been made the victim of a plot, and we want to set matters right as early as possible. Please take a seat."

The old mariner was completely calmed by Nelson Lee's gravely-spoken words. He sat down at once, and Dr. Stafford looked relieved. He hated a scene at any time, and a scene with a man like Captain Burton would have been appalling.

"The fact is, Captain Burton," began the Head, "I had reason to believe that your son partook of intoxicating liquor to such an extent that he became hopelessly inebriated——"

The captain jumped out of his chair with a force which shook the whole room. Dr. Stafford had certainly commenced in a most unfortunate manner.

"My 'Tom—drunk!'" roared Captain Burton, in a voice that sounded like rumbling thunder. "How dare you? By the Lord Harry! How dare you? You will repeat that statement at your peril——"

"Good—good gracious!" gasped the Head, allowing his glasses to fall off in his agitation. "Please—please be calm, captain——"

"Calm!" thundered the outraged father. "How do you expect me to be calm when you make such monstrous——"

"Your—your son was not really drunk!" the Head put in hastily. "De—dear me! I am becoming quite flustered! You would not give me time to finish my sentence, Captain Burton! The lad was drugged——"

"Drugged!" roared the visitor. "Are you mad, sir?"

The Head made a gesture of hopelessness.

"Will you—will you please explain, Mr.—Mr. Alvington?" he asked weakly. "I fear that I am not quite capable of dealing with this matter in the face of Captain Burton's anger."

Nelson Lee nodded.

And then, in calm, smooth sentences, he told Captain Burton all about it, and described the various events in full detail. The skipper listened attentively, and grew calmer as Nelson Lee proceeded.

But, at the mention of Jeiks' name he bounced round in his chair.

"Who did you say, sir?" he asked fiercely.

"The man's name is Captain Jelks, and his schooner is the Southern Cross, I believe," replied Nelson Lee.

Captain Burton positively quivered with rage.

"That—that infernal rogue!" he thundered "By the Lord Harry! I—I—"

"You evidently know the man?" suggested Lee.

"Know him—know him!" roared the skipper. "He's the blackest scoundrel on the high seas! He's the dirtiest hound— But please go on with your story, Mr. Alvington. I will explain later on."

"Mr Alvington" proceeded, and Captain Burton listened with pursed lips and glaring eyes. He rose after a while, and paced up and down the Head's study. And when the story was told, he looked from Lee to Dr. Stafford.

"I can see that I owe you an apology, sir," he exclaimed, fixing his gaze upon the Head. "My son has met with misfortune, but you were not to blame in the least. It is terrible—terrible! Poor Tom! The lad has been shamefully treated. I can understand perfectly. Those two boys are not so much to blame—although they'll have to suffer for their part of the dastardly work, confound 'em! We must get to work, gentlemen; we must have this scoundrelly Jelks punished!"

He paced up and down for a few moments, and then went on talking before his companions could make any comment.

"You think that my boy was tricked like this just out of sheer spite, don't you?" he asked. "You think that these schoolfellows of his practically arranged the matter? They didn't—I'll swear they didn't! It was Jelks who schemed to get hold of Tom—Jelks, the drunken blackguard—the thieving rascal!"

Captain Burton fumed and glared.

"Jelks was the prime mover in this plot!" he continued, with scarcely a breath. "He and that good-for-nothing mate of his. I can see it all! I can throw a good deal of light upon this pretty piece of scoundrelism. The boys scarcely did a thing, and a severe wallop ought to be sufficient for 'em. They were duped by this brute, Jelks. Con-

found him! I'd like to break every bone in his unclean body!"

Nelson Lee tapped the table gently.

"You promised to explain, Captain Burton," he reminded the visitor.

The skipper came to a halt.

"Of course I did—of course I did!" he exclaimed. "I was thinking that you knew all about it. The fact is, I'm a fool when I'm excited—and, by thunder, I'm excited now! I'm mad, gentlemen—downright enraged."

He sat down heavily, and lit a cigar which Nelson Lee had offered him a few minutes since.

"This'll cool me down," he said, breathing hard. "It's not often I smoke, but when I do it generally calms me. Now you want to know about Jelks, don't you? I'm not going to tell you everything, and you'll understand why. But I give you just a few details. I've met the man before—and he has reason to remember that meeting, seeing that he lay in the San Francisco hospital for six weeks afterwards!"

"Good gracious!" murmured the Head, rather startled.

"That's shocked you, eh?" went on Captain Burton. "I broke the scoundrel's leg, gentlemen—snapped it like a carrot. By thunder, he deserved it, too!"

"You—you surprise me," said the Head, looking awed. "I—I trust, Captain Burton, that you are not always so violent."

The skipper laughed.

"I'm not going to start breaking legs at St. Frank's, my dear sir," he said. "This man Jelks is a murderous brute. I'll tell you about it. I was in 'Frisco after a long voyage among the Pacific islands. You won't ask for details when I tell you that I got to know a certain little isle on which there is, I believe, a very considerable treasure. According to the information I obtained, a Spanish galleon went to the bottom in the lagoon of this island, and she's there now, to the best of my knowledge, loaded with gold."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Head. "How extremely interesting."

"This secret was known to me only—as I thought," went on the skipper. "I carried a plan of the island about with me, and had it in my pocket when I first met Captain Jelks. He, in some way or other, got to know of this

treasure, and the map. One dark night, whilst walking to the 'Frisco Docks, Jelks and Larson sprang upon me and made an attempt to knife me. I was within an ace of dying, gentlemen, and received a wound which has left me with a scar for life. But Jelks didn't succeed! I was just a little too quick for him. As he came at me I defended myself, and picked him up in my arms. I can tell you, I was simply raving with anger; I scarcely knew what I was doing. I whirled Jelks up, and threw him at Larson like a sack of coals. The mate was merely winded, but Jelks broke his leg. As for myself, I managed to stagger away, and get my wound patched up."

Nelson Lee nodded interestedly.

"The man is certainly a greater scoundrel than I believed," he remarked. "I do not wish to be curious, Captain Burton, but may I ask if your hopes regarding this treasure ever materialised."

"They haven't—yet," replied the skipper. "The incident I have told you of occurred three years ago. I sailed from San Francisco before Jelks came out of hospital. Well, when I got to England I found that I'd inherited a big fortune most unexpectedly. I haven't left these shores since. But that map is still intact, gentlemen. And, to the best of my knowledge, the treasure is undisturbed, lying on the bed of the lagoon."

"Doubtless you intend to take a trip out there one day?" inquired the Head.

"Most decidedly," agreed the captain. "I am rich, and I don't really want greater wealth. But there is a certain spice of adventure in the affair which appeals to me. As a matter of fact, I intend fitting out a ship for the trip this summer. But we do not wish to discuss that at present. I last heard of Jelks in London. A friend of mine—the captain of an Atlantic liner—told me that he had seen Jelks only a short while before. The man hadn't forgotten that incident in 'Frisco, and he knew all about my altered circumstances; he knew that I hadn't made any attempt to get that sunken fortune. I am not saying that he came to St. Frank's deliberately. It's my belief that he learned of Tom's presence in the school by sheer accident. Those two boys didn't want to get my son away—it was Jelks who planned it. He merely used the lads as tools, knowing that they had got their knife into Tom. Bless you, I don't blame the kids

much! They deserve a whipping, but that's about all. Whatever you say, I know that Tom was kidnapped—yes, deliberately kidnapped. It was done in such a way that Jelks is safe; but it was a case of abduction, all the same."

"But why?" asked the Head, rather bewildered. "Really, I fail to see why this man should take your son away by force."

"The explanation is simple, Doctor Stafford," put in Nelson Lee. "I can easily follow Captain Burton's argument. And, indeed, I am entirely in agreement with him. Jelks got the lad into his hands for a criminal purpose. He intends to use him as a lever—a lever for forcing the captain's hand. He will return Tom in exchange for the plan. Do you understand?"

"Upon my soul!" gasped the Head. "It is a most villainous conspiracy!"

"Exactly," agreed the detective. "And Captain Burton's information has put a totally different complexion upon the whole matter. We must act—and at once. We shall be thoroughly justified in taking drastic measures."

"Are you suggesting the police——"

"No, doctor. The police, I am afraid, would dilly-dally about, making inquiries of all sorts and descriptions," interposed Lee. "Even so, we couldn't blame them. The police don't act until they have very good reason. No, we must enter into this affair alone; it is necessary that we should act upon our own initiative."

"Really, Mr. Alvington, I cannot follow you," said the Head.

"Then I will be explicit. We must give chase to the schooner at once—to-night!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "Delay would be fatal. The schooner could only have proceeded a very short distance, and a motor-boat would be able to overtake her by dawn. That is my plan. We must give chase straight away!"

Captain Burton rose to his feet, his eyes gleaming. He thrust out his hand impulsively, and gripped Nelson Lee's.

"By the Lord Harry! That's the kind of talk I like!" he exclaimed heartily. "You're a man of action, sir, a man who wants to get to work. Talking is all very well, but it doesn't do much good. By George! You've made me absolutely enthusiastic! We'll get Tom back before long, never fear!"

CHAPTER II.

(Told by Nipper.)

IN WHICH WE START UPON AN EXCITING ADVENTURE, AND BOARD THE SOUTHERN CROSS SOON AFTER DAWN—CAPTAIN JELKS IS AFFABLE, BUT WE ARE NOT.

I POKED the fire up impatiently.

"It's no good you chaps getting irritable," I said. "We don't know what's happening in the Head's study, and we don't know what old Alvy's doing: But you can take it from me, my sons, that things will be getting jolly busy before long!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West sighed.

"But I've been waitin' an' waitin'," he complained. "It's shockin', Benny boy. De Valerie ain't been touched yet! What's the matter? Why hasn't he been called to the Head's study?"

"It's no good asking me," I replied. "The guv'nor knows best—and he's got this case in hand. I don't believe that Fullwood and De Valerie had as much to do with the Bo'sun's running away as we thought. It was that rotter, Jelks, who plotted everything."

"But why?" asked Tommy Watson bluntly. "It's all very well to say that, but what the dickens did Jelks want the Bo'sun for? It ain't sense, you ass. A chap like that doesn't want to be bothered with a school kid."

"Oh, well, jawing won't make any difference," I said. "I'll try and see the guv'nor before we go to bed—and it's nearly bedtime now, come to think of it. I wonder where the poor old Bo'sun is?"

"Don't talk about it, dear fellow," said Sir Montie painfully. "It's a frightfully rotten affair altogether. My opinion ain't much good, I know, but I've been thinkin'—I've been thinkin' quite a lot."

"Let's hope it didn't hurt you!" grunted Watson tartly.

"No, dear Tommy, it didn't hurt me at all," said Sir Montie, with perfect serenity. "Thinkin' never does hurt me. Perhaps it's because I don't think deeply enough, begad! Or there mayn't be anything to hurt, you know."

"Don't go on jawing like that," I said irritably.

"I apologise, Benny," murmured Sir Montie. "But I was thinkin' that we ought to have done something when we saw that schooner makin' for the sea. We ought to have done something desperate.

It was so shockin'ly tame, you know, turning back home, an' leavin' the poor old Bo'sun to his fate. Yes, begad, we ought to have done somethin' desperate!"

"Swim out in chase of the schooner, I suppose?" I asked sarcastically. "Don't be a bigger ass than you can help, Montie, for goodness' sake! The Bo'sun will be back here within a day or two, I'll bet. The guv'nor's on this job—and you know what he's like when he gets busy. You just wait in patience, and you'll see things."

I spoke confidently, but I only spoke my feelings.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I were in Study C, in the Remove passage. We hadn't done our prep., and didn't mean to do it, either. Not many of the fellows knew that we had been with Nelson Lee to Caistowe.

I had been expecting that De Valerie would be hauled up into the Head's study. But, so far, he hadn't been touched. He was lounging about in the common-room with all the assurance in the world. Yet he knew, jolly well, that there was a pretty little heap of trouble brewing for him.

At St. Frank's, of course, I was "Dick Bennett." It was rotten to be stuck in the study, knowing that Nelson Lee was having a good old jaw about the Bo'sun. I wanted to be with the guv'nor, but this wasn't practicable. I felt jolly sorry for Burton, and wanted to help him.

He was comparatively a new boy at St. Frank's; but, for all that, he was one of the most popular fellows in the Ancient House. A big, bluff, hearty sort of chap, with a sunny, jolly nature. Everybody liked him—they couldn't help liking him. Of course, when I say everybody, I didn't include cads like Fullwood or De Valerie or others of their tribe.

The poor old Bo'sun had a lot of rough expressions, which he had picked up on his father's ship, but the fellows rather liked them. He was a novelty. And the manner in which he had knocked Fullwood and De Valerie out, fighting the pair of them at the same time, had pleased the whole Lower School tremendously.

I didn't feel like going to bed; it seemed to be deserting the Bo'sun when he needed us more than ever. He had practically saved our lives on one occasion, and the thought of leaving him in

the lurch made me feel horribly mean. It was all very well to have the schooner stopped by other people—I wanted to take part in the thing myself.

And just as I was thinking this way the door opened, and Nelson Lee himself appeared. He was wearing his gown, as usual, and he beamed upon us benevolently, in full keeping with his "Mr. Alvington" character.

"Dear me! Quite a study in gloom," he exclaimed softly, as he closed the door.

"More like gloom in a study, sir," I replied, trying to be funny. "We're all feeling pretty rotten."

"Ready for bed, eh?" suggested the guv'nor.

"Begad, no, sir!" put in Sir Montie quickly. "Anythin' but that, Mr. Alvin-ton. We want to go an' help poor old Burton, you know. I wouldn't mind missin' a whole night's sleep!"

"Well, it is quite possible that you will have to," said Nelson Lee, sitting down. "Captain Burton has arrived, my boys, and he and I and the Head-master have been in consultation. We have arrived at a decision."

"Well, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"We are going upon a trip, my boys; I won't say any more at present," said the guv'nor. "You will probably guess details on your own account. After a considerable amount of persuasion, I managed to get the Head's permission for you three boys to accompany Captain Burton and myself on this very special mission. There is not a moment to lose, so get your overcoats and caps on straightaway. And don't say anything to the other boys."

We couldn't realise it for a moment or two.

"We're—we're going with you, sir?" I breathed excitedly.

"Yes."

"All of us?" gasped Tommy Watson.

"That is what I said, my boy."

"Begad! It's rippin'!" said Sir Montie, his eyes gleaming behind his pince-nez. "Dear Alvy, I— Oh, lor! I beg your pardon, sir, I'm gettin' quite confused—I am, really!"

"That's all right, Montie," smiled the guv'nor. "Now, boys, be ready within five minutes, and come straight to the Head's private door. I may tell you

that we are going straight off to rescue Burton."

And Nelson Lee departed from the study, leaving the three of us staring at one another with flushed, eager faces. Tommy and Montie, of course, knew our real characters—the guv'nor and me, I mean—that's why they were privileged now.

"Great pip!" panted Tommy Watson. "It ain't true, is it?"

"Of course it's true, you ass!" I exclaimed joyfully. "We're going after the Bo'sun, after all. By jingo, it's fine! We don't want any sleep to-night—rats to it! We can do without a night's rest for once in a way!"

"Dear fellow, of course we can!" said Tregellis-West. "But it's simply amazin'. This sort of thing ain't usual at all. I can't make out why old Alvy has been so splendidly sporty. I didn't think he'd want to be bothered with juniors, begad! It's simply stunnin' of him—it's top hole!"

"Oh, we must have got hold of it wrong," said Watson, refusing to believe it, even now. "Hang it all, we're only Removites, and we shall be in the way. Of course, we don't think so ourselves, but—"

"My dear ass, we're wasting time," I interjected. "Weren't the guv'nor's instructions clear enough? Blessed if you seem to understand what he really means. In practically every case I've always accompanied him—real cases, I mean, before I came to St. Frank's. Perhaps I'm useful sometimes—he says I am, anyhow."

"But we ain't you, Benny boy—"

"Oh crumbs!" I groaned. "How the dickens could the guv'nor take me alone? You've asked for it plainly, and I'm going to give it to you. He's taking you two chaps because he's practically got to! It would be too giddy noticeable if he took me only. That's why you're being allowed to come."

"Oh, begad!" murmured Sir Montie blankly. "We ain't really wanted, then? Dear boy, I'm feeling squashed. I wish I hadn't pressed you for an answer—"

I grinned.

"Oh rot!" I said, moving towards the door. "The guv'nor's taken you and Tommy on several adventures, and you've been jolly useful. He knows that. In fact, you two chaps can be trusted

anywhere, or you can bet the guv'nor wouldn't have you. He knows that you're both made of the right stuff!"

Tommy and Montie flushed with pleasure, and, out of consideration for them, I switched the light off. Then we passed out of the study, and bumped into Handforth and Co., who were passing.

"Clumsy ass!" roared Handforth, dancing on one foot. "Can't you see a chap's toe?"

"Well, it would be a bit difficult to miss seeing yours, Handy!" I said genially. "You must expect to have your feet trodden on when they're filling up the passage. There ain't much room left, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure roared, and Handforth transferred his glares from us to them. Their faces became very grave in a second.

"Anything to cackle at?" bawled Handforth. "You chaps had better be careful! I'm not going to be laughed at by my own study chums! I'll ask you to put up your hands, McClure!"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Handy!" said McClure pacifically. "Fancy anybody saying that your feet are big! Absurd!"

Handforth looked suspicious, but he didn't pursue the matter; and Tommy and Montie and I went off down the passage, chuckling. Several fellows wanted to know why we were looking so cheery, but we evaded their questions.

And, having secured our coats and caps, we sneaked out of the Ancient House into the Triangle. The moon was shining very brightly, and the air was mild, with a gentle breeze blowing. It was a perfect night.

Round against the Head's private door we found a big motor-car. This was a surprise, but I soon realised that it was Captain Burton's. He hadn't come from London in it—only from Bannington, where he had hired it. You see, he had come by the express from London, but the last train to Bellton had run. So the skipper had been forced to hire a car. Being an expert driver himself—having a car of his own—he hadn't bothered about a chauffeur.

We found Captain Burton there, standing on the steps. He greeted us jovially, and we took to him instantly. He was a big edition of the Bo'sun him-

self. Nelson Lee appeared a moment later.

"Jump in, boys!" he said briskly. "We don't want any of the other juniors to witness our departure. One of the prefects will explain your absence at bedtime. We must be off without a moment's delay!"

We climbed on to the car, in the tonneau. Nelson Lee took the wheel, and Captain Burton sat beside him. Then we started. My chums and I were simply bubbling over with excitement and keen interest.

The guv'nor didn't lose any time on this journey; the car simply buzzed. I should have liked to have been driving myself—I was quite capable of handling it. But I couldn't have everything I wanted.

As I had expected, we made straight for Caistowe, and arrived in the little seaside village in less than twenty minutes. I soon found out the guv'nor's plans, for he brought the car to a standstill just against the jetty. Here a short man in a peaked cap was waiting for us. He seemed to be quite a gentleman—and was one. Nelson Lee, in fact, had telephoned from St. Frank's to this man, whose name was Goodall. Mr. Goodall was the owner of a fast-sailing cutter—a really spanking little vessel.

There wasn't a motor-boat to be procured in Caistowe, but this cutter would probably be just as fast.

Captain Burton arranged matters in less than five minutes. A considerable sheaf of banknotes changed hands—the cost of hire, and a deposit. Mr. Goodall was quite comfortable in leaving his craft in Captain Burton's hands.

The car we left behind, the cutter owner agreeing to garage it for us. Then we tumbled on board, and were soon away.

The breeze was fresh, and the little vessel hissed through the water at a splendid speed. Tommy and Montie and I sat in the bows, enjoying ourselves tremendously. It was difficult to realise that we ought to have been in our beds by this time, in the Remove dormitory.

The air was a trifle keen on the sea, but simply delightful. The moonlight streamed down from a cloudless sky.

"How do we know which course to set," asked Tommy Watson.

"My dear kid, I'm not going to bother about that," I replied. "The

guy'nor knows what he's doing. He's been telephoning people up. I believe. Besides, the schooner can only take one course, really. This cutter has doubled her speed, and we'll soon overhaul her."

I learned, a little later, that Nelson Lee had received information to the effect that the Southern Cross would drop her anchor outside Falmouth for a few hours. So there couldn't be much mistake about our direction.

The sails of the cutter boomed musically in the breeze, and the water hissed away in two foaming cascades from her bows, as she cut through the water.

After we had been sailing for about half an hour, with Captain Burton in charge of the wheel, Nelson Lee made his way for'ard with a cigar between his lips. He smiled at us, and shook his head disapprovingly.

"This won't do, boys," he said. "Fortune has favoured us, and we have made a very excellent start. But you'll be good for nothing if you sit up here, in this fashion. I don't suppose we shall sight the schooner until after dawn, and that means there are several hours to while away."

"Oh, we're all right, sir!" I said cheerfully.

"I dare say you are, my boy," smiled the guy'nor. "But I must really insist upon your getting some sleep. The cabin is warm and comfortable, and there are some excellent bunks. You must all three go below and get to sleep. I promise that you will be called as soon as the schooner is sighted."

We protested, of course; but the guy'nor's suggestion was really an excellent one. And, five minutes later, we were snug and cosy in the cabin. The adventure was unexpected, and we enjoyed ourselves keenly. I realised that there had been no real necessity for us to come. The guy'nor, like the splendid sort he was, knew that we should enjoy the trip. And perhaps, sooner or later, we should be able to do something to justify our presence aboard.

It was all very well for us to talk about sitting up all night; but we were asleep within two minutes, lulled by the musical splash of the water as it hissed by outside.

I possessed the happy knack of being able to wake up when I liked—long association with Nelson Lee had taught me that. And I tumbled out of my

bunk, fresh as paint, soon after dawn. I didn't wake Sir Montie and Tommy, but went on deck.

The sun was shining like a golden ball above the horizon, and the sea was deep blue. The breeze had freshened with the dawn, and was now blowing vigorously. The cutter simply boomed over the water, her sails as taut as could be.

Nelson Lee and Captain Burton were over by the wheel.

"Hallo! I didn't call you!" hailed the guy'nor. "We haven't sighted the schooner yet, my boy!"

"No, sir, but this salt air has made me peckish," I said cheerfully. "What about brekker? I thought I might be useful. Ain't there any cocoa aboard—or something hot and steaming?"

"My dear lad, you'd better forage about for yourself," said the guy'nor. "I dare say you'll be rewarded—and I could do with something hot myself."

It didn't take me long to rake out a fat tin of cocoa, and get a small oil-stove going. There was a little kettle, and plenty of fresh water—to say nothing of a few tins of fresh biscuits and cakes. Mr. Goodall had done the thing properly, and I mentally concluded that he was a perfect gentleman.

Having made a steaming can of cocoa, I roused up Tommy and Montie, and we made a spiffing breakfast on deck. Sir Montie was quite enthusiastic: he hadn't the slightest idea that I could be so handy.

I made him work after breakfast, helping to wash up the cups and things. Tommy looked on, grinning. And, just as we were finishing, Nelson Lee gave us a hail.

We hurried up, and there, straight across the bows, was the schooner. At least, a schooner of some sort. And the chances were that she would prove to be our quarry. We were overhauling her rapidly.

The wind was still freshening, and Captain Burton had shortened sail a trifle. After a while he declared, with conviction, that the vessel ahead was the Southern Cross. And very soon the guy'nor made out her name, through his binoculars.

"The Bo'sun's on board that ship!" I exclaimed, as I sat for'ard with my chums. "The excitement'll begin jolly soon, my sons. I expect Jelks will be

simply purple with anger when we sweep alongside. Just you wait and see his dial! It'll be worth quids!"

"Dear boy, I wouldn't have it as a gift!" declared Tregellis-West.

But, as it turned out, I was mistaken. As the cutter drew up close, I saw that both the gov'nor and Captain Burton were looking very grim. They meant business, and were not going to put up with any nonsense. They had come to fetch the Bo'sun away—and were going to do it!

We were all prepared for squalls—for resistance, if necessary. We could see the schooner very clearly now. She was an old fashioned vessel, and in a dirty condition. Her sails were new, however, and gleamed beautifully in the sunlight. Her dirtiness, I judged, was mainly because of the slack discipline of her skipper. Several frowzy heads were leaning over the rail, gazing at us as we came skimming along.

And, upon the poop, Captain Jelks was pacing up and down, talking to Mr. Larson, the first mate. Now and again they paused to look at us through glasses. They must have been aware of our identity. But, rather to my surprise, Captain Jelks continued his pacing with complete unconcern.

The Bo'sun's father handled the cutter superbly. We slid right alongside, hailing the schooner to make us fast. In less than five minutes we were all on board; and the most surprising thing of all was that Captain Jelks greeted us with serene affability.

"Why, gents, I didn't expect to see you aboard my craft!" he exclaimed, his face wreathed in smiles. "By gosh! Cap'n Burton an' all! How do, Burton? Lettin' bygones be bygones—eh?"

"I don't know why you're taking up this attitude, my friend," said Captain Burton grimly. "But it won't serve you any good purpose. We have overtaken you for one object. My son, Tom, is on board your craft. I want him. You will oblige me by handing him over without any trouble."

Jelks looked very surprised.

"Your boy?" he repeated. "Why, bust me, I never realised that the kid might be your nipper, Cap'n Burton! So that was 'is name—eh? Well, well! It seems as 'ow you've 'ad your trip for nothin'."

"What do you mean?" asked Nelson Lee grimly.

"W'y, I mean that the boy ain't on this ship, an' never was," replied Jelks calmly. "Do ye think I'd be troubled by the likes o' he? You make me smile. I don't stand wi' such truck!"

"You awful fibber!" roared Tommy Watson. "The Bo'sun's on board—and you know it!"

"I don't want none o' your lip, kid!" said Captain Jelks smoothly. "I ain't denyin' that the young warmint arst me for a job. Why should I deny it? I'm a honest man, as everybody knows; never told a lie in my life. 'Ave you ever known me to be untruthful, Mr. Larson?"

"Never, sir—not in me nateral!" declared Mr. Larson solemnly.

"Enough of this infernal nonsense!" said Captain Burton, with rising anger. "You won't gain anything by it, Jelks. You'll hand over my son——"

"Don't I keep tellin' of ye that 'e ain't never set 'is foot aboard this hooker?" snapped Captain Jelks. "As I was a-sayin', the young brat arst me to take 'im for a sail—there's men as can prove them words. Bein' a kind-'earted sort o' fool, I give way, an' took the nipper with me to Caistowe. Wot was the result? Pah! I ain't got no patience with such!"

Captain Jelks spat disgustedly over-side.

"Well, what was the result?" asked Nelson Lee quietly.

"That blamed boy got me to pay 'is fare to Caistowe, an' then 'e changed 'is mind," said the skipper sourly. "Run off in the darkness arter we'd left Caistowe station. We never see 'im no more, an' so we sailed without 'im. Ain't that the truth, Mr. Larson?"

"Strike me pink, it is!" nodded the mate, who was the skipper's echo in everything.

I was feeling a bit dismayed. Captain Burton was simply fuming with rage. Only Nelson Lee remained calm. We had not anticipated any such reception as this. Captain Jelks was brazening the whole thing out.

He was trying to make us believe that the Bo'sun wasn't aboard at all. But that was a deliberate lie, and we weren't hoodwinked. But I realised, with a sudden shock, that we were completely helpless.

So long as Jelks maintained this attitude, we couldn't do a thing. It was impossible for us to search the ship, although we were satisfied that Jelks had been lying. We were at a deadlock.

It looked very much as though the poor old Bo'sun was booked for a long trip in the Southern Cross, after all. Nelson Lee and Captain Burton shared my thoughts, and the captain, at least, could scarcely hold himself in check.

"You confounded liar!" he thundered. "How dare you stand there and tell me such a tale?"

Captain Jelks swore.

"I'll 'ave you know one thing," he said deliberately. "This is my craft, an' I'm master of it. I don't stand bein' called a liar by no man. So I gives you just two minutes to get back on that cockleshell o' yours. If you ain't gone by then, you'll be chucked overside! Savvy?"

There was a moment's silence. The situation was absolutely tense. Several members of the crew were looking on from amidships with great interest. But just then, in that short interval, a cry came from below.

It was clear and unmistakable.

"Help!"

The voice was that of the Bo'sun, and we all jumped. Here, in a second, had come a positive answer to Jelks's lies. He scowled with fury; but his rage was nothing to that of Captain Burton.

That cry, uttered in his son's voice, and with a plaintiveness which was pitiful, caused the fine old skipper to lose control of himself. He just clenched his fists and shook them in the air. Then he hurled himself with all his strength at Jelks.

CHAPTER III.

(*Nipper continues.*)

IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE POWER OF EBENEZER JELKS.

THE attack was totally unexpected. Captain Jelks went down like a ninepin. I had never seen anybody floored so neatly in my life before. Captain Burton's fist struck Jelks full upon the mouth, and he reeled over, and fell with a crash upon the deck.

"You scoundrel!" roared the Bo'sun's father. "You lying dog!"

Jelks was on his feet in a second. His mouth was bleeding, and his eyes positively stood out from his face. A string of oaths left his lips, and, for a moment, he was too furious to speak coherently.

Then he uttered a wild bellow.

"Mr. Larson—Adams—Simkins!" he roared. "Get hold o' this brute an' hold him! By gosh! He'll pay for this day's work!"

In a moment Mr. Larson and two or three members of the crew took hold of Captain Burton. The old skipper fought like a tiger, but he was held down at last.

Nelson Lee looked at Sir Montie and Tommy and me sharply. We were already starting forward, boiling with indignation, and the gov'nor nodded quickly.

That was enough. He threw himself forward, and we followed suit. It was quite impossible to see Captain Burton being treated in this way. We went into the fight with a vengeance. Nelson Lee knocked Larson over with a crash, then he sent Adams reeling. Sir Montie and I tackled another man. It was a wild scrimmage for a few minutes. But in the end we got Captain Burton free.

Jelks was dancing with intense rage.

He yelled out orders in a continuous string, accompanied by shocking language.

Men came running up from below, and presently we were quite surrounded.

"Hold the lot of 'em!" snarled the skipper hoarsely. "Hold 'em tight, you scum! The first swab who lets go 'is 'old will 'ave to deal with me arterwards! By gosh! I'll show who's master on this craft!"

We had asked for it, of course, and we couldn't very well grumble when we got it. Although we fought gamely, we were held securely at the end of three or four minutes. All five of us were harshly gripped and held. But it had been impossible for us to see Captain Burton in the grasp of these rotters without lending a hand.

"You will have to suffer for this outrage, Captain Jelks!" said the Bo'sun's father pantingly. "Not content with kidnapping my son, you have now dared to lay hands upon us. You may be master of this ship, but——"

"Hold your lip!" roared Jelks. "You've laid 'ands on me, an' there's no excuse for you! I was brutally at-

tacked, an' I'm justified in puttin' the 'ole crowd of you in irons! An' that's where you'll go, too!" he added furiously. "You're prisoners—understand? Prisoners!"

We did understand; we couldn't very well do anything else.

"This is all very well, Captain Jelks," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "You know that the sole blame is your own. You deliberately lied to us by saying that the boy was not on board. We heard his cry for help, and it was only natural that Captain Burton should give way to his justifiable anger. You are in the wrong, and I should advise you to accept the matter calmly."

"Well, an' what else?" snarled the skipper.

"I will tell you. You will save yourself quite a considerable amount of trouble if you release the lad without further delay," proceeded the gov'nor. "Release him, and allow us to return to our cutter. We know, now, that he is imprisoned below."

Jelks laughed harshly.

"That's fine talk!" he sneered. "Do you think I'm goin' to take any blamed notice of it? You've 'andled me on my own poop, and I don't stand that from no man. Wot's more, you 'arf killed my first officer, Mr. Larson!"

Mr. Larson, who was holding Tommy Watson, and swearing under his breath, seemed fully alive.

"Do you know wot I'm goin' to do?" went on Jelks, leering at us. "Afore long I shall be droppin' anchor off Falmouth. I'll 'ave police aboard in less than 'arf an hour, an' then you'll be 'anded over to the law. I reckon you can chow that. Oh, my case is all right—you ain't got a leg to stand on. I've got witnesses to prove all I say, an' you know it. Assaultin' a skipper on 'is own ship! By goosh! You'll 'ave a taste o' somethink afore long!"

I was filled with dismay. Not on account of myself, or Tommy, or Sir Montie. We shouldn't come to any harm, I knew. But the gov'nor and Captain Burton would be in queer street if Jelks liked to carry out his threat.

The gov'nor was thinking just the same as I was—I knew that. As Jelks had said, his case was a good one. Captain Burton had been rash—altogether too rash. If we had remained calm, we should probably have beaten Jelks

easily. Nelson Lee could soon have tackled him—not with his fists, but with words. After that cry of the Bo'sun's, Jelks would have crumpled up; he would have been tame.

But Captain Burton's action had altered everything; it had placed us in the wrong. Not really in the wrong, but apparently so. And that was really all that mattered. The position was exceedingly acute.

But, somehow, I didn't think that Jelks would carry out his threat. To tell the truth, I feared that he would keep us below during the stay at Falmouth, and take us right across the Atlantic. What was to prevent him? Once out in the West Indies he could cast us off in a small boat, and leave us to land somewhere. I didn't think he would risk a police inquiry. Yet he couldn't allow us to go after what had happened.

"I'll learn you!" he went on viciously. "I dessey you know wot this means, Burton, if the others don't. A skipper is sole master on board 'is own craft. My men 'ave got to obey my orders. There ain't no law 'cept mine on this 'ere schooner. Mr. Larson!"

"Sir!" said the mate.

"See that these prisoners—prisoners, mark ye—are taken below!" said Captain Jelks with relish. "'Ave 'em shoved down into the lazaret, with the boy. They won't make no noise down there—leastways, not that matters. I'll learn 'em! But 'old on a minute afore you take 'em below!"

The skipper tumbled down the poop ladder, and gave some quick orders to two members of the crew. Nelson Lee and Captain Burton and we boys stood looking on, helpless and impotent.

We saw Jelks's orders being carried out. The cutter was sent adrift, and she fell away rapidly, rolling helplessly upon the roughening sea, with no hand at her wheel. The wind was blowing steadily, and with a certain freshness.

This action of Jelks was grim evidence of his intentions. He had sent our own boat adrift—that was clear proof that he meant to keep us prisoners on board the schooner.

Five minutes later we were roughly forced down the companion. We found ourselves in the captain's cabin—a dirty apartment which reeked of stale tobacco and spirits. In the floor, under the table, was a trapdoor. This led down into the

lazaret, or store-room. We soon discovered that it wasn't the actual store-room, but one which was disused. For the place was empty except for some old boxes.

We were simply thrown down like so many sacks of coal, for there was no ladder. One by one, we were forced to drop into the black hole. And then the trapdoor was closed down with a bang, and we were by ourselves.

I had been the last down, and I landed with a terrific jar—for the distance was considerable. Sir Montie had sprained his ankle a bit, but I didn't find this out until afterwards.

Pitch darkness enveloped us. I could hear the Bo'sun; he was talking excitedly and joyfully to his father. He, at least, was as pleased as Punch.

"Begad! We've found him, dear boys!" murmured Sir Montie, as serene as ever. "We've found the Bo'sun—but our own position ain't so very rosy, is it?"

"My boys, this is a real disaster!" said Nelson Lee, talking to us while Captain Burton was engaged with his son. "There is no sense in crying over spilt milk, but we must face the position. I am angry with myself, now, for having brought you——"

"Oh, I say, sir!" I protested. "We're all in it together, you know. And I don't suppose it's so bad as it seems."

"Make no mistake, Bennett," replied Lee. "The position is very serious indeed. Have you forgotten one important thing? This unscrupulous Captain Jelks has now got both the Bo'sun and his father. But, of course, you don't know the full facts, do you? Unless I am very much mistaken, Jelks will keep a tight hold on the lot of us."

We couldn't say any more just then, for the Bo'sun felt his way across to us.

"Shiver my maindeck!" he exclaimed huskily, as he gripped us in turn. "It's simply splendid of you, messmates! I don't know how I'm going to thank you. But it's all a mix-up, ain't it?"

"Why the dickens did you run off, you ass?" demanded Tommy Watson.

"By the Blue Peter! I was a fool! I was mad——"

"No, you weren't, Bo'sun," I put in. "That rotten drug had made you fuddled. You didn't know what you were doing, properly. But I can't help being surprised at one thing. Surely

you were clear enough in your napper to know that De Valerie wasn't to be trusted?"

I heard the Bo'sun gasp.

"By hokey! It wasn't you, Bennett, was it?" he asked hoarsely.

"What wasn't me?"

"You—you didn't come to the punishment-room, and persuade me to run away?"

"I? What are you jawing about?" I asked. "It was De Valerie who did that. We collared him just as he was coming down the ladder—after you'd skipped off!"

"Souse my scuppers! I knew it—I knew it!" muttered the Bo'sun.

"Dear fellow, you knew what?" murmured Sir Montie. "I'm in a shockin' state of confusion—I am, really!"

"Why, De Valerie made me think that he was you, Bennett!" said Burton. "Don't you understand? I was all mixed up, and didn't realise until afterwards that something was wrong. I couldn't see De Valerie in the darkness, and he only whispered. He told me that he was you, Bennett!"

"By jingo!" I exclaimed. "That explains it, Bo'sun!"

I knew, now, why Burton had been so ready to run away from the school. He had been under the impression that De Valerie's advice was my advice!

We couldn't discuss the matter much further, for Nelson Lee was examining the lazaret. We hadn't been searched, and the gov'nor still carried his electric torch. By the light of this we saw that our prison was a square apartment, with only an old box or two lying about.

The trapdoor was in the ceiling, high above our heads.

Escape was out of the question, for, even if we managed to get out of the lazaret, we should only be chucked down again. So what was the good of trying? In fact, after we had talked the matter over seriously, we were all inclined to be despondent.

Captain Burton was quite subdued; he had hardly anything to say. The only cheerful one among us was the Bo'sun. After his experiences, this present position seemed quite enjoyable to him.

But it was no good blinking at the facts.

We were prisoners, and in the power of an unscrupulous scoundrel. There

was no telling what he would do with us.

We were in a terribly deep hole, and there seemed no way out of it!

CHAPTER IV.

THE DERELICT CUTTER—CONSTERNATION AT ST. FRANK'S—NO HOPE.

TWO fishermen were walking along the beach of the small fishing village of Bickton, on the Dorset coast.

It was getting towards noon, and the sea was a trifle choppy, with a stiff breeze blowing. At the edge of the little bay, black, jagged rocks protruded from the sea. And one of the fishermen suddenly halted, and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"What's that over yonder, Jim?" he asked, pointing

The other man looked. And there, bobbing up and down on the waves, near the rocks, something fairly bright could be seen. It was lifted by an unusually large wave, and cast with a crash upon the rocks. It lay there, above the reach of the following waves.

"Why, that be a boat o' some sort, Henry," replied the other man. "Just cast ashore, seemin'ly. We'd best have a look."

The two men hurried round the beach, and soon reached the rocks. Picking their way over the slippery seaweed, they were able to gain a clear view of the little craft which had been cast ashore. It was a cutter, apparently, and there wasn't a trace of any living soul.

"Derelict, by the look of it," remarked Henry. "Leastways, there ain't any folk aboard. The tide's on the ebb, so we'd best wait awhile till we can go right close. It looks bad, Jim—real bad."

The derelict cutter was still awash, but the waves were unable to shift it from the rocks. The mast was snapped off, and lay with a tangled mass of sail and rigging over the bows. The vessel was lying on its side.

About half an hour later the two fishermen were able to make a thorough examination, for the tide had receded, leaving the cutter high and dry on the weed smothered rocks. And the examination seemed to prove the suspicions which both men shared.

"She capsized, Jim, maybe miles from

th' shore," remarked Henry. "An' all the folk aboard were drowned. There ain't a sign of 'em. This is what comes o' sailin' in a breeze, an' not bein' capable of handlin'—"

"What's this here, Henry?" interjected Jim quickly.

In the cabin, among the soaked wreckage, some overcoats were found. The fishermen examined them, and decided to act at once.

As a result, they walked quickly into Bickton village, and gave their information to the policeman. That worthy, after gazing gravely at the overcoats, and listening to the fishermen's story, nodded his head with great solemnity.

"Some o' them boys," he said. "That'll be it, Henry. I've heard tell of St. Frank's School—that's somewhere in Sussex, I'm thinkin'. Some boys out sailin', and got capsized. They're dead now, sure as anything."

And the constable went off to make use of the post-office telephone.

Exactly twenty-five minutes later Dr. Stafford, the Headmaster of St. Frank's, sat in his study staring before him dully. His face was deathly pale, and he looked ten years older.

"Good heavens!" he muttered huskily. "What a tragedy—what a tragedy!"

He rose from his chair unsteadily, and rang the bell. A pageboy soon appeared, and the Head raised a quivering finger.

"Go, Tubbs, and fetch Mr. Stockdale and Mr. Crowell," he said, his voice nearly breaking with emotion. "Fetch them at once, Tubbs—do not lose a moment. Go, boy—go!"

"Ye-yes, sir!" gasped Tubbs.

He was startled by the change in the Head, and he left the study in a state of wonderment and consternation. Tubbs was the Ancient House page, and he was soon racing away in search of Mr. Crowell, the Remove master.

"Hallo, Tubby, what's up?" asked an eager voice.

The pageboy paused for a moment. His path was barred by the fat figure of Teddy Long, of the Remove. It was nearly time for afternoon lessons, and Teddy was curious to discover the reason for Tubbs' almost scared look. Teddy Long was always curious, he was known as the Paul Pry of the Ancient House.

"I dunno what's up, Master Long," panted the pageboy. "The 'Ead's fair

tremblin' with fright—as though he might have seen a ghost! I'm hurryin' to fetch Mr. Crowell an' Mr. Stockdale."

And Tubbs hurried on.

The curious Removite looked after him, and nodded to himself. The whole Lower School was wondering what had become of Nipper and Co., and the Head hadn't thought fit to make any detailed explanation. Mr. Alvington, too—he was away. The boys only knew that the affair was something in connection with the Bo'sun.

And now, apparently, something was "on." Teddy Long meant to keep his eyes—and his ears—fully open.

Meanwhile Tubbs found Mr. Crowell, and gave his message. Then he hurried over to the College House, and sought out Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster. The two gentlemen happened to reach the Head's study door at the same time.

"Dear me! Is there something wrong?" asked Mr. Stockdale, mildly.

"I am sure I haven't the faintest idea," replied the Remove master, as they entered the room.

"Ah, you have come. I am glad," exclaimed the Head shakily. "I have terrible news, gentlemen—appalling, ghastly news. Not five minutes ago, over the telephone—"

"Good gracious! You are ill, sir!" said Mr. Crowell, in alarm.

"Ill? Heaven above, have I not reason to be?" groaned Dr. Stafford. "I will tell you bluntly, for it is the best way. Mr. Alvington, Bennett, Tregellis-West, Watson, and Captain Burton are—are dead!"

The two masters were nearly dumb with sheer, horrified amazement.

"Dead!" gasped Mr. Crowell, at last. "Good gracious me!"

"Drowned in the Channel!" muttered the Head huskily.

The tragedy was overwhelming. Both Mr. Stockdale and Mr. Crowell knew that the Head was speaking sincerely. But they could scarcely believe their ears. A master, three boys, and a visitor—all dead! The shock was almost too much.

"There—there must be some mistake, surely?" gasped Mr. Crowell. "It cannot be true, sir. It is impossible! Surely—surely, there is some hope—"

"I see none—none whatever!" said Dr. Stafford, speaking with difficulty. "As you are aware, the party left St.

Frank's last night for the purpose of rescuing Burton, of the Remove. They went to Caistowe, and embarked upon a small sailing cutter. I have had positive news that the cutter was wrecked—she capsized whilst at sea, and was cast ashore in Dorsetshire."

"And—and the bodies?" asked Mr. Stockdale, in a horrified whisper.

"Ah, it is evident that the poor souls were lost far from the shore," replied the Head, passing a hand before his eyes. "Not one of the bodies has been recovered yet. The cutter was cast ashore, a wreck. She must have turned turtle, casting her crew into the rough sea."

"How terrible!" murmured Mr. Stockdale. "How—how shockingly ghastly."

"But is it positively proved, beyond all doubt—" began Mr. Crowell.

"There is no question whatever."

"It may not have been the same cutter."

"My dear sir, two overcoats, belonging to Tregellis-West and Bennett, were found in the cabin of the vessel," said the Headmaster wearily. "There is no hope—no hope whatever."

Mr. Crowell shook his head.

"If you will pardon me, sir, I should advise you to wait until more definite news arrives," he exclaimed. "How do we know what happened? The party may have been rescued by another ship. It is possible—quite probable, in fact."

"It is good of you to comfort me, Mr. Crowell," said Dr. Stafford. "Your suggestion is certainly worthy of consideration. It would be foolish of me to make any premature announcement. I shall wait until to-morrow, at least. Say nothing to the boys; they must not hear of the tragedy yet. As for the parents of the poor lads who have gone, I—I hardly know what to do. I am afraid to tell them."

"I should say nothing at present," said Mr. Stockdale. "It will make no difference, sir, if the lads are really dead. The stunning news will be delayed—that is all. And there is a chance—a bare, slim chance—that all will turn out right."

And so, after a long consultation, the Head decided to await further news before communicating with the relatives of Watson and Tregellis-West, and the others. But when Mr. Crowell and Mr. Stockdale left the Head's study they observed at once that the whole school was seething with excitement.

The truth, in fact, was already public property.

It was impossible to trace the cause of the leakage; It was only too evident that the bad news had spread throughout St. Frank's like wildfire. Juniors and seniors alike were all discussing the tragedy.

Teddy Long was the real culprit.

He had taken good care to creep up to the Head's study door immediately after the entry of the two other masters. And Teddy had heard a good deal that had passed.

When he rushed out into the Triangle he was nearly bursting with the awful news. And, having let it out, it was whispered from end to end of the school. A great many fellows refused to believe it, and they scoffed at the very idea.

The grave, troubled faces of the masters, however, led the majority of the boys to believe the rumour. The terrible affair was talked of in whispers; somehow, the excitement, though intense, was subdued.

Afternoon lessons were completely forgotten. When Mr. Crowell went into the Form-room he didn't find a soul there. This was ample proof of the overwhelming excitement which was sweeping through the school.

St. Frank's, in fact, was stunned.

The juniors hardly dared speak of the tragedy; and they only discussed the news in whispers. Both houses were similarly affected.

Such fellows as Owen major and Handforth and Justin B. Farman were terribly shocked. Tregellis-West and Bennett and Watson—dead! It was simply too awful to be believed. And yet there was a ring of truth about the rumour which couldn't be ignored.

Mr. Crowell, upon finding his Form-room empty, went straight to the Headmaster's study, and wisely advised Dr. Stafford to make a speech without further delay. The whole school was seething with excitement and horror over the rumour; it would be far better to tell the straight truth before the wild stories reached the ears of outsiders.

The Head agreed with this view, and the school was called together in the Big Hall. Then the Head delivered a short speech in grave, subdued tones. He emphatically declared that there was still a certain amount of hope, and he earnestly urged the boys not to talk outside the school. It would be a disaster

if the story reached the inquisitive ears of some newspaper reporter, and was published prematurely. It was just possible that the party had been picked up; therefore, until confirmation of the accident was received, it would be better to say as little as possible. No good would result from idle chatter.

The school was dismissed; and the boys went to their various class-rooms. They were subdued and awed; they didn't think that there was much hope. And there were two particular Removites who sat during afternoon lessons almost as though turned to stone. If the rest of the school was shocked, these boys were terrified.

They were Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Cecil De Valerie.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIGHT IN STUDY M—A FULL CONFES- SION—SENT TO COVENTRY.

STUDY M, in the Remove passage, was De Valerie's own particular "den."

He had secured it for his own use, for he had a liking for his own companionship. Just now, however, he had a visitor in the person of Ralph Leslie Fullwood. The door was locked, and the pair faced one another with drawn, haggard expressions.

"It's—it's too awful, Fully," muttered De Valerie. "They're dead—drowned!"

Fullwood's eyes glittered.

"Well, what of it?" he demanded.

"We didn't drown them, I suppose? We didn't tell them to go off in that silly little boat, did we? Hang 'em! It was their own fault——"

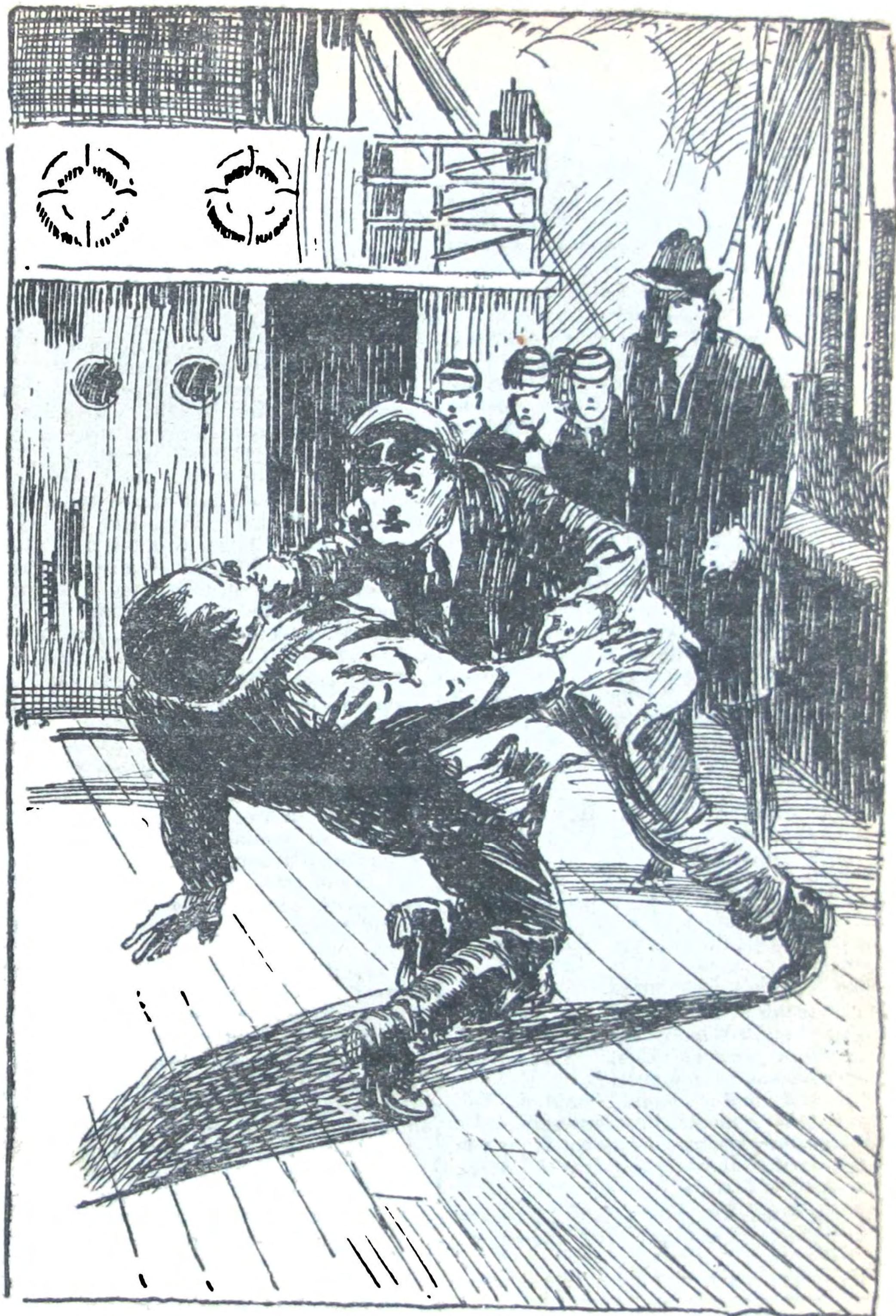
"Don't talk utter rot!" interjected the Rotter quietly.

"What—what do you mean?"

They looked at one another squarely. There was a striking difference in their attitude, for while De Valerie was deadly calm, Fullwood seemed to be upon the verge of hysterics.

"I mean that we are mainly to blame for this tragedy," replied De Valerie, his voice as steady as a rock. "Wait a minute! If it hadn't been for our plotting and planning the Bo'sun would never have run off—and there wouldn't have been any chase. That's why we're to blame!"

"You fool!" panted Fullwood wildly.



The skipper just clenched his fists and shook them in the air. Then he hurled himself with all his strength at Jelks.—(See p. 11.)

"What's the good of talking like that? We're not to blame! It was an accident the cutter capsized! You know that as well as I do!"

"We didn't upset the cutter, of course," went on De Valerie. "But it's just as well to trace this thing to its source. There's no getting away from the fact that we were the main cause of the whole affair."

"You liar!" choked Fullwood. "It was Jelks who did it all——"

"That's mean!" put in the Rotter quietly. "Jelks was more to blame than we were, perhaps, but we put Jelks up to it in the first place. Don't look so scared, you ass!" he added. "We're safe enough. But we'd better be careful how we go on; I noticed a lot of fellows eyeing us jolly queerly."

Fullwood took a deep breath.

"I—I'm going to own up!" he gasped huskily. "I can't stand it, De Valerie—I can't bear to think——"

"Don't be mad!" interrupted the Rotter sharply. "Why, a minute ago you were saying that we weren't to blame, and now you're talkin' about blabbin' like a kid! You're unnerved, fully—that's what's the matter with you. You don't know what the deuce you're talkin' about. Pull yourself together, you idiot!"

"We couldn't help it. It wasn't our fault!" muttered Fullwood, in a whisper. "I didn't have half so much to do with it as you, anyhow! It was you who sneaked into the punishment-room, an' advised Burton to skip. If the truth comes out, you'll catch it hotter than I shall!"

De Valerie's lips curled.

"You confounded funk!" he said contemptuously. "What's the good of getting into a panic like this? You haven't got the pluck of a mouse."

"You'd better stop!" panted Fullwood, raising his fist threateningly. "I'm not in a mood to stand any rot from you, De Valerie! It was your doin' all along, you schemin' cad!"

"At least, I'm not a funk!" sneered De Valerie. "Go on! Hit me—if you dare!"

Fullwood gave a gulp. These taunts were just about more than he could stand. He was worked up to such a pitch that he hardly knew what he was doing. And before De Valerie could

dodge Fullwood's fist crashed into his face.

"A funk, am I?" roared Fullwood madly.

De Valerie staggered back, and his eyes gleamed with evil fury.

"You contemptible worm!" he snarled. "By gad! I'll not stand that!"

And, the next second, the pair were fighting like fury. If Fullwood had kept his head, there would have been no break of this sort. But De Valerie was not prepared to stand any nonsense. His own temper had been aroused now.

And the two rascally Removites, both conscience-stricken, fought with amazing fury. They just hammered away at one another with all their strength. The table went flying with a crash, the coal-scuttle was kicked half across the study; a pile of crockery from the top of a recess-cupboard fell with a terrific clatter.

The pair fought without a single pause for breath, and already they were both severely marked. They kicked and stamped and staggered about, but neither uttered a sound save for panting gasps.

They were fighting without any real purpose; it was their panic which led them to continue the mad tussle. Each felt, inwardly, that they were responsible for the dreadful tragedy which had been hinted at by the Head.

Outside, in the passage, there was a clamour of excited voices. Something was evidently seriously wrong in Study M. Handforth attempted to burst the lock open with a heave of his burly shoulder; but the door withstood the shock.

"Great pip! Just listen to 'em!" gasped Griffiths, of the Remove. "They're tearing one another to bits! But who's fighting with De Valerie?"

"Don't ask silly questions!" roared Handforth. "We can't see t'rough doors, can we, ass? There's a terrific mill of some sort going on. Lend a hand with this door, you chumps! Don't stand there gaping——"

"Better go round to the window, Handy," suggested Owen major.

"My hat! That's a good idea!"

"Come on!"

In a second the whole crowd was streaming down the passage with a rush. They piled out into the Triangle, and sped round to the study windows. The one belonging to Study M was slightly

open at the top, and Handforth jerked up the lower sash with a mighty heave.

Then he and several others tumbled through, throwing the blind aside roughly. They found De Valerie and Fullwood still fighting like madmen. They were both badly punished, but not exhausted.

"Grab hold!" bawled Handforth. "Pull 'em apart!"

Five or six hands grabbed De Valerie, and a similar number took hold of Fullwood. The two battered juniors were torn apart, and they presented a sorry spectacle. De Valerie was now the most excited of the two.

"Let me go, confound you!" he raved. "I'm going to smash him—I'm going to —"

"Don't be a fool!" shouted Owen major. "You'll kill yourselves at that rate! Fighting like a couple of maniacs!"

"I'm—I'm going to the Head!" panted Fullwood wildly.

"Like that?" yelled McClure.

"You ass! You'll get a flogging——"

Fullwood took no notice of the yells; he seemed to be dazed. And he crossed to the door, unlocked it, and staggered out into the passage. De Valerie stood with clenched fists and gleaming eyes. He knew the the panic-stricken Fullwood was determined to blurt out the whole truth; his conscience was unequal to the strain.

And De Valerie also knew that his precious chum would throw most of the blame upon him. So, with a muttered exclamation of disgust, he followed Fullwood out of the study. The other juniors stared after him in amazement.

"They've—they've gone to the Head!" said Owen major faintly. "Gone to the Head in that state! Why, they'll be fired out like a couple of Huns! They're dotty—clean off their rockers!"

Handforth shook his head sagely.

"There's more in this than meets the eye, my sons!" he declared, with a rare flash of real intelligence. "There's something behind that we don't know of. Just you wait and see! They know more than we do!"

"What do you mean, you idiot?" demanded Conroy minor.

"Did you call me an idiot, Conroy minor?" bawled Handforth.

"Oh, don't act the ox now, Handy!"

snapped Conroy. "What a chap you are for getting on the high horse!"

The juniors talked excitedly; and, meanwhile, De Valerie overtook his terrified chum just outside the door of the Head's study.

"Hold on, you fool!" hissed the Rotter. "You can't go into the Head like that!"

"I'm goin', I tell you!" muttered Fullwood between his teeth.

"Don't be mad! There's no need to say anything——"

But Fullwood had already opened the study door, and he marched in. De Valerie, with clenched fists, followed him. There was nothing else to do.

Dr. Stafford was sitting in a chair before the fire, gazing vacantly into the flames. But now he started round, and frowned angrily. The shocking condition of the two juniors, however, brought him to his feet with a jump.

"How—how dare you!" he thundered. "How dare you enter my study in that disgraceful condition? Go at once——"

"We—we've come to confess, sir!" gasped Fullwood. "It—it was De Valerie and I who forced Burton to leave St. Frank's! We're to blame for—for the deaths of those poor chaps——"

Fullwood faltered in his speech, and paused for breath. De Valerie, standing behind, now as cool as ice, gritted his teeth. It was Fullwood who had hotly denied the suggestion that he and his chum were to blame; and now he was confessing to the Head! The Removite, in fact, was too terrified to realise what he was saying or doing.

The Headmaster drew in his breath sharply.

"Are you insane, boy?" he asked sternly. "De Valerie, tell me what this means. You have been fighting, I can see, but Fullwood was saying——"

"I suppose it's no good tryin' to get out of it now, sir," said the Rotter quietly. "The fact is, Fullwood and I were responsible for Burton's flight from St. Frank's. But we weren't mainly to blame, sir; it was Jelks who planned the whole rotten scheme!"

The Head pursed his lips.

"Close the door, De Valerie, and then wipe that blood from your face," he said, sitting down before his desk. "Now, tell me exactly what you mean. No, Fullwood, don't speak. I wish to hear De Valerie first."

"There's not much to tell, sir," said De Valerie calmly. "Burton gave Fullwood and I a lickin', and we didn't like it. So, when Captain Jelks suggested a plan for getting the chap out of St. Frank's, we agreed to help. Burton wasn't really drunk—we knew that all along. Jelks got him down to the White Harp by a trick, and then doped him."

"What do you mean by 'doped,' De Valerie?" asked the Head coldly.

"Why, that's what it's usually called, ain't it, sir?" said the Rotter. "I suppose it was a drug, or something. Jelks spilt a lot of whisky over Burton, and when he was brought to the school you naturally thought that he had been boozing—or—drinking, sir. And, as we'd reckoned, you sent him to the punishment-room."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the Head angrily. "Can you stand there, boy, and tell me that you knew the truth all the while? Were you prepared to see Burton cast from the school unjustly? Answer me, you wretched boy!"

"It—it was Jelks who planned it, sir," muttered De Valerie. "All I did was to get into the punishment-room and persuade Burton to run away. That's what Jelks wanted, an' I'm beginnin' to think that the fellow had a deeper reason."

"Your miserable story is not altogether a surprise to me, De Valerie," said Dr. Stafford. "You would have been closely questioned, in any case. But why have you chosen to come to me now? Why have you come here in such a shocking condition, to worry me when I am already overwhelmed?"

"They're—they're dead, sir!" panted Fullwood. "If—if it hadn't been for us, they'd never have gone out in that cutter! Oh, we've been a couple of silly fools! But it was Jelks's fault! We didn't know—we didn't——"

Fullwood choked, and remained gasping huskily. De Valerie looked on with an expression of contempt. But he, too, was feeling the effect of the suspected tragedy. The Head regarded the two boys with grave, severe glances.

"I—I suppose it'll mean expulsion, sir?" panted Fullwood.

Dr. Stafford shook his head.

"I am glad that you have come to me with your wretched story, my boys," he exclaimed slowly. "You have been

guilty of an act of dastardly wickedness, but I am quite sure that you realise the enormity of your offence. You have confessed—and that is a strong point in your favour. I should be harsh, however, to expel you from the school, for it is only too evident that you were led away by a scoundrel. It was not you who conceived this plot, but Captain Jelks. He incited you, and prompted you to act as you have done. In a way, my boys, I can sympathise with you; but your punishment has been severe. The terrible news which has arrived to-day has made you fully realise the enormity of your wickedness. Heaven knows, this ghastly affair has caused enough tragedy. You will not be expelled, but punished in another way. You may go now!"

"How shall we be punished, sir?" asked De Valerie calmly.

"That matter will be decided later on," said the Head, pointing to the door. "You may be sure, however, that you will both receive a flogging before the eyes of the whole school. Now go!"

Fullwood and De Valerie left the Head's study, and they regarded one another gloweringly out in the passage. Fullwood seemed to be rather relieved; but his companion in misfortune had a sneer upon his face.

"Satisfied?" he asked curtly.

"What do you mean, you ass?"

"Well, we're booked for a floggin' for one thing——"

"I don't care!" grunted Fullwood defiantly. "We can stand a floggin', I suppose? I'm glad it's all over!"

"This is what comes of losing your silly head!" sneered De Valerie. "At first you were babblin' that we weren't to blame at all—an' then you go to the Head an' make me tell everything! Never knew such a rotten funk! You may like floggin's—I don't!"

And De Valerie walked off, leaving Fullwood to follow at leisure. In their hearts, however, they were both glad that the whole thing was out; and a flogging, although painful, wouldn't do them any harm. De Valerie, in fact, had been expecting trouble, and it was just as well that the suspense should be over.

The pair received a surprise when they joined the other Removites. The whole story was known to the boys, and Full-

wood and De Valerie were greeted with yells of anger and derision and scorn. Perhaps Teddy Long had been eaves-dropping again—nobody knew, exactly—but the guilt of Fullwood and De Valerie was well known.

The prospect of a flogging was as nothing compared to the treatment the cads received from their Form mates; even Fullwood felt heartily sorry that he had been so rash. They were treated with contempt wherever they went—they were scorned and despised. And the whole Remove agreed to Handforth's proposal that the culprits should be sent to Coventry for the remainder of the term.

And so Cecil de Valerie and Ralph Leslie Fullwood became outcasts; even their own friends dared not speak to them. They were alone in the school, without a soul to speak to save themselves. And such a punishment as this was far more effective than many floggings.

The confession had been made solely owing to the mistaken idea of the well-meaning folk at Bickton, where the derelict cutter had been found. Under ordinary circumstances Fullwood and De Valerie would scarcely have been so hasty!

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE LAZARET—NELSON LEE'S RUSE—
AT THE LAST MOMENT.

CAPTAIN JELKS'S coarse voice came down distinctly through the flooring into the lazaret. The mate of the Southern Cross was in the skipper's cabin, too; the pair were evidently discussing the situation over a bottle of whisky.

The prisoners were by no means happy. It was late afternoon, and they had been confined in the lazaret since the morning; only a few hours, it is true, but they had dragged enormously.

Since their imprisonment they had not been disturbed once; Jelks had not shown his ugly face at the trapdoor, and no food had been given to the captives. The boys were hungry and thirsty; but Nelson Lee and Captain Burton were not so concerned regarding the matter of food.

"They can't starve us—that's one thing!" remarked Nipper, as he sat with his three chums in one corner. "I expect they'll chuck some grub down to us before long—a few mouldy biscuits, I suppose!"

"Oh, begad!"

"No good complaining, Montie," went on Nipper. "We're in a jolly deep hole, and we shall have to be thankful for small mercies."

"Dear fellow, I'm not complainin'!" protested Tregellis-West. "What's the good, anyhow? I was just thinkin' that it's nearly tea-time, and we were goin' to have somethin' special this evenin' in Study C, weren't we?"

"Oh, don't talk of Study C!" growled Tommy Watson disconsolately. "It seems as though we've been away for years, and as though St. Frank's is a thousand miles off! My hat, ain't it rotten?"

"This is what comes of yearning for a life of excitement!" said Nipper cheerfully. "My dear chums, there's nothing to worry about. This mess ain't half so bad as some I've been in! And we shall come out on top, I'll bet!"

"Souse my scuppers!" sighed the Bo'sun. "An' it's all through me, mess-mates. You have done all this for my sake. By hokey, I don't know what to say!"

"That's simple, then—say nothing at all!" remarked Nipper. "My dear chap, we don't want you to thank us for coming after you. We were only too jolly eager to be given the opportunity. So there's nothing to be grateful for. We're simply in a hole, and we've got to get out of it."

"But how?" demanded Tommy Watson.

"Oh, Mr. Alvington will think of something!" declared Nipper, using Nelson Lee's school name—for the Bo'sun was not in the secret. "He'll find a way out, I'll bet a fiver!"

"Dear fellow, it's wicked to bet fivers!" murmured Sir Montie. "Which reminds me, you know. I was expectin' to be searched an' robbed. But my money hasn't been touched, begad!"

"I dare say they'll think of that later on," said Nipper. "And if we are searched, we'd better hand over everything without question. I don't believe in knuckling under, but Jelks is a villain—"

ous ruffian, and he can do just as he likes on this ship. If we could only escape —"

"Oh, rats! What's the good of talking?" muttered Watson. "How can we escape? And, even suppose we got out of this place, how should we get away from the ship? The cutter's been cast adrift."

"Yes, with my overcoat, too—and Montie's!" grumbled Nipper. "I wonder what's happened to her? Wrooked, I expect!"

Nelson Lee stepped over to the group of boys, and stood chatting with them for a few moments. And while he was doing so the trap-door above opened, and a shaft of light came down into the lazaret. The flushed face of Captain Jelks was visible.

"Feelin' good?" he asked coarsely. "You're bound for the West Indies, my fine fellers! I'm takin' the whole crowd of yer—savvy? An' you won't git no grub till we're a day or two out. Arter that I'll have you up on deck—workin'! I don't carry no blamed passengers on my craft!"

Captain Jelks laughed uproariously, and the trap-door dropped with a slam. The voices of Jelks and Larson could be clearly heard as they laughed afresh.

"The West Indies!" muttered Tommy Watson aghast.

"Don't take any notice, my boy!" growled Captain Burton. "The fool's drunk, and doesn't know what he's saying. It won't be long before we're out of this, I'll swear! Keep your spirits up, and we shall be all right."

"Jelks is certainly drunk," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "And, by the sound of it, Mr. Larson is in a similar condition. The trap-door has not been rebolted. H'm! That suggests possibilities!"

"Why, we can't escape, anyhow, sir!" said Nipper. "Those rotters are in the cabin, and there's no other way out of this place——"

"When men get drunk, Bennett, they have a habit of falling asleep," remarked Lee. "I don't suppose that anything so convenient will happen now. If we mean to escape, we shall have to use our own ingenuity. And, for a start, I think it would be a wise move to have a peep through the trap-door—just to find out how the land really lies."

There was a grunt from Nipper.

"That's all very well, sir," he remarked, "but you ain't made like a telescope!"

The detective chuckled.

"No, there are difficulties, I will admit," he murmured. "But you may have failed to observe, my lad, that there are several old boxes piled up in the other corner. They are heavy, but I fancy we can shift them. Piled one upon the other, they will form quite a respectable ladder."

"By jingo!" exclaimed Nipper. "A ripping idea!"

It was something to do, at all events; and while Captain Burton held Nelson Lee's electric torch, the detective and the boys laboriously shifted the heavy boxes, and piled one on top of the other.

"Blessed if I can see the sense of it, Bo'sun!" muttered Tommy Watson to Burton. "Those brutes are in the cabin, and it'll be asking for trouble to climb through the trap-door!"

"Don't you worry your head, mess-mate!" whispered the Bo'sun. "Mr. Alvington knows what he's doing, I'll bet! If these chaps are really drunk, we might be able to escape. But I'm afraid it's a bit too rosy. The trap-door being unbolted is in our favour, though."

"How?"

"Why, Mr. Alvington might be able to slip up and fight the brutes," murmured the Bo'sun. "Souise me, it ain't impossible, Watson! They're fairly boozed, and they'd be easy enough to handle!"

"My only hat!" murmured Tommy Watson. "There might be something in it, after all!"

While they were whispering, Nelson Lee had mounted the boxes. Crouching upon the top one, he was easily able to reach the trap-door; indeed, had it been open, his head would have projected into the cabin above.

He motioned for the light to be extinguished, and the lazaret was plunged into gloom. Lee had no idea of carrying out the Bo'sun's brilliant suggestion; a noisy fight would not have suited his book at all. But it might be possible to trick the scoundrelly pair in some way or other. And, since this opportunity had come, Lee meant to take advantage of it. Promptness of action was one of the detective's chief characteristics. While other people were talking, he acted.

Very cautiously, Nelson Lee raised the heavy trap-door. It was still unbolted, as he had suspected, and this led him to conclude that Jelks meant to have further conversation with his prisoners before long. Or, possibly, some food was being prepared; even Jelks would not starve his victims; and Lee did not believe the man's threat to keep them without food until the open Atlantic was reached.

The trap-door was raised without even a creak, and the first definite object which Nelson Lee's eyes rested upon was a big boot. It shifted as he watched, for one of Jelks's feet was inside. He and the mate, in fact, were sitting opposite one another at the table. They were talking earnestly, and they had no inkling that one of their prisoners was so near.

Nelson Lee's chief object in raising the trap-door was to overhear the plans of the two men; he wanted to be prepared when the right time came. Certainly, Lee didn't suspect that he would be granted an opportunity for immediate action.

But, as he looked across the cabin floor, his eyes gleamed. The detective's eyes were just above the level of the floor, for the trap-door was only open three or four inches. It was impossible for Jelks and Larson to see what was happening, because the table intervened.

The men were talking, but Lee did not take in a single sentence; his original object was completely forgotten; he didn't care a jot what the men were saying. For, as he watched, he saw a whisky bottle, half full, standing just against the leg of the table. Jelks's hand came down and seized the bottle, but it was returned to its place a minute later, slightly more empty.

Lee was under no misapprehension as to why the bottle should be placed upon the floor, instead of the table. Mr. Larson, no doubt, had a weakness for whisky, and the cautious skipper decided that the bottle was safer out of the mate's reach.

But, if it was out of Larson's reach, it was within easy grasp of Nelson Lee's hand! The detective wasn't at all anxious to sample the quality of the spirit—he had quite another idea in his mind. The fact that the bottle was there gave him a chance which was totally unexpected and unlooked for.

Lee remembered that the Bo'sun had

been rendered helpless by the administration of a "dope." It would be rather humorous—grimly humorous—for Jelks and Larson to fall victims to the same treatment!

Their own scheme would recoil upon their own heads—and the idea of it gave Nelson Lee acute pleasure. He didn't hesitate a second. The bottle might be removed at any moment, and then it would be too late. Closing the trap-door softly, he fumbled in his breast-pocket, and produced a small leather wallet. It was really a medicine-case, containing drugs and concentrated medicines of all descriptions. Nelson Lee was never without this invaluable wallet, if he could help it.

It contained antidotes to deadly poisons, and such like; and it contained one particular drug which would come in very handy at the present moment. With nimble fingers, Lee unfastened the wallet.

"Hist!" he whispered. "Switch on the light for a moment!"

Those below were tensely on the alert, and Captain Burton pressed the button of his torch at once. Lee withdrew from the wallet a tiny phial with a metal screw-cap. With one twist he had it off, and shook out two small pellets.

Then, stuffing the medicine-case into his pocket again, he nodded. Captain Burton at once extinguished the light, and Lee again raised the trap-door. The bottle was still in the same position.

There was a risk of his arm being seen, but that had to be chanced. Without hesitating, Lee dropped the two pellets into the whisky bottle, and withdrew his hand sharply. It was amazingly lucky, for Captain Jelks reached down for the bottle only a second afterwards.

His foot shifted at the same time, and caught against the edge of the trap-door as it was closing. Lee waited, fearful lest his ruse should be discovered. But Jelks only cursed, and gulped down some more whisky. He evidently thought that his foot had merely caught against a slight inequality in the flooring.

Lee was down with his companions in a few seconds, and there was a gleam in his eyes which Nipper knew of old.

"Well, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"We will give them just ten minutes, boys," murmured Nelson Lee. "By that time, I think, both Mr. Jelks and Mr. Larson will be helpless."

"By the Lord Harry!" exclaimed

Captain Burton. "What have you done?"

"Merely introduced a slight narcotic into our friends' whisky," replied Lee. "They'll come to no harm, but they'll both be asleep very shortly. They treated your son in that way, Captain Burton, and it will be rather fitting for them to fall victims of the same treatment!"

"You've—you've doped 'em?" gasped Nipper excitedly.

"Exactly!"

"Begad! How do you do these things, sir?" asked Sir Montie, with mild wonderment. "It's amazin'—it is really!"

"On the contrary, Trogelis-West, the thing was strikingly simple," smiled Nelson Lee. "Now, we must all be quiet. I will return to the pedestal above, and listen. I don't think we shall have to wait long."

Lee was soon in position, and he could hear that Captain Jelks's voice was already thick and muddled. Larson asked for the whisky bottle to be passed over, and a guzzling sound a moment later was clear evidence that the request had been granted. Further guzzlings, in fact, conclusively proved that Jelks had forgotten to ask for the return of the bottle; and the mate was making hay while the sun shone, so to speak. Nothing could have been better from Nelson Lee's point of view.

For, three minutes later, the only sounds which came down to him were those of heavy, regular breathing.

The skipper and mate of the Southern Cross were helpless!

"By James!" murmured Lee. "I had not hoped for this!"

He pushed the trap-door right back, and nimbly crept up into the cabin. A lamp was swinging overhead, and it cast quite a brilliant light over the dingy cabin. Captain Jelks and Mr. Larson were both sprawling over the table, ap-
parently dead drunk. Their condition, indeed, was very similar to that produced by excessive drinking.

Lee glanced at the whisky bottle, and saw that a quantity of the spirit still remained. And he knew that the drugged men would not be helpless for very long. It was necessary to escape without losing a second.

"Up you come—all of you!" Lee called, putting his head under the table. "Be as quick as you can, and make no noise! The trick has worked!"

"Good egg!" came Nipper's comment. The boys and Captain Burton were soon in the cabin. Nelson Lee had taken his revolver out, and was gripping it firmly.

"We're not going to put up with any nonsense!" he declared in a grim voice. "We've got to leave this ship—and I fancy the crew will be quite easy to handle. Please follow me, and let me take the lead!"

The detective opened the cabin door, and the whole party mounted to the deck. The second mate was on duty, and he strode forward as the prisoners appeared. It was practically dark, and the schooner was cutting along at a spanking pace.

"Why, what in thunder——"

"You will oblige me by keeping your head!" interjected Nelson Lee sharply. "We have escaped, and Jelks and Larson are in the cabin, drink-sodden. I want my orders carried out to the letter—and I mean to see that they are!"

"Well, I'm busted!" gasped the second mate.

"Let's make a prisoner of him, sir!" advised Nipper quickly.

"Say, kid, that ain't necessary!" said the second mate. "I don't want you to think that I'm made o' the same stuff as those scum below. You've escaped, an' I'm durned glad of it, for one! I'd advise you to skip right off!"

"Don't trust him, sir!" muttered Nipper. "He'll be treacherous——"

The second mate had heard the words.

"That's unkind, bust me if it ain't!" he declared. "Just because Jelks an' Larson are a couple of drunken blackguards, it ain't fair to put me in the same list. I'd have helped you before if I could, but where's a second mate with the skipper and first officer hangin' about? If I'd have interfered, I should ha' been chucked in irons for insubordination. I'm with you, gents—and, to prove it, I'll have a boat got ready straight off. Good luck to you!"

"The man's sincere enough!" said Captain Burton to the boys. "It's often the case on an old' hooker of this sort. The second mate's nobody—unless his superiors are too drunk to attend their duties. It's all plain-sailing now."

The second mate proved that he was a decent man, and not a traitor. He gave some sharp orders, and a boat was soon being got ready. The crew were, for the main part, a set of low ruffians, but they

were equally as ready to help the prisoners to escape as they had been to capture them. They merely had to carry out orders, and nothing more. If they had been abruptly told to attack the party, they would have done so with prompt gusto.

The boat was soon ready. It wasn't necessary to stow provisions and water on board, for the coast was quite visible, a low grey line in the dusk. The escape, it seemed, had been a complete success.

But a hitch occurred at the last moment.

Even as Captain Burton was telling the boys to climb aboard the lifeboat, there came a bellowing roar from the cabin. This was followed by the sound of violent swearing. The second mate made a few choice remarks himself.

"You'd better clear right away!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Now, then, men, get busy on them ropes——"

A bellow of fury interrupted him. Captain Jelks had appeared on deck. He came swaying across drunkenly, scarcely able to walk. He had taken far less of the whisky than Larson, and had, consequently, recovered first.

"Who's skipper on this ship?" he roared furiously. "Take them fools prisoners agin! The fust man who refuses to obey orders will 'ave to account to me! Now then, look lively, you slab-sided swabs!"

The men, after a moment's hesitation, charged. They were in deadly fear of the skipper, and obeyed orders mechanically. The second mate, with a glance of real regret, turned to face the enraged Jelks.

"Let's fight!" roared Nipper desperately.

"Begad, I'm ready, dear fellow!" gasped Sir Montie, hitting out.

But it was useless—and Nelson Lee knew it. A fight would have been absolutely futile, for the odds were overwhelming. Even, if by some miracle, they managed to get the boat free, they could never get clear away.

So, within a minute, they were all held fast again. And Captain Jelks, having knocked the poor second mate down with a terrific punch, came swaying across to the captured party. They knew, instinctively, that their treatment now would be infinitely worse than before.

The attempted escape had failed!

CHAPTER VII.

TORPEDOED—MAKING THE RAFT—A SURPRISE—SAFE IN HARBOUR.

CAPTAIN JELKS swore savagely.

"You thought you was clever—eh?" he leered. "By ginger, I'll show you who's clever! You infernal dogs! You took advantage of the situation, an' nearly got away! By thunder, you'll pay for it!"

Captain Burton was very grim.

"You may be master of this ship, Jelks, but you won't be able to have your own way always!" he exclaimed quietly. "The whole proceeding is unlawful, and you know it. You'll get a spell of prison for——"

Jelks laughed drunkenly.

"I don't want any lip!" he snarled. "You ain't goin' back to the lazaret this time—I'll stow you down in the for'ard hold. You'll freeze there, an' wish you was dead! Look lively, you scum!"

He added the last words to several members of the crew, and gave a string of orders intermixed with oaths. It was only too clear that he meant to treat the prisoners with brutal harshness.

Nelson Lee and Captain Burton accepted the situation quietly; what was the good of doing otherwise? But the boys were nearly boiling with fury and disappointment. Just when they had been on the point of escaping! Oh, it was too galling for words!

Jelks lunched across the deck and kicked the second mate into activity. The skipper kept discipline on board his craft by sheer brutality. The crew were afraid to disobey any order.

"I'll learn you who's master of this ship!" roared Jelks, as the second mate scrambled dizzily to his feet. "I'll starve the whole crowd until they come cringin' at my feet for——"

And then something awful happened.

Without the slightest warning there was an appalling, deafening explosion for'ard. A blinding flash of ruddy fire lit up the deep dusk. Everybody on deck was flung down like so many ninepins, and the schooner staggered in her stride.

Everything was dire confusion for a few moments. One of the masts snapped off half way, and fell crashing towards the deck, carrying sails and rigging with it in wild destruction. By a miracle, however, the confusion of tackle fell harmlessly, for nobody was hurt.

And the schooner, having lurched drunkenly, settled down by the head, and listed heavily. The deep, roaring sound of rushing water followed, and the decks were smothered in reeking, choking smoke.

Captain Jelks picked himself up dazedly. The prisoners had been automatically released, and the air was filled with wild cries.

"By thunder!" roared Jelks madly. "We're torpedoed!"

"The boats—the boats!"

"She's sinkin'—make for the boats!"

The crew, momentarily panic-stricken, made a wild rush for the boats. But Captain Jelks tore in amongst the men, and sent two of them flying.

"None o' them games, you blamed swabs!" he bellowed. "You'll take orders from me! Git all the boats overside smartly, an' see that they're properly provisioned! Mr. Larson—where in thunder is that fool mate o'mine?"

The skipper rushed along the deck. He was beginning to lose his own head now, and he had certainly forgotten about the prisoners. They, having found their feet, were standing in a group.

"Torpedoed!" muttered Tommy Watson, very pale. "Oh—oh, my goodness!"

"Dear fellow, it's a shockin' thing," remarked Sir Montie, remaining perfectly calm. "An' what a frightful thing to do, begad! Fancy attackin' a helpless ship like this without even givin' a warnin'!"

"Nothing surprising in that!" said Nipper grimly. "The Huns don't care a toss for innocent lives, Montie. Haven't they proved enough that they're absolute devils? They ain't human beings, and if I had my way, the whole German race would be boycotted after the war—boycotted by every civilised nation!"

"This ain't the time to talk like that," muttered Watson. "Haden't we better find a boat for ourselves? Hang it all, there's no sense in waiting here until we go down, is there?"

But, while Tommy Watson was speaking, Nelson Lee could see that all the boats were being manned by the crew. Captain Jelks came along the deck dragging Mr. Larson with him. The schooner was now listing dreadfully, and it seemed inevitable that she would plunge to her last resting-place within a few minutes.

A roaring clatter from below, followed by a still heavier list, proved that a quan-

tity of the cargo had shifted. The vessel was utterly helpless and at the mercy of the wind and sea.

Of the submarine which had committed this act of murder, there was no sign. The attack had been stealthy, and the U-boat had evidently slid off into the gloom after its fell work had been accomplished; her commander probably feared that the Southern Cross was armed.

"It might have been a mine," said Nipper, staring out over the great water.

"No, my boy, I don't think it was a mine," disagreed Nelson Lee. "But come, we must find places in the boats. We shall be separated, probably, but that cannot be helped. It is a question of life or death now!"

They hastened along the deck, to where the men were piling into the boats. Captain Jelks turned as he heard the party approaching.

"There ain't room for you scum!" he roared harshly. "There ain't room for another blamed mother's son of ye!"

"Look here, Captain Jelks, the schooner is sinking," said Nelson Lee sharply. "You will find places for these boys, at least——"

"Ho! Think you can dictate to me, do you?" snarled Jelks. "There are a couple o' boats for'ard, if you want to get off afore the old hooker sinks. There ain't room here, I tell yer—git your own darned boat overside!"

Nelson Lee saw, at a glance, that there was room for two or three others in the skipper's boat, if it had been slightly overcrowded. And overcrowding, in such an emergency, was only to be expected.

On the other hand, it would be far better to get a boat to themselves. And precious minutes would be wasted while arguing with the villainous captain. Nelson Lee turned and hurried back along the deck, Captain Burton and the boys following. They had some little difficulty in climbing through the mass of wreckage, but reached the for'ard end of the ship in a few minutes.

And here they met with failure, for both boats were completely disabled by the explosion; one was a complete wreck, and the other hopelessly damaged. The explosion had expended its force upwards, for the torpedo had struck the vessel practically on the water-line.

"The dastardly rogue!" exclaimed Nelson Lee curtly. "He must have known that these boats were useless!"

"We'd better rush back, sir!" suggested Nipper.

"Yes, yes—come at once!" said the schoolmaster-detective crisply.

They rushed back this time, and when they reached the stern they found that all the boats had put off, and were now practically lost in the descending darkness. Only the faint splash of oars came to their ears.

They had been left alone on the sinking schooner!

They had been left alone without a boat, and without any means of making their escape. And, if Captain Jelks had not acted deliberately, he must, at least, have suspected the truth. And, in any case, he should have remained on board until every other soul was off. But the precious Jelks thought more of his own skin than anybody else's.

"Are—are we alone on board?" asked Watson, in a whisper.

"Seems like it!" replied Nipper. "I don't think anybody was hurt by the explosion. And the whole crowd got off in the boats. We've been left to sink with the ship—to go down, or to cling to bits of wreckage—"

"Bust my compass!" shouted the Bo'sun. "This ain't a time to talk about going down, messmates! If there ain't a boat, we can fake up something else—what do you say, dad?"

"Why, I was just thinking of saying the same thing myself, Tom, my lad," exclaimed Captain Burton briskly. "We shall have to make a raft, Mr. Alvington. It's the only thing now. She doesn't seem to be taking so much water as she was, and we might just have time!"

"All hands to the pumps!" roared Nipper.

"Begad! Where are they?" asked Sir Montie. "I'm willin'—"

"I didn't mean it literally, you ass!" said Nipper. "We've all got to help to make this raft—it'll be better than clinging to a spar, anyhow!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"We'll take Captain Burton's orders, boys!" he exclaimed. "Since the rightful skipper has deserted the ship, Captain Burton naturally takes his place. The situation may not be so desperate as it appears to be at the moment."

It was very dark, and it was clear, by this time, that the submarine had departed from the vicinity.

All sorts of articles were dragged on to a clear space, and a huge raft was commenced. Captain Burton and the Bo'sun worked like niggers, roping the articles together cunningly and strongly. In the middle of it, after twenty minutes' hard work, Nelson Lee left the party, and made his way for'ard. The others were so occupied that they scarcely noticed his absence.

And he was back within five minutes. He came with a smile on his face, and a cigarette between his lips.

"I think you may as well cease this frenzied labour," he remarked calmly. "There's no necessity for particular hurry."

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "The blessed schooner will sink under us in a few minutes, sir!"

"I don't think so, my boy," replied Lee. "As a matter of fact, the schooner is merely crippled—she isn't taking any more water aboard. We are just drifting, and there's no danger of sinking!"

There was an uproar at once.

"'Pon my soul, are you sure of this, Mr. Alvington?" asked Captain Burton, ceasing his work. "I haven't had time to look myself—"

"I noticed that the vessel had ceased to go down by the head," said Nelson Lee, "and I have just made a brief examination. I should like you to come and have a look, captain. When that cargo shifted, we lurched over to starboard to such an extent that the gash caused by the explosion is now well above the water-line. I don't think we're taking any more of the channel aboard."

"By jingo!" exclaimed Nipper.

Captain Burton lost no time in verifying Nelson Lee's statement. And, sure enough, he found that there was no real danger. The schooner, with careful management, could probably be taken into port in safety.

"The fool!" said Captain Burton, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "He's done for himself now, Mr. Alvington. There's no excuse for a skipper who deserts his ship while it's still seaworthy. Yes, Jelks is done for!"

"Why, can we take the ship to land?" asked Tommy Watson amazedly.

"There is a distinct possibility, at all events," declared the captain. "There'll be salvage money, too—quite a heap of

it, I should imagine. That'll easily pay for the poor old cutter, at all events."

"Salvage!" exclaimed Nipper. "By jingo, that's ripping! And Jelks can be arrested as soon as he sets foot on shore! It's almost unbelievable, you know—we've been actually saved by a rotten Hun submarine!"

"That doesn't make their foul work any the better, my boy," put in Nelson Lee quietly. "But we mustn't crow too soon. It is by no means certain that we can make port in our present condition."

Captain Burton, however, got to work without delay. The wreckage was cleared away as quickly as possible, and, although the sails could not be used properly, the skipper and his son soon succeeded in rigging up a sufficient spread of canvas to give the crippled schooner a small amount of speed.

Then, while the Bo'sun took the wheel, Captain Burton worked out the schooner's exact position by the chart. It was decided to make for Weymouth, that port being the most convenient from the present latitude.

The skipper, of course, knew the channel as a Londoner knows the Strand. And, throughout the night, the Southern Cross was coaxed along, gingerly and gently. She required the most ticklish handling imaginable. Too much speed would have cracked her already strained timbers, and too little would have made it impossible to manage her.

But Captain Burton managed to strike the happy medium by skilful handling. And, just as the dawn was breaking, Weymouth harbour was sighted. Like a crippled warrior staggering back from a battlefield, the schooner edged her way towards the harbour. And, at last, when the daylight had become strong, her anchor was cast overside, and she swung at her moorings.

"You've done magnificently, captain!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "I certainly did not expect such a complete success as this. Captain Jelks is finally beaten, for it will be easy enough to have him arrested as soon as he sets his foot on shore. And there will be quite a number of charges against him!"

Half an hour later, in response to signals, the party was taken ashore in a boat. After brief explanations to the harbour authorities, the tired and jubilant adventurers boarded a train for St. Frank's.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RETURN OF THE "DEAD"—FULLWOOD AND DE VALERIE AREN'T PLEASED WITH THEMSELVES—AND LEE HAS A SHORT AND INTERESTING CHAT WITH CAPTAIN BURTON.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH looked miserable as he lounged on the steps of the Ancient House.

His study chums, Church and McClure, were equally doleful in expression. Several other groups of juniors were standing about, some in the lobby, and some out in the Triangle itself.

A gloom had settled upon St. Frank's, although the sun was shining with unusual brilliance and spring-like warmth.

The fellows were waiting for the breakfast bell to ring. And, for once, there was practically only one topic of conversation throughout the whole school. The tragic affair of the sunken cutter was talked of to the exclusion of all else.

There had been no further news. The Head hadn't made another speech, and the boys had settled themselves to the fact that "old Alvy" and Bennett and Tregellis-West and Watson were dead. As for what had happened to the Bo'sun, nobody thought about it; the other matter completely overshadowed Tom Burton's fate.

"We shall get the full news this morning, you see," said Handforth dolefully. "They'll have picked up the bodies by that time."

"Oh, shut up!" said McClure gruffly.

"Don't talk about it," grunted Church.

"Why not? No sense in being thin-skinned," declared Handforth. "The poor chaps have been done in, so where's the harm of talking about it? There's not a fellow at St. Frank's more cut up than I am. Old Benny was a sport—the finest chap we ever had here—the finest skipper the Remove could wish for, although he wouldn't recognise my ability at footer."

"Oh, don't drag footer in, for goodness' sake," growled Church.

"And poor old Tregellis-West, too," went on Handforth mournfully. "Just think of him being dead! Why, St. Frank's ain't the same place! And old Alvy—who'll take his place, I wonder? Some beastly rotter, I'll bet! Old Alvy was the finest Housemaster——"

"Hallo, a telegram!" shouted Church suddenly.

The telegraph-boy had wheeled in at

the gateway on his bicycle. There was an immediate stampede in his direction, and he was nearly knocked off his machine. But the startled lad was quite unable to give any information; he only knew that he had a wire for the Head.

"News that the bodies have been found, I expect," said Owen major miserably. "Oh, ain't it awful? Just fancy three of our chaps getting drowned like that! I expect the Head'll make an announcement after brekker."

The juniors divided themselves into groups again, and stood talking. Nobody seemed to have an ounce of vitality. There wasn't a smiling face to be seen, or a cheery voice to be heard. The shadow of tragedy hung heavily over the old school.

"Things'll be all changed now," remarked Handforth to a group round the Ancient House steps. "Of course, we shall have to elect a new skipper for the Remove—that'll be me, I suppose."

"Rats!" growled a dozen voices.

"Anything wrong with me?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Yes, a fat lot!" said Hubbard. "But we haven't got time to enumerate all your faults now, Handy. Why, I'd make a better skipper than you, and I know jolly well I'm not much good at the job. There's such a thing as modesty."

"If you accuse me of boasting——"

"Don't start a row now, Handy," implored McClure. "It—it ain't decent!" Handforth nodded at once.

"I suppose you're right," he agreed. "It's hardly the right thing to start rowing when we're—— Why, what—— Great jumping corks!" he gasped, his voice rising to a hoarse bellow. "Look—look!"

Handforth was pointing wildly, and with bursting excitement. The juniors twirled round, and, at the same second, a perfect roar of shouts went up. The explanation was not far to seek.

For, striding in at the gates, were Captain Burton, "Mr. Alvington," Bennett, Tregellis-West, Watson, and Burton. And they were all smiling cheerfully, and seemed as happy as sandboys!

"Great pip!" gasped Hubbard. "They—they've come back!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"It—it can't be true!"

"They weren't drowned after all!"

A chorus of shouts went up. And,

before anybody moved—for they all seemed transfixed—Owen major sent up a shrill, cracked kind of cheer. It was instantly picked up by dozens of voices, and a perfect bellow of cheering rose upon the air.

"Hurrah!"

"Hip-hip-hurrah!"

The cheer must have been heard down in Bellton itself. Certainly there wasn't a single person in the whole of St. Frank's who missed that joyful burst of voices. And fellows came tumbling out from both Houses in scores. They came out of windows and doors like a flood. And the scene which followed was nearly pandemonium. For the space of five minutes practically everybody went mad, particularly the juniors.

The whole school had decided that the party had been drowned. And now, as though from the dead, they had returned! It was little wonder that the fellows released their pent-up feelings in a wildly enthusiastic outburst.

The returned adventurers were practically swept off their feet. Nipper and Tregellis-West and the others were surrounded by an excited, yelling mob. Nelson Lee was no exception, and he smiled good-humouredly. For he easily recognised that this mad welcome was a sign of his own and the boys' popularity in the school. Somehow, they all felt rather chokey.

And when, at last, they were allowed to make their way indoors, they were followed by an almost hysterical crowd. The masters themselves came out, and made no attempt to quell the disorder. Any such attempt would certainly have failed.

But, apart from all the other fellows, two Removites were lounging beneath the chestnuts. Their faces did not express happiness. A certain relief was in their eyes, perhaps, but they looked gloomy. Needless to say, the pair were Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Cecil De Valerie.

"Alive all the time!" snorted Fullwood. "I say, what thundering asses we were!"

"Thanks!" sneered De Valerie. "Drag me into it—I don't mind!"

"Well, didn't you come to the Head's study——"

"And didn't I try to drag you away before you went in?" snapped De Valerie curtly. "It doesn't make much difference to me, anyhow. I should have got

a flogging. I expect. But you were out of it—and now you're in it!"

"Oh, rats!"

De Valerie grinned unfeelingly. The precious pair, in fact, were exceedingly sorry that they had been so ready to own up. They called themselves fools, but it was too late to draw back now.

They were booked for a flogging, and there was no doubt that they deserved it!

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And while the school was seething with excitement, Nelson Lee quietly related to the Head all that had occurred since his departure from St. Frank's. Dr. Stafford was nearly overwhelmed with relief and joy. He had received word of the party's safety by telegram only a few minutes before the return of the adventurers themselves.

And, after prayers, the Head very wisely announced that the day was to be a whole holiday for the entire school. He knew well enough that work was practically impossible for the boys in their present state of excitement; moreover, the occasion demanded a special celebration.

Nipper and Co. and the Bo'sun were simply made breathless when they went among their fellow-juniors. They were urged to tell their story again and again to admiring audiences.

In return they learnt all about the terrible news of the cutter's disaster. At first Nipper and Co. had been much amazed at their startling welcome, for they had not dreamed of such a state of affairs. But they had been thought dead! They took great interest in listening to the Removites' stories.

Fullwood and De Valerie were practically forgotten; and the sentence of Coventry until the end of the term was forgotten also.

And, meanwhile, Nelson Lee was having a chat with Captain Burton in his own study. They had been discussing the whole affair, and the skipper had thanked the detective again and again for all he had done.

"My boy is back in the school now," he exclaimed gladly. "His name is cleared, too, and there'll be no more trouble. That infernal Jelks will be safe in prison for a year or two. He won't

come within a hundred miles of this school, I'll warrant! His scheme failed."

"I don't want to be curious, Captain Burton," said Lee. "But may I be allowed to hear a few details concerning this treasure island of yours? I am naturally somewhat interested."

"My dear sir, I shall tell you everything—everything," declared Captain Burton.

And, without delay, he went into details regarding the sunken hoard of gold which lay concealed within the rotting timbers of a Spanish galleon, beneath the blue waters of a Pacific island lagoon.

"As I told you before, Mr. Alvington, I am thinking of fitting out a vessel for the trip this very summer," said Captain Burton. "By the Lord Harry! I've got a splendid idea. You folks have a holiday in the summer, don't you?"

"Quite a long vacation," smiled Nelson Lee.

"Then, by Caesar, what's to prevent you coming along with me?" demanded Captain Burton, with shining eyes. "You, and my Tom and those three splendid young fellows who are his chums? What's to prevent you all coming? Jelks wanted to force the secret from me, but that's all ended now. You've simply got to come, my dear sir. I'll take no refusal!"

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"You are very generous, Captain Burton," he exclaimed. "But some months must pass before the summer holidays. The matter can be revived later on."

"It shall be. It certainly shall be!" vowed the skipper. "I'll make all my preparations to fit in, Mr. Alvington. Don't say anything to the boys—let it come as a surprise in the summer time. A holiday in the Pacific, searching for treasure! It sounds good, eh?"

"Wonderfully good," agreed Nelson Lee. "I only hope, Captain Burton, that the programme may be carried out."

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As to whether the programme was actually carried out—well, that is quite another story. And much was to happen at St. Frank's before the summer vacation came round.

And thus the affair ended, after much excitement and peril.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Grip of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By CLEMENT HALE.

NOTE.—As the title "In the Hands of the Huns" has already been used, we have altered the name of our Serial to the above.

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

GEORGE GRAY and his brother **JACK**, who are the English Staff of the Berlin Rovers, a football club in Germany.

OTTO BRACK is a scoundrelly German member of the team. But another German, named

CARL HOFFMAN, is friendly, and advises the Englishmen to leave Germany, which they refuse to do. They are arrested and sent to a camp at Oberhemmel.

(Now read on).

HOW GEORGE GOT EVEN WITH AN OLD ENEMY.

THE prison of Oberhemmel, as George first pictured it, was a massive and pretentious structure, thoroughly German in design, which looked strong enough to stand till Eternity.

Grim and frowning it was, with small barred windows, and narrow look-out slits.

Its entrance was utterly forbidding, seeming to promise the tortured soul that passed its gates every restriction, indignity and hardship which such a place can afford.

As they neared the entrance the gates swung creaking wide, and beyond the threshold they could see armed guards.

In a darkened doorway of the big barracks that lay back a little distance from the gates, sentries stood, whose bayonets flashed as they took a turn.

Sombre and frowning, the place struck a chill to the hearts of the weary prisoners of war. How long were they to be incarcerated here? What sort of treatment would be meted out to them? Was this to be a temporary prison, or would they be removed elsewhere?

George Gray cast a side glance to the grim but not ill-looking soldier who marched beside him.

"What place is this?" he demanded.

"The common gaol," was the reply.

"Shall we be kept here?"

The man shrugged.

"I don't know. Internment camps in the open will be organised, I think. I cannot say."

"Shall we be separated, George?" asked Jack, whose steps dragged wearily, and who looked too tired to stand further fatigue.

"I don't know, boy. I pray not. We shan't if anything I can do can prevent it."

The look of affection Jack cast his brother went to the big footballer's heart. He gripped his brother's arm, and helped him along. And it was permitted for once.

Across an open space, heavily gravelled, they went, and through an archway that led to a sort of parade-ground, walled in with a high wall on one side, and frowned over by the prison on the three other.

It was almost dark, though the sky was light yet from the afterglow.

They were brought to a halt, and lined up as before.

They were numbered, and again their numbers were taken.

Then ensued a long wait, while the officer in command of the escort apparently went to make his report.

It was insufferable waiting there. Some of them dropped from sheer fatigue and want of food, the weaker among them sobbing bitterly.

The man Wilson became almost mutinous. He reviled the guards and all Germans, and the country that had used them so badly.

"Give us food and water, if you've any manhood among you!" he roared. The cry was taken up.

"Give us food! Give us food!"

Louder and louder grew the cries, until they echoed back from the stone walls.

Then there came a diversion. A German officer—they afterwards knew that he was the governor of the prison—made his appearance, accompanied by a crowd of under-officers. The commander of the escort was talking to him.

The governor was gesticulating fiercely, and the quarrel was carried on under the very noses of the prisoners.

At last he stopped close to where George and his brother stood.

"You bring me prisoners, and hand me orders," he raved, "without my having been apprised of your coming! The prison is full. I cannot house this riff-raff here!"

"Sir, I am afraid you must. I have done as I was bidden. The fault is not mine."

The governor raved and cursed but submitted.

"They will have to sleep in the vaults and cellars to-night, then," said he in German.

George Gray understood his remark.

"I don't care where you put us, sir," he said, raising his voice so that all could hear, "as long as you give us food. We have eaten nothing to-day. We are dying of thirst!"

The governor looked at him in astonishment. He was about to reply when Jack reeled, and fell fainting in his brother's arms.

"Bear up, Jack, old boy!" choked George Gray.

Then he bore his brother to where the governor stood.

"Look! He has fainted. Is this how Germans treat Englishmen who have done them no harm?" he snarled, his eyes darting fire.

The governor questioned the commander of the escort, and learned from him that what the Englishman said was true.

"There was no time to get food," the officer explained. "We had no orders to procure either food or drink during the journey. They have had enough."

The clamouring prisoners, who seemed

about to burst their ranks, and make a fight for it, uttered an echoing shout of execration.

The governor held up his hand.

"You shall have food—such as the prison affords—as soon as it is convenient," he cried, and then he ordered a man to show George the way.

"You'd better take your friend inside," said he.

"He is my brother," cried George, his voice trembling with suppressed rage.

"Then take him away."

George, holding his brother tight in his arms, and carrying him as if he were a mere babe, followed a sergeant and two soldiers to the prison house.

They entered it, were led through an interminable series of passages, and at last shown into a sort of office.

Here a man was seated beneath a flaring gas jet reading an evening newspaper, and smoking a big German pipe.

He was in uniform like the others.

Some words passed between him and the sergeant, and George laid his brother gently down.

He did not look at the man who'd put his paper aside and was staring at him hard.

"So, English prisoners, are they?" he heard the man say in what seemed a strangely-familiar voice. "It's a pity the Fatherland has to look after them in time of war. Far better put them all against a wall and shoot them. What's the matter with the younger one?"

"He's fainted. Want of food," the sergeant explained. "And he's been through enough, poor devil!"

The other laughed.

"Fainted, has he!" he cried. "Well, I'll soon bring him too!"

With that he left the room.

He was absent a minute or a little more perhaps, and he returned bringing a pail full of water with him. George Gray was only half conscious of the fact. He thought vaguely that the water was for drinking purposes.

Not a bit of it.

"Stand away there!" shouted the brute coarsely.

Instinctively, without grasping the man's meaning, George Gray stepped aside, and as he did so the rascal hurled the contents of the bucket full in the face of the unconscious lad, drenching

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his clothes and covering the stone floor with the splashing liquid.

A cry of horror burst from George's lips.

"You villain!" he roared. "You black-hearted villain!"

Then, as he prepared to spring on the cur, he recognised him.

"Great Heaven," he shouted, "it's Kutz—"

He could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes. But he'd made no mistake. It was Kutz, their Berlin landlord, Kutz, who had betrayed them; Kutz, who had kept back their luggage, and brought the police to arrest them; Kutz, who might have enabled them to leave Germany before war had broken out, if he'd had the slightest spark of decency and gratitude in his composition.

At the recognition George saw red. There was murder in his heart, and afterwards he wondered why he held his hand for even a second.

But want of food had robbed him of the power for instant action, which was so characteristic of him, he afterwards knew.

But Kutz was speaking.

"Yes, George Gray," he laughed, "it's Kutz! Your old friend Kutz. You're surprised to see me in uniform—eh? But I am helping the Fatherland. We're going to bring Great Britain to her knees. And as you and your brother are to stay here for a while, I can promise you all the old attention and consideration you used to receive at my hands. Yes, all—all!"

And he laughed a devilish laugh.

The walls swam before George's eyes.

"Rules are strict here," he heard Kutz gabble on. "Prisoners have to obey them. If they don't they are flogged. And I shall wield the cat, perhaps. Can you feel it on your quivering flesh, Englishman?"

He got no further. The breaking-point had been reached.

George did not care a straw what became of him. He had a score to wipe off the slate. He'd his brother to avenge.

And so he hurled himself at the villain, driving him back under a shower of blows.

Kutz tried in vain to stand up against him. George's fists landed on the yielding flesh, breaking the skin, and striking

to the bone until his face was bruised and bleeding.

Kutz kicked at him, driving his nailed boot against George's ribs.

The footballer did not care. He'd suffered as much as that in a friendly game of football with the Huns.

He only hit the harder, and felled the brute to the ground with a mighty blow.

The sergeant and the two soldiers then seized him and dragged him across the room, driving their knees into the small of his back.

He shook himself free, and sent them staggering.

They came at him again, but he dropped them one after the other, then swung round to meet Kutz as the rascal staggered to his feet.

Kutz seized a rifle, and drove a smashing blow with the butt end at George's head. Had it landed it would have crushed the skull, and there would have been a sudden termination of this history.

The footballer was wary, keen-eyed, and as cool as a cucumber now.

He side-stepped the blow, ducking under it, and the rifle butt struck the stone floor with such force as to send the wood flying in splinters.

Then, rising erect, George gave the scoundrel the haymaker's lift with the right full under the chin, and as he went down pounced upon him, and pummelled him as he lay.

He meant having no mercy on him. All that he'd suffered, all that he'd seen other Englishmen and Englishwomen suffer at German hands since he and Jack had started from Berlin came uppermost in his mind then.

He knew that he would probably never have another chance like this, and the more the wretch howled and whined, and blubbed for mercy, the fiercer he became.

"Mercy!" he hissed. "It would be a mercy to kill you—"

And then— There came a rush of feet, the ring of voices, and soldiers came pouring into the room, headed by an officer, who took in the situation at a glance.

"Seize that man!" he roared.

The soldiers rushed forward, and kicked at George.

With a moan of agony the footballer

(Continued overleaf.)

raised his head, and looked up at them, looked up to see a man swing his rifle.

He saw the butt end coming down, and tried to avoid it.

Too late!

A dull crash. A deafening roar in his ears, and the dancing of a million lights before his eyes, and then came—blackness.

George Gray knew no more.

A FRIENDLY HUN.

WHEN George Gray awoke it was to find himself in darkness.

He lay upon something hard like a board, and his head throbbed with a dull pain.

Where was he? What had happened?

For a while he lay still and tried to think. Then he raised his hand to his head to find something damp there. And he remembered.

Of course! He had met and fought with the rascal Kutz. That was no dream; but a stern reality, and this darkened place in which he found himself, and into which just a faint streak of light penetrated from somewhere must be a cell. For was he not confined in the prison at Oberhimmel?

He stretched out his hands, and found a stone wall close to him. He then swung his legs, and discovered that he was lying on a wooden bed without mattress or pillow.

He sat up and called aloud.

"Is anyone there?"

For answer his own voice echoing, mocked him.

"Jack, Jack! Are you there Jack?"

No reply. George then buried his face in his hands and groaned aloud. He was alone. They had separated him from his brother. For a while, feeling weak, dazed, ill, and utterly played out, he remained for a long time overcome with such a despair as he had never known.

George Gray was not a man to allow his feelings to overwhelm him for long, however. The mood passed away, and as he again became conscious of the craving of an intolerable hunger and thirst, he rose to his feet, and his eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness he saw that he was in a narrow cell. Swiftly he located the door, and having found it, beat upon it with his fists.

No answer.

He tried again and again, and then kicked the door savagely, until, at last, he heard a guttural echo, and the sound of approaching steps.

Then a small wicket or peep-hole was opened, and a pair of bright Hunnish eyes peeped in.

"Ach, Himmel! Quiet there. The others are trying to sleep," said the owner of the piercing orbs.

"What have they done with my brother? He had fainted when I set upon that scoundrel Kutz. Where is he? Is he all right?"

"He's all right, Englishman. The doctor saw him. He soon came round. He's in one of the cells in this block. They've given him food and drink, and made him comfortable."

(To be continued)

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

Will be Entitled:

"A DREAD SECRET!"

It is Another Magnificent Tale of NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and HIS CHUMS OF ST. FRANK'S.

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