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A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S. Specially written by the Author of "The Rebel Remove," "Sticking To Their Guns," etc., etc.

May 18, 1918.

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A SCRAP OF PAPER!



A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER
AT ST. FRANK'S. Specially written
by the Author of "The Rebel
Remove," "Sticking To Their
Guns," 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 great 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.

(The narrative related throughout by Nipper.)

HOLDING OUT—VISITORS FROM THE THIRD—
TROUBLE IN THE AIR.

WILLARD'S ISLAND was quiet. The afternoon sun shone down gloriously, and a faint breeze rustled the leaves in the beeches and willows. The River Stowe flowed by lazily, and little clumps of flies buzzed with drowsy monotony.

The fact of the matter was, most of the denizens of Willard's Island were feeling lazy after partaking of a hearty midday meal. I won't call it dinner, because dinner under the present circumstances was somewhat difficult. We had fed well, and that was sufficient.

Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were lying in elegant positions in the long grass. Both were reading, and a short distance away Handforth was commencing to snore in the most unmistakable fashion.

As for myself, I surveyed the whole scene with complete satisfaction. As Commander-in-Chief of the Remove Revolutionary Army I felt great responsibility for the safety and well-being of my troops.

That morning the enemy had been repulsed. We had scored a distinct victory, the enemy retiring in complete disorder. Since this great event things had been extremely quiet on Willard's Island.

The enemy—in other words, Mr. Kennedy

Hunter, M.A.—had not put in a second appearance, and I was just a wee bit disappointed. For, to tell the truth, I had been hoping that he would state his willingness to open peace negotiations without further delay.

By this time Mr. Hunter surely realised that the Rebel Remove was quite capable of sticking to its guns until further orders. If Mr. Hunter did not choose to accept our terms, we were ready to hold out for another week—or even ten days.

The barring-out had been going on for several days as it was. We had had varied adventures, but Mr. Hunter had been defied all along the line. In spite of repeated attempts to quell us the new Housemaster of the Ancient House was forced to admit that we held the upper hand.

We had proved our determination, and it was now "up to" Mr. Hunter to accept our terms. We should certainly never surrender. A deadlock had been arrived at, and, so far as I could see, the only solution was for Mr. Hunter to accept defeat.

It was a half-holiday at the school. But this made no difference to us. Lessons, so far as the Remove was concerned, had ceased to exist.

Mind you, we were quite ready and willing to return to the Ancient House. The barring-out was becoming a trifle stale. We had no quarrel with the recognised rules of St. Frank's; this was no rebellion against authority. Our grievance was that Mr. Hunter imposed tyranny upon the Remove—and we had revolted as a protest.

For no reason whatever Mr. Hunter had forbidden all cricket in the Remove; he had placed the playing-fields out of bounds. Not content with these restrictions, all junior meetings were prohibited, and the time-honoured system of taking tea in our own studies was abruptly abolished.

But this was not all. In a hundred different ways Mr. Hunter had tyrannised over the Remove—and particularly Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and myself. Study C was the leading study in the Remove, and we three occupied it. We had therefore been singled out for particularly harsh treatment.

At last, in desperation, we had jibbed, and a barring-out had been organised. From the very start it had been a success, and we were justified in feeling that Mr. Hunter would soon be forced to climb down.

Our stronghold on Willard's Island was impregnable. Our defence system was perfect, and enemy attacks could easily be repulsed. As regards food, we had plenty—having commandeered a van-load of supplies destined for the Ancient House.

There was an old building on the island known as Willard's Folly. It had been built by some cranky individual years before. The place was designed after the style of an ancient castle, with turrets and battlements. Thus we felt like conquerors of old in possession of captured territory.

"We shall be having visitors before long," I remarked absently.

Tregellis-West looked up from his story paper.

"Speakin' to me, Benny boy?" he asked, yawning.

"I was speaking to anybody," I replied. "There'll be visitors along presently. Dinner's over at St. Frank's, and the fellows are sure to come along and have a squint at us. There'll be boatloads of them down the river soon."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "There's one comin' now."

Many of the rebels were on their feet, interestedly watching the progress of two or three boats which were coming down the river from the direction of the school. I was rather thoughtful. Should I allow any visitors to land? So long as they were to be trusted I decided there would be no harm in permitting it.

But we had to be very careful. Mr. Hunter was capable of trickery—I was convinced of that. If it suited his purpose he would send a crowd of Sixth-Formers down to us with expressions of friendship, intending all the time to trick us. But of course the Sixth wouldn't take a hand in any shady business of that sort. That was one consolation.

The first boat contained Bob Christine and Yorke and Talmadge, of the College House. These cheerful youths were also members of the Remove, but they were not under the control of Mr. Hunter. At ordinary times Christine, and Co. were our deadly rivals,

but at present all House antagonism was at a standstill.

"What-ho, my merry rebels!" grinned Christine, as his boat drifted near the island. "You look cheerful enough, I must say. When the dickens is this business coming to an end?"

"When Hunter gives in," I replied promptly.

"Afraid you'll have to wait a long time, then," said Yorke. "Hunter's going about the school raging like a lion. The fellows in his House are having a frightful time of it. The Fifth's tearing its hair."

Christine's boat drifted nearer.

"You can land if you want to!" I said, strolling down to the bank. "But you do so on your own responsibility. Don't say we invited you. I suppose old Stockdale's forbidden any intercourse with such young reprobates as ourselves?"

Christine and Co. grinned as they jumped ashore.

"Our Housemaster is a decent chap, thank goodness!" said Christine with a nod. "He's got plenty of sense, and hasn't given any orders at all. If we had Hunter in our House we'd squash him!"

"My dear chap, that's just what we're trying to do ourselves!" said Tommy Watson. "But Housemasters are awkward fellows to squash. Haven't you brought any news? We want to know what's been going on."

"Nothing much," said Christine. "Things have been a bit upside down, of course. Old Crowell has refused to have anything to do with old Hunter, and the Remove—what's left of it—is without a Form-master."

"So you've been havin' a high old time—what?" grinned De Valerie.

The Monks shook their heads.

"Not exactly," replied Christine. "Stockdale has been taking us himself, and we've been kept hard at it. I believe Hunter's making arrangements for a new Form-master—anyhow, Mr. Stockdale hinted at something to that effect."

"But Hunter ain't the Head!" protested McClure. "He hasn't got the right to appoint Form-masters. What's become of Dr. Stafford?"

"He hasn't come back yet," said Christine. "And while he's away Hunter's making hay. He's shoved himself into the Head's shoes, and is doing as he likes. But he takes good care to steer clear of the College House!"

"Isn't he looking subdued?" asked Watson anxiously.

"He looked wet this morning!" grinned Talmadge. "My hat! He was just like a drowned rat when he crawled across the Triangle. Did you duck him in the river?"

"No, he fell in," I replied. "Handforth turned the hose on him——"

"Hose?" repeated Christine, staring.

"My dear chap, you're behind the times!" I exclaimed. "In the dark hours of the night we borrowed the old fire-engine from the village—they don't want it now they've got the new one—and fixed it up for defensive purposes."

"Souse me! It was a huge success, mess-mates," chuckled the Bo'sun.

"I think the attackers were soused, Bo'sun," I remarked humorously. "Hunter was completely defeated—in spite of his crowd of hired ruffians. By jingo! It was a sight for sore eyes, Christine!"

"Well, we'd like to have a look round," remarked Talmadge.

De Valerie offered to act as escort, and the three College House fellows were carried off into the "castle." I then became aware that two boats were coming down on the current. The fact that they were zigzagging in a somewhat erratic fashion gave me a clue as to the identity of the occupants. Such an exhibition of rowing could only have been perpetrated by Third Form fags.

A nearer view confirmed my suspicion. The first boat was in possession of Owen minor and Heath and Lemon. Behind them came Conroy minimus, Jones, and two or three other members of the fag fraternity.

"We shall have the whole giddy school down here before long," growled Hubbard. "We don't want those cheeky fags messing about here. Yell to your minor to sheer off, Owen major!"

"Rats!" said Owen major. "The kids can land if they want to, I suppose?"

Hubbard turned to me for support.

"I don't suppose they'll want to land, anyhow," I remarked. "They've only come down to have a look on. The whole crowd belongs to the Ancient House; and it's a wonder they've come at all. I should have thought they would have been scared of Hunter."

"Don't you come here, you silly fags!" roared Hubbard.

Handforth, who was lying near, suddenly awoke from his sleep and looked up in a dazed kind of fashion. The sun was in his eyes, and a fly had settled upon his rather prominent nose.

"What the dickens—Gerraway, you beastly plague!" he roared, making a dive at the fly, and missing it. His huge hand whizzed through the air and unfortunately alighted upon the upturned face of Church, who was lying asleep.

"Yaroo!" howled Church, sitting up. "Who—who punched my nose?"

"Oh, don't make a fuss over nothing!" snapped Handforth. "My hand slipped!"

Church, who had received a violent blow, was inclined to be wrathful.

"Your hand slipped!" he shouted. "You're—you're dotty! How could your hand slip on to my nose?"

"It's big enough, anyhow," snapped Handforth tartly. "As a matter of fact, I thought I'd hit somebody's boot!"

Church was at a loss for words.

"Catching flies is a risky game, Handy," I grinned. "And when a fellow's got fists like yours he ought to be careful what he's doing."

"What's the matter with my fists?" roared Handforth.

"Well, they seem to be out of place," I

remarked calmly. "You ought to be proud of those fists, Handy. They're your strongest point. When you enter a room, the first thing a chap sees is your fist——"

"You leave my hands alone!" said their owner darkly. "If you ain't careful, Benny, I'll dot you one on the nose."

"What about discipline?" I asked. "I thought you had rather strict ideas on that subject, Handy? I'm your Commander-in-Chief——"

"Not just now," roared Handforth. "I'm not going to be insulted—Hullo! What's the matter with your nose, Church? It's been bleeding, by the look of it. Have you been having a fight?"

Church gasped.

"You—you ass!" he roared. "Didn't you punch me?"

"Rot! I only gave you a tap!" said Handforth. "And that was an accident, too. You shouldn't shove your silly face in my way!"

"I was asleep!" bawled Church warmly.

"Oh, I'm fed up with your growls!" sniffed Handforth, walking away. "Can't stand a little tap on the nose now!"

Considering that Handforth had done his best to drive Church's nose into his face, this was certainly rather cool. And a moment later Handforth was making himself very evident in another direction. While the great Edward Oswald had been asleep, Willard's Island had been strangely peaceful. But now the most noticeable thing of all was Handforth's megaphone-like voice.

Handforth had a habit of taking responsibilities upon himself which were quite outside his province. All the other fellows were content to let me rule the roost, so to speak; but Handforth had fixed ideas of his own.

"Now then, you fags!" he shouted importantly. "Sheer off! If you bring those boats any nearer you'll be treated to a dose of cold water from the hose! We don't allow any invaders to set foot on our territory!"

Owen minor, in the first boat, snorted.

"You ain't in command of this place, I suppose?" he said warmly.

"Never you mind who's in command!" roared Handforth, who didn't quite like that reminder from a fag. "If Bennett hasn't got the sense to order you away somebody else has got to do it. Buzz off!"

I grinned and waited. There was no necessity for me to interfere. Handforth was quite capable of dealing with this situation. Personally, I didn't care whether the fags landed or not—after all, it was their own look out. But Handforth was most decided in his views.

"We want to come and have a look round!" shouted Lemon, of the Third.

"You shut up, Juicy!" said Owen minor darkly. "I'm leading this expedition——"

"Rats! I'm just as important as you are—see!" shouted the fag who rejoiced in the name of "Juicy" Lemon. "I vote we give Handforth a splashing. I don't see why he should dictate to us."

And without waiting for support, Master Lemon lifted his oar and sent showers of spray whirling over the indignant Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Regad! You asked for it, Handy—you did, really!"

"I'll—I'll drown the lot of 'em!" roared Handforth, who was considerably wet. "You wait until you come nearer——"

"We ain't coming, thanks," grinned Owen minor. "We wouldn't set foot on your rotten old island for anything! Yah, rebels! Go and get your face washed, Handy! Yah, bully!"

Handforth fairly danced with helplessness. For terms the fags had been forced to put up with Handforth's high-handed manners. But now they had an excellent opportunity of calling him what they liked with impunity. And they took advantage of the fact that Handforth's dignity did not allow him to retaliate in a similar fashion. Both Lemon and Owen minor prepared to indulge in some more splashing practice.

But just then an urgent hail came from the second boat.

"Cave!" shouted Jones. "Old Suncliffe!"

The manner in which the fags livened up was remarkable. Amid great splashing the two boats attempted to get out into the current. But just when they were about to make headway an elderly man with thin features appeared from the meadow which bordered the riverside.

He paused, his gown billowing in the breeze.

"Owen minor! Lemon! Jones!" he shouted angrily. "Bring those boats here at once! Don't dare to disobey me, you young rascals! Come here immediately!"

The fags gave us a hopeless glance and steered towards the shore. Mr. Suncliffe was the master of the Third-Form, and his word was not to be ignored. In the Third Mr. Suncliffe was popularly known as "Sunny," this being merely a contraction of his name. It was, however, greatly misleading.

For Mr. Suncliffe was easily the most unpopular master at St. Frank's—excluding Mr. Hunter, of course. Hunter wasn't a St. Frank's master at all really, he was only a temporary measure, so to speak.

But Mr. Suncliffe had been the master of the Third for years, and he would probably retain that post for further years. As a scholar and a Form-master he was undoubtedly capable. But his temper was vile, and he was regularly in the habit of performing mean, petty actions which stamped him as a "beast."

"Serve the young asses right!" said Handforth vindictively, as he tried to dry himself with his handkerchief—a somewhat hopeless task.

The Third Form boats drew in to the river bank and the fags scrambled ashore. They were looking rather rebellious. Owen minor, who was the leader of all the mischief in the Third, was quite cheeky, in fact.

"We were only having a row, sir!" he exclaimed warmly. "There's no harm in having a row down the river, I suppose?"

Mr. Suncliffe frowned.

"Do not dare to excuse your conduct, Owen——" he began.

"There's nothing to excuse, sir," retorted the Third-Former. "It's a half-holiday, and the river ain't out of bounds——"

"You were associating yourselves with those wretched boys on the island!" snapped Mr. Suncliffe angrily. "I expressly ordered you to refrain from approaching the rebels, and you have openly defied me."

"Please, sir," gasped Lemon. "We—we were only passing by!"

"That's all, sir!" said Owen minor. "Handforth spoke to us and we just answered. I don't see that you can punish us——"

"Silence, you insolent boy!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe. "Follow me at once! I intend to detain you in your Form-room for the remainder of the afternoon. You must be made to understand that my orders are not to be flouted!"

The fags eyed one another with dismay. But they followed Mr. Suncliffe. Owen minor waved to us on the island, and I could see that his expression was grim. Certainly Mr. Suncliffe was needlessly severe. But he did not altogether disapprove of Mr. Hunter's methods.

"There's trouble brewing in the Third," I remarked thoughtfully.

And before so very long I was to find that my prediction was very true. The heroes of the Third were becoming fed-up!

CHAPTER II.

A SCOUTING TRIP—MR. HUNTER MAKES PLANS AND BATES RECEIVES A SHOCK.

DAWKNESS fell over Willard's Island.

The evening had been glorious, and the night promised to be starry and quiet. The weather, in point of fact, had been splendid right from the start of the harring-out. I only hoped that we should continue to be favoured.

Most of the rebels were "indoors"—that is, within the rough old building which was our temporary home. But Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I were lounging in one of the turrets.

We were on the watch, and should be relieved after another half-hour.

"A penny for 'em, dear old boy," said Sir Montie languidly.

"Eh?" I started. "Speaking to me?"

"I just offered you a penny, old fellow."

"For my thoughts?" I asked. "Oh, I was just—just thinking, you know."

"Go hon!" said Tommy Watson sarcastically. "I suppose you're wondering when old Hunter will give in?"

"No, I'm not," I replied. "As a matter of fact, I was thinking of—of the gov'nor," I added, in a lower tone. "I was wondering

how he got on last night. It's a jolly queer business, my sons. Hunter's up to a shady game of some sort."

"What's the good of worrying?" growled Watson. "We can't do anything, can we?"

"I'm not so sure about that," I replied. "When we get relieved, I'm going to do some scouting. If possible, I want to have a squint down that shaft on the other island."

And I nodded towards a tiny islet which was just visible in the gloom, lower down the river.

"Begad! Won't it be too risky?" asked Montie softly.

"We can't count the risks," I replied. "But I suppose you look at the matter from a different point of view. I've been used to detective work for years, and I just gloat over a bit of an adventure; and if there's a risk attached to it—well, that just adds some spice."

My chums looked at me solemnly. Of course, they knew that I was Nipper, and they knew that "Mr. Alvington," of the Ancient House, was Nelson Lee. But they were the only fellows in the whole of St. Frank's who shared the secret.

The gov'nor was away—hence the presence of Mr. Hunter, and, incidentally, the barring-out. I was well aware of the fact that Nelson Lee was only a short distance away—he was still in the neighbourhood—and the principal object of his attentions was the hateful Mr. Hunter.

There had been some queer goings-on. Not unnaturally, I was anxious to find out a few things for myself. There was a strange underground cavern, reached by means of the old quarry tunnels. Nelson Lee was actively engaged upon a task connected with this cavern. He had impersonated a mysterious German, and Mr. Hunter had evidently become suspicious.

At all events the gov'nor had been taken by surprise by Hunter the previous night. Stunned, Nelson Lee had been left upon the little island I was now gazing at, while Mr. Hunter went for assistance. Montie and Tommy and I had chipped in then, and Nelson Lee had been taken away safely.

On the islet stood a hollow tree, but it was not such an innocent object as it looked, for at its base there was an opening to a stairway; and I was quite convinced that this was merely another exit from the cavern.

What this cavern contained, or how much Mr. Hunter was connected with it, remained a mystery to me. I only knew that he was a criminal of some sort, and that Nelson Lee was doing his utmost to obtain the evidence necessary to warrant a prompt arrest. By what the gov'nor had told me, his case was nearly completed.

But I badly wanted to do something on my own account. And it would be fairly safe to land upon the islet and examine the hollow tree. I had an idea in my mind that Mr. Hunter was a member of a gang of international crooks. At all events, his position at St. Frank's was a mere cloak.

The fact that he was an M.A. was of no

consequence. There have been many master-criminals who had attained considerable fame before embarking upon their careers of crime. Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the High Lord of the Circle of Terror, was a good example of this. But I was positively sure that this business was in no way connected with the infamous Circle of Terror.

"Of course, we'll stand by you," said Tommy Watson slowly. "If you go to the other island, Bennett, we'll go with you. That's understood."

"Begad, rather!" nodded Sir Montie. "We couldn't think of lettin' you go wanderin' about by yourself, Benny boy. You need lookin' after—you do, really. You've got an appallin' habit of runnin' into danger."

"But I generally manage to get out alive and kicking, don't I?" I grinned. "But I don't expect we shall do much this evening. It's too early, for one thing, and Mr. Hunter may be busy at the school. I shouldn't be surprised if he knuckled under to-night. This barring-out can't go on for ever."

"That's just what I was wonderin'," said Tregellis-West gravely. "What about the holidays, dear boy? And what about when we come back after the holidays? Shall we take up our quarters on this island—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" I chuckled. "This game can't go on much longer. If it comes to it, we shall have to stick here until the gov'nor returns. But I don't believe it'll come to that."

Shortly afterwards our relief turned up. De Valerie and Owen major and Canham took up the watch, and we were released from duty.

"Everything quiet?" asked the Rotter—as he was called in the Remove, although he did not deserve that nickname now.

"Not a sound," I replied. "But keep a sharp look-out, De Valerie. There's no telling what Hunter will be up to. We're going off in one of the boats, to do a bit of scouting. But we shall probably be within hail most of the time."

"Right-ho!"

We descended from the turret and made our way down to the water. The boats were all drawn up on the grassy bank, but we soon had one of them down into the river. As was usual on these trips, Watson steered, Sir Montie did nothing, and I took the oars.

We slipped down on the current, and I scarcely exerted myself in the slightest. There was no hurry, and we were particularly anxious to make no noise. It was rather in our favour that the tiny island was covered with thick trees and bushes, and our approach could not have been observed unless somebody was deliberately on the watch—which was very improbable.

Our boat nosed its way in among the reeds silently, and I stowed the oars inboard and quietly hauled myself on to the bank. I secured the painter loosely, and then beckoned to my chums.

"Follow me singly," I whispered, "and don't talk at all. There's no telling who's about, and we can't be too cautious."

"Lead on Macduff!" murmured Watson. I crept silently forward, and the others followed me. I was in no hurry, and occupied five minutes in covering twenty yards. By then I was within sight of my objective—the hollow tree-trunk.

It was amazingly lucky that I paused just then, for a sudden sound came from the tree-trunk, and a moment later the head and shoulders of a man appeared. Even in the gloom I recognised him as Mr. Smiles, a man who had met Hunter on other occasions.

He was smoking a cigar, and, having dropped lightly to the ground, he seemed to be in no hurry to make any further move. Leaning against the tree-trunk, he smoked away comfortably.

"Waiting for somebody," I told myself.

There could be no doubt of this. Mr. Smiles pulled out his watch, and glanced at it by the glow of his cigar-end. Then he paced up and down slowly and easily. I wondered how long it would be before Mr. Hunter arrived. For I was quite certain that this man was waiting for the Housemaster.

Even if I had wanted to get away I could not do so now. My movements would have attracted unwelcome attention. Tregellis-West and Watson, just behind me, obviously knew that Mr. Smiles was present, for they did not make a sound.

I was curious. If Mr. Hunter came I should have no scruples about listening to the ensuing conversation. It wasn't a case of eavesdropping at all. For one thing, these men were crooks, and for another, I had no choice in the matter—unless I deliberately chose to give the game away.

Five minutes passed, and then Mr. Smiles turned sharply and peered among the trees towards the other end of the islet. I heard the stealthy sounds of a man creeping through the bushes.

I knew the dodge at once. Mr. Hunter had not come straight across from the river bank. He had worked round, and had arrived at the island at its extremity, so that his movements would not be observed from our stronghold.

"Ah, Smiles, I am afraid I'm rather late," said the well-known voice of Mr. Hunter. "I had to make a detour on account of those infernal young rascals on the other island."

"Haven't you got them under control yet?" asked Smiles.

"Good heavens! I wish you could have the task of looking after the puppies!" said Mr. Hunter vindictively. "There is one boy in particular—Bennett by name—who is far worse than all the others. That lad is positively dangerous. When I do get hold of him I'll half flay him!"

This cheerful prospect in no way dismayed me. I grinned in the darkness, and resolved that Mr. Hunter should never get hold of me.

"I can't quite understand why you arranged this meeting, Mr. Hunter," said Smiles. "You are coming down into the cavern later on—"

"No. I find it impossible to keep to that arrangement," said Mr. Hunter. "Trapps has arrived, and it is most essential that I should instruct him in his new duties. I cannot possibly spare the time to come down, Smiles."

"But you were going to examine—"

"Quite so—quite so," interrupted Mr. Hunter. "To tell you the truth, Smiles, I am finding it more and more difficult to move about. These wretched boys are beginning to talk, and I must be very cautious. In fact, I have decided to lie low for several days; I intend to keep within the House continuously, and thus do away with all these whispers. Even the servants are becoming a nuisance."

"Phew!" whistled Mr. Smiles. "You'll have to go carefully."

The Housemaster nodded.

"That's what I'm telling you," he agreed. "And since the tunnel collapsed in the other part of the workings I can't use that monastery passage. I'm inclined to believe there are spies at work, Smiles. It's quite possible that we shall have to clear out suddenly, so have everything in readiness. I don't fancy matters will reach that pitch, however."

The other tossed his cigar down.

"And what about your visits to the cavern?" he asked. "You don't propose to discontinue them altogether?"

"Exactly!"

"But I may want to speak to you—"

"My dear Smiles, if you will let me explain, all these questions will be unnecessary," interjected Mr. Hunter tartly. "I shall send a messenger regularly, and he will bring proofs and so forth to and fro."

"A messenger," said Mr. Smiles slowly. "Rather risky, isn't it?"

"Not at all. I shall send Bates."

"Bates!" said Mr. Smiles quickly. "Are you quite sure that he is reliable? We've never seen the fellow down there—"

"What you or the others have seen, Smiles, is quite immaterial," snapped Mr. Hunter. "Please allow me to know my own mind. You may not know Bates, but I do. He is as much to be trusted as you are yourself."

"But a page-boy!" protested the other.

"Tush! Bates is no page-boy," said Mr. Hunter sharply. "He is merely occupying that position for the time being. I wanted to have him near me, don't you understand? He is simply acting a part, and is actually my confidant. I have no hesitation in saying that Bates is reliable."

"You know best, of course," said Mr. Smiles. "And what do you propose?"

"Well, to commence with, Bates must be shown the ropes; he has never been down into the cavern by this entrance," said Hunter. "He accompanied me along the other tunnel once or twice, but I always left him behind on guard. I was uncertain, in fact, about those confounded boys. I want you to be up here again in an hour's time, for I intend to send Bates over as soon as he returns from Bannington. He has been there on a special mission for me."

"I am to meet this boy, then?"

"Exactly. In about an hour's time, Smiles," replied Mr. Hunter. "Give him any message you have for me—proofs, I mean. I hope you are getting on with that job rapidly? The stuff ought to be away to-night, you know."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of that, Mr. Hunter," replied Smiles. "I sha'n't see you again, then, for some little time?"

"Not until I send you word," said the other. "Bates, however, will be a frequent visitor to the cavern. I am quite sure that this change is a wise one. Above all, I wish to avoid suspicions amongst the servants and boys, and if I remain within my own House no questions can arise. That's all."

In that abrupt fashion Mr. Hunter concluded, and crept silently away. Smiles, after stroking his chin thoughtfully for a moment or two, climbed into the tree and dropped inside. I remained perfectly still, intensely curious. This conversation had told me nothing practically, but it had aroused my curiosity to fever pitch. What was this work which was proceeding in the cavern?

I wasn't at all surprised to hear of Hunter's decision, and it caused me quite a large amount of satisfaction to realise that I was the main cause of it. The majority of the fellows suspected nothing; to them Mr. Hunter was nothing but a harsh schoolmaster. My chums and I knew, however, that this was merely a side-line. Mr. Hunter's real occupation was something of a far more sinister character.

I allowed five minutes to pass before I moved a finger. Nelson Lee had often warned me against hastiness, and I had learned the lesson. When I felt that I was secure, I worked my way backwards and found Sir Montie and Tommy just behind me.

"Did you hear?" I breathed.

"Every word," whispered Tommy Watson. "What does it mean, Benny?"

"Dear fellow, it's frightfully queer, you know," murmured Tregellis-West. "I've got a feelin' that Mr. Hunter's a bad lot."

"I should think you had that feeling long ago, Montie," I replied. "A bad lot! He's several varieties of a bad lot, I should imagine! But did you hear what he said about that rotter, Bates?"

"Yes, rather!"

"We'd better be making tracks before long," put in Watson. "We don't want to be here when Bates comes. We might not be so fortunate a second time, although we weren't spotted just now."

"I've got an idea," I said calmly. "I thought of it while Hunter and Smiles were talking. I expect you'll say I'm dotty, and all that sort of thing, but I can't help that."

"What's the idea?" asked Watson bluntly.

"Somethin' frightfully risky, I'll bet," murmured Montie.

I nodded.

"I suppose there will be a certain amount of risk in it," I agreed. "But I'm prepared for it. You chaps needn't look scared, because you'll be left behind."

"Who's looking scared?" growled Watson. "And if you think I'm going to be left behind, Benny, you're jolly well mistaken!"

"My dear chap, you can't possibly come!" I exclaimed. "There can't be three Bates, you know!"

"Three—three Bates?" repeated Sir Montie blankly.

"Of course."

"Oh, you're off your rocker," snorted Watson. "Why can't you talk sense?"

"That's just what I am doing, my sons," I exclaimed. "You don't seem to get the idea. Bates has never been in this cavern, and he isn't known there. Supposing he got waylaid, and supposing somebody met Smiles in his place? How would the chap know that he wasn't talking to Bates?"

Montie and Tommy stared.

"Oh, you're clean gone!" declared Watson. "What's the good of supposing all that rot? Bates won't be waylaid——"

"Yes, he will!"

"How the dickens do you know?"

"Because we're going to waylay him!" I replied calmly.

"We're—we're going to waylay him?" said Watson blankly. "Then—then—— Oh, you potty ass! You don't mean to say that you're going to pass yourself off as Bates and go down into that cavern?"

I nodded.

"I'm going to try it on, at least," I replied.

"Begad! Supposin' you're spotted, Benny?"

"My dear old Montie, there's no question of my being spotted, so far as I can see," I replied calmly. "Bates isn't known to these burrowing merchants, and neither am I. If I tog myself out in Bates's uniform, I shall pass muster without a giddy suspicion. And just think of the information I shall probably get."

Tommy Watson snorted.

"And just think of the consequences if you're collared," he retorted. "Oh, I call it a potty idea. I'm not a nervous chap, but, dash it all, this is a bit too thick!"

I set my teeth grimly.

"I'm going to try it on," I insisted. "You can jaw at me as much as you like—it won't make any difference. Once I've made up my mind, I've made it up. And if things go wrong—well, I'm pretty nimble."

"Benny boy, I don't like it at all," said Sir Montie with a sigh. "But I ain't goin' to argue with you. Might just as well argue with these giddy bushes. But, dear old boy, I'm frightfully afraid of trouble."

I grinned.

"If you were coming with me, Montie, you'd be as eager as anything," I replied.

"But we can't all go on this trip. It's a job for one. And I think you'll admit that I'm more accustomed to this kind of work."

"Now, look here——" began Watson.

"No good, Tommy," I cut in. "I'm going!"

"Then you jolly well deserve to be copped—that's all I can say!"

"Thanks!"

My chums were rather incensed. I knew very well that they considered me mad; and perhaps my enterprise was somewhat reckless. But I should have kept awake all night if I had allowed this opportunity to slip by unseized. It was a chance which certainly wouldn't occur again.

I suddenly caught my faithful chums whispering together behind my back, but they looked very innocent when I faced them squarely.

"No larks!" I growled. "I'll bet you've been plotting to keep me here, or something of that sort. If you try any of those games on, there'll be trouble."

Sir Montie sighed again.

"It's no good, Tommy boy," he complained. "Benny's too sharp for us—he always is sharp, begad! I suppose we'd better resign ourselves to the worst. But there's no tellin' when we shall see him again—no tellin' at all."

And with that resigned attitude Sir Montie pretended to content himself. Watson assumed a somewhat antagonistic attitude. He was willing to help, but showed me very plainly that he didn't approve of the scheme at all.

We climbed into our boat again, and I directed the craft over to the left bank of the river—that is, the St. Frank's side. As I had expected, we found Mr. Hunter's boat tucked away in a little backwater among the reeds. He had been in the habit of crossing to the islet fairly frequently, and the boat was kept there permanently.

"We'll take ours higher up," I said. "We don't want to frighten Bates off before we can collar him."

It didn't take us long to hide our own boat, and then we crept by the bank until we arrived at the concealed craft. Here we held a short council of war—at least, I did. My chums were gloomy, and said little.

"Bates is a pretty lefty chap, and if we're not sharp he'll cause some trouble," I said. "Once we've got him down, the rest'll be easy. But, for goodness' sake, don't breathe a word in his hearing—especially you, Montie."

"Begad! Why am I picked out, dear boy?"

"Because of your beautiful voice," I replied. "Just one of your celebrated 'begad's' would give Bates the tip instantly. He'd know that we were his captors."

"But he'll see us, you ass!" sniffed Watson. "It ain't exactly dark!"

"He'll see three forms, no doubt," I replied. "But we've got to camouflage ourselves—although that's a rotten word. The chap who first introduced it into regular use in our language ought to be hung, drawn, and quartered."

"It means disguised, dear fellow."

"Of course it does!" I agreed. "That's a decent word, and it's what I meant just now. We've got to disguise ourselves."

"How?" growled Watson bluntly.

"Simplest thing in the world," I answered.

"Take your coat off, and then shove it on again so that the collar comes over the top of your head—it's quite easy. Bates won't be

able to make anything of us during the short time he's able to see at all. Just have a practice to begin with."

I showed them how to do it. Montie protested vigorously, complaining that his elegant coat would never set into its correct shape again. In the end Watson remembered that there were some old sacks in the boat, these having been used as a cushion at the stern.

He hurried off to get them, and they proved very useful. We simply cut armholes and places for our eyes. With these over our heads and shoulders we presented a most terrifying aspect, and were free to move about unhampered. I drew my unwilling helpers behind some bushes, and we waited.

"He's sure to be along within a minute or two," I breathed. "As soon as he appears, wait until I give the word, and then spring out."

"What about the stronghold?" asked Watson. "Suppose old Hunter makes an attack while you're away?"

"He won't," I said; "so I'm not going to suppose it. He's busy with Trapps—whoever that may be. Probably the new Form-master Christine was talking about. Anyhow, we needn't worry ourselves. And I shall be back within an hour, anyhow."

"I ain't so sure of that," grunted Watson gloomily.

"By jingo!" I breathed. "Look out!"

I had heard a footstep, and we all waited. A moment later Bates, the Ancient House page, appeared before us. I gave a sharp whisper, and the next moment Bates uttered a stifled shriek.

Three shapeless forms had risen from the very ground itself. And as Bates staggered back he was grasped by strong hands, jerked over, and laid flat upon his back.

The first part of the programme had been accomplished!

CHAPTER III.

IN THE MYSTERIOUS CAVERN—A NEAR THING—THE GUV'NOR IS UNGRATEFUL.

THOSE sacks came in very handy.

A fourth one was utilised for the purpose of quieting Bates. Before he could even yell the sack was thrust over his head and drawn up. And while Watson sat on the prisoner's legs, and Montie held his arms, I secured the sack. I fastened it round his neck—for it was my intention to undress Bates without delay.

The captive was exceedingly troublesome. He kicked and struggled madly, and we could do nothing with him.

"Let him go on," I whispered hurriedly.

It was the best policy. We allowed Bates just enough freedom of movement for him to continue his desperate struggles. As I had anticipated, he wore himself out in a very short space of time, and sank back, gasping breathlessly.

"Now!" I nodded.

The task was fairly easy after this short

wait. Bates hadn't sufficient strength left to struggle much more. We ripped his suit off ruthlessly, and consoled ourselves for this drastic treatment by remembering that the night was mild. After all, we didn't want to hurt the fellow.

The next thing was to tie his hands and ankles securely. We did this with some strong string, and then covered him with the sacks—which, of course, we had removed as soon as Bates had been blindfolded by his own sack.

"You chaps have got to keep guard over the prisoner while I go across to the island," I whispered, drawing my chums aside. "Don't leave him on any account. But keep your ears wide open; I might come back in a hurry."

While speaking I was rapidly changing my clothes. Bates was somewhat bigger than me, but his "buttons" suit fitted fairly decently. At all events the slackness was not very noticeable.

"Now we're all ready," I whispered, as I secured the last button. "I expect Smiles is waiting all ready to conduct me into the cavern, so I'd better not waste any time. Fare you well, my sons!"

They watched me go in silence. I pushed Mr. Hunter's boat from its retreat, and was soon rowing across to the islet. As I was tying the painter, after landing, there was a rustle in the bushes.

"That you, Bates?" came a whisper, in Mr. Smiles' voice. "I expected you earlier, boy."

"I was delayed, sir," I said steadily. "This job ain't one I've done before, an' I had to find the boat, too."

"Mr. Hunter has given you instructions, I suppose?"

"I'm goin' to foller you, ain't I, sir?" I said cautiously.

"Yes, that's right," replied Mr. Smiles. "It seems that you will do this journey frequently, Bates. It is rather a nuisance. But I have no doubt that Mr. Hunter has acted wisely."

"He's afraid o' them kids talkin', sir," I explained, remembering that I was supposed to be Mr. Hunter's confidant. "There's one or two of 'em regular young wretches for spyin'. I dessay Mr. Hunter told you."

"Yes, Bates, he did. Come along!"

My companion was entirely unsuspecting. After all, I couldn't see much risk in this enterprise personally, in spite of my chums' misgivings. Mr. Hunter had arranged with Smiles that Bates should come. A few minutes after the appointed time a fellow in page-boy's uniform had rowed across to the island. Wasn't it absolutely natural that Mr. Smiles should be deceived? How on earth could he know that I wasn't Bates? What cause had he for suspicion?

So far as I could see, none. Unless a very unlooked-for hitch occurred, I should emerge from the adventure quite safely. The only real danger lay in the possibility of Mr. Smiles asking me questions which I couldn't

answer. If that occurred, I should have to use my own ingenuity to help me out.

For the present I was keenly interested in the secret stairway down the old hollow tree. The very prospect of decelving these scoundrels all along the line thrilled me. There was something exhilarating in the affair.

"Be careful, Bates," said Mr. Smiles, as he climbed into the tree. "You will find resting-places for your feet easily if you follow me with caution. And remember all these details thoroughly—I can't guide you always."

"Of course not, sir," I remarked.

The interior of the tree-trunk was fairly roomy, and it was an easy matter to climb down. It widened out at the base, and descended straight into the bowels of the earth. It reminded me of a sewer-shaft more than anything else. There was an iron ladder leading straight downwards.

It was fairly long, but I reached the foot at last, and found Mr. Smiles there with an electric-torch. Before I faced him I screwed my features up until I wore a totally different expression to my own natural one. Nelson Lee had taught me this trick years before, and I had grown quite proficient in it. I could keep up this facial contortion for half an hour, if necessary, although scarcely any longer. Fifteen minutes of it was a strain.

As I had expected, Mr. Smiles flashed the light fully upon me. But he saw nothing unsuspicious, and he turned at once.

"Follow me, Bates," he said briskly. "And mind the walls—they are very wet."

I made no comment, but followed. Considering that the tunnel was cut right under the bed of the river, the moisture was not surprising. The whole place was dripping, in fact, and there were puddles all over the floor.

We walked along for perhaps three hundred feet, and then the tunnel became drier. A heavy door faced us. It seemed to be made of metal, painted a dull colour, and there were heavy bolts on it.

Mr. Smiles shot these back and pulled the door open. I scarcely know what I expected to see, but, as a matter of fact, there was nothing but a continuation of the tunnel beyond.

We passed through, and I observed that there were similar bolts on this side of the door also. Mr. Smiles shot them, but offered no comment. Then we continued on our way.

Of course I knew why that door was there. It was a kind of safety barrier, in case the outer tunnel became suddenly flooded from the river. The water would simply submerge that portion of the passage as far as the door. Without that safeguard, the whole cavern and everything in it might be flooded out at any moment.

The tunnel veered round to the left presently, and then I saw a dim light in the distance. It reminded me of a tube subway, only, of course, it wasn't so roomy. At last we arrived at the end, and emerged into a

huge natural cavern in the very bowels of the earth.

Perhaps it wasn't natural, however. At one time it had formed a portion of the quarry workings. Now, however, it was being put to a very different use. Electric lights gleamed at intervals, and I faintly heard the throb of an oil-engine somewhere. This engine probably operated a small dynamo, and also supplied the motive-power for several machines which were at work in the cavern.

There were four men there, and I noticed, with considerable surprise, that they were engaged upon the innocent occupation of printing. The machines were printing machines! In fact there was nothing at all criminal in the aspect of this mysterious underground workshop.

"There you are, Bates—I think you'll be able to find your way here next time, eh?" said Mr. Smiles. "You will be able to return without a guide, no doubt."

"Yes, sir," I said respectfully. "Shall I go now?"

"Not just yet, Bates. You have to wait until a package is ready for Mr. Hunter. Wait here."

Mr. Smiles went off, and I stood looking about me curiously. I was inwardly thrilling with excitement, but I took care not to reveal this. The workmen glanced at me casually, but didn't seem interested.

What was the nature of this extraordinary place? The idea of forgers entered my mind; but I dismissed it at once. These printing machines were not turning out counterfeit banknotes or Treasury notes.

Mr. Smiles had only moved a few feet before a man entered the cavern from another tunnel. He looked round, and then crossed quickly to Mr. Smiles. I strolled forward carelessly.

"Well, what is it, Henri?" asked my late guide.

"I have important news, m'sieur," said the man, with a trace of a French accent.

"Oh, indeed! What sort of news?"

"That man—that spy—who came here in Reinhardt's shoes," said Henri. "We know that he is near by. The man is spying on us, m'sieur. He is dangerous. It would be wise to deal with him at once."

Smiles gritted his teeth, and I stood listening with bated breath.

"Where is this fellow?" demanded Smiles.

"He is down the river, crouching near the secret boathouse," replied Henri. "He was seen by one of our comrades, and it is clear that he is waiting there for the purpose of spying on our movements."

"You madman!" snapped Mr. Smiles. "Did you not capture the fellow?"

"I was not there, m'sieur, and our comrade was alone," replied Henri. "He reported, and I at once dispatched him with three others to make a prisoner of this spy. I warned them to go cautiously, and they will approach the man from the rear."

"Ah, that is as well," said Mr. Smiles. "If you had met the party down the river the

brute would certainly have escaped. We cannot afford to take risks. Tell me more about it, Henri. I have not got the details quite clearly."

Henri continued speaking, but he lowered his voice as Mr. Smiles bent closer. I could not hear what was being said. But, goodness knows, I heard enough! The man who had impersonated Reinhardt was in imminent peril of being captured—and that was none other than Nelson Lee!

I scarcely knew what to do. Henri, of course, may have been mistaken, but there was not much hope of this. The gov'nor had been spotted, and these scoundrels were intent upon taking him prisoner. An attacking-party was even now on its way to catch him in the rear.

The secret boathouse was quite unknown to me; but I judged that it was a spot lower down the river where these men kept a motor-launch. I wanted to dash away at once. But what good should I do? I didn't know where to go, and any sudden movement on my part would bring suspicion upon me.

My feelings can well be imagined. I knew that the gov'nor was on the point of being captured by his enemies, and I was forced to stand there, looking indifferent, realising that I could do nothing.

I walked closer to the two men—at the risk of being ordered sharply away. But Mr. Smiles and his companion took no notice of me. I was Mr. Hunter's trusted messenger and above suspicion.

"They are going with caution," Henri was saying, "and will steal along the towing-path as far as the ruined cottage. It will then be quite easy for them to spring upon this man from behind, since he is crouching amongst the bushes close by. Our comrades have instructions to bring the prisoner in by means of the inland tunnel."

"That is well," said Mr. Smiles, nodding. "We must see that the doorway is unbolted in readiness."

"They cannot arrive until another half-hour has passed, m'sieur!"

"I shall be taking Bates along the tunnel in about fifteen minutes," said Smiles. "I might as well accompany him to the outlet and await the arrival of the party. Bates can stay with me until the prisoner is landed."

I set my teeth grimly.

At the same time I was feeling highly elated. I knew that Nelson Lee was close to the old ruined cottage—and this place was only a short distance down the river, standing quite by itself.

If I remained, I should have no chance of helping Nelson Lee to escape. It was therefore imperative that I should leave at once. With luck, I should be able to warn the gov'nor in time.

Bold action was necessary.

"May I go at once, Mr. Smiles?" I asked quietly.

The man turned to me.

"No!" he snapped. "You must wait until I am ready, Bates."

"But Mr. Hunter may be expecting me at once, sir—"

"Nonsense! Be quiet, boy!"

Mr. Smiles turned his back upon me, and I knew very well that I should have to take matters into my own hands. This development was totally unexpected, and I thanked my stars that I had embarked upon the adventure. To remain in the cavern with the full knowledge that Nelson Lee was in dire peril was out of the question.

Escape was absolutely necessary, and I did not blind myself to the fact that the job would be a difficult one. For I had only one course—and that was to make a sudden dash.

A table stood near me, and upon it were piles of small pamphlets. I didn't know what they were, but I thought it as well to take one; it would possibly give me a clue to the nature of this mysterious workshop.

I casually slipped one off the pile and put it into my pocket. Then I walked slowly towards the tunnel entrance—the one by which I had entered. At the same time I placed my hand in my pocket and fished out my little electric-torch, which, fortunately, I had brought.

All went well until I was half-way across the cavern. And then I heard Mr. Smiles utter a sharp ejaculation.

"Bates!" he rapped out curtly.

That decided me. I had been seen, and I knew that every second of delay would make my position worse. As it was, I had gained a bit of a start. Without even turning, I pelted for the tunnel at full speed, pressing the switch of my torch at the same moment.

"Bates!" shouted Mr. Smiles. "You fool, what the thunder—"

He stopped, and I heard him running after me, shouting out orders to other men. One of them attempted to cut off my retreat, but he was just too late. I plunged into the tunnel, and heard Smiles and two or three others pelting after me, yelling madly at the same time.

My action, of course, had aroused their suspicions, and now it was a chase in earnest. Without the aid of my torch I should have been hopelessly beaten. But now I could see my way clearly, and dashed on with every ounce of speed possible. My pursuers did not gain upon me, although they were uncomfortably near at hand. I turned the corner, and saw the bolted door facing me. Everything depended now upon my swiftness of action. If the bolts went stiffly, or if I fumbled them, it would be all up—I should be collared.

At the very best it would be touch and go.

I tore along, making an almost superhuman effort. The shouts and threats of my pursuers echoed loudly in the confines of the tunnel. It seemed to me as though Smiles was only a yard behind me.

At last!

I simply hurled myself at the door, scarcely knowing whether to be thankful for

its presence or otherwise. If I managed to get through, all well and good. But, if not—

Sobbing for breath, I wrenched at the bolts, and found that they worked easily and smoothly. Even as I shot the second one back and pushed the door open Smiles was within a couple of yards.

"Bates!" he panted hoarsely. "Stop, you young idiot—"

"Good-bye-e!" I couldn't help gasping.

I reached the other side of the door, and slammed it to. At the same instant, as I was in the act of shooting the lower bolt, Smiles hurled his weight against the door. Just for a second I thought that the game was up. But as Smiles drew back for a big effort, I pushed the bolt into its slot. A moment later the top bolt was also in its place, and I leant against the door, gasping for breath.

I had won!

And now I felt extremely grateful for the presence of this barrier. Smiles and Co. could not possibly reach me without making a long detour. In fact I was quite satisfied that I should be able to reach the gov'nor before any pursuit was possible. And my object had been accomplished.

Not that I had discovered much. The pamphlet probably would tell me a lot, but I was not thinking of this at present. My visit to the cavern had placed me in possession of information which would enable me to get the gov'nor out of a tight corner.

There were several frantic thumps upon the metal door, but then all was quiet. Smiles and his men were obviously hastening away, and I realised the necessity for instant action.

Having regained my breath, I hurried along the dripping tunnel until the iron ladder was reached. Three minutes later I was standing upon the shore of the islet, gazing across the river.

"You chaps there?" I whispered intently.

I waited, knowing that my voice would carry across the water in the stillness. There was no answering hail, but I saw two dim figures moving along the river bank. Sir Montie and Tommy had heard me, and were coming across. In a very short time our boat was taken from its place of concealment, and it edged across the river cautiously. I waited impatiently.

"Hurry up, you asses!" I whispered.

"That you, old boy?"

"Of course it's me, ass—"

"Thank goodness!" murmured Tregellis-West.

The boat's nose touched the bank, and I stepped into it and moved out into the centre. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie eyed me wonderingly. My own clothes, I noticed, were lying in the stern.

"What's the matter with Hunter's boat?" asked Watson curiously.

"I want to leave it here," I replied. "Smiles and some other chaps are chasing me, and they'll be puzzled when they

And the boat's still on the island. Besides, we're going down the river at once."

"What about Bates?"

"We shall have to leave him to himself for the present—he can't get away, anyhow," I whispered. "Now then, put your back into it, Montie."

"I'm in a frightful fog, you know," complained Tregellis-West. "What have you been doing, Benny? I'm dreadfully afraid that you've been gettin' into trouble. But I'm glad to see you safe and sound, begad!"

My chums were not kept in suspense for long. As we rowed I gave them a brief outline of my adventures. They listened with growing excitement, and were greatly interested.

"And—and we're going to warn old Alvy?" asked Tommy Watson breathlessly.

"That's the idea," I replied. "Now, let's buck up."

The distance was not far, and we soon reached the old ruined cottage which stood near the towing path. Everything was still and quiet, and I wondered if Nelson Lee was still waiting. At all events he hadn't been collared by the enemy, or we should have seen the party.

After landing, we crept forward cautiously. I realised the impossibility of finding the guv'nor by merely searching. If he was there, he would certainly answer a hail, after recognising my voice.

"Are you here, sir?" I whispered tensely.

"Begad! It's no good callin'—"

"Listen, you ass!"

There was a movement amongst the bushes, and then a dim figure loomed up before us. The next moment I found myself facing Nelson Lee—himself. He wasn't even disguised, but his face wore a frown.

"Upon my soul! Why on earth have you boys come bothering me here?" he asked testily. "Your curiosity, Nipper—"

"Well, that's all right!" I interjected indignantly. "We came to warn you, sir. Three or four of Hunter's pals are coming along from the rear—with the intention of collaring you. They might be here at any minute."

Nelson Lee eyed us grimly.

"And don't you think I have got ears, Nipper?" he asked. "Am I quite blind? Do you seriously imagine that I should have allowed myself to be captured? I appreciate your good intentions, but really, Nipper, I am inclined to be ungrateful. I was fully expecting trouble."

"But—but—" I gasped. "I don't understand—"

"Some little time ago a figure appeared," explained the guv'nor. "The fellow fondly imagined that I had not observed him, and he went off. I was fully expecting an attack in force—and expect it now—and I had changed my place of concealment. You don't understand this matter, Nipper, so why do you interfere?"

"In—in—interfere!" I stammered.

"That is the word I used, young 'un."

I simply stared at the guv'nor and gasped:

"After we'd rushed down here especially to warn you, too!" I exclaimed. "Dash it all, you might even thank us! I've been in that cavern—"

"What!" exclaimed Nelson Lee sharply.

I explained the whole matter, and the guv'nor listened with compressed lips. When I had finished he regarded me with somewhat grim amusement.

"I don't suppose my words will have any effect upon you, Nipper," he exclaimed. "You seem to be determined to investigate this affair personally. It was a risky proceeding to pass yourself off as Bates, and you ought to consider yourself very lucky that you have escaped. As for my being captured, I can assure you that I am quite capable of looking after myself!"

"I'm—I'm sorry—"

"That's all right, young 'un," interrupted Lee gently. "I know that you acted for the best and I cannot scold you. But, honestly, I advise you to steer clear of this affair. I should like nothing better than to have you with me constantly, working as we used to in the old days. But, my dear Nipper, we are both placed in peculiar positions, and we must suit ourselves to the different circumstances. You are a member of the Remove at St. Frank's, and your movements are consequently greatly restricted."

"Yes, I know that, guv'nor," I replied. "But, still, I don't like to be left out in the cold."

"Naturally," said the guv'nor drily. "And you don't intend to be—eh? Well, boys, I am very glad that nothing serious has developed out of to-night's adventure. You must beware of Mr. Hunter, however. He will soon discover the identity of the youngster who passed himself off as Bates—and you must be careful, Nipper. How is your rebellion proceeding?"

"Why, we're still holding out, sir."

"Well, don't give in until Mr. Hunter positively agrees to your terms!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "I have an idea that matters will reach a head very shortly. I thought that the end was in sight some time ago, but I was unable to obtain the evidence necessary."

"Against Mr. Hunter, sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"There are others implicated, Watson, in addition to Mr. Hunter," replied Nelson Lee. "Now I think you had better be going—"

"Oh, there's a pamphlet here," I put in, suddenly remembering. "I picked it up in the cavern—"

"Give it to me, Nipper."

I pulled it out of my pocket and handed it over. Nelson Lee calmly stowed it away and buttoned up his coat.

"But I want to look at it, guv'nor!" I protested.

"You'll look at it later on!" said Lee. "I don't want you to carry such a thing about with you. But we must leave this spot at once—we don't want to be seen together by our enthusiastic friends."



"You must regard this handkerchief as a white flag of truce, Bennett," called Mr. Hunter.—(See page 18.)

I knew that the gov'nor had changed the subject purposely, and naturally my curiosity concerning the pamphlet was increased. Lee walked off through the bushes and we followed him. Five minutes later, as we crouched silently in the gloom, we saw three or four dim forms approach. They were some distance away, and commenced a search.

This farce was kept up for some little time, but the search was unsuccessful. If by any chance they had come our way, we were quite ready for them. I hadn't seen any sign of the secret boathouse, but I knew that it must be somewhere near. Nelson Lee, no doubt, had very excellent reasons for watching the spot.

The search party took its departure at last, and we gave them five minutes. Then Nelson Lee nudged me.

"Go as quietly as you can, boys," he whispered. "Take my advice and get back to your fortress. When you release Bates don't reveal your identities. It can be managed quite easily if you are careful. Good-bye."

He slipped away, and we crept down to our boat and were soon rowing up the river. It was still comparatively early, for my adventure had been a swift one; much had happened in a little space of time.

Montie did the rowing, and I discarded Bates's uniform and donned my own clothes. My intention was to creep ashore and release the page-boy's hands. While he was untying his feet we could slip clean away.

But a surprise awaited us.

Upon carrying out the first part of my programme I made a discovery. The spot was bare and deserted—Bates had vanished!

CHAPTER IV.

MR. HUNTER IS SHOCKED—TROUBLE IN THE THIRD—OUT OF HAND.

BATES was having a chilly time, as a matter of fact.

Soon after our departure he had commenced wriggling at his bonds. Even while Tregellis West and Watson were guarding him he had quietly wrenched at the strings which bound him.

In all probability he had them fairly loose by the time Montie and Tommy brought their boat across to me on the islet. At all events, Bates managed to free his hands very shortly afterwards.

I had bound him securely, but with the knowledge that my chums would be on guard the whole time. It was the fact that they had been called away by circumstances which gave Bates his opportunity.

The page-boy soon had his ankles free after discarding his wrist ropes. And then he made tracks for St. Frank's—thoroughly startled and alarmed.

I won't go into details regarding Bates's attire. There wasn't much of it, as a matter of fact. Considering that we had deprived

him of his uniform, his present state can easily be imagined.

It was just as well that the night was very dark. Bates, you may be sure, was very glad of it. He even hated the stars just now. And he took particular care to keep to the fields on his way to the school. Roadways and lanes were unattractive to Master Bates in his present predicament.

He was worried tremendously by the fact that Warren had gone out on this particular evening. This made it impossible for him to call at the porter's lodge and borrow an overcoat.

The thought of entering the Ancient House appalled Bates enormously. He came to the conclusion that only one move was possible. He would have to enter the school by means of a window—Mr. Hunter's window for choice. For the Housemaster would understand the matter, and would provide him with adequate clothing with which to escape upstairs.

Arriving at the playing-fields hedge, Bates broke through and trotted across towards the Triangle. The breeze, he found, was far more chilly than he had imagined. And the fact that several juniors were chatting on the steps of the College House caused Bates to gnash his teeth with helplessness.

He waited, shivering, for five minutes. He had never seen so many people in the Triangle before. Seniors and juniors were dodging about constantly. To make matters far worse, Mrs. Hake stood at the door of her tuck-shop for absolutely no reason whatever. As soon as ever she grew tired of the night air Bates prepared to make his dash.

He had even started when Mrs. Poulter, the matron, entered the gateway with two of the maid-servants. Bates groaned and backed into concealment again. By this time he was icily cold and nearly frantic with anxiety.

But at last the Triangle was deserted. Careless of all consequences, the airily-clad page-boy darted across and reached Mr. Hunter's study window without creating a scandal. To his joy a light gleamed behind the thick blinds, and he tapped urgently upon the glass.

After hours had passed—according to Bates's reckoning—the blind was pushed aside and the lower sash was raised. The head and shoulders of Mr. Kennedy Hunter projected out of the window.

"Who is that?" he asked sharply.

"May—may I come in, sir?" said Bates in a husky whisper.

"Good gracious! What on earth are you doing there, Bates?" snapped Mr. Hunter. "Why are you walking about without your coat?"

Bates decided to make a plunge. He was hurried in this decision by sounds in the Triangle behind him. The light which streamed from Mr. Hunter's window was not welcome.

The lightly-clad unfortunate sprang up and scrambled headlong into Mr. Hunter's study. The astounded Housemaster was scandalised to observe the bare condition of Bates's legs,

and he uttered a roar of anger as he slammed down the window.

"Bates!" he thundered.

"I—I—"

"You disgraceful young rascal!" roared Mr. Hunter. "How dare you walk about the Triangle in that condition? What have you done with your clothing? Above all, why have you dared to approach me—"

"I couldn't go indoors like this, sir!" gasped Bates feverishly. "I was stopped, sir—stopped and stripped! Some awful rotters prevented me going to the island, and I was bound up—"

"Are you mad, boy?"

"Nunno, sir!" panted Bates. "It's true, Mr. Hunter—every word of it!"

Mr. Hunter eyed the unfortunate Bates grimly.

"I entrusted you with a mission, Bates!" he said, his eyes glittering. "If you have failed it will be the worse for you. Tell me exactly what has happened. One moment. Wrap that coat round yourself."

Bates took Mr. Hunter's overcoat and donned it. He regained much of his confidence after that, and breathlessly explained the circumstances, describing the awful outrage I and my chums had committed, with many embellishments.

"Your story is merely a recital of utter carelessness, Bates!" said Mr. Hunter sourly. "I thought you were to be trusted, and this disgraceful business proves that my estimate was wrong. Who were these people who sprang upon you?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Haven't you got eyes?"

"They—they were wearin' hoods over their heads, or something, sir!" gasped Bates. "They didn't say nothin', an' I don't know 'em from Adam!"

"Were they boys, or men?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know—you don't know!" stormed Mr. Hunter. "Apparently that is all you can say! I am disappointed in you, Bates. Go upstairs at once and put some clothing on. You will get no sympathy from me. Indeed, I seriously think that I had better send you away. I have no use for fools round me!"

Bates quailed before Mr. Hunter's fury, and sneaked out of the study as rapidly as possible. Left alone, Mr. Hunter paced up and down, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Boys, of course!" he muttered fiercely. "Those infernal young ruffians from the island. By Heavens, something must be done—at once! This state of affairs cannot continue!"

The Housemaster paused on the hearthrug and stood glaring across the study. He was deep in thought, and he gazed unseeingly upon his interrupted work. He had been writing at his desk. But suddenly a strange gleam entered Mr. Hunter's eyes and he became intent.

A tap sounded on the door. With one sweep of his hand Mr. Hunter transferred his papers into the top drawer. He closed

it, locked it, and then picked up the morning's newspaper.

"Come in!" he called.

Mr. Suncliffe entered—Mr. Suncliffe looking decidedly red in the face and with his eyes expressing boiling heat.

"I have come to you, sir, for assistance!" he shouted violently.

Mr. Hunter laid down his paper.

"You will oblige me, Mr. Suncliffe, by moderating your tone," he exclaimed in his mildest voice, and surveying the excited Third-Form Master with beaming good nature.

"I have come for assistance," repeated Mr. Suncliffe hotly. "I regret to inform you, Mr. Hunter, that the Third Form is unmanageable. I have done my utmost, and the boys will not heed me."

"In fact, Mr. Suncliffe, you admit that you are incapable of dealing with your own Form?" asked Mr. Hunter sweetly.

"No, sir!" thundered the other. "I admit nothing of the kind! If you must have the truth, I am quite capable of handling my own boys. It was your interference which commenced the trouble."

"Interference!" repeated Mr. Hunter sharply.

"Just that, sir, and nothing more!" roared Mr. Suncliffe. "I must admit that your methods were harsh, but doubtless necessary in some cases. My own Form was quite manageable until you inflicted an undeserved punishment. I caught the boys mixing with the rebels this afternoon, and confined them to the Form room until tea time. That, in my opinion, was sufficient."

"Your opinion, Mr. Suncliffe, does not interest me in the slightest!" said Mr. Hunter sourly. "You will please bear in mind that I am the Housemaster. I ordered that the Third Form should be restricted to its class-room until bedtime—that it should go up to its dormitory supperless. It is, indeed, within five minutes of the Third's bedtime even now—"

"The boys will not heed me, sir," interrupted Mr. Suncliffe. "They are talking about obtaining supper without permission, and many of them have refused to go up to bed. I leave you to deal with them!"

Mr. Hunter rose to his feet grimly.

"Very well, Mr. Suncliffe!" he exclaimed. "Please follow me. I will show you how to subdue these unruly urchins!"

"Pray remember the Remove—"

"Bah! Your boys are mere children!" snapped Mr. Hunter.

The Third-Form Master made no other comment, but followed his principal out of the study and along the passage. Sour-tempered as Mr. Suncliffe was, he did not approve of such harsh treatment as Mr. Hunter had meted out. Detention for the afternoon would have been quite sufficient.

As it was, the Third had been cooped up the whole evening, and the prospect of going to bed supperless had made the youngsters utterly reckless. The leader in this riot was

Owen minor, who was generally the cause of the chief mischief in the Third.

Owen minor, in fact, had been thinking seriously. The Remove had revolted—so why not the Third? And matters would be ever so much easier for the Third, since a place of refuge was already provided. Owen minor had certain qualms regarding the reception the Third would receive on Willard's Island, but he resolutely thrust them aside.

When Mr. Hunter stalked into the Third-Form room he found Owen minor addressing a meeting. At least, that is what it was supposed to be. As a matter of fact every member of the Third was addressing the meeting. The din was considerable. But Mr. Hunter's entry resulted in a quick scamper and then complete silence.

The Third sat quivering with excitement.

"Now, Mr. Suncliffe, you will please name the boys who were responsible for the uproar you mentioned," said Mr. Hunter, swishing the cane he had brought along. "As you will observe, the boys are quiet enough now."

"Quite so, sir," said Mr. Suncliffe, between his teeth. "The chief culprits have been punished already. I have caned Owen minor twice, and Heath and Lemon once. In addition, they have received five hundred lines apiece. The whole Form is responsible, so far as I can judge."

Mr. Hunter eyed the Form grimly.

"Owen—Heath—Lemon!" he said, in soft tones. "Stand out here before the class!"

The three lags rose in their seats.

"Are—are you going to cane me, sir?" asked Owen minor rebelliously.

"Do not question me, boy!"

"Shut up, you ass!" whispered Lemon. "We've got to go through it now!"

Lemon and Heath walked out of their places nervously and stood facing Mr. Hunter with quivering limbs. Owen minor followed them at last, and the whole Form held its breath.

"We've been punished once, sir!" gasped Owen. "We only want our suppers—it ain't fair that we should be sent to bed——"

"Hold out your hand, Owen."

All the pent-up wrath of days blazed forth from Owen minor's eyes.

"Sha'n't!" he shouted recklessly. "I ain't going to be caned by a Hun like you! Three cheers for the Remove! Down with the Prussian!"

The cry was like fire to gunpowder. The Third had only been waiting for it. Driven to recklessness by the prospect of no supper, the lags backed up Owen minor loyally. Every junior rose in his place and yelled.

"Silence!" roared Mr. Hunter, alarmed. "Silence, you young cubs!"

Owen minor dodged nimbly as Mr. Hunter's cane swished down in a dangerous manner. Had that stroke gone home it would have slashed the Third-Former cruelly across the neck. And Owen minor, maddened, charged forward like a young bullock.

His head rammed into Mr. Hunter's stomach, and the Housemaster went over on his back with a crash which shook the whole

Form-room. A terrible gasp went up, and Owen minor rushed to the door.

"Revolt!" he cried excitedly. "Come on, you chaps, back me up! Forward, the Third!"

"Hurrah!"

And the Third Form, without a single exception, swarmed over the prostrate Mr. Hunter and crowded out into the passage.

The Third had followed the example of Remove—open revolt had come, and Mr. Suncliffe could not help smiling grimly as he regarded the winded Mr. Hunter. He was not at all impressed by the manner in which Mr. Hunter had subdued the Third!

CHAPTER V.

THE THIRD IN REVOLT—THE CRISIS REACHED—WHAT NEXT?

HANDFORTH and Church and McClure were on guard in the turret.

Willard's Island lay quiet and still. A great many of the rebels had gone to bed—particularly those who were due to take their spell of watch-keeping in the small hours of the night.

Handforth, as usual, was talking. Some fellows honestly believed that Handforth's loud tone of voice had been cultivated owing to his conversational prowess. Church and McClure, thoroughly bored, longed for the time when their relief would turn up.

"As I was saying, it's all a lot of rot," declared Handforth firmly. "This watch-keeping is a potty idea. I'm going to tell Bennett so when I go down. Do you think we shouldn't hear Hunter's crowd if they tried to get across?"

"Not if we were asleep," objected Church. "I reckon Bennett's right——"

"I don't care what you reckon," said Handforth. "If he'd only trust to me, he wouldn't go wrong. I'm such a light sleeper that I'd wake up the very instant——"

"A bomb dropped?" suggested McClure.

"If you're looking for a thick ear, Arnold McClure, you'll jolly soon find one!" roared Handforth. "I'm a light sleeper——"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Church.

"I ought to know whether I'm a light sleeper or not, I suppose?" said Handforth warmly. "As I was saying, if Benny would only trust to me—— Now, what's the matter with you, Church?"

"Didn't you hear something over there?" asked Church, peering towards the river-bank.

"No, I didn't—neither did you!" said Handforth. "Those tricks won't work with me, my son. If you think you're going to make me change the subject by a potty device like that——"

"I tell you I heard something!" exclaimed Church. "There you are! What do you call that?"

"Well, I should call it a hail," remarked McClure.

It was undoubtedly a call. Several figures were seen moving upon the bank, and Handforth and Co. peered cautiously. The figures

were so small that they couldn't possibly be an attacking party. Besides, the hail had been shrill and excited.

"Hi! Everybody asleep?" came the voice again.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, staring. "That's Owen minor! What the dickens are these Third-Form kids doing here? It's time they were in bed and asleep!"

"What's wrong?" called out McClure loudly.

"Send your boats over!" yelled Owen minor. "We're all here—all the Third!"

Handforth snorted.

"Clear off!" he roared. "Like your beastly cheek!"

"We've revolted!" howled Owen minor desperately. "Let's come on the island, for goodness' sake! Hunter will be after us in two minutes! Buck up, you slow coaches!"

"Over with the boats!" came a shrill chorus.

Handforth was thunderstruck.

"Revolted?" he bawled. "Don't talk rot —"

"Look here, I'd better go and fetch Benny," ejaculated Church hastily. "You can't deal with a matter like this, Handforth. Oh, my only hat! The Third barring-out now!"

And Church descended from the turret quickly. As it happened, he met me on the stairs. I had heard the Third-Formers, and had come up to see what was in the wind. Within a minute I knew the position exactly.

I was astonished. I had hardly expected the Third to follow the Remove's example. I never thought they'd have the pluck. And my chief feeling was one of admiration for the fags.

Their presence on the island would be awkward, and our food supply would not last half the time we had reckoned upon. But, in an emergency like this, there was only one thing to be done.

"We shall have to let 'em come over," I said quickly. "Plucky little beggars! I never thought they'd pick up enough spirit to defy old Hunter!"

"Begad!" exclaimed Tregellis-West. "Things are gettin' excitin'—they are, really! We shall have to eke out our grub by havin' turnips now an' again!"

I hurried out to the river bank, shouting to De Valerie and the Bo'sun to rouse some other fellows.

"Third, ahoy!" I shouted. "Who's in command over there?"

"I am!" shouted Owen minor.

"I suppose this isn't a lark?" I went on. "You've really rebelled?"

"We bowled Hunter over and trod on him, the beast!" yelled Owen minor. "He's after us now, I expect. Hurry up, if you're going to have mercy on us! Be sports, you know!"

I rather liked the fag-leader's tone. He was not in the least cheeky, and did not demand sanctuary for his followers.

"Look here, Bennett, we ain't going to have those cheeky fags on this island!" bellowed Handforth from the turret. "Let 'em

find their own giddy stronghold! Like their nerve, coming here——"

"Dry up, Handy!" I said sharply. "I'm Commander-in-Chief, and I'm going to let these kids come across. Why don't you come down and lend a hand with the boats? All right, kids, we're coming!"

"Hurrah!" yelled the Third.

De Valerie and Burton and Farman and several others were already launching the boats; they knew that action was necessary. Handforth's system of jawing first was not suitable for such an occasion as this. In a way, the Third was backing us up, and we couldn't possibly refuse to extend the kids a helping hand.

Three or four boats crossed the stretch of water together, and as soon as they reached the bank they were filled with excited Third-Formers. I was in charge of one of the boats, and I noticed that every member of the Ancient House Third was present.

Two journeys were necessary, but the whole crowd was transferred to Willard's Island without mishap. There had been no sign of Mr. Hunter, and everything was quiet. The same could not be said regarding the island. Commotion and confusion reigned supreme.

Handforth was having a heated argument with Owen major. The latter, naturally, was quite delighted, and proud of his minor. But Handforth had great ideas of dignity. He made himself believe that this Third-Form invasion would mean a loss of prestige for the Remove. But Handforth's idea was quite wrong. Exactly the opposite was the case.

"Look here, you fags!" I shouted, eyeing the excited crowd. "You're under my orders, just the same as the Remove chaps. If we're going to live together on this island, you'll have to work for your living. And I don't want any rows—understand?"

"We're with you, Bennett!"

"We'll do just what you tell us!"

"Rather!"

"Good old Benny—he's the chap to lead us!"

"Three cheers for Bennett!"

The Third-Formers, who were greatly excited, gave the cheers in cracked voices. All of them, I know, had been rather doubtful as to their reception on the island, and my attitude had given them tremendous relief.

"This is all very well," said Handforth, pushing forward. "I don't mind the kids being here, goodness' knows. Might as well be charitable. But how the dickens are the young asses going to sleep? And what about grub?"

"The sleeping question is a minor one," I replied. "I don't object to one of these kids sleeping with me. It'll be a squeeze, but that doesn't matter. And as for the grub, we've got enough on the island to last four days—and that's allowing full rations."

"Hurrah!" yelled the fags.

"And it's my opinion," I went on, "that things will come to a head now. The crisis has been reached. Hunter can't possibly stick out much longer. To tell the truth, I'm rather pleased with the Third."

"Good old Bennett!" roared Owen minor.

"Somebody on the bank!" came an urgent hail from De Valerie, who had gone up into the turret to keep watch.

We rushed out at once, and then saw the dim form of Mr. Kennedy Hunter upon the river bank. Behind him were other figures—Starke and Kenmore, probably. Mr. Suncliffe was also there.

"Boys!" came Mr. Hunter's angry shout.

"Hallo, sir!" I called.

"You will deliver up those Third-Form boys at once, Bennett!" shouted Mr. Hunter. "Send them over to me without delay!"

I grinned.

"Sorry, sir!" I shouted back. "I don't happen to be such an idiot as that. The Third's here, and it's going to stay here until our terms are agreed to. We're quite ready to come back quietly this minute, if you like. It's up to you, sir. You know our peace terms."

"You confounded young rascal!" roared Mr. Hunter furiously.

"All we want is your guarantee that nobody will be punished and that our rights shall be restored," I called. "That's all, sir. If you can't see your way to negotiate, the war must continue!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Long live the revolution!"

"Down with the Hun!"

"Boo!" howled the Third. "Boo! Yah!"

Mr. Hunter gave it up. At all events he did not speak again, but turned and disappeared into the darkness with his companions. He surely understood that we were as strong as ever. Doubtless he had come to the island under the impression that the Third-Form invasion had confused us. But he went away with the full knowledge that our motto was "No surrender."

"Well," I exclaimed, with a deep breath; "things are coming to a pass now, and no mistake. We'd better keep a strict look-out to-night. Hunter may make an attack in the dark—in desperation."

I examined our defences, and found everything in order. And I decided to have the watch doubled. The Third-Formers, of course, were pressed into service. It was only right that they should do their share. I must acknowledge that they were eager to do so.

I did not get to sleep until after midnight, and was up again by four o'clock. I did an hour's watch-keeping, and then went back to bed—finding it already occupied by Heath, of the Third. There was room for the two of us, so I didn't mind.

But as I fell into a doze I wondered how this fresh affair would develop.

What would happen when daylight came?

CHAPTER VI.

MR. HUNTER CLIMBS DOWN—UNQUALIFIED VICTORY FOR THE REMOVE.

BREAKFAST was over.

Tubbs had worked magnificently, and had performed wonders with the spirit stoves and utensils. We had plenty of spirit, and it was cleaner to use

these stoves than to make fires. Fires could be resorted to after our other supplies had given out.

The morning was slightly dull, and I fancied that a change of weather was coming. But everybody was in the best of spirits—the Third especially. These youngsters were particularly anxious that the rebellion should continue for several days. They didn't see any reason why it should end up abruptly.

Nine o'clock had already struck, and I was expecting a visit from Mr. Hunter at almost any time. I hardly believed that he would attempt to attack us again. Such an attempt would certainly fail—as Mr. Hunter was aware.

Yet I had an idea that the Housemaster would not tamely submit to our terms. The position, indeed, was jolly difficult. He wouldn't give in, and we wouldn't give in. Net result—a deadlock.

Most of the rebels believed that Mr. Hunter would suggest a peace by negotiation; that he would meet us half-way. But I wasn't prepared for this. Having taken up a strong stand, our only hope was to stick to our guns.

"Enemy advancing!" shouted Watson, who was on the look-out.

I rushed up at once, eager to see the strength of the enemy's force. To my astonishment I saw that Mr. Hunter was crossing the meadow from St. Frank's quite alone. The idea, evidently, was to have another pow-wow.

He came right down to the river bank, and found the island lined with expectant juniors. To my surprise, Mr. Hunter waved his handkerchief and smiled at us with his old geniality.

"Do you wish to speak to us, sir?" I shouted.

"You must regard this handkerchief as a white flag, Bennett," called Mr. Hunter. "I wish to come across to the island to speak to you quietly, but I want your guarantee that I shall not be molested."

"Right, sir!" I said promptly. "We'll treat you civilly, and won't touch a hair of your head. The British always respect the white flag!"

"Hear, hear!"

Mr. Hunter nodded, and stood waiting.

"Bo'sun, take charge of the boat, will you?" I called. "You'd better take four or five chaps with you, though," I added in a low voice. "If Hunter is willing to trust us, I'm not willing to trust him!"

"Souise me! You're right, shipmate!" said Burton, nodding.

He took four of the strongest fellows in the Remove with him, and we watched the boat cross to the mainland. I did not suspect treachery on Mr. Hunter's part, for he would have gained no advantage by collaring three or four fellows—but it was just as well to be prepared.

Mr. Hunter was strangely meek, however. He stepped into the boat, and sat in the stern while it was being rowed back. I wondered what this visit portended, and every other fellow was just as curious.

Mr. Hunter stepped ashore, and found him-

self surrounded by grim-looking rebels. He must have been impressed by our determined aspect. But he merely smiled and turned to me.

"I understand, Bennett, that you are the leader of these boys," he said.

"That's right, sir," I replied.

"Well, my lad; don't you think this farce has proceeded long enough?"

"Too long, sir," I answered steadily. "But we're not keeping it up. As I told you last night, we're quite ready to return to the Ancient House at once. We're not grumbling against the ordinary school authority."

"Quite so, Bennett, quite so," said Mr. Hunter. "Perhaps I was unduly harsh. I have been thinking over the matter carefully, and have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake. It is foolish to quarrel with the boys of my own House, and I am most anxious to have peace."

"Oh!"

"Upon what terms, sir?"

"State your terms, sir!"

Mr. Hunter eyed the excited fellows calmly.

"You are quite anxious upon that point, eh?" he asked. "I am not at all surprised. Seriously, boys, you have tried my patience to the utmost. I have no doubt that you all deserve equal punishment, but I am inclined to treat you leniently. In fact you may return to the Ancient House as soon as you wish. I will guarantee that no punishments shall be inflicted."

"Oh!"

"And what about the other matters, sir?" I asked.

"What other matters, Bennett?"

I looked at Mr. Hunter squarely.

"The cricket, sir, and the ban on the playing-fields," I replied. "Then there's the question about having tea in our studies. It's just as well to settle these points straight away, isn't it? We only ask that the Ancient House shall be conducted as Mr. Alvington conducted it."

"Hear, hear!"

"That's all, sir!"

Mr. Hunter stroked his chin slowly.

"I was not prepared to go to such lengths of leniency, Bennett," he exclaimed. "But I am feeling in a good humour this morning, and am inclined to be foolishly generous. This rebellion is the talk of the countryside, and I am most anxious to have it brought to a conclusion."

"So are we, sir."

"I have suffered severely at your hands, boys—you have handled me in the most disgraceful fashion on two or three occasions," went on Mr. Hunter. "I realise, however, that you were excited, and were scarcely responsible for your actions. So we will let bygones be bygones."

"And you accept our terms, sir?" I asked wonderingly.

"I scarcely like that expression, Bennett, but we will let it pass," said Mr. Hunter.

"I make you an offer. If you will all return to the Ancient House you will receive no

punishment, and your liberties, as you choose to call them, shall be fully restored."

There was a general gasp.

"Hurrah!" shouted several excited juniors.

"Victory!"

"Three cheers for the Remove!"

There was a tremendous uproar. Fullwood and Co. yelled for cheers for Mr. Hunter, but they were not given. Everybody knew quite well that the Housemaster had only knuckled under because he could do nothing else.

"We will all come over at once, sir," I said quietly. "But I should prefer you to put your guarantee into writing and sign it. Only a matter of form, sir, but we should feel more comfortable."

Mr. Hunter clicked his teeth and gazed at me balefully. He knew very well that I did not accept his bare word—he had expected it—and he was prepared. At the same time, the pill was a somewhat bitter one to swallow.

"Cannot you accept my promise, Bennett?" he asked grimly.

"Hardly, sir."

"Upon my soul! How—how dare you——"

"Perhaps you remember that little incident at the monastery ruins, sir?" I asked quietly. "You came to us one night and said that you were anxious to discuss terms. You also told us that you were quite alone. As a matter of fact, it was merely a decoy, for you had a party at the rear, preparing to attack."

Mr. Hunter compressed his lips.

"Strategy, Bennett—merely strategy," he exclaimed curtly.

"I've got another name for it, sir," I replied, amid a murmur of approval. "And I don't think the fellows will care to accept your bare word. We are quite ready to come back to the Ancient House, and we will respect you as our Housemaster. But we want a written guarantee that your promise will be honoured."

"Hear, hear!"

Mr. Hunter coughed.

"Perhaps, on the whole, you are justified in taking this attitude, boys," he remarked. "I must admit that my stratagem was somewhat drastic. But you forced me to adopt harsh measures by your unruly conduct. As I said, however, we will let bygones be bygones."

"We're agreeable, sir," I replied, still rather doubtful.

But Mr. Hunter took a bulky notebook from his pocket and uncapped his fountain-pen. A box was lying there, and he bent down low and commenced writing. I watched without speaking. The other fellows were whispering amongst themselves. The Third was looking somewhat glum; Owen minor and Co. had been hoping that the barring-out would continue for some days.

Mr. Hunter tore the sheet from his notebook and handed it to me. The ink was still wet upon it, and stood out intensely black on the white paper. I scanned the words eagerly, trying to detect some tricky phrase

which would enable Mr. Hunter to slip out of his obligation—he was quite capable of such a ruse.

But the "guarantee" was perfectly in order. Mr. Hunter stood eyeing us with an expression which almost seemed like amusement. His attitude was something of a mystery to me until I remembered that he could scarcely have adopted any other. He had lost a large amount of dignity by surrendering in this fashion; a display of temper on his part would only have produced jeers from the Remove. But, by assuming a good-natured bearing, Mr. Hunter hoped to save himself from humiliation.

The document was of the utmost importance, for, with this in the possession of the Remove, Mr. Hunter would be utterly unable to go back upon his word. If he did so he would be dishonoured for all time.

The words he had written were short and concise:

"The boys of the Remove Form under my direction—i.e., those boys boarding in the Ancient House—having surrendered, are hereby permitted to return to the school to renew their regular duties. I guarantee that no boy shall receive any punishment whatsoever, and that the full liberties of the Remove shall be restored from this date onwards. Cricket will be allowed, the playing-fields are placed within bounds, and the custom of taking tea in junior studies is renewed. In the event of further revolt this guarantee automatically becomes null and void, but so long as the Remove adheres to the school rules, this guarantee will hold good. I also give the boys permission to submit this document to the School Board of Governors in the event of any dispute.

"(Signed) KENNEDY HUNTER."

I had no fault to find with the wording of the Housemaster's peace treaty. It was quite straightforward. With this in the possession of the Remove he could do nothing—he had placed himself in our hands.

Certainly I had not expected such an abject "climb-down" on Mr. Hunter's part. It only proved that he fully realised the impossibility of beating us.

The guarantee was passed round, and caused general satisfaction. When I got it back into my hands I folded it up and stowed it away in my pocket-book. Mr. Hunter looked on calmly.

"There's one other question, sir," I said.

"Well, Bennett?"

"What about the Third, sir?" I asked.

"You haven't mentioned——"

"Ah, yes, the Third," said Mr. Hunter.

"I must admit that I had overlooked those young rascals. Give me the paper again."

I took it out, and the Housemaster added a few words to the effect that the Third Form would also be allowed to return to the school unpunished. He signed it again, and everything was in order.

In fact the readiness with which Mr. Hunter committed himself to writing made me

suspicious. Was there a trick here? For the life of me I couldn't see one. Everything was open and above-board.

Needless to say, I was greatly elated. The barring-out had been a great success; the Remove had gained an unqualified triumph. By sticking to our guns we had forced Mr. Hunter to admit abject defeat and to accept our terms.

To continue the rebellion, even for another minute, would automatically render the guarantee null and void. Mr. Hunter probably imagined that he would be able to trick us in that way; but I was wary of him.

"From this minute, sir, we are under your orders," I said quietly. "The revolt is a thing of the past, and we'll carry out any instructions you care to give. I'm very glad, sir, that this affair is over."

"So am I, Bennett—exceedingly glad," said Mr. Hunter genially. "And now everything will go smoothly, eh? I can assure you there will be no cause for complaint regarding my rule in the Ancient House."

"Hurrah!"

"You will all return to the school at your leisure," went on Mr. Hunter. "Do not hurry yourselves, boys, since it is too late for you to participate in morning lessons. I shall expect you to be in readiness, however, for the usual afternoon duties."

"Oh, of course, sir," I agreed readily.

"And now, Bennett, I will take my departure," said Mr. Hunter. "I realise that my presence restricts you somewhat, and it will be better for me to return to the school. You, of course, will make your arrangements for transferring the boys without delay. I shall instruct Warren to see about the supplies of food which are still upon the island."

Five minutes later Mr. Hunter was upon the river bank. He strode away across the meadow, and a mixture of excitement and regret prevailed amongst the late rebels. The Third was frankly disappointed.

"I call it rotten!" declared Owen minor warmly. "We haven't had a giddy look in! Just like old Hunter to do a dirty trick like that!"

"Don't you be a young ass," I said severely. "We've got every reason to congratulate ourselves. Hunter has eaten humble pie, and we've got everything our own way. It's victory—complete victory."

"Rather!"

"Begad! I can hardly believe it, dear old boys."

"Well, I'm feeling a bit that way myself, Montie," I agreed. "But Hunter can't back out of this agreement—it's as plain as your face!"

"Pray refrain from such frightful personalities, dear boy," protested Tregallis-West. "My face is shockin'ly plain, I know——"

"My dear chap, I was only speaking in a general way," I grinned. "Now, we'd better get to St. Frank's as soon as possible——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "There's no hurry."

"Perhaps not, but we don't want to give Hunter any cause to complain," I said. "And let me give you a word of warning—especially you Third-Form kids. We've triumphed, and it would be decent for us to take it quietly. I don't want you to go crowing about the school and gloating over Hunter's defeat. That's the very thing that'll make him angry. We've won the day, and that's sufficient."

De Valerie nodded.

"You're right, Bennett," he said. "Jeerin' ain't good form—what? We'll be as good as gold, an' Hunter will have to search with a magnifyin' glass before he can find any faults."

"Ain't we allowed to cheer when we get in the Triangle?" demanded Hubbard warmly.

"I didn't say anything about cheering," I replied. "That's a different thing to jeering. But I shouldn't advise you to let yourselves go too freely. Take it quietly, and Hunter will have no chance of complaining."

The fellows realised that my advice was sound, and they all agreed to do as I wished. And, straight away, we boarded the boats and crossed to the river bank. When everybody was over I advised them to form into something like order and march back to the school calmly.

The procession was quite an imposing one. We all glowed with keen satisfaction. Having gained all our points, we couldn't hold out a minute longer.

I had been expecting a rousing reception, and I wasn't mistaken. Morning lessons were just over by the time we arrived, and Christine and Co. received a huge surprise as we marched into the Triangle.

Mr. Hunter's visit to the island had not been known to anybody save himself, and our return caused a tremendous sensation. We were surrounded by seniors and juniors alike.

"Thought you'd soon knuckle under," said Chambers of the Fifth. "Now you'll get it in the necks, my fine rebels. I'm not sure you don't deserve—"

"You ass!" roared Handforth. "We've won! Do we look like a defeated army? Mr. Hunter's given in completely, and we've come back victorious. Three cheers for the Remove!"

"Hip-hip-hurrah!"

The cheers were given with a will, and after that we dispersed into groups and told our adventures to ready listeners. There was general amazement when it was learned that Mr. Hunter had agreed to all our demands.

There was one change, we found. Mr. Crowell was adhering to his resolve not to work under Mr. Hunter; he was staying in the College House, accepting Mr. Stockdale's hospitality.

Accordingly, there was a new Form-master for the Remove. This gentleman rejoiced in the name of Mr. Trapps, and he possessed a hatchet-face and a lanky figure. He didn't

look at all pleasant, but it wasn't fair to judge by appearances.

Some of the fellows were inclined to grumble; Handforth even talked of renewing the rebellion until Mr. Crowell returned. But that would have been absurd. We had gained all our points, and it wasn't fair to grumble at this change. After all, it was no concern of ours. It was merely a quarrel between Mr. Hunter and Mr. Crowell.

Before dinner I took care to stow the guarantee in a safe place. I didn't even let the other Remove fellows know where it was. I placed it in Tregellis-West's cash-box in the study cupboard, and locked the cupboard in addition. This cash-box had been presented to Montie by a kind relative, and was almost a miniature safe. No amount of tampering could possibly open it.

With the key in my own pocket I felt comfortable. For, to tell the truth, I didn't trust Mr. Hunter an inch. I knew his character far better than the other juniors, and believed that he was capable of taking possession of the document if he could only find it. But now it was beyond reach of any pilfering fingers.

The whole Ancient House seethed with excitement for some little time, but it was surprising how the fellows settled down into their old mode of life. And it was good to be free once more.

Everything was O.K., and great satisfaction prevailed.

But, alas, an awakening was near at hand.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TREACHERY OF MR. HUNTER—A MERE SCRAP OF PAPER—TRICKED!

MR. TRAPPS presided over the Remove during afternoon lessons.

In spite of his somewhat sinister aspect he proved to be gentle and easy-going. In fact he was far more lenient than Mr. Crowell himself. He winked at little faults which Mr. Crowell would have dropped upon instantly. This may have been on account of his own "freshness." When he got used to the Remove he would probably be different; but it was generally agreed that Mr. Trapps was a decent sort.

The majority of the boys quite enjoyed lessons. This may sound astonishing, but it's a fact. The barring-out had grown stale towards the finish, and the fellows had begun to feel their restrictions.

It was good to be at full liberty once more. Pocket-money was plentiful, for every fellow had found some letters waiting for him. Remittances had come to hand, and the Ancient House was a land flowing with milk and honey.

I found five pounds waiting for me, and Sir Montie stowed ten quid into his pocket-book. Tommy Watson, who didn't happen to have a millionaire for a pater, had to content himself with a modest ten shillings. But he didn't mind.

Tea in Study C was a huge success. Mrs. Hake had stocked her tuck-shop in readiness for the occasion, with a rare eye to business. Every junior study, in fact, made a special effort on this occasion, and I'm afraid the food regulations were sadly ignored.

There were visitors in plenty. In Study C we entertained Christine and Yorke and Talmadge, and discussed cricket while we ate. After a thoroughly enjoyable meal I set to business in earnest, and prepared for big action in the cricket line at once. It was still daylight, and I meant to have all my men on Little Side for practice.

They, of course, were quite eager, and we enjoyed the cricket immensely. It was practically dark by the time we trooped in, and good humour prevailed everywhere. In the lobby I was accosted by Bates. I regarded the page-boy coldly.

"Well, what do you want?" I asked.

"If you please, Master Bennett, Mr. Hunter has told me to fetch you," said Bates, with unusual deference. "Mr. Hunter wants you and Master Watson and Master Tregellis-West in his study at once."

"What for?" I asked shortly.

"Mr. Hunter didn't say, sir, but I believe it's about the school-work," replied Bates. "You've got be'ind, owin' to this rebellion, and Mr. Hunter wants to talk things over. He's in a surprisingly good temper, Master Bennett."

I nodded grimly.

"All right, Bates," I replied. "We'll come at once."

He went away, and I regarded my chums thoughtfully. I couldn't quite understand why Mr. Hunter wanted to discuss the school-work with us, and I concluded that Bates had made a mistake. Anyhow, there was no reason why we shouldn't go—in fact we couldn't do anything else. A request from a Housemaster was a command.

"Shall we go?" asked Watson doubtfully.

"Must," I replied. "I shouldn't be surprised if this is a piece of his trickery. If we don't go he'll be able to say that we revolted again, and that makes the guarantee valueless. Oh, Hunter's up to all sorts of tricks. We'd better go at once, and then he can't have any opening."

"Begad, you're right, Benny," said Sir Montie. "It's the only thing we can do. An' there can't be any risk. We've got Mr. Hunter's written promise that everything is all right."

And so, without further delay, we hung our caps up in the cloak-room and proceeded to Mr. Hunter's study. We were feeling quite confident, and I tapped firmly upon the door. Even now we were unaware of Mr. Hunter's actual baseness.

"Come in!"

I turned the handle and walked into the study. Watson and Tregellis-West followed me. The lights were full on, and Mr. Hunter was seated at his desk, toying idly with a pencil.

To my astonishment the door closed

swiftly, and I heard the key turn in the lock. It was Bates who had performed this action, and there was a peculiarly unpleasant grin upon his features.

I faced round swiftly, my pulse beating rapidly. Over by the window stood Mr. Trapps, and by his side was the mysterious Smiles! Starke and Kenmore of the Sixth lounged on the other side of the room.

I caught my breath in sharply.

The locking of the door, the presence of all these enemies in the room, and the grim expression upon each face, made me suspect a trap. Sir Montie and Tommy felt the same, for they uttered exclamations of dismay.

"You told Bates to fetch us, didn't you, sir?" I asked steadily.

"Exactly, Bennett."

"Is anything the matter, sir?" I asked, looking round the room.

"Nothing, that I am aware of," replied the Housemaster, tapping his blotting-pad with the end of a pencil. "I have summoned you to my study for a very definite purpose. You, I believe, are recognised as the leader of the Remove?"

"That's right, sir."

"Well, Bennett, I wish to have a very serious talk with you," said Mr. Hunter. "These other boys, I suspect, are your supporters—you three, in fact, were the actual ringleaders in the recent rebellion?"

I stared.

"The whole Remove was in it, sir," I replied. "But I thought the question was settled? I thought everything was going on as usual?"

Mr. Hunter laughed unpleasantly.

"You are very foolish to think that way, Bennett," he replied. "Did you imagine for one moment that you would escape punishment?"

"But—but you promised——" burst out Watson.

"Silence, Watson!" snapped Mr. Hunter. "I am speaking to Bennett. The whole Remove will receive very severe punishment, and you three boys will be given a severe flogging at once——"

"A flogging!" I shouted amazedly.

"You heard what I said——"

"But what about your promise?" I roared.

Mr. Hunter looked at me steadily. A great rage was welling up within me, and my eyes blazed with fury. For Mr. Hunter to even talk of a flogging was almost unbelievable. We had left Willard's Island of our own accord, because Mr. Hunter had guaranteed that no punishment should be inflicted.

"I don't understand you, Bennett," said Mr. Hunter calmly.

"Don't—don't understand me!" I gasped. "What about your written guarantee——"

"You are talking nonsense!"

I simply stared, momentarily bewildered by this astounding attitude. I felt thankful that I had locked Mr. Hunter's guarantee

safely away. He could never get over that document.

"Nonsense!" I repeated dazedly.

"Certainly! What invention is this of yours, Bennett?" asked Mr. Hunter coldly. "I have no recollection of any written guarantee, as you call it. Neither did I promise that no punishment should be inflicted. You left the island of your own accord, and you must now suffer for your delinquencies."

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie faintly.

I felt utterly at a loss for words. The barefaced manner in which Mr. Hunter was repudiating his promises fairly took my breath away. It was so astounding that I could do nothing but gape. He had given no promise! He had no recollection of any written guarantee!

And the madness of it! I had the signed guarantee in my possession, and the thought of this brought relief to my mind.

"If you punish any of us, sir," I exclaimed hotly; "I shall send that paper to the school governors——"

"What paper?" asked Mr. Hunter.

"The—the one you signed this morning!" roared Tommy Watson.

"I signed no paper this morning," replied the Housemaster calmly. "I do not know what you are talking about, you foolish boys. Is this some absurd fabrication? Do you imagine that you will intimidate me——"

"I've got the paper!" I shouted.

"Produce it, boy—produce it!"

"That's likely, isn't it?" I exclaimed bitterly. "You would take it from me——"

"How dare you, Bennett?" roared Mr. Hunter. "Go and fetch this paper you refer to. I defy you to produce such a document."

I stood there, thinking confusedly.

I was in a dilemma. If I refused to produce the paper everybody in the room except Mr. Hunter would believe that I had been lying. Mr. Hunter had signed that guarantee in the presence of the Remove and the Third—and now he was denying it!

Naturally everybody would conclude that we juniors had concocted the story to suit ourselves. People are always ready to believe that boys are first-class liars. Some fellows in the Remove were liars, as a matter of fact. But Mr. Hunter's audacity was startling.

Should I fetch the document? Would it be risky? Mr. Hunter couldn't very well take it from me and destroy it in the presence of all these witnesses—such a course would have been too perilous.

"Well, Bennett?" asked Mr. Hunter calmly.

"I'll fetch the paper, sir," I exclaimed. "But I want Tregellis-West with me."

"Very good." Mr. Hunter turned. "Kindly conduct these boys to the spot where this imaginary paper is kept, Mr. Trapps," he said. "If they can show me any written guarantee of mine I will allow them to go unpunished. But the whole matter is a sheer farce."

Mr. Trapps escorted us out of the Housemaster's study. He was looking very grim. We passed down the corridors, and entered Study C. I was rather glad that nobody had seen us on the way.

I switched the light on and passed round the table. Sir Montie accompanied me, and Mr. Trapps stood by the door. For the life of me I couldn't help feeling nervous. I tried to remember all the details concerning the paper; and I positively knew that I had placed it in the cash-box with my own fingers.

But, at the same time, I had a dreadful feeling that the document had been spirited away. If not, Mr. Hunter's attitude was simply mad. The very fact that he had told me to fetch the paper seemed to prove that it wasn't to be found.

"Hurry up, Bennett!" said Mr. Trapps sharply.

I placed the key in the lock of the strong-box, turned it, and opened the lid. Then both Sir Montie and I gave little gasps of relief. There was the paper, neatly folded, lying before us.

"Begad!" breathed Sir Montie. "How gratifyin'!"

I seized the document eagerly, and casually glanced into the folded portion. Then, with a hoarse cry, I laid it flat. And I stared—stared with utter amazement and consternation.

The paper was blank—a mere sheet of white paper!

I felt as though I had gone dotty for a second or two. I remembered that the ink from Mr. Hunter's fountain-pen had been exceptionally black, and—I snatched the paper up and examined it minutely.

The truth had dawned upon my bewildered mind.

"We've been tricked, Montie!" I gasped huskily.

"But, dear old boy, that ain't the paper——"

"Yes, it is!" I exclaimed, staring at Tregellis-West wildly. "Don't you understand? That ink Mr. Hunter used must have been a special sort—it has faded away into invisibility since the words were written!"

By sheer Prussianism Mr. Hunter had won, and I knew only too well that he meant to keep the upper hand.

But would he?

In spite of the dreadful position, I had a feeling that the most dramatic excitement of all was to come!

THE END

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

BEGIN THIS THRILLING 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 First Chapters.

GEORGE GRAY, his brother JACK, and WILSON, are three members of the Berlin Rovers, a football Club in Germany. When war breaks out they are interned in a camp at Oberhemmel, but one night they manage to escape. The alarm, however, is given, and there is nothing to do but to run for it. They succeed in evading pursuit, and hide till the next morning in a turnip field. At daybreak they set out and capture three men who are driving carts to market. They bind and gag them, and set off with their waggons. Luck favours them, and they drive to a market-town, where they leave the waggons. They then take tickets for Berlin.

(Now read on.)

THE TRAIN SEARCHED.

GEORGE and Wilson stood in the corridor. Jack Gray, who was much more tired and nervous than either of the others, owing to his frail physique and highly strung temperament, occupied a corner seat, and, on the advice of his brother, closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

It would obviate the necessity of replying to any casual questions that might be addressed to him.

George and Wilson smoked. Hardly ever did they speak to each other, for to speak was risky; but they smoked and thought, or read a paper they found in the corridor which some passenger had tossed aside.

As they read their hearts sank within them. It seemed as if the Germans were carrying all before them. Liege had fallen after putting up a brave resistance. Brussels had been occupied, Namur had been shelled and captured, and the Huns were hurling the British and the French back on every hand. Paris, it seemed, was in the enemy's grip.

George's heart was sore within him. Oh, if only he could get back home and join the Army! If only he could get out and fight!

At last he opened the window and tossed the offending sheet to the winds, after which he felt better.

Twice during the journey tickets were

examined. Once it seemed to George that the railway official eyed them with suspicion: yet nothing happened. The heavy growth of hair upon upper lip and chin, and their grimy appearance helped their deception.

And so by great good luck they arrived within ten miles of Berlin.

"Bernau!" roared the porters, as they steamed alongside the platform. "Bernau!"

Jack opened his eyes, looked at George and Wilson, and, at a sign, joined them in the corridor.

They were in the back part of the train, and presently they heard a German fuming because he was not permitted to leave the train.

"Not permitted to alight!" roared the incensed Hun. "Why not? I do not intend to go further than Bernau."

"Can't be helped," was the none too civil reply. "The train is being searched for escaped British prisoners. Nobody must leave it until the examination has been concluded."

In vain the irate German stormed and fumed and swore. The official was inexorable; and at last the passenger resigned himself to his fate.

He came gesticulating along the corridor, and addressed himself to the three friends.

"It is monstrous!" he complained. "It is officialdom gone mad!"

George smiled and nodded. The Hun passed on.

What was to be done? If they were to undergo a systematic examination George knew very well that they would betray themselves, and would be arrested.

It was time to act.

The compartment in which Jack had travelled was empty. The passengers had crowded out to seek refreshment.

Through it, on the other side of the train, was the permanent way.

"Come on—quick!" whispered the sturdy footballer. "It's our only chance."

He passed swiftly through the compartment, opened the door, and dropped down on to the line.

Jack followed. Wilson was the last, and the big fellow had the presence of mind to

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

shut the door and turn the handle. The next moment he, too, was down on the metals.

Crouching low, and keeping in close to the express, George crept onward.

Could they manage it, or had they been seen, he wondered? With wildly beating heart and holding his breath, he crept onward, onward into the darkness, until he reached the end of the train.

The next moment he was past it. Left and right of him were the platforms, but they were deserted, the porters and officials all being interested in the examination of the passengers.

Soon they were beyond the station, with the night around them.

George paused, and glanced back at the red tail-lamps of the train.

Then he laughed.

"We have tricked the fools!" he said, in a low whisper. "Let's keep to the railway, facing the oncoming trains, until we can find an opportunity of leaving it. Once on a country road, we can gain Berlin afoot with ease."

BERLIN.

AN hour later, for they were cautious, and took their time, they had left the railway, passed across some fields, and gained a broad and well-made road.

Proceeding along this at an ambling walk until they found a sign-post, they turned down the main road to Berlin, and swung onward with fresh heart.

Dawn broke with six miles yet to cover. This time they did not hide, but tramped boldly onward, for they had put many miles between themselves and the scene of their exploit. That their description had been circulated was, of course, a certainty. Yet men like themselves could be found working on every farm in or near Berlin.

They ran their greatest risk through looking so young. Nearly every man in Germany of their ages had already joined the colours.

However, they faced the music, and, swinging onward, at last found themselves in the outskirts of the capital.

As they entered the busy streets and approached the centres they knew so well they began to feel as if their task was done.

They would find humble lodgings, then seek friends who might be disposed to help them—and they had made many friends in Berlin—and so escape to Holland or Switzerland. The period of their captivity seemed to have drifted for ever behind them, and the freedom they longed for to be almost within their grasp.

They were very careful in selecting their lodgings, for they knew that every German is a spy, but at last secured rooms in a common lodging-house kept by a poor and humble German widow. They ordered and ate a substantial meal, and then sallied forth to look around them and note for themselves

what changes were to be found in the great Continental city since they'd seen it last.

What they saw and heard disgusted them beyond measure.

Vulgar, blatant, intoxicated with the thoughts of victory and the irresistible might of their vast armies, people thronged the streets, the cafes, the public places. Flushed and madly excited, cheering and shouting like madmen, even though rumours had echoed home that here and there they'd had a rare beating.

Everywhere flags were displayed. There wasn't a house, hotel, club, or public building that did not flaunt the colours of the Allies of Middle Europe. The Kaiser had ordered rejoicings for victory, they heard, and the scenes and sounds that met them at every turn depressed their spirits so that it was long ere they recovered.

Towards evening each of them was shaved in a barber's shop.

They stood the ordeal well, and had few questions to answer, as a crowd was waiting to be operated on. Feeling cleaner and brighter that night, they entered a cafe, ordered food, and spent almost the last of their money.

It was a cheap cafe which they selected, and it was busy, as all the cafes and beer-houses were. Fat, double-chinned Germans and their wives occupied almost every table. Large, tapering glasses and huge mugs, with leaden lids, overflowed with the lager which was to become so scarce before the war was through.

Amid the hum and bustle and noise the three friends passed unnoticed, drank their cool, refreshing light lager, and ate their German sausage and salted gherkins.

For an hour and a half they remained, smoking and talking over their plans in whispers, which were drowned by the noise about them.

As far as they could tell, they remained unobserved, unnoticed.

Suddenly a shadow loomed above them. They thought it was a German waiter. Instead, it proved to be a customer—a stout, deep-chested, heavy-browed German, well-dressed, and about fifty years of age, who pulled a chair out and flung himself into it, staring keenly at them while he gave an order to the waiter.

George and Jack, glancing at him, felt their hearts leap within them.

They knew him. He was a certain Herr Wilhelm Beckmann, one of the enthusiastic directors of the Berlin Rovers, who had shown them many a kindness on their arrival in Berlin, when they first joined the Berlin Rovers Football Club.

Wilson recognised him, too.

Beckmann sipped his beer, paid and tipped the waiter, and seemingly became absorbed in all that was going on around him.

George nudged Jack, who in turn trod on Wilson's foot. It was time to go. They rose, and made for the exit.

(Continued overleaf.)

Out into the street they went, and, finding themselves safe beneath the stars, breathed freely again.

"Thank goodness! It was a close shave!" breathed George, in deep relief. "He didn't recognise us. But we'd better cut it while we're safe."

And then a shadow fell across them as they turned, and Beckmann barred the way.

"Ah, my good friends!" he said, with a dry smile. "It is better we should talk out here than in there. I had heard of your escape. The authorities communicated with the club, thinking you might make your way back to Berlin. And it was shoost luck that I found you."

"Well," cried George hotly, facing him with flashing eyes and clenched fists. "And now that you have found us, what then? Are you going to hand us over to the Berlin police?"

Beckmann pulled at his fat chin and looked serenely at George.

"I think," he said, "you three had better come home with me, so that we can talk quietly there. I haf goot friends in Englant. I haf always been well treaded dere. The war,"—and he shrugged his shoulders—"is a mistake. I shall not betray you. I will help you if I can. Come!" So saying, he held out a fat hand, and reluctantly, after studying his face, George took it.

THE TRAP.

AN hour later, the three friends, in the safe seclusion of Wilhelm Beckmann's study, having told their story, were listening to his advice.

It seemed sound.

He bore them no ill will, Beckmann said; on the contrary, they had served him and the Berlin Rovers well, and but for the unlucky mishap which had brought about the war, they might have spent some pleasant years together. He would help them with money, and try to get them safe across the

frontier into Holland or Switzerland if he could, leaving it to their honour not to fight against the Fatherland if they could possibly help it.

He would have to think of ways and means, of course. Meanwhile, they had better return to their cheap lodgings, and communicate with him only at night. They must talk no English, and not betray themselves. If they did, and were retaken, they were, of course, to say nothing of his friendly overtures, because if they did he might be severely punished.

He gave them supper, handed them each one hundred marks, to be repaid in happier times, saying that he would never miss it, and dismissed them with a cheery smile and a hearty handshake.

They left him feeling brighter, happier, and more hopeful.

"Good old Beckmann!" cried George, as they footed it back to their lodging-house. "He always was a good sort, and war hasn't changed him." While these other devils are shrieking the Hymn of Hate, he hasn't forgotten old friendships, and he's as good a patriot as any other German, notwithstanding. On that I'll stake my life."

The others agreed, and they slept the sounder and happier for the pleasant experience.

From that moment they began to regard their chance of escape as rosy in the extreme. Given a little time, and the perfecting of their plans, it seemed a certainty.

They kept in close communication with Beckmann, and were told by him that they could expect a satisfactory denouement in a few days.

He hoped to be able to motor them to Hanover himself, he said, where a friend of his would take on the responsibility. Meanwhile, they were to study the German language with all their might, so as to be able to meet eventualities.

Alas for his plans and their hopes!

(To be continued.)

"TURNING THE TABLES"

IS THE TITLE OF

Next Week's Splendid Story. Mr. Hunter has foiled Nipper and Co. by a base trick. How can they counter him?

SEE

"TURNING THE TABLES."

OUT ON WEDNESDAY. WAR-TIME PRICE—THREE-HALFPENCE.