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A Tale of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER. By the Author of "The Rebel Remove," "A Scrap of Paper," "Turning the Tables," etc., etc.

June 1, 1918.

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A Tale of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's. Introducing **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER**. By the Author of "The Rebel Remove," "A Scrap of Paper," "Turning the Tables," 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.

(The narrative related throughout by Nipper.)

CHAPTER I.

FENTON IS OBLIGING—THE LETTER FROM DR. STAFFORD—HIGH HOPES.

BREAKFAST was over in the Ancient House at St. Frank's.

The May morning was delightful, and a great many fellows, seniors and juniors, were sunning themselves in the Triangle. The weather had put everybody into a good temper; but the Remove was unusually elated.

There had been some excitement that morning.

Only a short time before breakfast Mr. Trapps, the temporary master of the Remove Form, had been sent about his business. To be quite frank, the Remove had given Mr. Trapps the order of the boot.

Without attempting to excuse my conduct, I will admit that I had been the ring-leader in this affair. As skipper of the Remove—Ancient House section—it was only natural that I should have led the other fellows.

"Something's got to be done, of course," I said, addressing a little knot of juniors round the Ancient House steps. "We must have a Form-master of some sort; and it'll be time for lessons in half an hour."

"Why not ask Crowsfeet to come back?" suggested Tommy Watson.

I shook my head.

"No good doing that," I replied. "Mr. Crowell has decided to remain over in the College House until Mr. Hunter has been hoofed out. We've finished with Trapps, thank goodness, and we shall soon be finished with Hunter."

"It's a shockin' thing, really," observed Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Dear fellows, we've acted in the most disrespectful manner. I'm afraid we're becomin' too reckless, begad! The way we raced Trapps down to the station an' bundled him on to the mornin' train was simply appallin'."

The Removites, instead of looking appalled, grinned at the recollection.

"Serve him jolly well right!" said Edward Oswald Handforth, the redoubtable leader of Study D. "Serve him jolly well right!" he added, probably because he had nothing better to say.

"Well, he certainly asked for it," I agreed. "But that doesn't alter the fact that we're in the happy position of being without a Form-master. Of course, as leader, I can take charge of you——"

"Rats!"

"We ain't standing that!"

"Rather not!"

"Keep your hair on," I grinned. "I wouldn't take charge of the Remove for golden quids—scarce as they are nowadays. Besides, there'd be trouble with Christine. He's captain of the College House lot, and trouble would certainly follow. No, my sons, we've got to find some kindly disposed person who will consent to take charge of the Remove——"

"Why not cut lessons altogether?" suggested McClure.

"Why not?" I repeated sternly. "Well, I can name two or three reasons. To begin with, we don't want to give the Head any excuse for saying that we butted against the ordinary school authority. Our quarrel has been with Hunter and Trapps, because they acted like tyrants. And, for another

reason, it wouldn't do us good to laze about all day——"

"Oh, that's nothing," declared McClure. "There's cricket and boating and all sorts of things we could do."

One or two fellows upheld this view, but the more serious spirits, such as Burton and De Valerie and Sir Montie, agreed with me that we had no excuse for "cutting" lessons. We should have placed ourselves in the wrong at once.

The question was rather difficult. I had been giving much thought to it, and had already come to something like a decision. Before stating what this is, it would be as well for me to go into a few details.

Mr. Hunter, our new Housemaster, was a brute, of course. He hadn't been at St. Frank's very long, but during his rule in the Ancient House there had been more trouble than in all the previous ten years.

The Remove had not only broken into an open revolt, but the Third had joined in as well. The harring-out had been a distinct success, for we had gained all our points. Mr. Kennedy Hunter, however, had acted like the Prussian he was. He had signed a guarantee of good faith, and we had not learned until too late that the paper was worthless—that the ink had faded into blankness before the day was out.

After that there had been trouble. Tregellis-West and Watson and I, as the ring-leaders in the harring-out, were trapped in Mr. Hunter's study, and we had received the flogging of our lives. Not content with this, Mr. Hunter had imprisoned us in a cellar, leaving us in total darkness and feeding us upon bread and water—and very little of either.

He had acted in this way because he suspected that we knew too much about him. Well, as a matter of fact, we did. We knew that he was engaged upon some criminal work in the district—that his position at St. Frank's was merely a blind—and we knew that Mr. Trapps, who had been placed in charge of the Remove, was a fellow-crook.

Nelson Lee, who had left St. Frank's for a time, had turned up trumps. He had released us from the cellar on the second night. The gov'nor, of course, was known at St. Frank's as "Mr. Alvington," and the work he was engaged upon was of a very secret nature. Even I didn't know the actual character of it. But I could easily guess that Mr. Hunter was the object of Nelson Lee's activity.

The gov'nor had given us some very excellent advice. In short, he had advised us to go straight to bed, believing that Mr. Hunter would not dare to interfere with us again—when he found that we had escaped.

But Nelson Lee had overlooked the fact that our backs were still sore and aching from the effects of the flogging. Our feelings towards Mr. Hunter were the reverse

of kindly, and instead of going to bed we had accomplished a very different task.

De Valerie and Handforth and one or two others had been awakened, and the Avenging Tribunal had come into being. Disguised with cloaks and hoods, we had hauled Mr. Hunter out of bed, and had taken him down into the cellar which we had lately occupied.

There had been a trial, and Mr. Hunter received a birching and confinement for forty-eight hours. In short, the tables had been turned, and Mr. Hunter was treated exactly the same as he had treated his victims.

It was impossible for us to regard him as an ordinary schoolmaster. He was a rotter to the backbone, and if ever a man deserved flogging, he did. And he did not like his own medicine at all.

Flushed with success, we had gone a step further. Mr. Hunter had been forced to re-write the guarantee—in good old-fashioned ink this time—and that important document was now reposing safely in Mr. Stockdale's safe, in the Ancient House. It was carefully sealed up, and, needless to say, Mr. Stockdale was not aware of its character.

But we had Hunter in a cleft stick. When he was released from the cellar he wouldn't dare practise any more of his tyranny. If he had been a man, instead of a bullying coward, he would never have written that guarantee. But the threat of the birch had reduced him to submission.

Under the terms of the "agreement" the Remove was to have all its liberties restored, and Mr. Hunter would not dare to ignore his written word. In addition we had put in a clause to the effect that the Remove was granted full permission to rid the school of Mr. Trapps in any manner possible.

We had promptly taken advantage of our self-made loophole. Just before breakfast Mr. Trapps had been hustled down to the station and had been forcibly pushed on to the early morning train. He knew well enough that if he showed his face at St. Frank's again he would be treated even more drastically.

We had relented regarding Mr. Hunter's confinement, having decided to release him during the afternoon. He was subdued, anyway, and would be able to do nothing further of a tyrannic nature.

Personally, I was very anxious to show that there was no revolt against the recognised school authorities. If we carried out McClure's suggestion we should place ourselves entirely in the wrong. But McClure, although a decent fellow in every way, was not very fond of lessons.

"It's no good talking," I said decidedly. "We've got to be on our good behaviour now. Crowell's an obstinate sort of beggar, and he won't set foot inside the Ancient House again until Hunter has been kicked out. I don't blame him, if it comes to that. But what are we going to do about a Form-master?"

"Why not ask Fenton's advice, old boy?" suggested Sir Montie languidly.

"That's exactly what I am going to do," I replied. "In fact, I'm going to ask Fenton to take charge of the Remove. He's captain of the school, and one of the best fellows breathing. He'll make an ideal Form-master, and he'll realise that our quarrel is only with Mr. Hunter."

"He'll kick you out of his study," said Handforth.

"He won't have a chance, because I sha'n't go to his study," I answered. "As it happens, Fenton is coming across from the gym. now. We'll put it to him straight away. Who'll come with me?"

Tregellis-West and Watson stepped forward at once, and De Valerie and Handforth and two or three others followed. They were not very optimistic, I could see, believing that Fenton, of the Sixth, would regard our request as a piece of cool cheek. At the same time, the Removites rather liked the idea of having Fenton as a temporary Form-master. He was good-natured and easy-going.

"I say, Fenton," I called cheerfully.

The school captain turned his head and paused. We approached him in a body, and I noticed that Fenton's expression was rather severe.

"We're a deputation," I announced.

"Oh," said Fenton. "Well, what do you want?"

"Are you open to a decent offer?" I went on calmly. "The Remove happens to be without a Form-master."

"What are you talking about, you young ass?" interrupted Fenton. "What about Mr. Trapps?"

"Oh, he's gone," I replied. "Didn't you know?"

"I knew that you kids had been up to some more of your impudence," replied Fenton, frowning. "But I'm not interfering. It's Mr. Hunter's affair, and he'll have to deal with it. It's a queer thing he hasn't dealt with it already."

I grinned. I knew well enough that Fenton was fully aware of the fate which had overtaken the unfortunate Mr. Trapps. He preferred to remain ignorant of the matter, however, being actually on our side. As head prefect of the school, however, he couldn't possibly acknowledge this.

"Mr. Hunter won't cause much trouble," I replied mysteriously.

"No trouble at all, in fact," grinned Handforth. "He's squashed—squashed flat. As flat as a pancake that's been under a steam-roller!" he added, with a feeble attempt at humour.

"Well, I can't bother about your troubles——" began Fenton.

"Don't be in a hurry," I said hastily, as Fenton was walking off. "You know well enough that we're as good as gold when it comes to the ordinary school rules, Fenton."

"Oh, yes, I know that!" said Fenton drily. "Well?"

"That's just it," I continued. "It'll be

time for lessons in a few minutes, and we've got nobody to look after us. We want you to take charge of the Remove until Mr. Crowell comes back."

"You cheeky young bounder——"

"Oh, I'm serious," I interrupted. "Honest Injun, Fenton!"

Edgar Fenton hesitated.

"If you're really serious," he said, "I might consider it. But I don't want any of your beastly cheek——"

"We mean it, Fenton—honour bright!" said Watson anxiously.

"Well, I must say you've done the right thing," exclaimed Fenton, with an approving nod. "I'm not making any remarks about your treatment of Trapps, but I dare say you know what I think. And I'm pleased to find you've got a sense of proportion. I was expecting trouble from the Remove."

"Well, there won't be any," I said. "We're anxious to be good little boys, Fenton. And if you'll take charge of us during lessons we'll regard it as a personal favour. You won't find it necessary to cane anybody for talking in class—not even Handforth!"

"Look here——" began Handforth wrathfully.

"There's the bell going now," interrupted Fenton. "Right you are, kids. Buzz off to the Form-room, and behave yourselves. I'll be along in five minutes. But mind, if I find you are tricky, I shall drop the thing at once. I'm just going along to tell Mr. Langton."

And Fenton walked off briskly. Mr. Langton was the master of the Sixth Form, a very meek gentleman who had held his appointment for the past fifteen years, and seemed good enough to hold it for fifteen more. He had suffered very little at Mr. Hunter's hands, being considered by that individual as unworthy of serious attention.

The Remove, as a whole, was very pleased with the arrangement. The College House fellows were openly jubilant. After the petty tyranny of Mr. Trapps, Fenton would seem an angel. He was even far better than Mr. Crowell himself, much as the Remove liked its popular Form-master.

I impressed upon the fellows the necessity of refraining from cheek. Fenton was good-natured, and if we behaved ourselves we should have an easy time of it. But Fenton was a determined fellow, and he would not hesitate to inflict lines and canings if occasion demanded.

He came into the Form-room looking rather important. Fenton was by no means given to "swank," but he naturally felt the responsibility of his present position. And it pleased his natural vanity to know that the Remove had personally requested him to take charge of things.

Morning lessons were a great success. Not a line was inflicted, although Handforth came very near the mark. He chose a singularly inopportune moment to confide to McClure the fact that Mrs. Hake's home-

made stick-jaw was of a very inferior quality, and that she was profiteering in a most unwarrantable fashion. In all probability these remarks were quite true, but any other fellow would have chosen a more suitable occasion for imparting such information—which, as a matter of fact, was well known to McClure all the time, considering that McClure's cheek was full of the toffee in question. McClure had thought fit to improve the shining hour by sticky refreshments during the second lesson, Fenton's eye being by no means so keen for such matters as Mr. Crowell's. The latter gentleman, having had much experience of Removites during many generations, had developed an extraordinarily acute vision for ominous bulges which could scarcely be ascribed to tooth-ache.

McClure was not at all pleased with Handforth for his confidential whisper. Fenton had warned Handforth severely, and, at the same time, even his inexperienced eye could not be oblivious to the enlarged condition of McClure's face. As a direct consequence McClure was curtly ordered to empty his mouth.

When lessons were over Fenton made a few remarks concerning our general behaviour, and expressed the hope that it wasn't merely a flash in the pan. He received sundry assurances, in various keys, that everything in the garden would continue to be lovely.

Fenton, not entirely convinced, marched across to the College House and sought Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster. He found that Mr. Stockdale was already acquainted with the facts, having been supplied with information from Mr. Langton.

"Really, Fenton, I don't care to express my opinion on the subject," said Mr. Stockdale, as Fenton stood before his desk. "I am pleased to see that the Remove boys are behaving themselves—more particularly because many of them belong to my own House. Things are reaching a pretty pass, I'm afraid."

"Well, Mr. Trapps was really unbearable, sir," said Fenton. "It's against all authority, but I don't blame the juniors for kicking him out. He was one of Mr. Hunter's importations, and a rank outsider."

"I should prefer not to discuss the subject, Fenton," said Mr. Stockdale, somewhat severely. "Mr. Trapps has gone, and that is sufficient. I have spoken to Mr. Crowell on the subject, and he adheres to his decision to remain under my roof until Mr. Hunter takes his departure. Since the Remove is on its good behaviour you may as well continue your present duties. By the way, have you seen anything of Mr. Hunter this morning?"

"No, sir," replied Fenton. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I presume he has left the school for some reason of his own," said Mr. Stockdale contemptuously. "Mr. Hunter's conduct is very extraordinary at times, but I am consoled by the fact that his regime will soon be at an

end. You will be glad to learn, Fenton, that Dr. Stafford is returning to St. Frank's this evening."

Fenton bent forward eagerly.

"Really, sir?" he exclaimed. "By Jove! That's good news!"

"Very good news indeed, Fenton," replied Mr. Stockdale comfortably.

He passed over a letter which Fenton perused with interest. It was a short note from Dr. Stafford, announcing the fact that he would arrive in Bellton by the eight-thirty train on the evening of the present day.

"This is great, sir," said Fenton, handing the letter back. "Mr. Hunter won't be able to let himself go any longer. He's been taking on airs and riling the roost as though he were the Headmaster himself—"

"Quite so, Fenton—quite so," interrupted Mr. Stockdale. "We will not discuss the subject. Let us be very satisfied that Dr. Stafford will soon be in our midst once more. I sincerely hope that his coming heralds the return of Mr. Alvington!"

"And the dismissal of Mr. Hunter!" said Fenton genially.

He took his departure a few minutes later, knowing that on the morrow it would not be necessary for him to take the Remove any longer. For Mr. Crowell would certainly return to his duties when the Head took charge of things once more. For Fenton rightly believed that Dr. Stafford's return would be fatal to Mr. Hunter.

As it happened, Fenton ran across me as he was crossing the Triangle. It was not usual for seniors to give information to juniors, but Fenton was feeling in a very good temper.

"Heard the news, kid?" he asked cheerfully.

"What news?" I asked, in return.

"I don't know that I ought to tell you, because you'll make a fuss," said Fenton. "But the Head will be with us again this evening. He's coming by the eight-thirty train. Don't let the kids make too much noise."

Fenton passed on, leaving me whistling softly to myself. The denouement was at hand. Needless to say, I was filled with delight. Mr. Hunter was certainly at the end of his tether, and the finish of his regime was in sight.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRIBUNAL AT WORK—MR. HUNTER IS SUBDUED—VAQUE SUSPICIONS.

MR. KENNEDY HUNTER, M.A., was raging.

He could not altogether be blamed for giving way to a fit of mad passion. The time, by his watch, was 3.45 p.m., and he had been a helpless prisoner in his own cellar since the small hours of the morning.

He realised fully that imprisonment in a cellar is no joke. He also realised that the Remove had "put one over" on him in the

most determined manner—as Justin B. Farman would have expressed it.

The avenging tribunal seemed like a nightmare to him. He recalled the manner in which he had been hauled out of his warm bed in the middle of the night; he recalled the mysterious, cloaked figures. And it seemed to Mr. Hunter as though he must shortly awaken to find that the whole ghastly affair had been a particularly bad dream.

Unfortunately, however, it was stern reality. He—Mr. Kennedy Hunter—had been birched and imprisoned in a cellar! And he could do absolutely nothing when he emerged! Mr. Hunter bitterly reviled himself for having written that fatal document.

"I shall ignore it!" he decided passionately. "By Heaven! Those wretched juniors shall suffer in a manner they little dream of! It will be days before anything can be done with that infernal guarantee, and before then the Remove will have learned that——"

Mr. Hunter caught his breath in sharply.

He had been pacing up and down the inky cellar, his hands clasped behind his back. But now he halted and listened. Yes, the door was being unlocked. The Housemaster gripped his teeth tightly.

The door swung open, and the brilliant light from an electric-torch streamed into the cellar. Mr. Hunter was quite blinded for the moment by the sudden glare. The next moment something charged into him. He went over on his back with a thud.

"The ropes, comrades—the ropes!" panted a gruff voice.

The attack had been so sudden that Mr. Hunter was bound up almost before he knew it. Only his ankles were secured. Thick cords were passed round and round his feet and legs: his hands, meanwhile, being tightly pressed beneath him.

The attackers were not satisfied until they had roped Mr. Hunter's ankles with such security that the knots could not possibly be untied without great trouble. And then the mysterious forms stood back, and Mr. Hunter wriggled round with a bellow of fury.

"You—you scoundrels!" he panted.

"It is well, comrades!" exclaimed one of the figures—which Mr. Hunter could dimly see beyond the light. "Thou hast served thy sentence—wretched man that thou art. Freedom is awaiting thee!"

Mr. Hunter, who had been fearing all sorts of fresh outrages, gasped with surprise and relief. The Avenging Tribunal regarded him sternly.

"You shall pay for this, you young hounds," snarled Mr. Hunter fiercely. "You shall pay dearly!"

"Thy threats are idle," said the gruff voice. "Comrades, we must not overlook the fact that this brutal individual may possess a knife. It will therefore be wisdom on our part if we search his pockets."

"How—how dare you!" screamed Mr. Hunter, whose hand was already feeling for

his knife. "If you lay a finger upon me——"

The Tribunal laid not only "a" finger upon him, but quite a number. And they nimbly went through his pockets until two knives came to light, a small one and a large one.

"These articles will be placed where thou wilt find them later on," exclaimed a member of the Tribunal. "We bid thee farewell, base one, and impress upon thee the fact that further violence on your part will end in further violence on ours!"

The Avenging Tribunal took its departure, leaving Mr. Hunter wrestling furiously with the knots. He heard the door close, and then soft footsteps sounded upon the stairs. After that came complete silence.

Those knots, Mr. Hunter discovered, were tarts. They resisted his efforts for a long while, and he keenly felt the loss of his two knives. He had fondly imagined that the Tribunal would overlook such a detail, and he had pictured to himself the joyful prospect of capturing the masked ones and discovering their identities.

But this dream was dispelled now, and Mr. Hunter nearly cried with rage before the knots were overcome. Fully ten minutes elapsed before his legs were free, and then he stamped out of the cellar like a raging bull.

The fact that he had gained his freedom only served to infuriate him still more. His intention was to bring terrible punishment upon the culprits. They belonged to the Remove, of course—the Remove was doubtless in revolt again.

Mr. Hunter, unwashed and untidy, mounted the cellar steps and found his two knives at the top. He pocketed them and emerged into the sunlit corridor. It was good to see the daylight again, but the released man was far from being subdued. His treatment at the hands of the Tribunal had brought him to the verge of madness.

Bates, the page-boy, entered the corridor from the other end as Mr. Hunter strode down it. He paused, his mouth agape.

"You—you fool!" thundered Mr. Hunter angrily.

Bates could utter no reply. He had been wondering what had happened to the Housemaster, and had been just a little worried at the sight of Tregellis-West and Watson and myself in the ordinary ranks of the Remove. Bates concluded that Mr. Hunter had released us, and the latter's fury at this moment was astonishing.

Mr. Hunter stormed down the passages until he arrived at the Remove Form-room. He had forgotten his bedraggled, untidy appearance, and he burst into the apartment like a whirlwind.

The Remove was just preparing to finish lessons for the day, and Fenton, thoroughly pleased with himself, was making a few remarks concerning discipline. But all eyes were turned towards the door as Mr. Hunter burst in.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Fenton, staring. Mr. Hunter gulped.

"Where—where is Mr. Trapps?" he shouted hoarsely.

"Gone, sir——"

"Gone!" shouted the Housemaster; "gone! Don't talk nonsense, Fenton——"

"Mr. Trapps has gone, sir," repeated Fenton stiffly, and thinking it unnecessary to go into precise details. "He left by the morning train."

Mr. Hunter swept the class with his glittering eyes. His gaze rested on me with baleful joy, and he pointed a quivering finger.

"Bennett!" he snapped. "Come out here!"

"Hold on, sir," interrupted Fenton. "I'm in charge of this class, and I think you feel unwell—don't you? You look rather feverish, sir——"

"Don't dare to criticise my appearance, Fenton!" snarled Mr. Hunter. "I am perfectly well aware of the fact that several boys belonging to this Form assaulted me in the most abominable manner not fifteen minutes ago, and Bennett was the ring-leader."

"Oh!"

The Remove uttered a long drawn-out gasp.

Fenton grinned cheerfully.

"I think you're mistaken, sir," he said, regarding Mr. Hunter with a steady eye. "Nobody in this class assaulted you——"

"Silence, Fenton!" stormed Mr. Hunter. "I will stand no nonsense from you, sir! I know well enough that some of these wretched boys attacked me——"

"Oh, well, if you know it, sir, I needn't say anything," snapped Fenton. "But it happens that the Remove has been in this room since the commencement of afternoon lessons. Not a single boy has been out once."

"You are lying, Fenton," snarled Mr. Hunter. "You are excusing these infernal young dogs by your false statements!"

Fenton's eyes gleamed.

"I've never been accused of lying before, sir," he said hotly. "If you don't wish to take my word, you can question Monsieur Leblanc. We've been having French this afternoon, and Monsieur only left the room about three minutes before you came in. Perhaps you'll accuse him of being a liar, too!"

Mr. Hunter took a deep breath, and he felt as though a pail of cold water had been thrown over him. Fenton's words clearly proved that no members of the Remove Form had left their places for hours.

The Housemaster realised the absurdity of his position, and he turned without a word and left the room. I looked over at Sir Montie and winked. He winked back, incidentally knocking off his pince-nez in the process.

Mr. Hunter met with similar success in the Fifth Form-room. He merely discovered that

no members of the Fifth had had a minute's freedom during the course of the afternoon. And even Mr. Hunter, in his present condition, was not mad enough to suppose that the Tribunal was composed of fags or Sixth-formers.

He strode to his study in a state bordering upon insanity. His pet theory, nursed so carefully for hours and hours, was thrown to the winds. He had not been flogged and cast into the cellar by the Remove! That, at least, is what Mr. Hunter supposed. What other conclusion could he come to?

In his study he realised that a wash and a change of clothing was vitally necessary. His mind was full of plans for drastic action—for he fully intended to renew his despotic rule with as little delay as possible.

In his present mental state he cared nothing for his written guarantee. A wild desire to slaughter every member of the Remove surged within him. And it was at this stage that he received a most uncomfortable shock.

There were several letters lying upon his desk; they had come by the morning's post, and had been neglected until now. Mr. Hunter turned them over savagely and singled one of them out.

He tore it open, read a few lines, and then swore.

"Stafford coming back!" he muttered frenziedly. "Stafford——!"

He paused, appalled. He had had every reason to believe that the Head would not return until another two or three weeks had passed. This letter was not from Dr. Stafford, but from one of Mr. Hunter's associates, who was, nevertheless, fully acquainted with the Head's movements and plans.

All matters connected with the Remove passed from Mr. Hunter's mind. This new problem overshadowed all else. It was totally unexpected, and Mr. Hunter felt almost bewildered.

He glanced at the clock, and saw that the time was ten minutes past four. Only just over four hours! This difficulty had needed immediate attention. In ordinary circumstances Mr. Hunter would have been provided with the whole day to make his arrangements. But now there was no time—it was approaching evening already!

"And I was cooped up in that cellar!" muttered the Housemaster furiously. "By Heaven! I had a feeling that something like this would occur. On the very day I needed to be here, I was—— Pah! It is appalling!"

It was certainly unfortunate. But Mr. Hunter was a man of action. Although very little time was at his disposal, he meant to make the best of it. Dr. Stafford's return was something overwhelming. Once the Head stepped into the school again, Mr. Hunter's day would be over. He knew it—he was well aware of that fact. He would be turned out of the school at once.

And it was highly necessary for him to remain! He would not be ready to leave St.

Frank's until at least a week had passed. There were papers—

"Something must be done!" muttered Mr. Hunter, interrupting his thoughts. "Confound it! To think that I had the whole day before me and was denied action. I must see Smiles at once—at once!"

He jabbed at the bell, and Bates appeared, looking rather startled, a few minutes later. He was expecting all sorts of dreadful things, but Mr. Hunter merely glared at him and gave a sharp order.

"Bates!" he snapped. "Go and fetch Mr. Smiles at once! Bring him back with you without a second's delay."

"Yessir!" gasped Bates. "Shall I—"

"Go!" rapped out Hunter. "Bring Mr. Smiles to me!"

Bates went hastily. He knew Mr. Hunter's moods, and it would have been dangerous for him to remain. His instructions were quite precise, and he only paused to obtain his cap. Then he set off across the Triangle and left the school premises.

Half an hour later Mr. Smiles walked into the Triangle briskly. As it happened, Tregellis-West and Watson and I were lounging near Warren's lodge. We were discussing the novel position, and the entry of Mr. Smiles did not surprise us. We knew that he was an associate of Hunter's.

"There's something doing, my sons," I said thoughtfully.

Mr. Smiles went straight to the master's private door, and was soon within Mr. Hunter's study.

"Ah, Smiles, I'm glad you've come," said the Housemaster, who had taken the opportunity of washing himself and changing his clothes. "Sit down. Do you know that Stafford is coming back to-night?"

Smiles started.

"No, I didn't know—"

"Well, he is, and we must act with decision," said Mr. Hunter briskly. "I don't propose to tell you what has been happening—we have no time—but I was prevented from reading my letters this morning. If I had known of this development, I should have acted very differently. But I did not become aware of the fact until an hour ago. We must lose no time."

"But I don't quite see—" began Mr. Smiles.

"Listen to me, man, and you'll understand," interjected Hunter. "We must deal with the situation promptly. There is very little time at our disposal, but we can manage the trick, I am sure."

And the pair talked softly together for fully twenty minutes. Then they emerged from the Ancient House and crossed to the gates. My chums and I were still talking there, and we had been joined by De Valerie and the Bo'sun.

"Better shift," remarked Watson diplomatically.

"Rot!" I retorted. "I'm not going to shift for Hunter."

And we stood our ground. The pair came up, and passed through the gateway without

even glancing in our direction. I noticed that Mr. Hunter carried a small pocket timetable; he had been consulting it as he walked across the Triangle.

And, somehow, I was troubled with vague suspicions. I don't know why, but I couldn't help feeling uneasy. There was something in Mr. Hunter's expression which was unusually grim.

"I don't like the look of things," I remarked absently, as I strolled away with Watson and Sir Montie.

"What things?" asked Watson.

"Oh, nothing," I replied, more absently than before. "But there's trouble in the air, my dear chaps."

It was a somewhat vague statement, but my suspicions were vague. Of course, I am setting all these facts down in their proper sequence; at the time I hadn't the slightest idea of what passed between Mr. Smiles and Mr. Hunter. It was not until afterwards that I gleaned all my facts, making it possible now for me to relate them. And it must be readily understood that I find it necessary to use my imagination occasionally. Otherwise certain portions of my history would be scrappy and uninteresting.

And, as I strolled towards the playing-fields with Tommy and Sir Montie, I felt uncomfortable. The brisk arrival of Mr. Smiles, and his prompt departure accompanied by the Housemaster, struck me as being significant.

And I couldn't quite get rid of my uneasiness.

CHAPTER III.

A LITTLE EXPEDITION—THE EVIDENCE OF MR. WILLIAMS—MY RESOLVE.

HAL BREWSTER grinned.

"Well, we didn't do so bad," he admitted modestly. "It's a lucky thing it was our afternoon for cricket practice. We just managed to slip away nicely."

"And weren't you spotted?" I asked.

"I don't think so," replied Brewster. "The Ancient House was perfectly quiet when we marched in, all the fellows being in their Form-rooms. And we shoved on those clocks on the cellar stairs."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "My dear chaps, we're tremendously grateful. This little trick has confused the scent greatly. Hunter guessed that the tribunal was composed of Remove fellows, but he got a shock when he found that we'd been in the Form-room all the afternoon."

Brewster and Glynn and Ascott, of the River House School, grinned appreciatively. They had every reason to feel satisfied with themselves—and we had greater reason to feel satisfied with them. For they had come to the rescue in a little problem which had been concerning me.

According to a previous arrangement, we had met the "Commoners" from Dr. Hogge's Academy at the corner of the playing-

fields. And they were now telling us of their adventures with Mr. Hunter.

I had realised the difficulties of releasing Mr. Hunter from the cellar. For any Remove fellows to do it, would have been fatal, for a few inquiries on Hunter's part would have revealed their identities. But by having him released in the afternoon, while we were all at lessons, I had bridged the gulf, so to speak.

Brewster and Co. had no connection with St. Frank's whatever. But they were splendid chaps, and had helped us at the time of the harring-out to the best of their ability. They had turned up trumps now.

As Brewster himself remarked, it had been fairly easy for them to steal into the Ancient House and to deputise as "the Avenging Tribunal." Mr. Hunter, naturally, assumed that they were the same fellows who had flogged him during the night. Brewster and his chums had merely carried out my careful instructions.

"It was splendid," I exclaimed warmly. "You're quite sure Hunter didn't recognise your voices? But, of course, that's an unnecessary question. The way Hunter stormed into the Form-room this afternoon was quite eloquent enough."

"He thought we were you three chaps," I expect," grinned Ascott. "My hat! You ought to have seen him! He was nearly bursting with rage. But, I say, you're going a bit strong, ain't you?"

"No stronger than was necessary," I replied. "But Hunter's day is practically over. Trapps was kicked out this morning, and Hunter will follow him before long—perhaps to-night."

"I hope so—for your sake," remarked Brewster.

We parted with our friendly rivals shortly afterwards, and went in to tea. Once settled down to that cheerful meal in Study C, I decided to tell my chums the news. For I hadn't mentioned a word about the return of the Head so far.

As it happened, Sir Montie opened the way for me.

"Dear old boy, I've been thinkin'," he exclaimed, as he stirred his tea.

"Very deeply?" I asked with concern. "You mustn't strain yourself, old man—"

"Pray don't rot, Benny," protested Sir Montie. "I'm serious—I am, really. You may not credit the fact, but I'm quite capable of thinkin'. An' that remark of yours on Little Side was deep. I've been probin' it, you know."

"What remark?" I asked.

"About Hunter," said Tregellis-West. "You said that he might be kicked out before long—perhaps to-night. Why were you so definite, old boy? Why to-night? You spoke as if you knew somethin'."

I nodded.

"As a matter of fact, I do know something," I said. "Our esteemed and honoured Headmaster, Dr. Malcolm Stafford, will be in the midst of his flock to-night."

Sir Montie and Tommy stared. Watson, in fact, nearly upset his tea in his excitement. He only succeeded in splashing Sir Montie's elegant waistcoat.

"The Head coming back!" he shouted, staring.

"By the eight-thirty train," I explained.

"Oh, rot. How the dickens do you know?" demanded Tommy. "If the Head comes back Hunter will get the order of the giddy hoof!"

"Exactly," I agreed. "That's why I've been looking so cheerful. Fenton told me at dinner time—and Fenton wouldn't spread a yarn like that unless it was true. He'd just come straight from Mr. Stockdale."

"But why didn't you tell us before, dear old man?" asked Montie.

"Well, I didn't want everybody to know," I replied. "You couldn't have kept such a thing secret all the afternoon. And I've got an idea that it would be just as well for us to meet Dr. Stafford at the station," I went on thoughtfully. "He knows all about me, of course, and we could have a little private chat with him on the way up."

Tommy Watson looked at me aghast.

"But he'd consider it frightful cheek," he protested.

"Not on your life!" I replied. "Dr. Stafford is the only man at St. Frank's who knows that I'm Nipper, and that 'Mr. Alvington' is Nelson Lee. You two chaps are in the secret, but nobody else is. Don't you catch on? We can tell the Head a few things about Mr. Hunter—things we couldn't mention if a crowd of other fellows came with us."

"Benny's right," said Tregellis-West slowly. "He always is right, Tommy boy. We've got heaps an' heaps to tell the Head."

"I saw Fenton just after lessons," I grinned. "He complimented me upon my powers of keeping a secret. I told him that there wasn't any sense in shouting a thing all over the school. The fellows will be pleasantly surprised when the Head turns up this evening. That's what Fenton thought, too."

And then I became thoughtful.

"I wonder what Hunter and Smiles are up to?" I said, frowning. "I don't like it, my sons. There's mischief brewing. The Head's return is fatal to Hunter, and I've got a feeling that he's skipped."

"Bunked?" gasped Watson.

"Didn't you notice that time-table?" I said. "Hunter and Smiles were going to the station, I'll bet. And if they've vamoosed I shall be sorry. I wanted to see Hunter kicked out in style."

"It would have been interestin', old man," said Sir Montie. "But perhaps you're wrong, although that would be rather remarkable. It ain't often you're wrong, Benny. Pass the cake, Tommy boy, when you've finished with it. I'm feelin' quite nervous over that cake, you know."

Watson, who was cutting the cake in question, apparently overlooked the fact that

there were three of us. He grinned, and passed over the remains. Tea proceeded without many remarks, for we were all busy with our thoughts.

We had prep. to do, and got busy on it as soon as the tea things were cleared away. By the time we had finished this uncongenial but necessary task the clock told us that it was time to prepare for our little trip.

So we sallied out into the twilight and walked leisurely down the dusty lane towards Bellton. The evening was warm and the air perfectly still. By the time we reached the station the gloom had thickened and the platform lamps were alight.

The train was not yet signalled, and so we sat upon one of the seats and waited. Nobody else was there, as I had half-feared. But it was quite on the cards that Mr. Stockdale would appear. Or one of the Head's motor-cars might arrive upon the scene. There were two of them at the school.

Neither of these events happened, however, and the train steamed in with only ourselves occupying the platform—except for the old porter. We scanned the carriages closely. One door opened and a man stepped out. But it was quite impossible for us to mistake him for the Head.

An elderly lady, of ample proportions, waddled along the platform from the forepart of the train, encumbered by numerous bags and packages—apparently the result of a shopping expedition in Bannington. But of the Head there was no sign.

"He hasn't come," I said thoughtfully. "I'll give Fenton a piece of my mind when I get back, I can tell you. He must have been kidding me—"

"Beg pardon, young gents."

The interruption came from the man who had first alighted. I couldn't see him distinctly, but his voice was familiar. I looked closer, and then nodded.

"Oh, it's you, Williams," I said. "I suppose you haven't seen anything of Dr. Stafford?"

Mr. Williams nodded.

"Yes, I have, young gents," he replied. "I was just going to speak to you about this 'ere bag. Dr. Stafford left it be'ind him—"

"Where the dickens did he get out, then?" asked Tommy Watson. "Talk about a fool's errand! We thought the Head was coming on to Bellton. You're a fine chap, Benny. Bringing us down here—"

"Hold on," I interrupted. "Let's get the thing clear."

We piloted Mr. Williams out into the station-yard and then called a halt. Mr. Williams was well known to us, being the chauffeur and general "man" of Dr. Brett, the village medico. Dr. Brett was a personal friend of Nelson Lee, and we had seen Williams upon two or three occasions.

"Did the Head get out at Bannington?" I asked keenly.

"Yes, sir—that's where I got in," replied Mr. Williams. "I was lookin' for a compartment, when I see the door of a first-class compartment open and Dr. Stafford stepped out. An' then I noticed that he left this 'ere case be'ind him. I picked it up quick and tried to find 'im, but 'e'd gone."

"So you brought it with you?" I asked.

"I thought that was the best thing to do, young gents," said the chauffeur. "You'll take it and give it to Dr. Stafford, won't you?"

I took the attaché case and eyed Mr. Williams keenly.

"It's not like the Head to leave things behind him," I said. "Was he in a hurry, or was there somebody with him?"

"He was beckoned to, Master Bennett. Some gent called out just as the train was stoppin'—that's what drew my attention," explained Mr. Williams. "The 'Ead jumped out at once and forgot all about 'is bag."

The chauffeur probably considered that my questions were unnecessary. The incident was only trivial, after all. Mr. Williams, however, was quite respectful. I daresay he felt that he had lost a tip, for he would certainly have received one had he taken the attaché case up to the school.

But my suspicions were aroused, and I was very acute. I felt that a little cross-examination would prove enlightening. So I pressed a two-shilling piece into Mr. Williams's hand with the object of making his tongue work more freely. He was extremely gratified.

"That don't seem right, Master Bennett," he protested. "It ain't your case—"

"That's all right," I interrupted. "I just want to ask you a few questions, Williams. Did you see the man who beckoned to Dr. Stafford?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was he?"

"Well, never 'avin' see him before, I couldn't say—"

"Was he a big chap, or—"

"He wasn't big, young gent," said Williams. "A smallish kind o' man, with glasses and a really cheerful-lookin' face. 'E was wearing a dark suit—brownish, I believe. Oh, and his 'at was one o' them soft things."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "Mr. Hunter!"

"Of course it was Mr. Hunter," I replied briskly. "I guessed that all along. Was there anybody with him, Williams?"

"Not as I know of, sir."

"Well, that's all right," I went on. "Thanks. We'll be getting along now, you chaps."

We bade Mr. Williams good-night, and I led the way swiftly down the village street. My chums had some little difficulty in keeping pace with me.

"Is this really necessary, Benny boy?" asked Sir Montie mildly. "Why this frightful hurry? It's warm, and the roads are shockin'ly dusty. My trousers are simply gettin' ruined."

"Blow your trousers!" I said. "I knew there was something in the wind. But I didn't expect anything like this."

"Like what?" demanded Tommy.

"Didn't you hear what Williams said?"

"Of course I did, ass! But there wasn't anything in that," said Watson. "Hunter met the Head at Bannington. Well, what of it? There's no law against a fellow meeting a man at a railway station, that I know of."

I snorted.

"Why do you suppose Hunter met the Head?" I asked. "You know as well as I do that Dr. Stafford's return is just what Hunter doesn't want. And why did he meet the Head at Bannington? Why not here?"

"Dear fellow, I'm beginnin' to think things——"

"About time, too!" I snapped. "My dear dense idiots, Hunter didn't go to Bannington just to say 'How-do-you-do' to the Head. There's a deep game on, and I've got a suspicion that foul play——"

"Foul play!" gasped Watson.

"Isn't Hunter capable of it?" I demanded.

"I may be wrong, but, by Jingo, I'm going to make sure! Just look at this thing squarely. Hunter goes to Bannington and entices the Head out of the train. What for? It looks to me as though there's shady work going on!"

Sir Montie and Tommy were startled.

"But why are we hurryin' so much?" asked Montie.

"Because I want to find out if Hunter's got back," I replied. "If he's back and the Head isn't with him—well, we shall know that something's jolly wrong. And that's when we'll start investigating."

"Investigating!" panted Watson. "Oh, crumbs!"

We hastened onwards, and at last arrived in the dark Triangle. Handforth and Church and McClure were lounging on the Ancient House steps, and I noticed that they were not particularly animated. This didn't look as though the Headmaster had returned.

"Hunter back yet?" I asked casually.

"Yes, two minutes ago," replied Handforth. "I was expecting ructions, but he's busy over something, I believe. Looks as worried as the dickens. He didn't even look at us as he went in."

"Was there anybody with him?"

"No," said Handforth. "I say, the Head was coming back this evening, it seems——"

"Was coming back?" I repeated sharply.

"What do you mean—'was'?"

"You're jolly dense, ain't you?" said Handforth. "That young bounder, Teddy Long, has been listening at keyholes or something. Anyhow, he's been spreading the yarn that a wire arrived from the Head, saying that he's been delayed and won't be here until next week. Long heard Fenton saying that the Head was expected this evening. Jolly rotten, ain't it?"

"It's queer," I answered. "Where was the wire sent from?"

"How the dickens do I know that, you fathead?" snorted Handforth.

I grinned, and passed indoors. I walked straight to Study C, and closed the door as soon as my chums were inside. My grin had vanished now, however, and I was looking grim.

"Well?" I asked. "What do you think now?"

"It's frightfully strange, Benny," admitted Sir Montie slowly.

"Strange? It's as plain as anything," I replied. "The Head's been kidnapped."

"Kid-kidnapped?" gasped Tommy Watson.

"Hunter's taken him off somewhere," I said. "There's nothing else to think. And, when you come to look at the thing squarely, it's just exactly what Hunter would do. He doesn't want the Head here, so he's keeping him away. And he probably sent that wire himself—from Bannington. I tell you, the whole thing looks jolly fishy."

"And—and what are we going to do?" asked Watson breathlessly.

"We're going to investigate," I replied.

"Begad! Are we, really?"

"We're going to investigate," I replied grimly, "and we're going to start on the job at once!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TUNNEL BENEATH THE RIVER—A DRAMATIC SITUATION—A SHOCK FOR MR. SMILES.

MY chums looked at me with different expressions. Tommy Watson was openly excited and full of eagerness. Sir Montie, in his own particular way, was excited as well; but that complete serenity of his did not desert him for a moment.

"It'll be rippin'," he remarked. "Investigatin' sounds good. Benny boy. But I should like to know how we're goin' to start. I'm frightfully interested on the subject—I am, really!"

"It's no good being interested in it only, Montie," I replied. "We've got to get to business. Of course, I may be wrong—I've got no actual proof of these suspicions. The Head may have been delayed in Bannington, and he may have sent that wire himself. But do you think it's likely?"

"No, it seems a bit tall," said Watson.

"Why didn't the Head telephone, instead of sending a wire? I believe you're right, Benny. I believe Hunter's been up to some awful villainy."

I rubbed my hair anxiously.

"I wish I knew where the guv'nor was," I said, frowning. "I'd like him to have a hand in this. He'd know what to do in a second."

"Why, he's stayin' at the George Tavern, ain't he?" asked Tregellis-West.

"Of course he isn't," I replied.

"But he told us that he was there," objected Watson. "Don't you remember,

Benny? When old Alvy helped us out of that cellar, he said that if anything went wrong we were to send somebody down to the George Inn, and that we were to inquire for a Mr. Kent."

"Exactly!"

"Well, that Mr. Kent's old Alvy—Nelson Lee."

"If you'll cast your mind back," I said calmly, "you'll distinctly remember that the gov'nor didn't say anything positive. I asked if 'Mr. Kent' was him, and he said something about my perspective powers being remarkable. No, kids, 'Mr. Kent' ain't the gov'nor."

"Who is he, then?"

"I'm blessed if I know," I replied. "A Scotland Yard chap, perhaps, or a Secret Service man—somebody who meets the gov'nor every day, and who knows his movements. Either that, or 'Mr. Kent' is merely a name. Your own common-sense will tell you that Nelson Lee wouldn't stay openly in the village."

"H'm!" grunted Watson. "What are we going to do, then?"

"Why, we're going straight to the George Tavern," I replied promptly. "If we can't see the gov'nor, we shall be able to see this other chap. But it's no good guessing things. Let's go down as quickly as we can."

"It's after locking-up—"

"Oh, you potty ass!" I snorted. "Who the Dickens cares for locking-up? This is a jolly serious matter, and if we're out all night it won't do us any harm. Just think of the glory if we succeed in rescuing the Head from Hunter's clutches."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "It sounds blood-curdlin', old boy."

We left Study C and passed out into the Triangle. The gates were locked, but this was of no consequence. We scaled the wall with ease, and then broke into a steady trot. The night was now very dark, for high clouds were obscuring the stars. The air was still close, with a suggestion of thunder about it. But the sky did not look like a storm.

The village was quiet when we arrived, but it was comparatively early yet, and the various inns were still open. We halted at the staid old hostelry known as the George Tavern, the most respectable hotel in Bell-ton.

We were informed at once that Mr. Kent was not in, and that he was not expected until late. This was quite definite, and we knew that it would be useless waiting or leaving a message.

"Well, this means that we've got to act according to our own plans," I said, as we walked away. "It's rather rotten, but it can't be helped. Things generally happen in this way."

"But what can we do?" asked Watson breathlessly.

"Well, to begin with, we'll have a look at that island," I replied. "Let's take the

towing-path and hurry along to the boat-house. I don't suppose we shall do any good, but it'll be a start."

I had been thinking keenly, and I came to the conclusion that if Mr. Hunter had actually kidnapped the Head, he would probably keep him prisoner down in the mysterious cavern which I had visited more than once.

During the great harring-out, which had only recently been settled, the Remove had occupied Willard's Island for two or three days. And while in possession of this stronghold I had discovered several sinister things in connection with Mr. Hunter.

There was another island a short distance down the river—a mere islet, a speck upon the water, with a few trees growing upon it. On this little place stood the stump of a hollow tree.

Investigation had proved that the hollow tree merely concealed the entrance to a deep shaft, which led straight down into the solid earth. At the foot of this shaft a tunnel led right beneath the River Stowe into the old quarry cavern. Such a place would make an ideal prison, and it was most probable that we should strike lucky at the first shot.

There would be danger, no doubt, but I was feeling in a reckless mood. And both Tommy and Montie were ready and willing to follow me until further orders. They would never dream of turning back if I wanted to go on.

A certain amount of time was lost in going up to the boathouse; but this was unavoidable. We had no desire to swim across to the island. A small, handy boat was soon got out.

We slid noiselessly down the river. Sir Montie steered and Watson rowed. I crouched in the bows with my eyes and ears wide open. But although I searched the gloom ahead and kept my eyes upon the banks, I saw no sign of any living thing—except the cows in the adjoining meadows.

And at length we nosed our way in amongst the reeds at the top of the islet. Having secured the painter, we stepped ashore and crept forward. To all intents and purposes the island was deserted. And one would imagine that it had been deserted for years.

"Not a sound!" I breathed. "Just follow me, and don't jaw!"

We crept forward, and as we approached the hollow tree I motioned to my chums to hang back. They paused against a bush, rather reluctantly, I believe, and I continued my way.

When I arrived at the tree-stump I found it silent and deserted. A glance into the interior and a few seconds' tense listening told me that no human being was within sight or sound.

"All right!" I breathed. "Come on!"

Tregellis-West and Watson slid up out of the darkness, and without hesitation I led the way down the shaft. If I had hesitated I

should probably have decided to remain upon the surface. For, considered coldly, this move on our part was not only reckless, but foolhardy.

However, we didn't stop to consider such details at the time. We were out for purposes of investigation—and so we were doing it. As the governor and I had often found, it was necessary to be even foolhardy at times.

An iron ladder—obviously a recent fixture—was fitted to the side of the shaft, and it was of considerable depth. We crept down it, and reached the bottom without mishap. Then I got my torch out, and flashed its light along the wet, dripping tunnel. The place looked as though it hadn't been visited for centuries. There were even no footmarks upon the ground, for this was a mass of sloppy mud, too liquid to retain impressions.

"Now, be ready to bunk at the word," I whispered cautiously.

"Go ahead, old man," breathed Sir Montie. "I'm tremendously interested."

As we turned down the tunnel I began to feel that our mission was somewhat useless. A short distance along the tunnel, as I was well aware, further progress was barred by a heavy iron door. This had been provided as a safeguard, in case this section of the tunnel became flooded.

There were bolts on both sides of it, and it was too much to hope that we should be able to get past. But Fate, I suppose, led me to undertake this trip. For we were undoubtedly favoured in the most gratifying manner, although appearances did not seem to point to it.

I had been along this tunnel before, but only in semi-darkness and in considerable haste. I now took the opportunity of examining it carefully. And just as the iron door came into sight I noticed two narrow openings in the rock wall on the left-hand side of the tunnel. At this portion the rocks were dry, so I gathered that we had passed beyond the limits of the river.

I flashed my light upon the narrow openings, and saw, with some surprise, that they were doorways. There were doors, too, but they must have hung there for ages, for they were cracked and warped and black with the usage of years.

"Hold on a minute!" I whispered softly.

And just then there came an unmistakable sound to our ears. Booted feet were clanging down the iron ladder of the shaft! The sounds echoed clearly through the old tunnel. Instinctively I switched my light off.

"Oh, my goodness!" panted Tommy Watson.

"Somebody's coming!" I hissed. "It's no good getting startled, but we're trapped; we can't dodge back, and that iron door is bound to be bolted on the other side. This is a pretty kettle of fish, and no mistake!"

Voices sounded as well, and it was only too obvious that the men must have come across to the island only a few minutes after we had landed.

"We must dodge in here!" I muttered sharply.

I felt before me and touched the woodwork of one of the doors. It worked stiffly, but there was no creak. And we passed through and closed the door behind us. I couldn't tell where we were or how big the place was.

"Listen!" I whispered.

The footsteps were still upon the iron ladder, and I reckoned that it would be safe to flash my light out just for a second. It was horrible to stand there, knowing nothing of where we were or what lay ahead of us. For all we knew, there might be a yawning chasm at our very feet.

"It's worth the risk!" I said softly. "Keep your eyes open, my sons!"

The light flashed out, and I looked round eagerly. Only for a couple of seconds did I allow the lamp to glow. But in that short space of time I saw that the floor was quite solid, and that the place was merely a tiny cell. Years before it had probably been used as a store place for explosives or something of that kind. At present it was empty and bare.

The roof was low, being only a foot above our heads. Rocks jutted out everywhere, and the whole place was no larger than an average coal-cellar.

"If we keep quiet we shall be safe," I whispered. "These chaps are going straight through to the cavern, I expect, and they'll have no reason to come in here."

"Hadn't we better secure the door, in case?" breathed Sir Montie.

I felt the door cautiously; but there was no fastening upon it, with the exception of a broken latch. I therefore whispered to my chums to stand close by. If anyone attempted to enter we should press against the old woodwork.

"They'll probably think that the door's jammed or something," I breathed. "But it's not likely that they'll want to come in here, anyhow."

We stood stock still, anxious and tense. By this time the newcomers had reached the foot of the shaft. The voices were much clearer, and I recognised two distinctly. One belonged to Mr. Hunter, and another was that of Smiles. Hunter must have left the school only a few minutes after we had started for the village. But we had been delayed over the boat, and Hunter could have done quite a lot in the time.

"Bring him along, Smiles," we heard him exclaim. "Yes, the first one. It's larger. We don't want to take him into the cavern itself."

I caught my breath in, but said nothing. My chums evidently had not caught the significance of Hunter's words. Feet shuffled along the muddy tunnel. The sounds came nearer, and when they were actually upon us they ceased.

I had one hand upon Montie and one upon Tommy, and I felt them both stiffen. The same suspicion had occurred to them.



There was a curious rushing noise which filled the whole tunnel. Nipper realised the grim truth in a flash. The tunnel was flooded!—(See page 23.)

Hunter and Smiles were about to enter this very cell!

It was a moment of intense suspense.

But then, to our untold relief, a door creaked noisily. The men were entering the other doorway, just a yard or two down the tunnel. For the moment we were saved. But this feeling of relief was rapidly destroyed.

For, astonishingly enough, our own refuge became flooded with light! It proceeded from the edge of a low wall of rock close against us. Just for a moment I was bewildered, but then the truth dawned upon me.

"Down—down!" I said hissing.

We all three crouched down instinctively. We were in deep shadow, but the roof was brilliantly lighted. And voices came to us so clearly that it seemed as though Hunter and Smiles were right upon us.

But the truth was simple.

These two rock cells were side by side. They were probably natural formations, and only the doorways and doors had been executed by the hand of man. The two cells, although separate and distinct, had only one roof.

You will understand exactly what I mean when I say that the place was something like two compartments in a railway coach, with a dividing partition which falls short of the roof. They're as common as flies on local and suburban trains.

The partition, in this instance, was a jagged wall of rock about five feet in height. On the other side was the other compartment—in other words, the rock cell. Thus, if we remained quiet, we still stood a chance of escaping detection.

It was a dramatic situation, and I couldn't help feeling that luck was with us. And, somehow, I've generally noticed that when one's luck starts in the right direction it generally continues.

So far we were safe; our presence was not suspected. But the terrible proximity of our enemies made us feel that the position was intensely precarious. As a matter of fact it was. Our imprisonment in the cellar beneath the Ancient House would be luxury compared to the fate we should suffer if Hunter caught us here.

These two cells were quite separate and apart from the cavern beyond the iron door. I was pretty sure that they hadn't been used for years, and it was just the irony of fate that we should seek refuge in one of them at such a time.

We waited, hardly daring to breathe. The slightest sound on our part would inevitably lead to instant discovery. And so we crouched there, unable to move a finger. I wondered how long the tension would last.

"Yes, that's all right," came Hunter's voice, practically in our ears. "Splendid, Smiles—splendid!"

"It's infernally risky, Hunter——"

"We had to do something, man," interrupted the Housemaster. "I am extremely sorry that it has been necessary to treat

you in this fashion, Dr. Stafford. But I assure you no real harm will befall you."

I almost started. Dr. Stafford! So I had been right, after all! The Headmaster of St. Frank's was just behind the rock wall, a prisoner. He had been brought down the shaft, and it was evidently Hunter's intention to keep him a prisoner in this dismal place.

"I think we may as well remove the gag, Smiles," said Mr. Hunter pleasantly, his voice seeming to beat down upon us from the roof. "Our distinguished visitor can cry for help to his heart's content down here."

We heard some shuffling sounds, and then there came the sound of somebody taking a deep, deep breath. A tense silence followed, but only for a moment.

"You base scoundrel!" came the well-known voice of Dr. Stafford.

It was not savage or furious; but those words contained untold indignation and quiet dignity. That was just like the Head. Under no circumstances would he demean himself by being violent.

"You are complimentary, Dr. Stafford," said Hunter mockingly.

"I think you must be mad, sir!" exclaimed the Head, his voice vibrating with intense emotion. "What have you to say in extenuation of this appalling conduct? Why have you brought me to this extraordinary place?"

"I have already explained, Dr. Stafford, that your presence at St. Frank's is undesirable at the present time," replied Mr. Hunter softly. "You will be kept here for a week—perhaps a little longer. But you need have no fear, my dear sir. You will be well looked after and well fed. A certain amount of discomfort is inevitable, but no actual harm will come to you."

"I am lost in amazement!" said Dr. Stafford. "And let me tell you, Mr. Hunter, you will surely be made to suffer for this dastardly outrage. I am strong enough to keep my level senses, thank Heaven!"

"It would really make no difference, in any case," said Mr. Hunter. "An outburst of rage on your part would scarcely concern me—it would be your trouble. You must remain in this apartment, Dr. Stafford. An attendant will be supplied almost at once, and he will bring a mattress and blankets. Smiles, you must remain with Dr. Stafford until Bates arrives to take up his new duties as warder."

"You are going now?" asked Smiles.

"Yes, at once," replied Mr. Hunter. "We must get this business concluded in as short a space of time as possible. We cannot be too cautious, Smiles. Success has attended our efforts so far, and we have every reason to congratulate ourselves."

"You won't have presently!" I breathed grimly.

Luck had thrown us into this position, and I saw all sorts of possibilities arising. By this time it had become fairly obvious that Mr. Hunter had no intention of entering our

own particular cell. If we were discovered it would be owing to incautious movements on our part. I trusted Sir Montie and Tommy, but I was just a bit anxious. It is so jolly easy to scrape a foot without thinking.

"I can only conclude, Mr. Hunter, that you have taken leave of your senses," came the Headmaster's voice.

"You are quite at liberty to believe that, if it pleases you," said Hunter mockingly. "I have no objection whatever."

"You are a schoolmaster, sir—you are in charge of the Ancient House—and for a learned gentleman of your standing to descend to such amazing depths as this is quite beyond human comprehension," exclaimed Dr. Stafford, his voice quivering. "Make no mistake, Mr. Hunter; you will be forced to pay—"

"Really, I find this dialogue somewhat wearisome," interrupted Mr. Hunter. "I have no intention of going into explanations, Dr. Stafford. You will not be harmed, and your liberty will be restored in due course. For the present you must settle yourself to a week of inactivity. I wish you good evening."

The Head made no reply. Hunter and Smiles passed out into the passage, and stood there talking in low voices for a few moments. I tried to hear what was being said, but only caught a word here and there.

Hunter, it appeared, would make his way straight to the school, and would dispatch Bates at once with the necessary blankets for the Head's couch. Smiles was to remain on guard until Bates turned up.

A minute or two later Smiles re-entered the rock cell. A match scratched, and the fragrant smoke of a cigarette arose over the rock partition. My chums and I gazed at one another mutely.

And then came the voice of Mr. Smiles.

"The whole thing is somewhat unfortunate, Dr. Stafford," he exclaimed pleasantly. "If you had remained away from the school—"

"Really, sir, I have no wish to converse with you," interrupted the Head stiffly.

"That's all right," exclaimed Smiles. "You needn't say a word, Dr. Stafford. I am just talking in order to kill time. Perhaps I had better busy myself in some other way. Fortunately I have a paper in my pocket."

The next moment we heard the noisy rustle of a newspaper. And, without losing a second, I took advantage of the fact. While everything was still any movement on my part would have been dangerous. But the rustle of the newspaper effectually drowned any slight noise.

There was a rough projection of rock a foot from the floor. I stood upon this and my head was well above the top of the wall. By bending slightly over I was enabled to take a peep into the other "compartment." Mr. Smiles was seated upon an old tub, and the Head practically faced me. At the

moment he had his eyes cast downwards and did not see my flushed face.

A patent kind of electric-lamp was standing upon a ledge, and it cast quite a good light all round. I turned and crouched down. Sir Montie and Tommy were regarding me with subdued excitement.

Conversation was quite impossible, but I made signs to them. I pointed to myself and then directed my finger into the other cell, indicating that I contemplated jumping down.

Tregellis-West and Watson understood in a minute. Tommy, although as brave as a young lion, was never a chap to seize opportunities. He shook his head vigorously and in some alarm. Sir Montie looked thoughtful, but made no sign either way.

I then made them understand that they were to follow me over instantly, and Watson changed his tone, so to speak. He nodded just as vigorously as he had shaken his head before. So long as he was going to take part in the excitement he didn't care.

My idea was to get busy at once.

A pure stroke of chance had given us the opportunity of releasing the Head, and we should have been dotty if we had neglected it. It was a chance which wouldn't occur again.

I took a deep breath and set my teeth.

Then, with one swinging heave, I projected my body over the wall of rock and landed with terrific force right upon the back of the unfortunate Mr. Smiles. With a bellow of fright and pain he went sprawling. I went sprawling, too, and Tregellis-West and Watson tumbled over to my assistance.

Just for a moment dire confusion reigned.

CHAPTER V.

THE ESCAPE—NELSON LEE DECIDES TO ACT— AT THE END OF HIS TETHER.

MR. SMILES, of course, didn't have a chance.

He was taken at a disadvantage during the first second of our attack, and never had the slightest opportunity of putting up a decent scrap.

Surprise was the chief element in the defeat of Mr. Smiles. He was hurt but very little, but by the time he really understood what had happened resistance was useless. For I was sitting astride his chest, Watson was pinning his feet down, and Sir Montie held his hands above his head. We had the man spread-eagled upon the floor, in fact.

"You—you young dogs!" he gasped furiously.

"You can jaw as much as you like, old sport," I said breathlessly. "We've got you down, and that's where we're going to keep you. Reach over for that piece of rope, Tommy—"

"Upon my soul!" came the Head's voice from behind me. "Good gracious me! Bennett—Watson—Tregellis-West! This is most extraordinary. I am bewildered—I am surely dreaming!"

Dr. Stafford spoke in a dazed kind of way.

"Sorry to give you a start, sir," I hastened to say, without shifting. "But we were forced to do the trick suddenly. We're going to get you out of this hole, sir—if we can!"

"Dear me!" muttered the Head amazedly.

Watson reached over for the rope—a small coil of rough stuff—and in a very few moments Mr. Smiles's ankles were bound. Then he was turned unceremoniously upon his face and his wrists were secured behind his back. To make doubly sure, I bent back his knees and tied the ends of the two ropes together, so that his ankles and wrists were drawn close. In this unfortunate position Mr. Smiles had not the slightest chance of gaining his freedom.

"You young fools!" he raved. "If you do not release me——"

"That's enough!" I cut in sharply. "If you can't keep quiet we'll gag you. In fact I think we'd better do it, in any case."

Smiles was wearing a scarf, and I jerked it off and bound it round the lower part of his face.

By this time we were feeling flushed with victory. Events had happened in the most lucky manner, and I had every hope of winning through. But we weren't out of the wood yet, and every second was of value.

"Now, sir!" I exclaimed crisply.

With my pocket-knife I cut through the ropes which bound the Head, and he stood up and looked at us in a somewhat bewildered fashion. But there was gratitude in his eyes, and we could not help noticing.

"My dear boys, I shall not attempt to thank you now," he exclaimed, in a quiet, steady voice. "Indeed my mind is too upset to allow me to think clearly. I only know that you have released me from a dreadful position."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "It was Benny, sir. Tommy an' I were as helpless as a couple of cricket-stumps, you know. We shouldn't have done anythin' without Benny. He's a wonder, sir—he is, really!"

"You talk too much, Montie!" I interrupted. "There's nothing wonderful about it at all. And we've got to get out of this place in double-quick time. Will you come at once, sir?"

"Certainly, Bennett—certainly."

I took up the electric-lamp and led the way out into the passage. All was silent, and I had every hope of gaining the exit without interruption. Hunter had gone to St. Frank's, and Bates couldn't be here for quite a long time. But there was always the chance of somebody else appearing on the scene.

We hurried through the muddy section of the tunnel and arrived at the exit shaft.

"I'll pop up first, sir," I said, placing a foot upon the lower rung of the iron ladder. "Tregellis-West and Watson will bring up the rear."

We mounted quickly, the Head displaying much agility. The prospect of recapture made him unusually active, no doubt. But

we reached the open air without mishap, and the island lay before us, dark and still.

I couldn't quite believe that we had escaped, even now. To say that our venture had been a success would be putting it mildly. It was a complete triumph in every way. For not only had we gained our own freedom, but we had released Dr. Stafford into the bargain.

"I am afraid we are marooned," exclaimed the Head breathlessly. "There is no way across——"

"There's a boat hidden amongst the reeds at the bottom of the island, sir," I interrupted. "Unless it has walked off of its own accord, it must still be there."

"Dear me! It is quite amazing," said Dr. Stafford.

The whole affair was amazing from the Head's point of view, no doubt. We had sprung from nowhere just when matters had seemed hopeless. And now there was nothing to prevent us "making good" completely.

The boat was still in the same place, and we pushed off at once. My full confidence had returned. Hunter himself could come along now, for all I cared. We were in the open, and afraid of nothing.

When we stepped upon the main river bank I chuckled.

"Our luck's in to-night, my sons," I murmured. "We've rescued the Head, and everything's all serene. I wish the gov'nor——"

I paused, catching in my breath. A man had stepped from behind a clump of willows. He came forward quickly, and I clenched my fists.

"Look out!" I said sharply.

"You needn't alarm yourself, young 'un," exclaimed a well-known voice. "Why, Dr. Stafford, I didn't expect to see——"

"Good gracious!" gasped the Head. "Mr. Alvington!"

"The gov'nor!" I breathed delightedly.

The newcomer was Nelson Lee himself, and I was more pleased than I could say. In the gloom we couldn't see his features, but the voice was unmistakable. He came closer, and patted my back.

"Well done, Nipper," he said softly. "Tell me all about it."

In as few words as possible I explained the whole affair; how I had suspected treachery, and how I had investigated, with the help of my chums. Nelson Lee listened attentively, nodding with approval more than once.

"You have done wonderfully, boys," he commented, at last. "I really must congratulate you upon the businesslike manner in which you effected Dr. Stafford's escape. Events could not have gone more smoothly."

"The boys are wonderful—wonderful," declared the Head.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I am ready to agree with you, Dr. Stafford," he said. "And now we must hasten to the school. Mr. Hunter must be rendered harmless without further delay. I mean to act at once."

"Are you going to—to arrest him, sir?" gasped Watson.

"Yes, my boy."

"Have you got a warrant?" I asked quickly.

"Yes, Nipper, I have a warrant," smiled Nelson Lee. "My case is complete, in fact. I am now in a position to act decisively. After to-night's episode I realise that delay would be fatal."

"Good business!" I said heartily. "And supposing we hadn't run into you, sir? Would you have arrested Hunter just the same?"

"Well, I am not quite sure," replied Nelson Lee. "My original plan was to await until the morning; but, upon the whole, it will be far better to get the thing over. To-morrow I shall return to St. Frank's as 'Mr. Alvington.'"

"Oh, rippin'!" ejaculated Sir Montie delightedly.

"Thank you, Montie," said the guv'nor, with a slight smile. "I can assure you that I am extremely anxious to take up my old duties. The Ancient House, I am sorely afraid, has been suffering severely."

"We've survived, sir," I exclaimed, grinning. "And now we'll hurry— Oh, but what about Bates?"

"We cannot waste time upon that young gentleman," said Nelson Lee. "He is of very little importance, in any case. The most urgent matter of all is to surprise Mr. Hunter and make him a prisoner."

"But he'll go along and release Smiles," I protested.

"There is that point, certainly," agreed Nelson Lee. "Perhaps we had better—"

Nelson Lee ceased speaking, and stood listening intently. Then he motioned to us to be silent. Somebody was approaching, and I confidently expected that he would turn out to be Bates, Hunter's confidant—at present acting as page-boy in the Ancient House.

But the newcomer was a tall man, and could not be mistaken for Bates. He paused upon seeing us, and then came slowly forward again.

"Who's that?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, Thompson!" exclaimed the guv'nor. "Just the very man I wanted!"

"I didn't know it was you, sir," said the stranger, coming forward. "There seems to be something doing—"

"Exactly, Thompson—there is something doing," interjected Nelson Lee. "Smiles is a prisoner in the tunnel, having been bound up by these three enterprising members of the Remove Form. I don't advise you to enter the tunnel single-handed, but you had better remain on guard at this spot. Bates is expected, and if he comes along you must detain him."

"Very good, sir," said Thompson promptly.

I gathered that he was a Secret Service man or a Scotland Yard detective. At all events he took the guv'nor's orders without question, and I knew that Nelson Lee was quite pleased.

"Thompson came along just at the right moment," he exclaimed, as we walked briskly towards St. Frank's. "I can see that we are in for a regular round-up to-night. But Mr. Hunter is the chief prize."

"I don't pretend to understand, Mr. Lee, and I must wait for an explanation," said Dr. Stafford. "Perhaps I had better call you 'Mr. Alvington.' These boys, of course, know all about it, but it is just as well to keep in the habit of using your school name."

"How do you propose to capture Hunter, guv'nor?" I asked eagerly.

"It will be quite a simple matter to arrest him, young 'un," replied Lee. "We shall probably find him in his study, and the business will be quite short. He will be unaware of my identity, since I am wearing a simple but effective disguise."

I took a deep breath.

"May—may we come with you, sir?" I asked anxiously.

"I was expecting that request, you young rascal," chuckled Nelson Lee. "I see no reason why you should not witness the final little scene. You and your chums have certainly shown yourselves deserving of much consideration. Your effort of to-night is particularly praiseworthy."

"It is, indeed!" ejaculated Dr. Stafford warmly.

I wanted to ask the guv'nor dozens of questions, but this wasn't the time for that, as I was well aware. Later on, perhaps, he would explain matters to us in detail.

We didn't know yet what Hunter's game was, or what was the nature of the mystery which the strange underground cavern contained. As it happened, our curiosity would not receive satisfaction for some little time.

By the time we arrived at the school it was fairly late. Supper was over, and the Remove fellows were getting ready for bed. The absence of Tregellis-West and Watson and I had not caused much comment so far; but if we failed to accompany the Remove to the dormitory there would certainly be curious chatter.

Not that we cared a jot for this. To-night was a special night; we should see the finish of Hunter the Hun. And the prospect was most alluring. We had suffered such torment and injustice at his hands that we were ready to gloat over his complete downfall.

He had kidnapped the Head as an act of desperation. Dr. Stafford's return had been unexpected, and Hunter was not prepared. According to his own statement, he contemplated keeping the Head a prisoner for a week.

Well, Dr. Stafford was free, and I hugged myself when I pictured Hunter's confusion and amazement upon finding that his knavish trick had only hastened the end. It was decent of the guv'nor to allow Montie and Tommy and me to be in at the death.

The Triangle was deserted, and we walked quickly over to the masters' private door in the Ancient House. We had seen no sign of Bates. He had either passed us in the

darkness, using a different route to the river, or he had not yet started. The latter was actually the case.

There was a light in the window of Mr. Hunter's study. This was really the Head's study, but the Housemaster had appropriated it for his own use. Nelson Lee led the way down the corridor, Dr. Stafford following immediately behind. We brought up the rear.

We held our breath as Nelson Lee opened the door. Our entry was quite a procession, and I fully anticipated violence on Hunter's part. But the Housemaster remained perfectly still in his chair.

He sat at his desk, and his expression upon seeing the governor was one of puzzled astonishment. It quickly changed as he caught sight of the Head. A hard, glittering expression entered his eyes and his lips tightened.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed softly. "This promises to be somewhat interesting. I hardly expected you to arrive so soon, Dr. Stafford!"

"You base scoundrel!" thundered the Head.

Hunter allowed his gaze to rest upon me.

"Ah, I have not the slightest doubt that these boys are responsible for the little miscarriage of my plans, eh?" he said smoothly. "And who, pray, may you be?" he added, addressing the governor.

"My name would not interest you in the slightest, Mr. Hunter; but I am an officer of the law, and I hold a warrant for your arrest," replied Nelson Lee.

Just for a moment there was a tense silence.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Hunter at last. "Upon what grounds?"

"The charge is one of extreme gravity," said Lee quietly. "It comprises espionage and —"

Mr. Hunter laughed with apparent good humour.

"Come, come!" he exclaimed banteringly. "There is some mistake surely?"

"I think not," said the governor. "You are, I believe, Mr. John Kennedy Hunter, late of Mr. Owen Browne's Academy?"

"I will not deny that I am the gentleman in question," said Mr. Hunter, still keeping himself under complete control. "At the same time I certainly believe that you have made a gross blunder. Espionage, eh? That word scarcely sounds palatable, my dear sir."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly.

"I admire your attitude, Mr. Hunter," he said. "You are keeping cool under the most trying conditions. But have we not had enough of this gentle bluffing? It rests entirely with yourself whether you accompany me quietly——"

"Really, I have no intention of accompanying you at all," said Mr. Hunter mildly. "I shall be obliged, Dr. Stafford, if you will send this—er—person about his business."

The Head gazed at Hunter, and it seemed as though he were about to explode. This astounding "nerve" on Hunter's part had

taken us all rather by surprise. That the man should even attempt to bluff it out was remarkable enough; but that he should appeal to Dr. Stafford, after what had occurred an hour earlier, was just about the limit.

"You scoundrel, sir!" thundered the Head. "How you have the audacity to sit there amazes me. This is my study, sir, and I order you to take your departure without further delay. If it were not for the more serious charge, I should certainly have you arrested for criminal assault and abduction!"

Mr. Hunter rose from his chair with a little sigh.

"It is quite a comedy," he said smoothly. "A nuisance, of course, but I suppose it will be necessary to humour this enterprising gentleman. His charge is utterly preposterous——"

Mr. Hunter broke off abruptly. A second before he had been yawning with well-acted indifference. But, in a second, his whole attitude changed. It was so abrupt that I scarcely knew what had happened.

Mr. Hunter whipped a small bottle from his waistcoat pocket. It was a ribbed phial, dark blue in colour, and there was a red label upon it. A poison bottle! Hunter sent the cork flying and, even as Nelson Lee dashed round the desk, the Housemaster poured the contents of the phial down his throat.

He sent the empty bottle into the fender, and then smiled mockingly.

"Just too late, my friend!" he exclaimed, his voice shaking a trifle. "My little bluff was useless, but I am afraid there will be no arrest. The inquest no doubt will be somewhat interesting——"

His voice trailed away, during the last three or four words. He staggered, clutching at his throat, backed dizzily round the desk, and fell upon the carpet almost at my feet. His face was contorted in a ghastly manner.

"Great Heaven!" panted Dr. Stafford, aghast.

"I was a fool—a fool!" snapped Nelson Lee harshly. "I should have been prepared for this desperate act. I am afraid—— Give me that bottle, young 'un—quickly!"

I snatched up the empty bottle, and passed it over to the governor. Sir Montie and Tommy had backed over to the hearth-rug, and stood looking on, too horrified to say anything.

The tragedy had been so sudden, in fact, that we were all confused. I had never dreamed that Mr. Hunter would commit suicide in this appalling fashion. Nelson Lee sniffed at the phial sharply.

And then came another surprise.

Whilst the governor was sniffing, Hunter moved abruptly. He sprang to his feet as though actuated by clockwork, tore towards the door, wrenched it open, and swept out into the passage like a streak.

Blam!

The door closed, and the key turned with a noisy click.

"Tricked!" roared Nelson Lee furiously. "Upon my soul, the man is cleverer than I gave him credit for being!"

I tried to speak, but couldn't. Tricked! Hunter hadn't drunk poison at all, and that was why he had acted so quickly upon seeing that Nelson Lee was sniffing the bottle. And he had not only escaped, but we were locked into the study, and the key was on the other side of the door!

CHAPTER VI.

AN EXCITING CHASE—TRAPPED IN THE TUNNEL —IN DIRE PERIL.

NELSON LEE was justly enraged.

Personally, I couldn't see that the gov'nor was to blame for what had occurred; but I knew jolly well that he blamed himself. Hunter had performed a double trick, and he had performed it amazingly well.

The advantage he had gained was of immense value. For we should be delayed for just sufficient length of time to enable him to break away into the darkness of the night. One minute was sufficient for this.

It was a time-worn trick, but effective, nevertheless. Hunter had succeeded merely because of his clever acting and astonishing agility. All the time he had been sitting at the desk he had had this cunning trick in mind.

"The window—the window!" snapped Nelson Lee curtly. "Get out of my way, Nipper—confound you, boy!"

It wasn't my fault that the gov'nor had stumbled over my foot, but I couldn't be wild with him for talking so sharply. He had every reason to be exasperated. He practically tore the blind down, and sent the lower sash up with a bang which nearly smashed a couple of the panes.

I have certainly never seen anybody get through a window with such speed as the gov'nor did at that moment. I was after him instantly, leaving Tregellis-West and Watson to follow as soon as they could get their breath.

The Triangle was bathed in faint starlight. The moon had appeared from between some clouds, too, and the first thing I noticed upon tumbling into the Triangle was a running figure near the wall. Nelson Lee was running like mad towards it, and I followed his example.

Mr. Hunter certainly had gained a start, but it was only a small one. Owing to Nelson Lee's prompt action, Hunter's advantage was robbed of half its value. By the time we arrived in the road Hunter was tearing down it at full tilt.

Agile as the gov'nor was, I had scaled the wall with greater speed than he, and we both pursued the fugitive together. I was compelled to run "all out" in order to keep up the pace.

The whole thing was just an exciting chase. Hunter knew that dodging was useless, and so he ran for dear life—a straightforward flight. He dashed through a gap in the hedge, and streaked across the meadow towards the river.

"Making for the island!" I jerked out huskily.

"We must catch him, young 'un—we must catch him!" said Nelson Lee between his teeth. "I deserved this, by Jove!"

We were gaining rapidly, and at one time I began to hope that we should overtake Hunter before he reached the river bank. I remembered that our boat was lying in amongst some reeds near the bank, and this gave me a jar.

Hunter would certainly appropriate the boat if he got the chance, and there was no other craft handy. But I also remembered that Nelson Lee had left a man in charge on the bank, and he would probably be able to turn the tide of events in our favour. If the fugitive was delayed for just thirty seconds it would be sufficient.

We saw him negotiate the hedge, and then an hour seemed to pass before we reached it ourselves. By the time we arrived much had happened. Mr. Hunter had seized our boat, and was already rowing like mad across to the island.

Not another soul was in sight. The man who had been in charge had either left his post or had been attacked by some of Hunter's accomplices. At all events, he wasn't on the spot now, and that was all that really mattered.

In those brief seconds I wondered what the gov'nor would do. There was no other boat within half a mile.

Splash!

I gasped, for Nelson Lee had dived neatly into the river, fully dressed as he was. He commenced swimming strongly towards the island, in the wake of the boat. I just stood and stared.

"By Jingo! That's done it!" I gasped.

I wasn't going to be beaten by the gov'nor, and the next second there was another splash. The water was cold, but I scarcely noticed that at the time. I'm a fairly decent swimmer, I believe, but it's a rotten job swimming with all your clothing on. My feet felt like dead weights as I struck out.

But, for all this, I managed to keep pace with Nelson Lee. I was only a short distance behind him, and we forged across in fine style. We were, in fact, overtaking the boat.

And then something nasty happened. There was a crack and a spurt of fire, and something hit the water a yard from my head.

Hunter was firing at us!

This was grim, with a vengeance! I had not expected the tyrant of St. Frank's to go to such desperate lengths. There was another report, but the aim was equally as bad. And, in any case, the thing was really

to our advantage, for Hunter lost speed considerably.

He realised this himself, and made a final spurt, dropping his firing tactics. The boat's nose rammed against the grassy bank, and Hunter scrambled out. He didn't wait, but tore up the steep slope towards the hollow tree.

Nelson Lee was only a few yards behind, having scrambled ashore a second after Hunter. I followed, and witnessed an exciting little fight on the tree itself. Our quarry was in the act of dropping into the hollow centre when Nelson Lee grabbed his coat.

The pair of them fought like demons for a few moments, but the advantage was with Hunter, for Nelson Lee had only obtained a partial grip, and, in addition, he was well-nigh pulled with his tremendous exertions. That swim had taken it out of us, coming immediately after the foot-chase.

Hunter just managed to wrench himself free, and he slithered down the iron ladder with more speed than safety. Nelson Lee followed, and I was so close upon him that I nearly kicked his head off more than once.

Both the gov'nor and I remembered the iron door. Once on the other side of that Hunter would be safe from further pursuit. And the thought of his getting away in that complete fashion caused the gov'nor to use almost superhuman efforts. I did the same merely because I was too excited to do anything else.

By the time I landed in the tunnel Nelson Lee and Hunter were speeding along the muddy passage. It was touch and go now. I remembered that Hunter might be trapped himself. If the door was bolted on the other side—and that was more than likely—he would be simply cornered.

But this was not the case.

As I ran I heard a loud metallic clang. And the sense of disappointment which ran through me was exhausting. All my strength seemed to ooze away and I faltered in my stride.

The fact of the matter was, I was just about done up. The prospect of collaring Hunter had kept me going up till now. But the realisation that he had escaped put the finishing touch on my efforts.

I found the gov'nor leaning against the metal door, examining it with his electric torch. He was shaking visibly with the effects of his enormous exertion, and his frown was black.

"Oh, gov'nor!" I gasped. "What—what rotten luck!"

"He scraped through by a bare inch, Nipper," said Nelson Lee wearily. "Upon my soul, luck has turned against us this evening. I was hoping that this door would be bolted on the other side."

I felt too weak and shivery to say anything. My breath was laboured, but I stood there leaning against the wall, wondering what had happened to Smiles. He had been released, of course. Somebody must have come through the doorway through the inner

cavern. Smiles had been set free, and our man on guard had either been lured away or had been overpowered.

Everything had gone wrong.

"Well, what's to be done now?" I asked at length. "It's no good sticking here, sir—"

"Not a bit of good, Nipper," cut in Nelson Lee grimly. "We must make our exit without loss of time. In strict truth, I was rash in venturing down into this tunnel."

The gov'nor regarded me sternly.

"And why did you follow, you young rascal?" he added.

"Well, that's about the limit!" I gasped. "Don't you think I wanted to lend a hand?"

"I suppose you did!" growled Nelson Lee. "Well, come on, Nipper. We've made a precious mess of this business, but things may not be so bad as they seem. We'll get up into the open air once more."

He led the way down the tunnel, and flashed his light up the shaft. I was near by, and I noticed something very curious. It seemed as though the light of the torch was reflected high above. Lee switched off his torch, and I caught in my breath quickly. The other light was still there!

"Why, there's somebody—"

I paused, for a voice came echoing down the shaft.

"I think you will be safer if you remain where you are, my friends," it said. "You are nicely trapped, for there is no exit either way!"

"Smiles!" I yelled.

Nelson Lee said nothing at all. But he knew as well as I did that our position was serious. Smiles was at the top of the shaft, barring our exit. We couldn't possibly get out by any other means.

"I advise you to move away from this shaft," came Smiles's voice again. "My revolver happens to be pointing downwards, and my finger is upon the trigger. You may have succeeded in releasing Dr. Stafford, but you have gained no further advantage."

"You—you rotter!" I roared.

Nelson Lee tugged at my sleeve, and we retreated up the tunnel for some little distance.

"We are paying for our folly, my boy," said the gov'nor bitterly.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that we were extremely foolish to venture down this tunnel so blindly. In our haste to overtake Hunter we overlooked the fact that the place is a trap. The steel door bars our exit one way, and Smiles is on guard at the other end. Presently, no doubt, Hunter will return with several men. We shall have to fight, young 'un."

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

"Not that fighting will be much use," continued Lee. "Indeed, it would be wise, perhaps, if we surrendered meekly—"

"I don't think!" I interrupted indignantly.

"My dear lad, these men are desperate, and they would not hesitate to shoot us

down at the slightest provocation," the gov'nor reminded me. "I am responsible for your safety, having led you into this trap, and I feel bound to—"

"You didn't lead me into it, sir," I put in. "I followed of my own accord, and there's no need for you to feel responsible. I don't see why we should knuckle under tamely if Hunter and his men come along."

"When there is no hope of gaining the upper hand it is wise to give in immediately," said Nelson Lee quietly. "We shall then have a chance of acting later on, perhaps. It all depends upon circumstances. Taking everything into consideration, resistance would really be futile. We may expect the attack at almost any minute, Nipper."

I nodded gloomily.

"Smiles must have been on the island all the time," I growled. "He saw Hunter come down here, and he saw us follow. And now he's sitting up there, guarding the exit. We're absolutely diddled."

The position was not at all comfortable. The gov'nor and I had unwittingly placed ourselves in the enemy's hands. We were caught in the tunnel like rabbits in a burrow, and I hardly dared think what would happen next.

I certainly wasn't prepared for what actually did happen!

CHAPTER VII.

SIR MONTIE AND TOMMY TO THE RESCUE—A DESPERATE ACT—NELSON LEE'S VOW.

IN the general excitement I had completely overlooked Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. But they had no intention of being left out of the fun. It wasn't likely.

They had been in the Head's study at the time of Hunter's dash for freedom. I had scrambled through the window, and had streaked after the gov'nor across the Triangle. That was the last I knew of my chums' movements.

But they were pretty active, for all that.

They arrived at the wall a few seconds after I had scrambled over, and they just managed to catch a glimpse of me as I pelted after Nelson Lee.

"Begad! Shall we follow, dear fellow?" panted Sir Montie.

"Of course!"

Watson scrambled over into the lane and commenced running. Tregellis-West followed his example, and the pair of them hurried down the dusty road at a gallop. But they were a long way behind.

"Benny went through that gap," gasped Watson. "My only hat! They must be making for the river—for that little island!"

Sir Montie nodded.

"They're goin' back to the tunnel," he agreed. "But there's no tellin' what might happen, you know. This is shockin', Tommy—it is, really. We're left miles behind. It

ain't right that we should be left out of the fun."

"We're not going to be!" puffed Watson, as he ran.

By the time they scrambled through the gap they saw Nelson Lee and me peltng across the meadow. They ran as hard as possible, but they couldn't reduce the distance which separated them from us. Just before reaching the river Sir Montie tugged at Watson's sleeve.

"Dear boy, let's make for the boathouse!" he said breathlessly.

"You ass!" panted Watson. "That's a long way up the river—"

"But we must have a boat, old fellow. There's only one, you remember, an' Benny an' Mr. Alvin'ton will use that, unless Hunter collars it first. We may save the situation by gettin' a boat down to the island."

There was common sense in what Sir Montie said, and Tommy Watson realised it. So the pair of them altered their course and made for the corner of the meadow. They knew that there was no sense in hurrying to the river bank just for the pleasure of standing helplessly by the water's edge, unable to follow.

A certain amount of delay, no doubt, would be caused by visiting the boathouse, but it was delay which would probably be very useful later on. Sir Montie, for all his affected languor, was as keen as needles.

He and Watson arrived at the boathouse in a very short time. It wasn't locked, and in a very few minutes they had a neat little boat skimming down the river. They passed Willard's Island, and then came within sight of the other tiny islet on which the hollow tree stood.

"Nothin' doin', old boy," breathed Sir Montie cautiously. "There's no sign of 'em, begad!"

"I expect they've gone down into that tunnel," said Watson, who was rowing. "By George! We're missing all the giddy fun! Steer right into the reeds, Montie. It won't take us a minute to scramble up that tree—"

"Dear boy, pray don't talk so loudly," murmured Sir Montie.

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know what might have happened," replied Montie, shaking his head sagely. "There's no tellin'. An' don't forget Benny's advice. He's warned us many a time."

"Warned us of what?"

"Well, it would be silly for us to go dashing over the island like a couple of kangaroos," said Tregellis-West. "It's always well to be cautious, Tommy boy. It doesn't cost anythin', an' there's no tellin'."

"Oh, rats to you and your 'no tellin''," growled Watson. "I don't see that we need be so jolly careful. They've gone down that tunnel, and if we go cautiously we shall waste heaps of time."

"Just as you like, Tommy," murmured Sir Montie, shrugging his shoulders. "It

ain't my advice, you know. It's Benny's. An' Benny's advice is always worth takin'—it is, really."

Watson didn't make any answer, but Montie knew well enough that he was convinced. It would be far more sensible to waste a few seconds and to proceed with stealth than to act rashly.

Therefore, a few moments later, the boat slid noiselessly into the reeds at the top of the island. The two Removites stepped out cautiously, and Montie secured the painter to a small bush.

There was another boat a short distance away, but this was not hidden in amongst the reeds. The island was perfectly still, and no sound could be heard. But as the juniors were creeping up the slope they both paused.

A voice had come to their ears.

"I think it will be safer if you remain where you are, my friends," it said, in mocking tones. "You are nicely trapped, for there is no exit either way!"

Montie and Tommy stood stock still.

"Smiles!" breathed Watson, catching his breath.

Sir Montie nodded.

"He's up in the tree, old boy," he replied.

"But what the dickens does he mean——"

"Dear fellow, he wasn't talkin' to us," whispered Montie. "He doesn't know we're here. He was talkin' to somebody down in the tunnel. It looks to me as though Mr. Alvin-ton and Benny are collared, begad!"

"Great pip!"

"It's shockin', but we might be able to do somethin'," went on Montie. "It's a good thing we came cautiously."

"Oh, my hat, rather!"

And just then Smiles spoke.

"I advise you to move away from this shaft," he said. "My revolver happens to be pointing downwards, and my finger is on the trigger."

Smiles said more than that, but those words were quite sufficient to tell the listening juniors that Nelson Lee and I were trapped in the tunnel. And they also heard my voice, echoing up the shaft.

"You—you rotter!" was what I bellowed.

"That was Benny!" muttered Watson in a scared voice. "Oh, my goodness! What the dickens shall we do, Montie?"

Tregellis-West set his teeth.

"It's no good talkin' about it," he said.

"We've got to get busy—good an' plenty, as Farman would put it. Dear Tommy, this is where the band begins to play. This is where all the excitement starts, begad!"

"We're—we're going to collar Smiles?"

"Exactly," said Montie.

"But how can we do it—how?"

"By collarin' him, of course," said Tregellis-West vaguely. "We might be able to pitch him down the shaft, or somethin' cheerful like that. But it's no good wastin' time, Tommy. Come on."

Sir Montie naturally took the lead. Watson was as plucky as a lion, and a splendid follower, but he wasn't much good when it

came to taking the lead. Sir Montie, on the other hand, always came out strong in emergencies.

The two juniors crept forward without a sound. As they emerged from behind a clump of thick bushes they saw the hollow tree on the rise above them. The moon had just appeared from behind a cloud, and the soft, silvery light revealed the head and shoulders of Mr. Smiles.

His back was towards the boys, and he was smoking a cigar leisurely. It was quite evident that Mr. Smiles was enjoying himself, and he had not the slightest idea that peril was so near at hand.

"A rush, Tommy—it's the only way," breathed Montie.

Tommy Watson nodded.

He could see that Montie was right. Caution would be useless now. Smiles had a revolver, and he would use it when desperate. And if he turned and found the boys creeping towards him he would undoubtedly "see red."

The only safe way, therefore, was to rush Mr. Smiles suddenly. He would then have no opportunity of turning round. Just as the juniors were about to hurry forward Smiles tossed his cigar away and took something from his pocket. It gleamed in the moonlight, and Smiles handled it gingerly.

"Now!" gasped Montie suddenly.

They rushed forward with terrific speed, and actually arrived at the hollow tree before Mr. Smiles became aware of their presence. Both sprang up at the same moment, and grabbed the man's shoulders fiercely.

"Got him!" roared Watson.

Smiles gasped, and then swore violently.

"You young hounds!" he shouted. "Let me go! This thing in my hand is a bomb! Be careful, hang you—— Oh! Oh!"

Smiles gasped out the two exclamations in a tone of frenzied alarm. Something dreadful had happened. Watson, in his excitement, was shaking Smiles's arm violently, and the object in his fingers was jerked out.

"Look out!" bellowed Smiles hoarsely. "Let me go, you fools——"

Boom!

Exactly what happened next is somewhat difficult to describe. A loud explosion occurred at the foot of the shaft, but the sound was practically confined underground. Only the dull echo of this sounded above.

An enormous rush of air and smoke surged upwards. It was a terrific blast of heat and choking smoke. The force was so terrific that Smiles was lifted like a straw. He was hurled through the air, and came crashing down into the midst of a thick bush.

Tregellis-West and Watson, fortunately, had dropped out of the tree just in time, and they escaped injury. But Smiles was lying in the bushes, still and quiet. The boys dared not approach him at first.

The disaster had been so sudden that Montie and Tommy were stunned.

But what had been happening to Nelson Lee and me? It will probably be supposed

that we had been blown into little pieces. But if that interesting event had occurred, I couldn't very well be setting down this narrative of events.

As a matter of fact the gov'nor and I had a very narrow squeak.

We heard Smiles shout "You young hounds!" and I guessed instantly that Montie and Tommy had come to the rescue. But then Smiles had said something about a bomb, and my blood seemed to freeze.

"Back, gov'nor—back!" I gasped.

But Nelson Lee was already dragging me away. We raced along the tunnel towards the steel door. But before we arrived the explosion occurred. The gush of air which rushed along the tunnel sent us flat upon our faces, but we were scarcely hurt. We scrambled up, dazed, but very much alive.

"The bomb was evidently a very small affair, Nipper," said Lee breathlessly. "And the force of the explosion, no doubt, expended itself upwards. It is fortunate that we— What is that sound?"

There was a curious rushing noise. The sound filled the whole tunnel. We were in the dark and could see nothing. The noise increased in volume. And then something hit me violently upon the chest and sent me crashing over. I was submerged, and gasped and spluttered helplessly.

The tunnel was flooded!

How I managed to get to my feet I don't know. But when I did so I found that the gov'nor was beside me. Water swirled all round us, waist-high. And it was rising higher every second, and the thunderous roar was louder than ever.

"Are—are you all right, gov'nor?" I gasped.

"Yes, Nipper. I thought——"

"What's happened?" I spluttered confusedly.

"Our position is desperate, I am afraid," came Nelson Lee's steady voice. "That explosion dislodged the rocks—and this tunnel, as you know, runs right beneath the river. The water is rushing in, and within a few minutes we shall be submerged. The tunnel will be flooded out."

"Oh!" I muttered huskily.

The full realisation of the position left me limp. There seemed to be no hope. The steel door barred our way, and the other exit was already flooded. In all probability the tunnel itself had caved in.

"We're trapped," I muttered—"trapped like rats in a drainpipe!"

A terrible death awaited us; but, somehow, I didn't think of this. My thoughts were bitter and angry. Hunter had beaten us—he had won! Hunter had escaped, and—and— Oh, it was too awful!

Nelson Lee's electric-torch flashed out. The light revealed a tossing mass of muddy water ahead of us. It was surging round madly, and the level of it already reached our chests.

"Come, Nipper," said the gov'nor sharply.

"We—we can't get out of this——"

"Nonsense!" snapped Lee. "Pull yourself together, lad."

I felt dazed and bewildered, and couldn't think clearly at all. Nelson Lee waded forward, and I followed him mechanically. Our difficulties increased at every step. For, not only was the water rising, but the tunnel dipped slightly. By the time we had traversed thirty feet the water was eddying round my neck.

"It's—it's no good, gov'nor!" I panted hopelessly.

Within a minute I should be under completely—I knew it. But Nelson Lee grasped my arm, and we went forward again. The whole affair was a nightmare. Just ahead the rock walls had caved in, and piles of debris lay under the water. This, in a way, helped us, for the level of the floor was raised.

Near the bottom of the shaft a huge hole had appeared in the rocks. The water was pouring out of this thunderously. But the iron ladder was still intact—it was twisted and bent, but quite whole.

Nelson Lee remained perfectly calm. He helped me along, and at last we stood at the foot of the shaft. My wits had returned now—I had a feeling that we were going to escape the death which had seemed certain.

"Oh, gov'nor," I panted huskily. "We—we shall do it!"

"Of course we shall, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "Just a little mishap—that's all. We are both unhurt——"

"Benny—Benny!" came an anxious hail from above.

"Hallo!" I roared. "Who's that—you, Montie?"

"Dear boy, I'm frightfully relieved!" came Sir Montie's voice. "Is Mr. Alvin-ton all right?"

"We are both coming up at once, Montie," called Nelson Lee.

"Oh, thank Heaven!"

Tregellis-West was immensely pleased. I could tell. And the gov'nor and I, pulling ourselves on to the ladder, rose into safety. We left the tunnel filling with water; within five minutes it would be totally submerged.

My strength returned in chunks, so to speak. By the time I reached the open air I was practically all right. Wet through, fagged, bruised and sore, but as right as rain in other respects.

Nelson Lee reached the ground first, and I followed. We found Tregellis-West and Watson standing in the moonlight. Their faces were pale, and their eyes shone with excitement and anxiety.

"Oh, goodness!" panted Tommy. "I—I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought, Watson," interrupted the gov'nor. "We are safe and sound. We have to thank you, I presume, for this fortunate event?"

"Begad! Fortunate!" gasped Sir Montie.

"Undoubtedly. But for your intervention

we should have been down in the tunnel still," replied Lee. "But where is Smiles?"

Montie and Tommy shivered.

"He's killed, sir," said the former quietly.

"Killed!" I echoed.

"I—I believe so, Benny," Montie answered.

"He's in that bush—he's been there ever since the explosion. Tommy an' I daren't look at him closely. We—we thought that —"

"I quite understand, Tregellis-West," said Nelson Lee, nodding.

"He was blown right into the air, sir," said Watson unsteadily. "Oh, it was awful! It's a marvellous thing we weren't hurt ourselves."

The gov'nor had walked over to the clump of bushes. We stood still, watching. Lee gently lifted Smiles out of the tangled branches and laid him upon the grass in the moonlight.

For a few minutes Nelson Lee was busy; then he beckoned to us.

"Is he quite dead, sir?" I asked.

"The gentleman is very much alive, boys," said the gov'nor calmly. "His injuries, I believe, are merely superficial. A bruise or two, and many scratches. There are no bones broken, and he is unconscious through shock."

"We thought he was killed, sir," said Watson huskily.

"It was fortunate that Mr. Smiles fell into the bushes," the gov'nor continued.

"He has certainly escaped very lightly. We

will secure his ankles. Just to make sure. He is a slippery customer."

"And what about Hunter, sir?" I asked.

Nelson Lee tied a handkerchief round Smiles's ankles; then he stood upright and looked at me squarely. There was a grim expression in his eyes—an expression I knew well.

"The night's work is not over yet. Nipper," said the gov'nor steadily. "Mr. Hunter has eluded us for the moment, but he is doomed to disappointment. Before the dawn I intend to capture the rascal."

I couldn't quite see how it was going to be done, but there was a note of confidence in Nelson Lee's tone which couldn't be missed. He knew more than I did, evidently, for it seemed to me that Mr. Kennedy Hunter, M.A., had slipped away completely.

As events turned out, the gov'nor was right.

The night's work was not over by any means. And, before the dawn, Hunter was finally captured. But, meanwhile, the greatest excitement of the whole adventure was destined to occur.

The Tyrant of St. Frank's was at the end of his tether, and very shortly he would suffer complete downfall. But I have not sufficient space here to set down all the various adventures and perils which occurred immediately following our escape from the flooded tunnel.

The final episode in our battle against Mr. Kennedy Hunter is worthy of a place alone—and I'll get busy on the job right away.

THE END

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

UNDER THE TITLE OF

"The Fall of the Tyrant"

Will deal with the Final Adventure of the Hunnish Housemaster, Mr. Hunter. NELSON LEE and NIPPER, together with his chums at St. Frank's, play a more than usually exciting part in bringing about the Housemaster's downfall.

Send out this Copy to your Pal at the Front!

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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 Roters, 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. They arrive safely in Berlin and take rooms at an apartment house. They are sure their landlady does not suspect them, and she seems honest. Meanwhile an influential German named Beckmann promises to try to get them through to Holland. The landlady, however, and her son betray them, and once again they are in the grip of the Huns. They are taken to Ruhleben, and the prisoners already there give them a cheer.

(Now read on.)

FIRST NIGHT IN THE NEW CAMP.

THERE was a genuineness about the prisoners' welcome that sent a thrill to the hearts of the hapless Britishers who had now to share their dreary lot with them, and they stiffened at the sound of it.

"Rule Britannia. Vive la France," yelled George, waving his hand, and the scowling escort had to put up with it.

They were stopped by an officer, and some questions were swiftly asked and answered. Then on they swung again, and a half an hour later, after having been paraded, their names taken and checked, and beds served out to them—these proving to be sacks filled with straw—they were shown their sleeping quarters, which proved to be part of a stables, George, Jack, and Wilson being accommodated in a loose box.

Three or four men were set to sleep in each box. The stables were lofty, well con-

structed, and well ventilated, too well ventilated, seeing that there was no fire or stove of any kind, and that the hot water pipes were not in use. For the ventilation the prisoners were thankful, though they could have done without the freshness.

Above were the hay lofts, and to these ladders led. They served as sleeping quarters for other prisoners, and from a casual glance the newcomers could see that the great camp was nearly full.

They had to wait a long time before food was served out. It consisted of some vegetable soup with some pieces of coarse meat floating in it, some rice pudding with prunes, and sausages.

Such as it was, the famished new arrivals enjoyed it, and afterwards their comrades who shared the stables with them flocked round, eager to learn the latest news of the outer world, to ask how the war was going, and to see what the strangers were like.

When they discovered that they were three of the unfortunates who had been interned in Oberhemmel camp, and that they had escaped therefrom, the Ruhlebenites hardly knew how to welcome the heroes.

A foraging expedition raided other parts of the camp, and returned laden with some whisky, cigarettes, and tobacco, to say nothing of a few dainties such as crystallised fruits, sweets, and the like, which were showered on our heroes.

While they smoked and ate and talked, the crowd around them grew. Soon there was a ring four or five deep about them.

When it was learnt that the Germans were not having it all their own way, that the latest news in Berlin showed that the French had struck back, and that General French had exacted a heavy toll in lives for the hammering he'd been subjected to, every face grew cheerful.

Then in turn the three friends had to listen to tales of hardship, of cruelty, even of inhumanity suffered by the unfortunates who were interned in Ruhleben.

Things were a bit better now, it seemed, but at the start they'd been simply awful. Hun brutality then was indescribable, and protests had been ignored.

(Continued overleaf.)

The stables had been licked into shape. The American Ambassador had visited them several times, and thanks to his timely intervention, some abuses had been lightened.

For instance, bedding was better, the food not so bad as it used to be; they received parcels regularly from home—those, at least, who had relations and friends there—and blankets had been served out.

Also the grand-stand of the racecourse had been made more habitable, and the stables converted into something more like a barracks than they used to be.

Also roads had been constructed—by prisoner labour—and they were allowed to play games, of which football was an easy first favourite, and had even been permitted to use the racecourse, under guard.

Here a fine field had been marked out by the enterprising professional footballers interned there.

Matches were played, league matches and cup-tie games.

The faces of the newcomers brightened as they heard.

"Of course," almost shouted Wilson, "Bloomer is here, and Cameron, and a dozen other chaps I know. And here are the Grays and myself. If there's going to be any more football, for goodness' sake let us be in it."

"And so you shall," cried a deep bass voice, and a man shouldered his way through the press.

The three chums looked at him, and recognising him instantly, burst into a shout of joyous welcome.

"Bert Thomas," cried George, rising to his feet.

"It's George Gray, as I'm alive. And Jack too, and Wilson. How are you George? How are you, Jack, my son? Wilson, old sport. I'm glad to meet you. Now we will have a lively time. I play for the Hornets, and we've got a poor side. But if you chaps will play for us, we'll win the cup as sure as we're alive."

"No. They're going to play for the Ramblers," said a stout, red-faced, sturdy man, as he in turn came to shake hands with the new arrivals. "How are you, boys? Glad to meet you, though I'd rather you'd got safe back to England."

The speaker was George Sturgess, an excellent player, who had been coach of a club at Hanover when the war broke out. They knew him well.

And so they turned to talking football in order to pass away the time, and George Gray stirred them with an account of the match they had played at Oberhemmel, and how they had got even with the traitor Kutz.

All too soon came the order for them to turn in, and after the crowd had dispersed

the three chums threw themselves down on their straw beds, drew their rough blankets about them, and went fast off to sleep.

A CUP-TIE MATCH.

ALTOGETHER, when they settled down to it, the three friends found life at Rubleben infinitely preferable to that they'd spent at Oberhemmel. True, there was strictness of supervision on occasion, though they were allowed to ramble about within their limitations as they chose, and sometimes some favoured one was permitted to go to Berlin under escort.

After they had been there some time, to the great delight of the Grays a parcel and letters arrived from their mother, who had learned of their whereabouts through the German authorities—who had been urged to communicate with Mrs. Gray by Wilhelm Beckmann, George discovered a long while after.

The letter contained money, and for the first time the brothers found themselves comparatively rich.

They shared their parcel with their friends and purchased some much-needed necessities. A store had been opened within the camp by an enterprising German frau, whereat they were able to make purchases of food-stuffs, and it was also possible to buy luxuries from outside.

A bribe here and there among the Hun officials of the camp worked wonders. They began to look forward hopefully to the future, for none of them had the slightest doubt that when she had girded up her loins and made her preparations, Britain would win.

So the weeks passed away, with only an occasional disagreement, and they managed to get some sort of enjoyment out of their humdrum, prison life.

And of course George Gray, Jack, and Wilson played for the Hornets.

They first turned out in a cup-tie match, which was played on a fine autumn afternoon on the cup-tie ground on the racecourse.

The prisoners crowded in their hundreds to look on and a regiment of armed soldiers watched over them—ay, even enjoyed the game too.

On that memorable afternoon the Hornets played the Rovers, the "fancied" team for the cup. The Rovers had won their match in the first round by ten clear goals. The Hornets, on the other hand, who were looked upon as one of the weakest sides in the competition, had just managed to scramble a draw with the Wanderers, whom they beat luckily by a single goal on the replay on a smaller ground.

(To be continued.)