

No. 170.—GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIES BEGINS TO-DAY!

WAR-TIME
PRICE

THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 1^{1D}/₂



THE COMING OF THE SERPENT!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Handforth—Detective" and numerous other Stories.

September 7, 1918.

A Rollicking, Long, Complete School Tale appears every Tuesday in

“THE MARVEL.”



The Wonderful Tales of The Fighting Four at Calcroft School are
all the rage! Get “THE MARVEL.” to-day.

ORDER FORM

To Mr. Newsagent.

(Address)

.....

Please reserve me each week a Copy of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY.

(Name and Address)

.....

.....



THE COMING OF THE SERPENT!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at
St. Frank's, introducing **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER**
and the Boys of St. Frank's.

By the Author of "Handforth—Detective" and numerous other Stories.

(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

DOING THE THING PROPERLY—THE HON. AUBREY
IS HIGHLY AMUSED.

STUDY C, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's, was not exactly a place of peace and quietness. At least four fellows were talking at once, and the result was not exactly harmonious.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West, to be precise, was on his hind legs, and he was somewhat inclined to be indignant. Tommy Watson and I were grinning hugely. And sundry visitors, who had just dropped in, were taking part in the argument, quite regardless of the fact that it had nothing to do with them.

"When you chaps have quite finished," I said politely, "I'll try to get on with my prep. If this din goes on much longer we shall have a dozen prefects on the scene, wondering who's being slaughtered!"

Tommy Watson glared at me.

"Blow the prefects!" he roared wrathfully.

"My dear chap, don't jump down my throat——"

"I can't help it!" snorted Watson. "This silly idiot still sticks to his fatheaded idea, and won't budge!"

"Are you referrin' to me?" asked Tregellis-West stiffly.

"Yes, I am!"

"Then I must remind you, dear fellow, that I have rooted objections to bein' characterised as a silly idiot!" said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez deliberately. "An' if it comes to budgin', I positively refuse to do anythin' of the sort. I maintain that it would only be the proper thing to meet the new fellow——"

"He ain't a baby in arms, is he?" bel-
lowed Watson.

"Not that I am aware of, old boy."

"Then what the dickens do we want to meet him for?" demanded Watson. "I appeal to you chaps," he added, turning to the grinning spectators. "Is it necessary to meet this new kid?"

"Well, it's not exactly necessary, but it would be rather decent," said Cecil de Valerie. "A new kid is always rather nervous, but I reckon it's better to let him find his own feet."

"That's what I say!" declared Walsen triumphantly. "And yet this giddy fashion-plate here——"

"Begad! I object to that remark!" interrupted Sir Montie warmly. "I am not a particular chap as a rule, but I draw the line at bein' compared to a fashion-plate. Fashion-plates are shockin' abominations, an' they ought to be abolished. I have always maintained that tailors ought to institute some other method of displayin'——"

"Oh, my hat!" I grinned. "You've got him switched on to fashions now! There's no telling when he'll finish. And can't you continue the argument in somebody else's study?"

"You needn't worry yourself, Nipper, old fellow," said Sir Montie. "I have no intention of wastin' further words on the subject of tailorin'. I prefer a more appreciative audience!"

And Tregellis-West, whether by accident or design, focussed his pince-nez upon the baggy trousers which adorned the legs of His Grace the Duke of Somerton.

That cheerful junior grinned.

"Meaning me, I suppose?" he asked calmly.

"Dear boy, I always refrain from personalities," said Sir Montie. "However, since you have raised the question, you will perhaps allow me to remark that your trousers are baggy to the point of bein' unwearable. Begad! Ain't you frightfully uncomfortable?"

"That's just where we differ, my son," grinned the duke. "If I wore trousers like yours, I should be afraid to sit down! The thing which puzzles me is how the deuce you manage to keep that crease so perfect. I suppose they're glued stiff, or something?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tregellis-West looked shocked.

"Please do not make such horrid suggestions, Somerton," he protested. "But we were talkin' about this new fellow, Pitt. He's booked for the Remove, an' he's due to arrive to-morrow afternoon. Now, my idea is to meet him——"

"Oh, great pip!" gasped Watson. "Don't go all over it again!"

"I have no intention of doin' anythin' of the sort," said Sir Montie. "The matter, so far as I am concerned, is finished. I have already made up my mind, and shall refrain from tryin' to influence you any longer. I shall meet the train to-morrow afternoon, an' I intend to welcome Pitt decently. If you fellows don't like to come, you can stop away!"

"This is where we feel humbled!" I grinned. "Montie, the gallant, is going to meet Master Reginald Pitt, and we can go to the dickens. Of course, we sha'n't allow that—so there's nothing else for it but to go as well."

"Not likely!" snorted Watson, glaring at me.

"My dear chap, what's the good of objecting?" I sighed. "If Montie says he's going, there's an end of it. I'd rather try to argue with Handforth than the noble Montie. Handforth gets wild, and gives you the chance of punching his nose. But you can't do anything with this serene boulder. Let's decide to go, and get it over."

"Pray, do not imagine that I wish you to come if you are opposed to the idea," said Tregellis-West frigidly. "I would not dream of botherin' you——"

"That's all right," chuckled De Valerie. "We might as well make up a party while we're at it. Do the thing in style—what? Nothin' like bein' polite—and, personally, I'm rather grateful for having been shown the correct way to behave."

"I am quite aware, De Valerie, that you are rottin'," said Sir Montie icily. "However, we will let the matter rest."

"Thank goodness!" I breathed.

"I'll come with you, if you like," said Somerton generously.

"Dear boy, please do not trouble!" exclaimed Tregellis-West, with some signs of alarm.

"Oh, you needn't worry!" grinned the duke. "I've got a new suit upstairs, and I'll put it on especially for the occasion. I'd do anything to earn your favour, you know."

"I wish you'd do something to earn mine!" I broke in. "I've been trying to get on with this prep for half an hour, and, although I'm not a rude chap, I shall feel greatly obliged if everybody will take a gentle hint. Buzz off!"

"Well, that's gentle enough, anyhow!" said De Valerie.

He strolled out of Study C, chuckling, and the other visitors melted away a moment later. Tommy Watson and I continued our prep, without a word, but Montie remained upon the hearthrug, engaged in the task of polishing his eyeglasses. Judging by the

time he took, he was apparently doing his utmost to rub the glasses completely away.

The whole argument, as I have already explained, was of the most unimportant nature; but as the coming of Reginald Pitt was to lead to strange and startling events, I have thought it just as well to record the matter.

My esteemed guv'nor, Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated criminologist—and also the Housemaster of the Ancient House at St. Frank's—had mentioned to me, a day or two earlier, that a new fellow would be arriving for the Remove. To-day we had learned that he would put in an appearance the following afternoon—which happened to be a half-holiday.

This being so, Sir Montie Tregellis-West, the acme of politeness, had put forward the suggestion that a select little party should stroll down to Beliton Station and welcome the new arrival in a manner which was worthy of the best traditions of St. Frank's.

Tommy Watson didn't see the fun of it. He was keen upon going for a picnic up the river, to Willard's Island. In addition, we wanted to practise our rowing, in readiness for the annual inter-House Junior Boat-race, which was due to be contested the following week.

Personally, I didn't care particularly which we did. There would be plenty of time for rowing after tea, in the cool of the evening. And I was fully satisfied with the form of the Ancient House Eight.

"Yes, the pale blue one," murmured Sir Montie absently.

"Eh?" said Watson, looking up.

"The pale blue one, dear boy."

"The pale blue what, you fathead?" roared Tommy.

"Please refrain from roarin' in that aggressive fashion, Watson!" said Tregellis-West severely. "As a matter of fact, I was referrin' to somethin' which would not interest you in the slightest."

Watson sniffed.

"Socks, I suppose!" he said disdainfully. "Fancy going about in pale-blue socks! Some fellows have queer tastes! I wouldn't wear pale-blue socks——"

"You—you idiot!" shouted Montie. "I was referrin' to a waistcoat!"

"Just as bad!" growled Watson. "That thing you've got on is enough to scare a bullock! Red spots and a green background, with yellow stripes!"

"Begad! You frightful fibber!" roared Sir Montie indignantly. "This waistcoat is perfectly tasteful, an' there is no trace of yellow in it whatever. An', if it comes to that, I've told you more than once, dear fellow, that your tie is in shockin' bad taste. Pray refrain from criticising me while you offend the eyesight of all decent people by wearin' that awful abomination!"

Watson turned nearly as red as his tie—which was relieved by splashes of blue, and was, indeed, rather showy. But Watson declared that it was patriotic—making a red,

white, and blue effect with his collar. As I pointed out, however, this was rather a mistake, as his collar was usually drab.

"You leave my tie alone!" snorted Watson.

"Dear boy, I wouldn't touch it!" snapped Sir Montie.

"Peace, children—peace," I said, looking up. "You're not going to have a row about it, are you? I don't care if you wear a tie with fifty colours, Tommy. And as for Montie's waistcoats, we've got used to 'em by this time."

"I was thinkin' of wearin' my pale-blue one for to-morrow afternoon," explained Tregellis-West graciously. "It will rather match my striped trousers. What do you think, Nipper?"

"Don't ask me!" I replied promptly.

"Might think we are going to meet a giddy girl!" snapped Watson. "In fact, I've half an idea that Montie wants to go out on the spoon—"

"Begad!" Tregellis-West went scarlet. "I'm the most peaceful chap imaginable, but I refuse to stand here and listen to these gross libels. I have never gone out with a spoon—I—I mean—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see the reason for this ridiculous hilarity," said Sir Montie frigidly. "And unless you apologise at once, Watson, I shall be compelled, much against my will, to—"

"Commit murder?" I asked politely. "You look like it!"

"I trust I shall never kill anybody over an absurd argument of this sort," said the swell of the Ancient House. "I like Watson tremendously, but I positively refuse to be insulted—even by my best pals. I call upon you, Nipper, to back me up!"

"Oh, certainly!" I said solemnly. "I'll back you up all you like. Tommy, you insulting bounder, apologise at once—apologise twenty times, if necessary!"

"You silly ass—" began Watson indignantly.

"Apologise!" I said, winking at him.

"Oh, all right!" growled Tommy. "I apologise, Montie."

"Then the matter is finished," said Tregellis-West, beaming. "I certainly wish to remain on good terms—"

"But I think you're a spoony ass, all the same!" added Watson thoughtfully.

"Begad! You frightful rotter!" gasped Montie. "I'll—"

"All right," interrupted Watson serenely. "I apologise!"

"Eh?"

"I apologise," interrupted Watson. "Of course, you're going to put that waistcoat on because you want to make eyes at the girls and look as fetching as possible. I dare say you'll get off—"

Sir Montie nearly choked.

"Begad! I'll—I'll give you a frightful thrashin'!" he shouted, wrenching off his elegant coat. "Put up your hands, you insultin' bounder!"

"That's all right!" said Tommy Watson calmly. "You can't touch me, Montie. You're a gentleman, I suppose? I apologise profusely. You must accept that, you know."

"You—you apologise?" gasped Tregellis-West.

"Certainly!" grinned Watson. "I'll keep it up as long as you like, old chap. I'll apologise a hundred times, if it'll please you. But be quiet for a minute. I want to think out the next insult—"

"You frightful fellow!" roared Montie.

"You've been rottin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've been taking me in—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tregellis-West swallowed hard, strode across to the door, and bestowed a glare upon us which, by all rights, ought to have frozen us on the spot. But it didn't. We sat on our chairs and roared. And the outraged Montie passed out of the study and slammed the door.

"A bit rough on the ass!" I grinned.

"Well, he shouldn't be so jolly handy with his 'noblesse oblige' ideas," said Watson. "I don't feel like going to the station to meet a silly new kid—"

"Oh, give it a rest!" I said hastily.

Tommy Watson dried up. But somebody else wasn't giving it a rest. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of Study A, were quite interested in the news that a new fellow was coming for the Remove.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the leader of that small section of the Remove who termed themselves the Nuts, was always on the lookout for innocent youths who were unused to the wiles of humanity. At the beginning of every term Fullwood and Co. always reaped a rich harvest from the new boys.

The Nuts were smooth-tongued youths, with elegant manners and confidential airs. Their chief pastime was card-playing for money, smoking, and backing horses—all on the strict Q.T., of course. And they regarded a new fellow as "fair game."

If Reginald Pitt proved to be a wealthy youth, with heaps of pocket-money to throw about, Fullwood saw no reason why that money should not be transferred into the pockets of his own "set"—and, incidentally, into his own.

"There's a good chance here," said Fullwood, as he and Gulliver and Bell strolled down to the village in the dusk. "This chap Pitt is probably rolling in filthy lucre. I'm rather short at present, and we might be able to skin the ass."

"Yes—if that rotten Nipper doesn't get hold of him first," growled Bell. "Our little games are known, Fully, and Nipper may warn the new kid against us."

"New kids are always silly fatheads," said Fullwood calmly. "Even if he is warned it'll take a few days to soak in—and we can skin him in the meantime."

And, with these charitable intentions for the morrow, Fullwood and Co. continued their

way to the village. Just near the bridge they ran into one of the shining lights of the River House School—the select academy for young gentlemen presided over by Dr. Hogge, M.A., which was situated near by.

This particular "shining light" was the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne, the leader of the insufferable cads who called themselves the "Honourables." He was not exactly friendly with Fullwood and Co., but, being of a similar calibre, he was naturally drawn to them.

"I say, Fullwood, old fellow!" he exclaimed in his absurd, affected drawl. "Somebody's been tellin' me that there's a new kid comin' to St. Frank's. Rathah unusual, ain't it? New kids don't generally arrive in the middle of term——"

"This one will," said Fullwood. "Chap named Reginald Pitt, I believe. He's coming down by the afternoon train. But why are you interested?"

"Oh, nothin'," said the Hon. Aubrey carelessly. "I'm utterly indifferent as to how many kids you have. But I thought it was merely a yarn. Thanks, awfully!"

And Wellborne strolled on with his usual swagger. Fullwood and Co., who were not quite so "nutty" as the Hon. Aubrey, grinned to themselves.

"Now, what the dickens did he want to know that for?" asked Gulliver curiously.

"Blessed if I know—an' I'm jolly certain I don't care," replied Fullwood. "Let's get on."

They forgot all about the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne, who, meanwhile, was approaching the River House School. As he swaggered along he grinned to himself. By the time the gates of Dr. Hogge's Academy came within sight Wellborne was chuckling. And as he entered the school grounds he burst into a roar of merriment.

Evidently something was tickling the fancy of the Hon. Aubrey. But the joke, whatever it was, was securely locked within his own bosom. But there was no doubt as to the genuineness of the River House fellow's merriment.

CHAPTER II.

MEETING PITT—NOT QUITE A GENTLEMAN—
CHRISTINE IS TOO PREVIOUS.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST beamed, and regarded his following with an approving eye. In addition to Tommy Watson and myself, De Valeric and the duke and Justin B. Farman had come along.

We were waiting to welcome the new fellow. The afternoon sun was shining brilliantly down upon the old platform of the little railway station at Bellton. It was a hot afternoon—unusually hot for so late in the summer—and Reginald Pitt, at all events, would see the village at its best.

And there was some splendid scenery in the neighbourhood of St. Frank's, too, although the juniors, taking them as a whole, never seemed to notice it. The famous Bell-

ton Woods were looking somewhat sombre now, for the leaves were beginning to fall, and a brown carpet lay upon the ground everywhere.

The River Stowe could be seen from the station, a refreshing, sparkling ribbon of blue, trailing away through the green meadows. There were a good few boats out, mainly occupied by seniors and juniors from St. Frank's.

Sir Montie, as I remarked, beamed. He had got his way, and he was feeling contented. I must confess that but for the hospitable ideas of Tregellis-West, the new fellow would have found it necessary to wend his way to St. Frank's unescorted.

"You must remember, dear fellows, that you would have been delighted if you had been accorded the same welcome," said Sir Montie urbanely. "'Do unto others——'"

"Oh, corks! Don't spring any quotations on us!" protested Tommy Watson. "When I came to St. Frank's I had to find my own way about. There was no brass band to meet me——"

"Pray do not be absurd, Tommy boy," said Montie. "There is no brass band here, as you are fully aware. I should very strongly condemn the idea of providin' a brass band."

"Train's coming," remarked Somerton cheerfully.

"That's a good thing," I said. "Montie would go on jawing for hours if we let him. And we'd better let him do most of the jawing. His elegant language will impress the new chap tremendously."

"Begad! How absurd, old boy!" protested Montie.

"Guess Nipper's dead right," grinned Farman. "I'll sure allow your accent is a heap pretty, Tregellis-West. Say, this yere new feller will be just struck flat when he gits listenin' to your high-falutin' chin-music!"

"Not much music about it!" said Watson tartly.

"Don't spoil the harmony, Tommy!" I said with a chuckle. "It wouldn't look well for Pitt to step out of the train and find you and Montie scrapping on the platform."

"There is no danger of that, old fellow," said Sir Montie coldly. "I have no intention whatever of scrappin' with this grumblin' bounder. I shall have a few words to say to Watson later on!"

"Look out for squalls, Tommy!" I grinned.

Watson grunted, and we watched the train draw into the station. Tommy had come with us, but he frankly and openly showed that he considered the whole idea to be ridiculous. On other occasions we had met new fellows—but only when requested to by Nelson Lee, or for other special purposes. There was really no reason why we should make a fuss over Pitt, except that Montie thought it necessary.

The train was short, being only a local one running on the Bannington-Caistowe branch line. It came to a standstill, and we all saw the shock head of a boy gazing somewhat nervously from a first-class compartment.

"Funny-looking merchant!" grunted Watson.

"Give him a chance to reveal himself," I remarked. "You can't judge a chap by his head. What should we think of Montie if we had only his head to go by?"

Tregellis-West studiously ignored this pleasant remark, although he heard it. He strode elegantly forward, and arrived opposite the first-class compartment just as the door opened. The passenger who stepped out was a boy of about fifteen. He was attired in Etons, but he wore them as though he had never donned such clothing until this particular day.

His collar was sadly crumpled, his tie was situated somewhere over on the starboard quarter, as Burton described it afterwards, Burton being the son of a retired sea captain. The new fellow's waistcoat was half undone, and—horror of horrors—several inches of flannel shirt were revealed. I half expected to see Sir Montie faint on the spot. For any new fellow to arrive wearing a flannel shirt was an almost unpardonable sin. Moreover, even the most inexperienced eye could detect the fact that this flannel shirt had not seen the interior of a laundry for quite a long while.

To further add to Montie's confusion, the condition of the new junior's neck and hands was very similar to that of his shirt. The paw which he thrust forward was not only grimy, but coarse and rough.

"Ow are yer?" said the boy genially.

Sir Montie recovered himself with an effort.

"Toppin', dear old boy—toppin'!" he said, with studied politeness. "You are Pitt, I take it?" he added, fully intending to be on the safe side before accepting that questionable-looking fist.

"That's my name—Pitt—Reggie Pitt!" said the new boy. "Can't yer see my 'ands?"

"Quite distinctly, thank you—most distinctly!" said Tregellis-West, taking the hand gingerly.

"Blessed if I can see it!" muttered Watson. "It looks all dirt to me!"

It was rather unfortunate that Watson should have spoken so loudly, for Reginald Pitt turned on him at once.

"Nice an' perlitē, ain't yer?" he asked heavily. "My 'ands are good enough for me, an' I ain't asked you to take 'em, 'ave I? You stow yer lip, funny face!"

"Great pip!" gasped Watson, turning red with wrath. "I'll—I'll——"

"Shurrup, you ass!" I whispered. "Can't fight now; let the chap have his head until we get to the school, anyhow." I grinned. "This looks like being entertaining, my sons. Montie wanted to come and do the honours, and we'll back him up!"

"By gad! He'll need backin' up—what?" grinned De Valerie.

"The fact is, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West, holding his right hand somewhat extended, as though to give it an airing; "the fact is, I'm wonderin' if you haven't made a bloomer. You're quite sure you're bound for St. Frank's?"

"That's right, matey," agreed Pitt. "I'm goin' into the Fourth Class——"

"Class!" gasped Sir Montie.

"That's wot you call it, ain't it?" asked Pitt. "The Remove, or somethink after that style!"

"Not the stables, by any chance?" asked Watson. "I heard one of the grooms saying yesterday that he wanted a new stable-boy. I suppose you haven't made a mistake?"

"I reckon you can 'ave that job," said Pitt calmly. "I should say it would just about suit you, cocky!"

"Cocky!" stuttered Watson. "Look here, I ain't going to stand that, I can tell you——"

"Well, I ain't goin' to stand bein' called a stable-boy!" said Pitt. "Still, if it don't suit your 'ighness, I won't say it agin. I ain't the chap to displease nobody. I s'pose you blokes all belong to St. Frank's, don't yer?"

"Er—exactly!" replied Sir Montie, with a cough. "But pray allow me to point out, Pitt, dear old boy, that it is not exactly usual for people to refer to us as 'blokes'!"

"Distinctly unusual, by gad!" murmured De Valerie.

"Well, it's all the same to me," said the new boy. "You can call yerselves wot yer like. An' wot's your name—you with the gaudy old fancy weskit?"

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie, taking a deep breath. "I—I shall really be compelled to punch—— Ahem! My name, Pitt, is Tregellis-West, and I'm a member of the Remove."

"Sir Launcelot Montgomery Tregellis-West," I put in solemnly. "Don't forget the embellishments, Montie. It's rather hard lines on you, isn't it? You took about an hour choosing that waistcoat, didn't you?"

Pitt grinned.

"Oh, so 'e's a bloomin' baronet, 'is 'e?" he asked. "I've 'eard of 'em, but I allus thought they was old fellers with whiskers. 'Ow are yer? Let's shake 'ands agin!"

"Really, it is not at all necessary," said Tregellis-West hastily. "And I am really a mere nobody, Pitt. This fellow here is a duke. Pray shake hands with him!"

This, to say the least, was decidedly cowardly on Montie's part. The Duke of Somerton, however, being a good-natured fellow, extended his hand without waiting for it to be grabbed.

"There are no distinctions at St. Frank's," he said easily. "I'm Somerton—that's all. Hadn't we better be shifting? We came down to give you a welcome, Pitt."

"Very kind of yer, I'm sure," said the new boy. "It's a pity you brought that chap with yer, though," he added, pointing to the boiling Watson. "If 'e ain't careful 'e'll bust somethink afore long!"

"That's a fact!" said Watson grimly. "I'll jolly well bust your face, you low-down bounder! I'm fed up with this. I don't want to be seen walking through Bellton with a beastly coal-heaver!"

And Tommy Watson, red in the face with

wrath, stalked off. He hadn't an atom of snobbishness in his whole being, but to be called "funny face" and "cocky" was rather too much for even Watson's modest dignity. He felt that to remain would mean a scrap on the spot, and Tommy didn't exactly like the idea of scrapping with a pair of fists like Pitt's.

We were all tremendously surprised, and, needless to say, shocked. To have an awful fellow like this in the Remove was unprecedented. Ignorance is not a crime, and if Pitt had displayed the right spirit we should have welcomed him. But he was aggressively unpleasant, and seemed to be going out of his way to get our backs up.

"It's a good thing that nasty-tempered cove's gorn," said Pitt, jerking a grubby thumb in the direction of Watson. "'Oo is 'e, any'ow? 'Im an' me won't git on together, I can see. I never could abear them sneakin', stuck-up blokes!"

"If I were you, Pitt, I shouldn't pass so many opinions," I said grimly. "Watson happens to be one of my friends, and you'll have to change your tone if you're going to keep on good terms with me."

Pitt calmly put his tongue out.

"Think I care about you?" he sneered. "Go with yer pal—an' good riddance to yer! I'm as good as you are, any'ow! An' I'll soon show everybody at St. Frank's that Reggie Pitt ain't goin' to be trampled on. I'm goin' to throw my weight about, an' I'll punch any feller's nose 'oo tries to lecture me!"

"Well, my dear chap, you can have your head!" I said calmly. "If you've come to St. Frank's with that spirit I don't want to have anything more to say to you. But you seem to forget that we came down to the station especially to meet you, and I, for one, don't like being insulted!"

"'Ark at Mr. Stuck-Up!" sneered Pitt in a coarse tone. "Come to meet me, did yer? Well, I never asked yer to. You wait till you're asked afore you shove yerself forward. You can all clear off. I don't like the looks of any of yer!"

"Say, jest you take a tip from me, sonny," said Justin B. Farman. "When you've been around this school for jest five minutes you'll feel so mean that you'll kinder shrivel up. Take my tip, an' say as little as possible. I guess you ain't so sweet-tempered as you might be. You'll sure find trouble if you don't watch out!"

And Farman turned his back and walked away. I followed, and De Valerfe and the duke accompanied me. We had had enough of Reginald Pitt to last us all the afternoon.

Sir Montie, however, who had weird and wonderful ideas of his own, hesitated. He was far more anxious than we were to flee from the presence of this insufferable bounder. But he remembered that it had been his idea to meet Pitt, and he couldn't very well desert him now. Tregellis-West mentally decided, however, to escort the new fellow to St. Frank's by the shortest route and then leave him to look after himself. How on earth this boy could have gained entrance

to such a select school as St. Frank's was a startling mystery.

"Ain't you goin' too?" asked Pitt jeeringly. "Why don't you follow yer pals? Think I can't find my way alone, or wot? That's right—stare! Got nice manners, ain't yer?"

"Begad! Was I staring?" asked Sir Montie, with pain, and wishing with all his heart that he had never suggested the expedition. "I'm frightfully sorry, old boy. Suppose we get movin'? Oh, by the way, haven't you got a trunk?"

"It's comin' on by the next train," said Pitt. "Lead the way, old funny weskit. Can't say as I think much of this 'ere 'ole," he added, as they emerged from the station. "Sleepy, dingy place, ain't it? There ain't any 'ouses or streets or trams."

"Trams are scarcely necessary in Bellton, Pitt," explained Montie vaguely, wondering if the new boy had spent all his life in the slums. "I don't wish to give you a lecture, but don't you think it would be as well if you didn't pass such shockin'ly candid opinions? It's frightfully bad form, I assure you."

"Bellton's a dirty little 'ole, an' I ain't goin' to say anythink else," replied Pitt. "I s'pose St. Frank's will be the same. It's a pity my dad didn't send me to a clarsy school!"

"A frightful pity!" said Sir Montie, with feeling.

They passed down the village street, Tregellis-West setting the pace, walking as rapidly as he thought becoming. His one desire was to get rid of this fellow at the earliest possible moment. He couldn't desert him until St. Frank's was reached, however.

As they were passing up the lane the picturesque pile of the old college came within full sight. St. Frank's was admittedly one of the finest old schools in the kingdom—a beauty-spot of the county. During the summer vacation, when the school was deserted, dozens of painters invaded the village, their one object being to sketch the imposing old building. Consequently, Sir Montie fully expected to hear admiring remarks from Reginald Pitt.

"That's the school, dear boy," said Montie proudly.

"Wot, that?" asked Pitt. "Huh! Pretty rotten-lookin' place, ain't it? Why, one o' them council schools in London looks a sight better—there's somethink to see in a council school—not a lot of old dirty grey buildin's straggled about—"

"You will oblige me, Pitt, by sayin' nothin' further!" interrupted Sir Montie furiously, his patience having become exhausted at last. "I positively refuse to have my alma mater insulted in this gross fashion—"

"Your wot insulted?" asked Pitt, staring.

"I'm afraid any explanation would be wasted upon you," said Sir Montie patiently. "St. Frank's is the finest school in the kingdom, and you might at least wait until you have become fully acquainted with it before passin' such disparaging remarks."

"I've got eyes!" said Pitt sourly. "W'y, I'm 'anged if some of it ain't all in ruins! That's a fine school, ain't it?"

"The old monastery has been in ruins for centuries, Pitt," explained Montie. "It's history is amazin'ly interestin', an' I would outline it to you if I thought that my efforts would be appreciated."

Pitt sniffed, and they proceeded on their way, and at last entered the Triangle, passing under the imposing stone gateway. A good many fellows were in the Triangle.

The Duke and De Valerie and I had arrived shortly before, and we found Tommy Watson indignantly explaining matters to a group near the Ancient House steps. Handforth and Church and McClure were there, and several College House fellows were grinning near by. The situation struck them as being humorous; they wished us joy with our new school-fellow. Being in the College House, they believed that Pitt would not trouble them. I'm referring now, of course, to Christine and Co., the leader of the Monks.

"Hallo!" said Handforth, looking round. "Here comes the giddy merchant! Oh, my hat! Who's his tailor?"

Sir Montie and Pitt advanced, and all the other juniors remained silent, anxious to hear what this unique new boy had to say. Sir Montie detached himself from Pitt, and went straight indoors to wash his hands.

"Watch me!" said Handforth calmly.

He lounged forward deliberately. It was Edward Oswald's genial intention to take a tremendous rise out of the new fellow. Handforth was rather celebrated for that pastime. As the other Removites said, he was rather fond of throwing his weight about. And he took a particular delight in making new boys feel that they were entirely unimportant beings.

"So you're the new kid — eh?" said Handforth condescendingly. "What's your name?"

"Inquisitive, ain't yer?" asked Pitt. "You go an' play with them other little boys, and don't bother me. Your face makes me feel faint to look at it! Crikey! Was you born like that?"

Handforth nearly collapsed.

"Why, you — you — Look here!" he roared. "If you ain't careful, you cheeky bounder, I'll punch your nose!"

"Garn! Full o' swank, ain't yer?" sneered Pitt. "Like all the rest o' your sneakin' pals—I never see such a set of stuck-up blighters! I'm sorry I came to this 'ere school!"

"By George! You'll be sorry in a minute!" exclaimed Handforth furiously. "Here, hold my coat, somebody!"

"None o' them games!" said Pitt, backing away. "We don't want no fightin'. If you touch me, I'll yell for 'elp. I'll 'ave all the masters down 'ere——"

"Nice specimen, ain't he?" remarked Christine. "I wish you joy with him. Thank goodness he ain't coming into the College House! We should never hold our

heads up straight if that cad was put over on our side!"

Pitt looked round.

"College 'Ouse?" he said. "W'y, that's where I'm booked for."

"Eh?" said Christine, with a start.

"Are you going into the College House?" I asked joyfully.

"You bet!" replied Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared every Ancient House fellow.

"Rot!" roared Christine, in alarm. "There must be some mistake!"

"Rather!" shouted Yorke and Talmadge.

"No mistake that I know on," said Pitt.

"I'm goin' in a clars called the Remove, an' I'm goin' to live in a place called the College 'Ouse. Afore I left 'ome my dad told me all about it during the slack time."

"Slack time?" repeated De Valerie mildly.

"Yes, while he wasn't servin'."

"Serving!" yelled Christine. "Does your father keep a shop?"

"A shop! Garn! Not likely!" exclaimed Pitt, with contempt. "My dad keeps one of the biggest pubs in London!"

Christine fainted—at least, he collapsed into the arms of Yorke and Talmadge. This was surely the limit!

"I've got three or four bottles of whisky in my box," went on Pitt calmly. "My pater's comin' down to see me once every week, an' 'e'll bring some of 'is pals with 'im. Crikey! It won't 'arf be a lark! They'll be sure to get 'ere 'arf boozed every week——"

"You're rotting, ain't you?" gasped McClure.

"Not likely!" replied Pitt. "Do you mean to say you ain't 'eard o' my dad? He's known as Pitt the Pug, an' used to be one o' the finest prize-fighters in the Ring. 'E keeps a book now, an' I'll be able to give you all sorts o' tips about 'orses. You'll like my dad!"

"Oh, rather! grinned De Valerie. "From your description, he appears to be a perfect gentleman. Christine, old chap, you might take this beauty over into your House. Hide him away somewhere. The best advice I can give is to take him into a dark corner and smother him. Do it gently, you know, but make a thorough job of it!"

"Hold on!" shouted Handforth grimly. "This chap doesn't belong to my House, thank goodness, but I'm not going to let him slip off so easily as that. He made some insulting remarks about my face, and I'm going to punch him into next week!"

"Why not go the whole hog?" I asked calmly. "Why not punch him right along the calendar——"

"This isn't a time for joking!" snapped Handforth, rolling up his shirt sleeves. "Pitt's an unclean bounder, but I shall have to soil my hands for once. I'm going to smash him!"

To judge from Handforth's attitude, his words were not idle. And Handforth, when he was aroused, was capable of inflicting terrific punishment. Nature had provided

him with a pair of fists which were specially suited for delivering violent blows—as Church and McClare would testify at any time. Those cheerful youths watched the proceedings with sheer joy: it was a novelty to see those fists being used against somebody else.

"Lemme alone!" yelled Pitt, in alarm. "Hi! 'Elp!—'elp! Keep your hands off me, you rotten bullies!"

But several fellows had grasped Pitt firmly. He continued to roar with all the strength of his lungs, and everybody was fairly disgusted. Even Handforth half decided to leave the cad alone.

In any case he was unable to administer the promised thrashing, for Mr. Crowell, the Remove master, suddenly appeared in the doorway of the Ancient House. He frowned over the tops of his glasses, and strode forward.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "What is the reason of this disgraceful commotion? Release that boy at once!"

Pitt was released, and he recovered his spirit.

"I knew I'd bring a master on the scene!" he said. "Cowardly young 'ounds—that's wot you are. You just arrived in time, old mate!" he added, turning to Mr. Crowell.

The Form-master's glasses dropped off his nose.

"How dare you?" he demanded warmly.

"What is your name, boy?"

"It's Pitt, sir," shouted Watson joyfully.

"He's the new Remove chap—going into the College House, thank goodness!"

Mr. Crowell started.

"Pitt!" he exclaimed. "The Headmaster informed me— But this is impossible—utterly impossible! Who are you, boy?"

"Keep your 'air on, old cock!" said Pitt.

"Oh, great pip!" murmured Handforth faintly.

Mr. Crowell was not a gentleman to be trifled with. His hands shot out, and he grasped Pitt by the collar. The boy struggled fiercely, but in vain.

"You impudent young rascal!" thundered Mr. Crowell. "I'm well aware that you have been deliberately insulting me. Even a boy of your evident ignorance knows better than to call a master—er—by the disparaging term you just mentioned. You will be flogged, boy—"

"If you touch me I'll 'ave the law on yer!" whimpered Pitt, all his confidence vanishing. "I—I didn't mean to insult, sir! I—I'm sorry! Lemme go, please."

Mr. Crowell relaxed his grip, although he did not release him.

"Since you have apologised, my boy, I will let the matter rest," he said. "I can only conclude that there must be some mistake. I have been informed as to the character of Pitt, and you do not answer the description in the slightest."

"Please, sir, it was only a joke," wailed the boy. "A joke on these 'ere kids. I meant to clear out afore any masters came on the scene."

"A—a joke?" gasped Handforth.

"My name ain't Pitt—it's Alf Summers, an' I live at Bannington," blubbered the boy tearfully. "Some young gents give me a quid for doin' it, an' I didn't see no 'arm —"

"That is quite sufficient!" said Mr. Crowell, with obvious relief in his voice. "Leave these premises at once, you impudent boy, and do not show your face here again. Go!"

Master Alf Summers scuttled away across the Triangle and disappeared down the lane, leaving a trail of dust behind him. And Mr. Crowell, a smile upon his lips, re-entered the Ancient House, studiously ignoring the juniors on the steps, who appeared to be on the verge of collapse.

"Done!" I said faintly. "Done brown!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Diddled and dished!"

But although we were startled by this revelation, there was a feeling of tremendous relief in all our hearts. The impossible fellow was not Pitt at all. We had been japed—and japed thoroughly.

"It's those River House cads, I'll bet a quid!" I exclaimed grimly. "Oh, my goodness! They've scored this trip!"

And every other fellow was bound to admit the fact.

But the Hon. Aubrey De Vere Wellborne and his elegant chums had not finished the game yet. This wheeze was the biggest they had ever played against St. Frank's—and they had entered into it heart and soul.

CHAPTER III.

THE HON. AUBREY'S WHEEZE—JAPING THE NEW FELLOW—THE CLIMAX!

WELLBORNE AND CO. were in high good humour.

They were standing upon the wide platform of Bannington Junction, awaiting the arrival of the London express. This, of course, happened previous to the incidents I have just recorded. My surmise had been correct: the japers were the River House Honourables.

"Well, we've arranged things with that dirty urchin, Summers," said Wellborne, with a chuckle. "Bai Jove! They'll get a shock at St. Frank's this afternoon!"

"Oh, rather!" agreed the Hon. Cyril Coates and the Hon. Bertram Carstairs—Wellborne's bosom chums.

Summers, at that moment, was seated in the local train, which was awaiting the arrival of the express before it started. Wellborne, being a particular fellow, had arranged the affair in private, and would not be seen with his grimy tool in public. So Summers had taken his place in a first-class carriage, with precise orders as to how he should proceed. As a matter of fact the impostor had not gone to such lengths as Wellborne had outlined, having a very keen regard for the safety of his own skin.

"It's bound to work," observed Carstairs cheerfully. "An' while they're havin' a merry time at St. Frank's, we'll have a merry time with the real kid. It's the jape of the season!"

"Rathah!" agreed Wellborne. "It'll take the shine out of those uttah cads, you know. We shall be able to cackle over this durin' the whole term. Oh, it's awfully rich!"

The express roared into the station and drew to a standstill. Quite a crowd of people got out, for Bannington Junction was a fairly important place. Wellborne and Coates and Carstairs kept their eyes well open, and saw a smallish boy in Etons jump nimbly from a first-class compartment and hurry towards the guard's van.

The River House boys said nothing until Reginald Pitt had superintended the removal of his trunk. There was no doubt that this junior was the genuine article, for the initials "R. P." were painted in bold letters upon the trunk. Moreover, Wellborne stole a glance at the label.

"Thank you kindly, sir," said the porter who was attending to Pitt, as he received a tip. "That's your train over there. It don't go for five minutes. Shall I put your trunk in the van—"

"Hold on!" said Wellborne, lounging forward. "You're Pitt, ain't you—bound for our school, St. Frank's?"

"That's right," said the new boy.

"We've come to meet you," explained Wellborne calmly. "I shouldn't go on that beastly local train if I were you. We've got a trap waitin' outside."

Reginald Pitt looked interested. He was a slim boy of about fifteen, rather small and apparently wiry. His hair was dark, and his eyes were dark also. His somewhat thin features had a sallow aspect, but he seemed healthy enough, for all that.

"Have you come here especially to meet me?" he asked.

"Rathah!" replied the Hon. Aubrey. "Let me introduce you to Coates and Carstairs. I'm Wellborne. We're all in the Remove—that's where you're bound for, ain't it?"

"Yes—College House."

"Good!" said the Hon. Bertram. "We're all members of the College House. We thought it would be rather decent to come and meet you and show you the ropes. You ought to be grateful."

Pitt smiled.

"Well, I am," he replied. "It's jolly decent of you. I didn't expect to be honoured in this way. Oh, I say! What about my box? We can't take that in the trap—"

"An' it's too late to put it on that train now, too," said Wellborne calmly. "Nevah mind. It'll go on the next—in about two hours. It'll get to St. Frank's before you want it."

Wellborne had deliberately kept the new fellow talking until it was too late to have his trunk placed upon the local train. And

having arranged for it to go by the next, the River House fellows escorted their victim out of the station into the yard.

Here a trap was waiting—hired especially for the occasion—and the four boys climbed into it. Two minutes later they were bowling along the old Bannington High Street in the brilliant afternoon sunlight.

"This is heaps better than going in the local train," remarked Pitt, as they left the outskirts of Bannington behind. "Have one of these? I suppose it's allowed at St. Frank's—on the quiet?"

He proffered a packet of cigarettes. Wellborne and Co. glanced at one another, but accepted the offer with alacrity. Smoking was one of their chief pastimes.

"Allowed?" replied Wellborne, with a laugh. "Bai Jove! You are rathah humorous, don't you know. My dear fellah, smokin' is allowed all ovah the school!"

"Openly?" asked Pitt, staring.

"Rathah!" lied Wellborne calmly. "It's quite the usual thing to have a cigarette in the Triangle—scores of fellabs do it every day. But, of course, if the Head happens to appeah, it's necessary to hide the smokes. A feahful bore, of course, but the Head's rathah particulah, the old crank!"

"What about the other masters?"

"Oh, they wink at smokin'!"

"And the prefects?" asked Pitt, puffing at his cigarette.

"The prefects smoke more than anybody," said the Hon. Cyril, trying not to chuckle. "An' there's gamblin' allowed, too. Do you gamble, by the way?"

"Yes—when it pays!" grinned Pitt.

"Then you'll have a rippin' time at St. Frank's," said Carstairs.

"We have card-playin' in the studies every evenin'," explained Wellborne carelessly. "An', talking about studies, every fellah has one to himself."

"Juniors?" asked Pitt wonderingly.

"Bless your little life, yes!" said the Hon. Aubrey. "Rippin' studies, too. As comfortable as you please, with easy-chairs an' every luxury. It's a mattah of choice whether we do lessons in our studies or the Form-room," he added calmly. "I prefer the study, personally, because I can smoke an' slack, don't you know. Lessons are a frightful bore."

"St. Frank's seems to be quite a nice place," said Pitt innocently. "I thought the discipline would be more strict."

"Best place in the world," declared the Hon. Cyril. "Some fellows, of course, prefer cricket an' all that sort of rot, but cricket's a kid's game. You'll like St. Frank's, Pitt. Not so very big, but select."

"Why, I thought St. Frank's was quite a large place!"

"Whatevah put that notion into your head?" asked Wellborne. "Theah are two houses—the Ancient House an' the College House—but they're all one, really. One buildin', I mean. You'll find out all about it when we arrive."

Wellborne and Co. proceeded to tell a few more startling lies concerning the astounding public school which Pitt was about to enter. He listened with great interest, swallowing the tales whole, so to speak. And the Honourables had the utmost difficulty in keeping themselves serious. Japing Pitt was splendid sport.

Arriving in Bellton, the trap was left outside the George Tavern—from where it had been hired. Having paid the bill, Wellborne and Co. escorted their charge down the village street. They moved rather hastily, for there was a possibility of meeting some real St. Frank's fellows—and that would spoil the fun completely.

However, the quiet side-lane in which Dr. Hogge's Academy was situated was turned into without incident. And here Wellborne was obliged to go carefully.

There was a big board outside the River House School, and if Pitt spotted it he would know that the place wasn't St. Frank's at all—for Wellborne's idea was to jape Reginald Pitt very thoroughly.

At this time in the afternoon practically all the Academy fellows would be in the spacious playing-grounds, and Wellborne knew for a fact that both Dr. Hogge and Mr. Wragg were out. Mr. Wragg was the under-master, and a regular rotter—in the eyes of all the decent fellows at the River House School. He toadied to Wellborne and Co. in the most sickening fashion—chiefly because they were well-connected youths with heaps of money.

Mr. Wragg seldom punished the Honourables, but he was always down upon the other fellows. And it was particularly neat, in Wellborne's opinion, that this practical joke with Pitt would eventually bring the new St. Frank's junior into contact with Mr. Wragg.

The difficulty with regard to the announcement-board in the front of the school was overcome quite easily. By keeping quite close to the hedge on the same side of the road as the school Pitt was given no opportunity of seeing the board at all, for thick bushes grew on either side of it.

The River House School, although a comparatively small place, had a somewhat imposing frontage. Even this, however, was insignificant in every way compared with the stately old pile of St. Frank's.

"Heah we are!" exclaimed Wellborne, as they entered the open gateway. "Welcome to St. Frank's, deah boy!"

Reginald Pitt eyed the school in astonishment.

"Why, I thought it was much bigger than this!" he exclaimed, in tones of keen disappointment.

"Bigger!" echoed Carstairs. "Why, my dear fellow, St. Frank's is select. It doesn't go for quantity. Quality's our motto. Besides, you haven't seen the South Aspect yet—it's round the other side, and you'll be awfully astonished when you do see it. Imposing, you know!"

Considering that there was no South

Aspect—at least, in the manner Carstairs intimated—Pitt would certainly be surprised. But Wellborne and Co. did not want to arouse any suspicions in the new junior's mind. The cream of the joke would be lost if he tumbled to the truth at this stage.

"I'd like to have a look round, if you don't mind," said Pitt meekly. "I hope it's not troubling you too much?"

"Oh, not at all!" said Wellborne. "Don't mention it, deah boy. Only too bally pleased, don't you know. But I'm afraid we can't show you round just at present. No fellahs are allowed to go round the school grounds as soon as evah they arrive. It's always considahed the thing to go to your own study an' stay theah until the Headmastah comes along for an interview."

"Don't I go to the Headmaster?" asked Pitt. "That's the usual thing, isn't it?"

Wellborne smiled indulgently.

"Bless your innocence!" he exclaimed. "My deah boy, St. Frank's isn't the same as othah schools. The boys are treated propahly. The mastahs are servants, in a mannah of speakin'. They wait on us—you undahstand?"

"It seems a bit queer," remarked Pitt sceptically.

"You'll get used to it," said the Hon. Aubrey calmly. "For example, you go straight to your study, an' the Head will come to you. It's not your place to go to the Head. Undahstand? He'll put a few questions to you, an' all the rest of the rot, an' then considah your special ordahs. Oh, an' you'll have a valet, too," added Wellborne casually. "Every fellah at St. Frank's is provided with a valet, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Carstairs violently.

"What the deuce is the mattah with you?" demanded Wellborne, glaring at his hilarious chum.

"Oh—ha, ha!—nothin'!" gasped Carstairs. "I—I was just thinkin' how awfully queer it must seem to Pitt—"

"No need to cackle!" snapped the Hon. Aubrey.

"Besides," went on Carstairs, "somethin' tickled my neck just then—a fly. I believe. Supposin' we take Pitt to his study?"

"Have I got a study already?" asked Pitt.

"It's been prepared for a week," replied Wellborne. "Everything's complete, you know. Some othah chap's been usin' it so's to keep it aired, but you can pitch him out this evenin'!"

They all entered the wide-open doorway of the River House School. The Honourables, to tell the truth, were suffering agonies. They badly wanted to yell, but it was impossible to give vent to their amusement while Pitt was with them. The Hon. Aubrey's statement regarding the valets had been rather too much for Carstairs, and he had nearly spoilt the whole thing. But Pitt was looking as innocently interested as ever and evidently had no suspicions.

The little party passed along the wide hall and mounted the heavy staircase. Arriving in the upper corridor, Wellborne quickly moved along until he came opposite a door which stood quite by itself at the end of the passage.

"This is your study, Pitt," he exclaimed, producing a key from his pocket. "I locked it up before we came out, in case some of the fellows got playin' jokes. Personally, I don't believe in japin' new boys."

"Oh, a rotten game!" said Coates, shaking his head.

Wellborne forgot to mention that he was just admitting Reginald Pitt into the sacred apartment belonging to Mr. Wragg. He also overlooked the point that it was most unusual for a junior to possess a key which fitted a master's study; Pitt didn't want to know that.

Wellborne had searched high and low for the key, but had found it in the end. It really belonged to a box-room at the top of the house, and it fitted Mr. Wragg's lock perfectly.

And the under-master being out, his door was naturally locked. The success of the whole scheme was largely a matter of luck, and Wellborne and Co. ushered their victim into the study with feelings of real joy.

"Squat down an' make yourself at home," said the Hon. Aubrey genially. "Smoke as many cigarettes as you like, deah boy—the Head will be rather pleased if you do. He likes the chaps to feel at home."

"Are you going away?" asked Pitt.

"Must!" replied Wellborne reluctantly. "Frightfully sorry, an' all that, but we really can't stay. The Head'll be along in about a quarter of an hour. Don't budge, Pitt, deah boy. He'll be awfully wild if you ain't heah when he arrives. An' I'll give you a tip," he added confidentially. "Some of the chaps are thinkin' of raggin' you—that's really why we took the trouble to come an' meet the train. So don't show your face in the corridor. Just stay heah, smokin' an' loungin' about until the Head appeahs!"

"Thanks awfully," said Pitt. "I'll stay, Wellborne. Jolly good of you to take so much trouble over me. You're a real sport."

"Oh, don't mention it," said the Hon. Aubrey. "It's nothin'!"

And he and his suffering chums passed out into the corridor and closed the door behind them. Here, at least, it was possible to relax the solemn expressions on their faces. They grinned from ear to ear, and gasped, finding great difficulty in preventing yells of laughter from bursting out.

The jape was finished. It only remained now for Mr. Wragg to find the new fellow. Wellborne locked the door silently, slipped the key into his pocket, and then he and the other two pelted along the passage and burst into their study.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Carstairs, collapsing into a chair. "I nearly died, Well-

borne. The silly ass—the frightful idiot! We've spoofed him gorgeously."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Honourables yelled themselves hoarse, and speech was impossible for at least two minutes. And then Wellborne wiped his tears away and rose to his feet.

"We'll get outside," he remarked. "Wouldn't do to be found here when old Wragg appears. We can watch the window from behind the bushes."

And Wellborne and Co., hugely delighted with the success of their great wheeze, left the study and made their way out into the open.

Meanwhile, Reginald Pitt was locked within Mr. Wragg's study—waiting to face the storm of which he knew nothing!

At least, that is what the Honourables fondly supposed.

CHAPTER IV.

NOT SUCH A DUFFER—TURNING THE TABLES—A BIT TOO THOROUGH.

REGINALD PITT grinned cheerfully. He was standing in the centre of Mr. Wragg's study, and he looked round him with great interest. The innocent, meek expression had completely gone from his eyes, and in its place there was a keen look of concentrated joy—which, somehow, looked crafty in addition. His ears must have been unusually sharp, for he heard the distinct sound of great laughter—and knew exactly what it meant.

For Reginald Pitt was not quite a duffer.

On the platform at Bannington Junction he had fully believed that Wellborne and Co. were St. Frank's fellows. But the Honourables had told rather too many lies; they were too tall to be swallowed. Pitt pretended to swallow them, however, and his innocent air had led the precious trio to overdo the whole jape.

By the time the River House School had come within sight Pitt was fully aware of the fact that he was being japed on a large scale. He said nothing. Pitt didn't see why he shouldn't carry the joke a little further and make it recoil upon the instigators.

It was not until they actually stood facing Dr. Hogge's Academy that Pitt fully realised that this wasn't St. Frank's at all. The whole truth dawned upon him then. This was a rival school, and the object of the joke became apparent.

"We'll see about it!" murmured Pitt genially. "Those silly fools won't laugh when I've finished! By George! They'll wish they'd never seen me before long!"

He glanced round the study again.

"A master's room!" he decided. "That's the idea. They wanted me to smoke, and get into a proper row. Jolly neat, but not quite neat enough for me. I fancy I'm a bit too fly!"

He drew something from his pocket, and chuckled. It was a white handkerchief, with

Wellborne's name beautifully stamped in one corner. Pitt had annexed it only a few minutes before Wellborne and Co. had left him to his room. Exactly how Pitt had accomplished this manoeuvre was rather a mystery, but he certainly possessed extremely light fingers. And the fact that he had annexed the handkerchief at all proved that he was as keen as the japers—and a lot keener!

To be quite truthful, the new boy for the Remove was like mustard, and he was more than a match for a dozen Wellbornes. He sized up the situation within a minute, and remained icily calm.

"These chaps are dead against St. Frank's," he told himself, as he proceeded to light a cigarette. "That's as clear as daylight. I'm a St. Frank's chap now, and it's up to me to turn this opportunity to account. If I don't I shall be the laughing-stock of the whole school. I don't suppose I've got much time, so I'd better look slippy!"

Pitt strolled across to the door and tried it. It was locked, as he had expected. He then knelt upon the desk, and gazed out into the grounds. Being in the centre of the study, he was invisible from outside. And, quite distinctly, he saw several forms in the midst of some bushes.

"They think they're jolly clever!" grinned Pitt. "The silly fatheads! Waiting for the bust-up, I suppose. They won't have to wait long!"

He had been reasoning things out, and he knew that his time was very limited. The den was to turn the tables completely upon Wellborne and Co.—to bring punishment upon their shoulders instead of upon his own. And Pitt was very thorough in his methods.

He stuffed Wellborne's handkerchief into his pocket, and noted that the study was quite a luxurious apartment. Mr. Wragg was a great believer in comfort. The desk was a superb piece of furniture, nearly brand new—a recent extravagance of the undermaster's.

Pitt calmly took out a heavy pocket-knife and proceeded to deface the beautifully smooth surface of the desk with a series of long slashes and scratches. By the time he had finished the desk was ruined—so far as appearances went. The leather top lay in shreds, and the sides and drawer-fronts were positively appalling to gaze upon.

Yet Pitt enjoyed his despicable handiwork with great pleasure. However severe the jape played upon him, he had no excuse whatever for committing such a destructive outrage as this. And, after all, Wellborne and Co. had displayed somewhat astonishing moderation in their practical joke. It was not even caddish, but merely a schoolboy jape, such as Christine and Co. might have played upon the Ancient House. Only Christine and Co., of course, would have refrained from lying.

But Pitt hadn't finished yet, by a long way.

His next act was to take the poker and deliver a sharp crack upon the large over-mantel mirror. He judged his blow accurately, for the glass cracked in a dozen directions, but made no particular noise. Pitt grinned with satisfaction as he looked round once more.

"That easy-chair needs attention," he murmured softly.

The easy-chair, like the desk, had been installed at the beginning of the present term, and was a costly article. Pitt proceeded to cut the tapestry covering to ribbons, and by the time he had finished the chair was a wreck—the stuffing was out, and the springs projected from every point.

He emptied the contents of the inkpots over the papers on Mr. Wragg's desk, and the result was ghastly. An evil glitter appeared in Pitt's eyes as he saw two large quart bottles of ink in a corner. He seized them with a shackle of glee.

All the books were pulled out of the massive bookcase and piled upon the floor in an untidy heap. The quart bottle of red ink, which was nearly full, was splashed over the whole collection. Not only were the books ruined, but the carpet suffered severely.

The black ink was preserved for another purpose. A drinking-glass stood upon the mantelpiece, and Pitt filled it half-full of black ink, and then hurled the contents at one of the walls. He repeated this process half a dozen times. The result was pitiable. The wallpaper, the pictures—many of them uncovered watercolours—the curtains, and the whitewashed ceiling—all were smothered. Mr. Wragg's study, in fact, was converted into a state of chaos and ruin. The job was done thoroughly and effectively.

Finally, Reginald Pitt wiped his inky fingers upon Wellborne's handkerchief and tossed it under the easy-chair—in such a position that it could just be seen, although apparently concealed.

"I think that'll do," murmured Pitt pleasantly. "Not bad at all; in fact it's distinctly good. It'll teach those cads not to play tricks with their betters! My hat! They'll be tanned blue for this!"

Another idea came to him, and he got busy with a large square of cardboard which had been tucked up one corner. Having finished, he grinned at his handiwork with real delight. Pitt saw nothing whatever contemptible in his destructive measures; to him it was a huge joke. Yet he had caused, at the very least, forty or fifty pounds' worth of damage!

"About time for me to go," he murmured. "It wouldn't do for me to be collared now. Wellborne and his fatheaded chums will have to pay the piper. They called the tune, so they can't grumble!"

He took a cigarette from his pocket, broke it in halves, and lit the two uneven ends. After a few puffs at both he laid them in an ash-tray, together with the remains of his first cigarette, making three ends altogether.

Then he crossed to the door, examined the



Sir Montie nearly fainted at the sight of the appalling new boy.—(See page 5.)

lock for about fifteen seconds, and then produced a short length of stout wire. After six efforts he succeeded in turning back the ward in the lock. Nelson Lee could have done it in next to no time, but for Pitt to accomplish the trick was somewhat astonishing. It wasn't the first lock he had picked by any means!

He opened the door cautiously and peeped out. The corridor was quiet and deserted, and Pitt slipped out, quietly closed the door, and risked discovery by remaining to re-lock it. It was merely a proof of his thorough methods.

He guessed—correctly—that Wellborne and Co. were keeping no watch upon the corridor. They believed that their victim was locked in, and were watching from a safe place—outside the window, on the other side of the building.

With light, noiseless footsteps Pitt slipped down the stairs and entered the hall. He didn't meet a soul, although he heard noisy voices in the apartment near by. Then, as bold as brass, he walked out and dived immediately into the bushes near the house. He knew very well that many windows overlooked the gates, and he didn't want to be seen leaving. So, cautiously and deliberately, he worked his way behind the bushes until he was able to break through a hedge which took him into Dr. Hogge's orchard. From here it was only a matter of seconds to gain the road.

"Absolutely easy!" he murmured, as he strode along. "I'd give quids to be there when the rumpus happens! But it can't be done. I shall hear all about it afterwards, though."

Pitt was a self-reliant youth, and although he did not know in which direction St. Frank's lay, he made no inquiries, and walked straight towards the school without a falter. Pitt merely used his eyes. He noticed, while lounging against a gate, that several boys wearing the St. Frank's colours all went in the same direction, some on bicycles and some on foot. Pitt took the same course, and soon came within sight of the gates.

He strode in and took a few steps into the Triangle. Then he paused, admiring the picturequeness of the grand old buildings. As it happened, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I were lounging against the Ancient House steps. Christine and Co. were over by the gym, and Handforth and several others had just emerged from Mrs. Hake's tuckshop.

We all made a rush at Pitt as soon as he appeared.

"What's your name?" demanded Christine, who arrived first.

"Pitt—why?"

"You're sure it's Pitt?" asked Christine suspiciously.

"My dear chap, it's been Pitt as long as I remember," said the new fellow coolly. "What's the matter? Is this a game? Because, if so, you might do me a favour and explain."

"We've had one Pitt here this afternoon already!" said Handforth. "He was a giddy impostor. You've been japed, my son. Somebody came here—some awful bounder—and said he was you!"

Reginald Pitt roared.

"So that was the game?" he grinned. "I thought there was something deeper in it. That chap Wellborne seems to be a funny merchant! Never mind. He'll have to pay pretty heavily before long."

"How will he have to pay?" asked Christine.

"Oh, I've prepared a little surprise for him," said Pitt. "You see, he and two other asses met me at Bannington, and told me they were St. Frank's fellows——"

"The awful nerve!" roared Handforth.

"Well, what happened?" I asked.

"It didn't work, that's all," was Pitt's answer. "I pretended to be taken in, and seemed a proper mug. The asses didn't see that I was as cute as they were."

And the new fellow calmly explained how Wellborne and Co. had played their practical joke, and how he had been aware of it all the time. We listened with great interest.

"After they'd locked me in the study I got busy," grinned Pitt, looking round with perfect serenity. "I'm a new fellow, but I've got the honour of St. Frank's to think of. I didn't see why Wellborne should have the crow over us."

"Begad! That's the spirit, dear boy!" said Sir Montie.

"Rather!" grinned Christine. "Pitt, you're as welcome as the giddy flowers in May! You've upheld the flag. But I must say you've got heaps of nerve for a new kid."

"What's the good of being meek?" asked Pitt. "I'm not a swanker, but I'll bet there's not another chap here who could beat me at thinking out wheezes. You wait until you've heard what I've done. You'll simply yell. Ha, ha, ha!"

Pitt proceeded to yell on his own account.

"Well, go on!" said Handforth. "We're waiting for the joke."

We were all regarding Pitt curiously. He was a most unusual new fellow. His dark eyes did not impress me particularly, except that they seemed unusually mysterious, and perhaps a little sinister. There was a half-smile on his face, too. Upon the whole, I was not pleased with the appearance of Reginald Pitt.

"Wellborne left you in Mr. Wragg's study," I said. "Well, what happened after that? How did you get out? Didn't you say that the door was locked, and that Wellborne and Co. were watching the windows?"

Pitt nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "I picked the lock."

"Eh?" said Handforth, staring. "You did what?"

"Picked the lock."

"What were you before you came here—a burglar?" asked Handforth, with heavy sarcasm. "We should like to know!"

"It's easy enough to pick a lock," grinned

Pitt. "And it comes in handy sometimes. At my last school I got a terrific flogging for opening my housemaster's study."

"Well, that's nothing to boast about," said Tommy Watson tartly.

"Oh, I don't mind floggings; I expect I shall have a good few here," said Pitt calmly. "A fellow can't stick to the school rules always, you know. Must have a little fling now and again. But about this Wellborne affair. I reckon those fatheads will get some nice little floggings, between them!"

"Why?" I asked.

"I wrecked Wragg's study," explained Pitt. "When it's found out Wellborne and Co. will get it in the neck—hot. Serve 'em right, too. I made a thorough job of it."

"What do you mean—wrecked Wragg's study?" I said sharply.

Pitt stared at me.

"I mean what I say," he answered. "I always speak plainly. There was a new desk in the room, and I ruined it—scratched it with my knife. It looks beautiful now."

"I say, that's a bit thick, you know," remarked Christine. "You're coming into my House, Pitt, and I'm jolly pleased with you. You've started well. But I don't approve of ruining a good desk."

"Sorry," said Pitt calmly. "You won't approve of the rest, then. Still, it's no business of yours, is it? I shall have to stand the racket if anything comes out. I ripped up a brand-new easy chair, too, and emptied ink all over the books—pints of it. I expect the carpet will look highly coloured."

"You destructive rotter!" said Watson hotly.

"Don't be an ass!" snapped the new boy. It wasn't my room, was it? Wellborne shouldn't have been so funny. I splashed ink all over the walls, and generally wrecked the whole place."

There was a moment's silence.

"Begad!" murmured Tregellis-West. "Is this where we yell?"

"You ought to," said Pitt, looking round. "Don't you think it's rich? Don't you think it's funny?"

"I think you're a contemptible cad," I retorted warmly. "Wellborne may have ragged you, but that's no reason why you should destroy a master's study. You ought to be kicked, and it'll serve you right if you get flogged."

"Hear, hear!"

"Rather!"

Pitt looked round with a sneer on his lips. "As it happens," he said, "it'll be Wellborne who'll get flogged. I happened to leave a handkerchief in Wragg's study, and it's got Wellborne's name on it. I've left everything so that the masters will think that Wellborne and those other chaps did it. I'll teach them to play tricks with me!"

And Reginald Pitt sauntered off with his hands in his pockets.

"The frightful beast!" said Handforth angrily. "You're welcome to him, Christine! He ought to be ducked in the fountain!"

Christine looked grim.

"He's going to be, too!" he exclaimed fiercely. "Lord a hand!"

There was an immediate rush of College House fellows. Handforth wanted to take part in it, but I drew him back. We didn't like the Monks to interfere in our affairs, so it was only right that we should stand out of this.

We were interested spectators, however.

Pitt, who seemed extremely pleased with himself, had evidently no idea that swift and drastic punishment was to follow. He had told his story firmly believing that we should roar with merriment. We didn't see anything funny in it, however.

And before Pitt had taken many steps he was surrounded, yanked off his feet, and whirled towards the fountain. Christine and Co. were determined to give him a lesson without delay.

Splash!

Reginald Pitt descended into the fountain pool with a yell. He went completely under, and when he staggered out, soaked to the skin, there was a distinct shout of approval. Some of the fellows wanted to duck him again, but Christine wouldn't allow it.

"No, once is enough," he said. "It's taught him a lesson. I'll bet!"

Pitt stood upon the gravel, looking like a drowned rat.

"Think so?" he asked, as icily cool as ever. "My dear chaps, I'm not a bit wild. Only I shall know, next time, that it pays to keep things to myself. As a matter of fact I was rather hot, and that dip was refreshing!"

And he strolled over towards the College House with the utmost carelessness. Everybody looked after him in sheer astonishment.

"Well, he's a cool customer!" said Christine wonderingly.

"And you'll have trouble with him, too," I said with conviction. "He's going to make his weight felt at St. Frank's, you mark my words!"

And, as it turned out, I wasn't far wrong!

CHAPTER V.

MR. WRAGG IS SHOCKED—TROUBLE FOR WELLBORNE—IN THE NECK!

"GOOD! Now for the giddy rumpus!"

It was the Hon. Aubrey De Vere Wellborne who made this remark. There was a note of gloating triumph in his voice. He fondly believed that Reginald Pitt was still in Mr. Wragg's study, and that Pitt would receive severe punishment.

For it was the pleasant intention of Wellborne and Co. to swear positively that they had not seen Pitt during the whole afternoon and that they knew nothing whatever about the affair. So, if punishment fell upon Wellborne and Co., they would richly deserve it.

Mr. Wragg had just entered the school, and within five minutes at the most he would enter his study.

"Better stick where we are," remarked the Hon. Cyril Coates. "Old Wraggy might smell a rat if we were just near by. And, although he does love us, he wouldn't overlook such a crime as sendin' a St. Frank's chap into his study."

"Besides, he'd be frightfully wild if he knew that we had a key to fit his lock," said Carstairs. "We've got to lie low."

"That's the ideah," agreed Wellborne. "We'll see Pitt comin' out on his neck before long. We've no grudge against him personally, but he's a St. Frank's cad, an' that's good enough."

And Wellborne and Co. remained in cover and watched Mr. Wragg's window. There was not much satisfaction in this, but it was better than nothing at all.

Meanwhile the under-master made his way to the upper corridor. He was quite cheerful, having spent a pleasant afternoon at the vicarage. Just as he was passing along to his study the figure of Dr. Hogge appeared at the end of the passage.

"Ah, Mr. Wragg, I was wondering if you were back," he said pleasantly. "Have you finished with those papers yet?"

"This morning, sir," said Mr. Wragg. "I have taken the liberty to write one or two suggestions upon the margin. Examination papers, to my mind, should be quite clear and concise."

"Quite so, Mr. Wragg—quite so," agreed the doctor. "I welcome your suggestions, as I have told you on other occasions."

"I will get you the papers at once, sir," remarked Mr. Wragg. "If you will wait just one moment——"

"With pleasure."

The under-master, quite unprepared for the shock which was to follow, drew out his keys and unlocked the door of his study. Dr. Hogge was just behind.

"I was thinking of adding another question to the papers, sir," said Mr. Wragg, as he opened the door. "How would it be, do you think, to place—— Why, good gracious! What the—— Upon my soul! Good Heavens!"

"Is something the matter?" asked the Headmaster mildly.

"Look—look at this!" roared Mr. Wragg furiously.

He turned round as he spoke, and Dr. Hogge backed away in some alarm. The doctor, in spite of his name, was an extremely mild old gentleman, and any violence always upset him. It really seemed as though Mr. Wragg was visiting his wrath upon his innocent principal.

"Look at this, sir!" repeated the under-master wildly. "I am amazed! Who—who has committed this appalling outrage?"

"Really, Mr. Wragg, I fail to understand——"

Dr. Hogge's words choked in his throat. He had entered the study, and was now gazing in utter horror at the scene of ruin and desolation. In his agitation his eyeglasses dropped from the bridge of his nose and dangled at the end of the cord quiveringly.

"Dear me! How truly shocking!" panted the Head. "It appears as though somebody

has been upsetting the room. Mr. Wragg!" he added, turning to his companion helplessly.

"Upsetting!" choked Mr. Wragg, gazing round with wild eyes. "Upsetting! My study is wrecked, sir! My desk—my chairs—my books! Great goodness!" raved Mr. Wragg violently. "This is past all bearing!"

The two masters looked round the apartment hopelessly. Mr. Wragg's voice, grating at the best of times, now resembled the noise emitted by an unoiled axle—in the words of Brewster, who was not far off. It was undoubtedly discordant, and dozens of River House juniors crowded into the corridor, wondering if Mr. Wragg had taken leave of his senses. Some of the fellows fervently hoped so, for it would necessitate Mr. Wragg's instant removal.

"I am shocked beyond measure!" exclaimed the Head, after he had regained sufficient breath to be able to speak. "Can it be possible—is it conceivable?—that some of my boys are responsible for this unexampled destruction?"

"Who else could have done it?" shouted Mr. Wragg. "I will warrant that Brewster and his confounded friends are responsible for this vile outrage!"

"But—my dear sir—your door was locked!"

Mr. Wragg started.

"Good gracious! So it was!" he exclaimed, staring at the door as though he expected to see it close and lock itself again. "It has been locked all the afternoon. Somebody must have used another key, Dr. Hogge. Oh, the wretches shall suffer for this. It will cost me pounds and pounds——"

"Really, Mr. Wragg, I urge you to calm yourself," interrupted the Head. "As regards your loss, I shall certainly assist you in making good this destruction. But what is this? Dear me! A card, seemingly! There are words upon it."

The Head gingerly moved forward and gazed at the square of cardboard which Pitt had placed in a prominent position upon the bookcase. There were only four words upon it, daubed in ink:

"GUESS WHO DID IT?"

Mr. Wragg fairly quivered as he read the words.

"The insolence!" he raved. "It is hardly possible to believe that any of my boys could have committed this dastardly crime. I will have the police on them. I will have them cast into prison——"

"Control yourself, sir!" snapped Dr. Hogge sharply. "You will kindly allow me to investigate this affair. It is, after all, merely a vindictive minor outrage. I regret the destruction, but the culprits shall be severely punished."

Dr. Hogge, having recovered from his first surprise, was now icily calm and stern. For all his mildness he could be very severe on occasion. And he did not allow himself to get into such an absurd panic as Mr. Wragg.

"It is obvious that somebody secretly entered your study during your absence. Mr.

Wragg," he said quietly. "Can you suggest any possible culprit? It looks very much as though the outrage was committed by way of revenge. Have you punished anybody to-day?"

Mr. Wragg hesitated.

"Nobody, sir," he replied.

"I thought I saw you caning Wellborne

"A mere trifle, sir," Mr. Wragg hastened to say. "Wellborne is one of my best pupils, and I seldom have any fault to find with him. This morning he irritated me by persisting in answering me back, and I gave him one slight cut."

It was rather unfortunate for Wellborne that this should have been the case; it seemed as though Fate was working against him. Mr. Wragg seldom punished his beloved Honourables, no matter how severe their misdeeds. That morning, however, Mr. Wragg had been irritable, and Wellborne chose an inopportune moment to cheek him. This pastime could generally be indulged in with impunity, but not when Mr. Wragg was in one of his irritable moods.

"I am quite positive that Wellborne knows nothing of this matter," went on Mr. Wragg. "He is incapable of such— Ah! What is this? Somebody's handkerchief, I believe."

Mr. Wragg, like a hound on the trail, dived down and reached a lean hand under the wreck of the easy chair. He drew out a crumpled, inky handkerchief, and almost at once noticed a name in the corner. He gave a violent start as he read it.

"Wellborne!" he muttered huskily. "Good gracious me!"

"It seems as though Wellborne nursed a grudge against you, Mr. Wragg," said Dr. Hogge, his lips tightening. "He seized this opportunity to exact vengeance, never dreaming that he would be suspected."

"But Wellborne is incapable—"

"Tut, tut, sir!" snapped the doctor. "My opinion of Wellborne is not similar to yours, Mr. Wragg. I have had occasion, more than once, to severely reprove him for petty bullying and vindictive spite. We must question him without delay."

Mr. Wragg took a deep breath. He was becoming convinced that the Hon. Aubrey was the culprit; it was only in keeping with the under-master's character that he should suddenly become violently antagonistic towards the boy he had toadied to previously. Wellborne had destroyed his study—so Wellborne should suffer more severely than any other boy would have done. Mr. Wragg's priggish regard had suddenly changed to hatred.

Without a word he left the study and strode into the corridor. There was a scamper of feet, and Mr. Wragg caught a glimpse of two or three juniors just disappearing round the corner.

"Boys!" he shouted. "Come back—come back at once!"

Brewster and Ascott and two or three others reluctantly came back into view, and

they regarded Mr. Wragg somewhat uncertainly.

"Where is Wellborne?" demanded the master.

"Outside, sir," replied a boy named Doyle.

"Go and fetch him at once," snapped Mr. Wragg. "Hurry, boy!"

Doyle hurried off, not without certain feelings of joy. For Doyle had recently experienced trouble with Wellborne and Co., and he liked them about as much as he liked poison. If there was any trouble far Wellborne in the wind Doyle was quite eager to hasten it. And it happened that Doyle and two other juniors were in a position to give important evidence.

Wellborne and Coates and Carstairs were still lounging amongst the bushes in the sunlight when Doyle appeared. They were grinning, but were rather puzzled by the non-appearance of Pitt.

"You're wanted!" said Doyle breathlessly. "Old Wragg's in about fifty tempers, and you've got to go to him at once, Wellborne."

"Only me?" asked the Hon. Aubrey curiously.

"He didn't mention anybody else," said Doyle. "You're in for trouble—terrible trouble!" he added with relish. "What the dickens did you want to wreck Wragg's study for?"

"Wreck his study?" yelled Carstairs.

"Innocent, ain't you?" grinned Doyle. "That won't work with the Head. He's up in Wragg's study waiting for you. Better not keep him too long!"

And Doyle turned and went in again. Wellborne and Co. exchanged startled glances. There had been no mention of Pitt. They couldn't make any inquiry without admitting that they knew something about it.

"Bai Jove!" muttered the Hon. Aubrey. "Somethin's gone wrong! I'd better go, I suppose?"

He hurried in, and his chums followed. Wellborne nearly had a fit when he strode into Mr. Wragg's study. He gazed round him with a kind of fascination, and even his somewhat sluggish wits were capable of grasping the truth in the first minute. Pitt had done this—Pitt had turned the jape against the japers!

"Do you know anything about this, Wellborne?" asked Dr. Hogge sternly.

"Nun-nothing, sir!" gasped Wellborne huskily. "I—I've only just come in, sir. I've been out all the afternoon, until about two minutes ago. I don't know anythin', sir!"

The Hon. Aubrey's agitation was so marked and his denial so emphatic, that both the Head and Mr. Wragg knew at once that he was lying. And further evidence came from the doorway.

"Oh, what an awful whopper!" somebody whispered indignantly. "Why, Wellborne and those other two rotters were in the

corridor twenty minutes ago! They came out of old Wragg's study, too——"

"Shurrup, Doyle, you ass!"

Wellborne nearly went green. The speakers outside had no idea that their words were audible within. But they were. This would not have been the case if any conversation had been proceeding.

Dr. Hogge strode to the door.

"Doyle, whom were you speaking to just now?" he asked sharply.

"Barrett, sir," stammered Doyle, taken aback.

"Both of you will enter this study at once," said the doctor. "I overheard your words, and it is quite evident that you can throw some light upon this affair. It is too late to attempt any denials. Tell me the absolute truth."

The two juniors entered the study, looking dismayed. Under ordinary circumstances they would not have sneaked, but there was no help for it now. Their incautious whispers had given the game away.

"You little liars!" snarled Wellborne, wild with alarm. "You couldn't have seen me! I've only just come in——"

"Silence, Wellborne!" thundered Dr. Hogge.

He was thoroughly aroused now, and all his mildness had vanished.

"Did you see Wellborne leaving this study a short while ago?" he asked keenly. "Answer me truthfully, boys, and I will see that Wellborne does not persecute you afterwards—as, I suspect, you fear he will do. I command you to speak!"

"It'll be sneaking, sir——"

"There can be no question of sneaking in such a serious matter as this," said the Head. "Tell me what you saw, boys."

If that request had been made to Brewster and his chums, they would probably have closed their mouths. But Doyle and Barrett were not so particular. They realised that their best course was to obey the Head's order without delay.

"About half an hour ago, sir, Barrett and I were just coming out of our study," said Doyle. "We saw Wellborne and two other chaps——"

"Who were they?" rapped out Mr. Wragg.

"Coates and Carstairs, sir."

"Proceed!" said the Head.

"They were just coming out of Mr. Wragg's study, sir, and we saw them lock the door," faltered Doyle. "Then they went along the passage, and we heard them laughing like—like anything! That's all we know, sir. Ain't it, Barrett?"

"That's all," said Barrett awkwardly.

"Thank you, boys," said Dr. Hogge quietly. "You have told me all I want to know. The evidence is complete. Wellborne, denial is useless. You were seen leaving this apartment, and your ink-stained handkerchief was found under one of the chairs."

"I—I didn't do it, sir!" gasped Wellborne wildly. "It—it was a frightful

rottah named Pitt! We—we played a trick on him, an' brought him beah——"

"How dare you?" shouted Dr. Hogge. "Are you suggesting, Wellborne, that you brought a strange boy into this school, that you locked him in this study, and that he succeeded in getting out without a key? That he re-locked the door afterwards? How dare you propound such an obviously false excuse?"

Wellborne had nothing to say. He knew well enough that his explanation sounded preposterous, and that under no circumstances could the Head credit it. And the further Wellborne proceeded with his story, the more confused it became.

Coates and Carstairs were called in; and, although they attempted to lay the blame upon Reginald Pitt, they only earned themselves more severe punishment.

It was certainly hard lines on the Honourables. They were booked for a public flogging, and their pocket-money was stopped for some considerable time in order to pay a portion of the damage. At the same time, although Wellborne and Co. didn't exactly deserve this punishment, they were rotters of the first water, and had many times escaped scathless when they should have been flogged soundly. So, upon the whole, there wasn't much wrong.

As they heard their sentences they groaned inwardly. They couldn't even take revenge upon Doyle and Barrett, who had inconveniently seen them leaving Mr. Wragg's study after locking Pitt within.

And, further, they were absolutely amazed at the whole affair. Pitt must have been spoofing them! And how had he escaped? He hadn't left by the window, and only the door remained. And the door had been locked! It was almost uncanny to the dismayed trio, and one fact was rammed home forcibly.

They were terribly sorry that they had ever decided to play a jape upon Reginald Pitt, the new fellow for St. Frank's.

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE'S VISITOR—THE FORGED CURRENCY NOTES—LEE'S PROMISE.

WHILE all this excitement was proceeding at the River House School and amongst the juniors at St. Frank's, Nelson Lee, my respected guv'nor, was entertaining a visitor in his own study in the Ancient House.

This gentleman was Mr. Robert Westlake, and he was an official in an important position at Scotland Yard. His business, as he informed the schoolmaster-detective, was of great importance.

Mr. Westlake was a keen-eyed man with a grizzled moustache, and a head which was singularly lacking in hair. He and Nelson Lee were well acquainted, having met at Scotland Yard on many occasions.

"I have no doubt, Mr. Lee, that you will somewhat resent this intrusion on my part,"

said the visitor. "You are, I believe, taking a holiday down here—"

"By no means!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "I am quite open to accept any commission, provided it does not take me too far away from St. Frank's. In some respects, of course, my life here is easy and monotonous. But you would be surprised, Westlake, if you realised how many exciting events have happened in this quiet neighbourhood."

The Yard official smiled.

"I've heard quite a lot," he said. "One of our men—Detective-Inspector Lennard—only returned to headquarters the other day. He succeeded in recapturing Sutcliffe, the forger. But he openly admits that he would have been helpless but for your invaluable assistance."

"Nipper and I found some work to do, of course," said Nelson Lee. "Even in this lonely spot, Westlake, we cannot quite resign ourselves to a humdrum existence. I had fully decided to resume my old position at Gray's Inn Road, in London, but my boys here positively refused to let me go. For this term, at least, I shall remain—possibly for several other terms, too."

"It all depends whether you are bored to death—eh?" chuckled Westlake.

"Exactly!" replied Nelson Lee, offering his visitor his cigar case. "So long as I am provided with sufficient detective work to keep me entertained, I shall be content to stay on. Up till the present I have had nothing to grumble at. I only hope that you have brought me some further work."

"You couldn't have made things easier for me," said the Yard official. "As a matter of fact, I want you to accept a little commission. I don't suppose you'll care much about it, and probably you'll turn it down. But as I was in Bannington I thought I'd just run over in order to have a few words with you."

"Quite thoughtful of you, Westlake," said Nelson Lee. "What is this commission in connection with?"

"Forgery."

"Again? Just after Jim the Penman—"

"Not the same kind of forgery at all," interrupted the visitor. "This deals with currency notes—counterfeit notes. There has been a considerable flood of them recently and we are unable to trace them to their source."

"Then surely it is quite hopeless coming to me?" suggested the detective. "I am quite convinced, Westlake, that the culprits are not operating from the vicinity of this school. Bellton is a most innocent village, I can assure you."

"But Bannington is not far off, is it?" replied the other. "And these notes, Lee, are certainly being issued—or, at least, manufactured—in the neighbourhood of Bannington. That is why I came down from London, and it is also why I took the liberty of approaching you."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Haven't you any of your men on the job?" he asked.

"We've had two or three of our best officers in Bannington for quite a while," replied Mr. Westlake. "The crooks are cute, however. From the very moment the Scotland Yard men appeared the issue of notes ceased. The criminals are obviously well aware of our movements. We attempted a ruse, but it was useless. All our men were sent back to headquarters with reports that their efforts were fruitless. Meanwhile, two other officials arrived in Bannington secretly, hoping that the gang would resume its work."

"And there was nothing doing?"

"Nothing at all," was the reply. "We knew, however, that our men were being watched, and I am perfectly certain that nothing will be done so long as we continue our vigilance. The crooks are waiting for us to get tired."

"I understand exactly," said Nelson Lee. "It is obviously a waste of time for Scotland Yard to have men in Bannington indefinitely. Have you decided upon any plan?"

"Not exactly," replied Mr. Westlake. "The whole position is somewhat difficult. We are firmly determined to ferret out these rascals and bring them to justice. But they are shy birds. They remain in their nests, in complete cover, while there is the slightest prospect of danger. It is apparent, indeed, that they have confederates in London who keep them acquainted with the movements of our men. I was wondering if we couldn't adopt fresh tactics."

"It seems to be your only course," observed Lee.

"Exactly. And this is where you come in," said the official. "Scotland Yard will drop the game completely, making it known we are of the opinion that the counterfeiters are not situated in this district. That will put the scoundrels off their guard. And you, Lee, will take up this end of the affair, and do your best to locate the exact whereabouts of the gang."

Nelson Lee puffed at his cigar thoughtfully.

"Have you no actual clues?" he asked.

"None whatever. As soon as we commenced inquiries in Bannington the trail ended abruptly," replied the visitor. "We only know that the forgeries are perpetrated somewhere in the town. It will be for you to get on the direct trail. I'm afraid your task may appear hopeless, Lee, and I am quite prepared for you to refuse—"

"I haven't refused yet, have I?" interrupted Lee smoothly. "On the contrary, Westlake, I am somewhat attracted. I will certainly keep my eyes open and do my utmost in the matter."

"Splendid!" said Mr. Westlake. "This is very good of you, Lee. Personally, I am decidedly hopeful, in spite of the fact that the data I am in a position to supply is extremely meagre. I have great faith in your capabilities."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Flattery, eh?" he smiled. "That won't

do, Westlake. Wait until I have earned your praise. By the way, have you a specimen note for me to have by me?"

"A whole bundle."

Westlake reached for his attaché-case, unlocked it, and produced a neatly tied packet of one-pound currency notes. There were exactly one hundred, and Lee took them with interest.

For some little time he examined them closely.

"Are you trying to catch me?" he asked, looking up.

"No," replied the other. "Fairly perfect, aren't they?"

"If these notes are forgeries they are truly wonderful," said Nelson Lee, holding one up to the light and examining the water-mark. "With the naked eye, Westlake, it is really impossible to detect the fraud."

"That's what makes our task so difficult," said the Scotland Yard official. "These notes are being found everywhere, and it is only too certain that the issue is a large one. The whole country is flooded with false currency."

Nelson Lee took a genuine Treasury note from his case and compared it closely with the counterfeit one. To all intents and purposes there was no difference.

By the aid of a powerful magnifying lens, however, the detective very soon discovered several minor flaws, which were hidden from the naked eye. They were so minute that it was almost impossible to discover their presence.

"Yes, they are certainly forgeries," he declared at last. "As you say, Westlake, it is highly necessary to stop the issue of these notes without a moment's delay. The printing is perfect, the engraving work superb. May I keep these?"

"Certainly; only I hope you won't spend them!" said Westlake drily. "You could do so with perfect safety, for these forgeries can be passed anywhere. Even a bank would accept them without question. They are being perpetrated by a new gang, Lee, for we have accounted for every suspected crook in the country."

Nelson Lee dropped the bundle of notes into a drawer.

"Very well. I will commence my investigations as soon as a suitable opportunity occurs," he said. "The difficulty appears to be the total absence of a direct starting-point. If only I had more definite information I should be able to make positive plans."

"I feel that I ought to apologise for approaching you at all," said Mr. Westlake. "If you succeed in this affair, Lee, you may be sure that your reward will be considerable—financially, I mean."

"That's interesting, at all events," smiled Nelson Lee. "I have few opportunities of increasing my income down here, Westlake, and, although I don't grumble, I should certainly welcome the chance of earning suffi-

cient money to maintain my income at its normal level."

"I can quite understand that," agreed the other, rising to his feet. "You must be sacrificing quite a lot by remaining at St. Frank's."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that," was the detective's comment. "And, in any case, I am very contented here. Nipper, too, would not welcome the prospect of leaving. He likes detective work, but the young rascal is quite in love with St. Frank's."

After a little further conversation Mr. Westlake took his departure. I saw him go, and, being a curious beggar, I forthwith went to the gov'nor's study and made inquiries.

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"You are just two minutes earlier than I expected, Nipper," he said drily. "I gave you five minutes, and you have arrived within three. I am afraid your inquisitive nature——"

"Oh, chuck it, gov'nor!" I grinned. "I want to know who that bald-headed merchant was."

"The gentleman is not a merchant, Nipper," said Lee severely. "Neither is he bald-headed. There is a distinct fringe running around the base of his skull, and he is quite proud of it. Mr. Westlake, as you probably know, is connected with the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard."

I became interested at once.

"More work, gov'nor?" I asked eagerly.

"I hardly know, Nipper," was the reply. "I am not entirely satisfied with the task which Mr. Westlake has set me. It would be far more congenial if I had even the smallest starting-point. What do you think of these, young 'un?"

He handed me the bundle of false currency notes.

"On account, sir?" I asked. "Not bad, is it? You might as well hand me a few of these. I'm rather hard up——"

"Do you want to get locked up?" asked Lee sternly.

"Locked up?" I gasped.

"Passing false currency is a very serious offence," said the gov'nor. "I should not like you to end up in prison, Nipper!"

I stared at the notes.

"False currency!" I repeated. "These ain't false, sir! I've seen a few Treasury notes in my time, and I'd swear to these any day. Give me gold before paper every time, but these are genuine enough!"

Nelson Lee lay back in his chair.

"Their face value, Nipper, amounts to exactly one hundred pounds," he said calmly. "In actual reality they are worth, perhaps, fivepence or sixpence—certainly not more."

And then he told me what Mr. Westlake had said, and I was most interested. It meant that more work was in the wind, so to speak, and nothing would suit me better than that.

"And you've got to find out where these notes are being made, and who is respon-

sible?" I asked. "Rather a tall order, isn't it, sir?"

"It all depends, Nipper," replied the gov'nor slowly. "Fortunately, the field of investigation is restricted to Bannington and district. I shall set to work cautiously——"

"How, sir?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't exactly know how," he answered. "At all events, we cannot settle upon any plan of action at present. Now that your curiosity is satisfied, young 'un, perhaps you will have the goodness to leave me in peace."

I jumped up.

"A hint's as good as a nod to me, gov'nor," I said, grinning. "I'll clear now before I'm kicked out. But I'm willing to make a bet with you with regard to this forgery business."

"I disapprove of betting——"

"Well, a wager, then."

"That is a distinction without difference, Nipper," said Nelson Lee severely. "But what is your wager, anyhow?"

"That you'll ferret out these counterfeiters within a month from to-day," I replied promptly. "I'll bet you a new pair of boots—you need 'em, by the way—to a pennyworth of toffee that the whole crew are in the hands of the police a month from now."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I shall have to make my plans carefully, young 'un," he said. "I shall take care to capture the crooks on the thirty-second day."

"That's a day over!" I protested.

"Precisely!" said the gov'nor calmly, and with a twinkle in his eye. "It will pay me to lose the bet by a narrow margin, for I shall thus obtain a new pair of boots. You may as well get them in readiness, Nipper. I shall do my utmost to make my present shoe-leather last out. But get along with you!" he added briskly.

"And you don't approve of betting!" I grinned, as I made for the door. "Thank goodness I didn't say what kind of boots! They've got some down the village for ten bob—with soles an inch thick—— Oh, my hat! Ow!"

Nelson Lee's aim was distinctly good, and a dictionary struck me in the centre of the waistcoat with considerable force. That brought the argument to an end, and I scooted.

And, although I was destined to hear nothing more about the forged currency notes in the immediate future, Nelson Lee did not remain idle. Later on he became very busy indeed!

CHAPTER VII.

PITT ISN'T SATISFIED—COOL CHERK—GIVING HIM HIS HEAD.

IT was Handforth who provided Reginald Pitt with the nickname which was destined to stick to him for many a long day.

"The chap's an utter beast!" declared Handforth firmly. "Thank goodness, he ain't in our House—that's all I can say! He's as tricky as a monkey, as cunning as a blessed fox, and as slippery as a basketful of eels!" he went on, regardless of his former remark about having nothing further to say. "Pitt's a snaky rotter, and if I don't punch his nose once a day it'll be a wonder!"

"We'll leave Christine to do that," I said. "He's in the College House, so the College House fellows have got to take him in hand. But you're quite right about Pitt being snaky, Handforth."

Edward Oswald nodded.

"A serpent—that's the word," he said grimly. "By George, that's what we'll call him, too—the Serpent! It's a name that suits him down to the ground! He'll bite somebody before long!"

"I don't think much of your judgment as a rule, Handy, but I agree with you this time," I said. "Did you hear what happened to Wellborne and Co.? Brevster told me about it this morning. They were flogged like the very dickens."

"Well, it serves 'em right," remarked Tommy Watson. "I can't say I pity 'em much. But it was rough luck to be punished for something they didn't do."

A day or two had passed, and Reginald Pitt was firmly established in the Remove. He had been placed in Study V, in the College House, which had previously been empty. None of the Monks were inclined to share a study with a fellow who had made such an unfavourable impression on his first day.

Pitt was a decidedly unusual boy, however. By the end of the second evening he was on good terms with everybody. His astounding assurance, his coolness, and his pleasant manner of speaking, provided him with a place in almost every discussion. It wasn't easy to tell Pitt to clear out. Somehow he had a "presence." You couldn't ignore him. And he was so constantly present that most of the juniors soon overlooked the affair of the River House School.

But it couldn't be denied that Pitt was snaky in his manners. It became the habit to refer to him as the Serpent. He heard it frequently, many fellows addressing him thus. But Pitt didn't mind in the least; he seemed to take it as a compliment. He possessed the cheek of a dozen, and was always cool, always had ready answers, and was never floored. Several fellows had attempted to take a rise out of him, but they had failed miserably, and to their own discomfort. What was more, he evidently took a great interest in the welfare of his own House. On his second day he made two or three suggestions to Christine which the latter grudgingly admitted were quite excellent. Pitt, in fact, acted and carried himself as though he had been at St. Frank's for three or four terms.

Nobody, however, could say that the new boy was a funk. When Handforth had attempted to punch his nose, it was Hand-

forth's nose which had suffered the most. Pitt was quite small in comparison with Handforth, and his fists were tiny when placed side by side with Edward Oswald's formidable "punchers." Yet, for all that, he faced Handforth without a quiver, and got the best of it.

On the third evening Pitt lounged into Study Q in the College House, the celebrated apartment occupied by Christine and Yorke and Talmadge. The leaders of the Monks were just about to have tea.

"No room!" said Yorke curtly. "Sorry, Pitt, but we don't like your face. You'll close the door after you, won't you? Let me recommend Mrs. Hake, if you want to buy things for tea. You've come to the wrong place!"

Reginald Pitt grinned.

"I've just had my tea, thanks," he said calmly. "I may have some bad qualities, but I'm not a sponger. I just wanted to make a few remarks."

"Good!" said Talmadge. "You won't mind making 'em out in the Triangle, will you? Your face is making this butter melt—"

"Drop it!" said Christine. "If Pitt wants to say something, he can say it. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Pitt dropped languidly into the only easy-chair in the room, ignoring the glares of Yorke and Talmadge.

"Well, as a matter of fact, there is something wrong—something badly wrong," he said calmly. "This study, I believe, is the leading junior study in the College House?"

"Who says it isn't?" demanded Yorke warily.

"My dear chap, don't get excited," said Pitt. "Nobody says it isn't. But it strikes me that there's something wrong at St. Frank's. No offence, but you fellows, as leaders of the Monks, ain't enterprising enough."

Bob Christine looked grim.

"Oh!" he said coldly. "What fault have you got to find? I'd better warn you, Pitt, that you're in considerable danger of leaving this study on your neck!"

"Let's chuck him out now!" snorted Talmadge.

Pitt waved his hand.

"What's the good of chucking me out?" he asked smoothly. "I came here to offer a suggestion. You're not going to take offence because I pass an opinion, are you?"

"It all depends what the opinion is!" said Christine.

"It's just a frank criticism—and I believe that you'll take it in a good spirit," said Pitt candidly. "I mean it in a good spirit, so don't jump on me in a hurry. I'm in the College House, and I naturally want the College House to be the top House at St. Frank's."

"So it is!" roared Christine and Co. in one voice.

Pitt elevated his eyebrows.

"Is it?" he asked coolly. "That's says to me, anyhow. I haven't been at St. Frank's

long, but I've got eyes. And I can see that in all big matters the College House takes a back seat—particularly the Junior School, which I'm interested in."

"I don't know about a back seat!" said Talmadge grimly. "But if you ain't careful you'll take a seat on the floor! Are we going to allow this, you chaps? Boot him out, Christine—"

"Oh, let him finish!" said Christine.

"I was only going to suggest that an alteration should be made," said Pitt. "You're sensitive on the subject, of course. I don't wonder at it. But, fairly and squarely, isn't it a fact that the Ancient House leads the way in nearly everything?"

Bob Christine frowned.

"Well, what about it?" he growled.

"That's better—you admit it!" said Pitt briskly. "Now we shall understand one another better. That chap Nipper seems to be the organising genius of the Ancient House juniors, and I must say that he's a real live wire."

"So he is," declared Christine frankly. "He's one of the best chaps breathing. Why, before he came the Ancient House was a dead letter. Everything was dead, in fact. Sport, games, decency, and everything else. Nipper changed everything, and sent the Ancient House soaring. The bounders have passed us—"

"Rot!" roared Charlie Talmadge. "You—you awful traitor—"

"It's no good blinking at the facts," interrupted Christine. "Pitt's quite right—we do take a back seat. But I'm blessed if I can see how Pitt's going to alter it."

"That's just the idea," exclaimed Pitt. "The fact is admitted, isn't it, that the College House takes second place at St. Frank's? Well, I don't exactly see why it should be so. Why can't we buck things up and create a hum?"

"A—a which?" asked Yorke, staring.

"Why can't we show the Ancient House that we're not going to stand any of their old buck?" said Pitt calmly. "You're the leader of the Monks, Christine, and I'm only a new kid—I know that well enough. Don't say I've got cheek. As a matter of fact, I have. Plenty of cheek is a good quality."

Christine and Co. stared at Pitt rather helplessly. Somehow, he always seemed to disarm them. He forestalled them by his remarks concerning cheek, and they hadn't anything to say.

"I'm a new kid," he repeated, "and I don't suppose I've got any right to jaw at you like this. But it's a House matter, so we'll waive all precedent—see?"

Christine breathed hard.

"No, I don't see!" he said grimly. "But go on—let's hear the rest of it. You mightn't have another chance!"

"Well, since you don't seem to be capable of making the Ancient House sit up, I'm willing to take the job on," said Pitt coolly. "How does the idea strike you?"

"You cheeky rotter!" roared Yorke.

"You ain't goin' to stand this, I suppose, Christine?"

"Let him finish!" said Christine coldly.

"I can see well enough that you're all getting wild," remarked Pitt, rising to his feet. "That's silly. I didn't come here to have a scrap with anybody. As I was saying, I'm willing to show you how matters can be altered. Just give me a chance, and I'll make Nipper and all the rest of 'em bite the dust. I want a free hand."

"A—a free hand?" repeated Talmadge dazedly.

"Exactly!"

"You wouldn't like a free boot, I suppose?" suggested Yorke. "I've got one here, and there's a good kick behind it——"

"Oh, don't start any violence!" said Pitt testily. "I'm not afraid of your boots. If it does come to a scrap, I sha'n't be pitched out easily. But where's the sense in scrap-ping? My motive is a good one, isn't it? I don't want to dispute your leadership. I'm a College House chap, and I've got the honour of the College House at heart. Why shouldn't we soar above our rivals? Just a few wheezes, and we can make the Fossils hide their heads in humiliation. That's my idea."

Christine took a deep breath.

"You haven't got any others, I suppose?" he asked grimly.

"Plenty," said Pitt. "But we needn't go into any more just at present. Give me a free hand——"

"I'm not going to get wild with you, Pitt," interrupted Christine. "Shut up, you fatheads!" he added, turning to his indignant chums. "Pitt came here to suggest an idea, and he's done it. Now he can clear out!"

Reginald Pitt sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said frankly. "I thought you'd be broader-minded, Christine. And I've got some jolly fine wheezes, too."

"You've given us a sample already!" said Christine curtly. "We don't like your wheezes, Pitt. They're too vindictive——"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" interrupted the new boy. "That affair hadn't anything to do with St. Frank's. Those chaps played a mean trick on me, and I paid 'em back in their own coin. You may think I've been boasting, but I haven't."

"Oh, no!" said Talmadge, with heavy sarcasm. "You never do boast, do you? Of all the insufferable nerve! You have the cheek to come here and tell us how the College House should be run!"

"Your mistake!" said Pitt coolly. "I didn't do anything of the sort. I simply said I could run it better—that's all!"

Christine's temper gave way at last.

"Prove it!" he shouted hotly. "Anybody can jaw like this. Substantiate your words by deeds—and then I'll believe you! Hang it all, I'll give you a free hand——"

"What!" roared Talmadge and Yorke.

"A free hand!" repeated Christine grimly. "You can give us a proof of your marvellous methods, Pitt. I'll allow you just one week. Understand?"

"You—you silly ass!" yelled Yorke. "Do you mean to say that you're going to let Pitt step into your shoes——"

"I didn't say that," interjected Christine. "He's got a free hand, that's all. He can work some marvellous wheeze of his own, and prove that he's worth his salt! If he hasn't worked the stunt within a week, we shall know that he's all jaw!"

Pitt nodded serenely.

"Good enough!" he said. "A week's all I want, Christine. You'll find that I'm not a boaster. The College House will be cackling over the diddling of the Ancient House before to-day week!"

And Reginald Pitt strolled out of the study.

But neither Bob Christine nor anybody else knew Reginald Pitt yet! He was destined to spring quite a number of surprises on the College House, and the whole of St. Frank's generally!

The Serpent's venom had yet to be revealed!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

UNDER THE TITLE OF

"The Boat-race Mystery!"

Will be another Magnificent Account of the Adventures at St. Frank's of NELSON LEE, NIPPER and his Chums, and the Extraordinary New Boy nicknamed "the Serpent."

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

WAR-TIME PRICE—THREE-HALFPENCE.

GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIAL!

The Chums of Littleminster School.

A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

The First Chapters.

BASIL HOOD is a new boy at Littleminster School.
On his arrival he makes a friend of

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGGIN** are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. One day he and Hood go out fishing. They are cast adrift, and Challis saves Hood's life. They are sent for by the Head, who, after hearing all the facts, praises Challis for his heroism.

(Now read on.)

JOHN CHALLIS RESOLVES TO GO HOME.

JOHN CHALLIS was very silent as he and Basil made their way back to the school. The new boy, looking up into his face, was dismayed by its anxious, set expression. Challis walked on without seeming to notice anything that was passing around him. He did not hear the jeers of the boys, and was blind to their undisguised hostility. Basil dared not say a word. He was awed by Challis's manner. Slowly the big boy ascended the stairs, until he reached the door of his room, into which he would have passed without speaking, had not Basil touched him on the arm.

Then Challis turned with a start.

"Yes, kid, what is it?" he asked, frowning darkly.

"Don't look at me like that, John. I'd rather have died than have got you into trouble. And I'm afraid it's all my fault. Do—do you want me for anything—"

"No, young 'un," said the big boy quietly. "You run along. And, I say, you'd nothing to do with it, you know."

"But—the accident might not have happened if I hadn't been with you. I believe you'd have got ashore, and have saved the punt somehow, if you hadn't had to look after me. And it's a lot of money to have to stump up. Will your father be angry?"

Challis eyed the fag gloomily.

"No. I don't know that he will," said he. "He's not that sort. But I'd have given my right hand, I think, rather than have incurred such an expense. Hood, there's something wrong with me. I'm always in trouble.

I wish I'd never come to Littleminster. What's the good of it all? The others shut me out, and—when I think of the Head paying that money to Laws for me, I could hide my face for very shame." He flushed hotly.

"And he'll write to my father," he went on bitterly, clenching his hands. "I shan't be able to tell the old dad myself. What'll he think, when he doesn't know the circumstances?"

"Write and tell him yourself," suggested Basil, courageously.

"I'd rather see him and tell him," muttered the boy, "but that's impossible."

He then stretched out his hand, squeezed Basil's, smiled at him, and turned into his room.

"Talking doesn't make it any better," he cried, more cheerfully. "Run along, young 'un, and leave me to myself. I'm best left alone."

After Basil had gone Challis sat moodily at his table, with his task books set in front of him. Every now and again he took up his pen, but he could not concentrate, and at last gave it up with a sigh.

That evening he slunk into the dining-hall as if ashamed, and sat down, white-faced and frowning, keeping his eyes riveted on the cloth or the floor.

He was deaf to the taunts hurled at him.

"The cad's sulking," cried Myers. "The Head gave him gyp, I'll bet. Look at the craven-hearted duffer. And we've got to put up with a chap like him at Littleminster."

Some of the others shied pellets of fingered bread at the unpopular boy, some of which hit him in the face. He paid no heed.

"I don't believe he's got the pluck of a mouse," said Digby.

As soon as he could Challis rose and vanished from the scene of his unpopularity. Mr. Evans, watching him narrowly, saw that he had taken the Head's lecture very badly to heart.

"He's got it on his mind," thought the master.

The boy returned to his room and sat himself near the window in the dark, staring out into the quad below.

His thoughts continued to dwell upon that scene in the Doctor's study, and at times drifted to his humble home, where he saw

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

the postman arrive with the Doctor's letter, saw his father open it, and frown darkly at the news it contained.

"If I could only go to him and explain," he thought. "He would understand. But if he thinks that I've been guilty of some mean, underhand trick, what then?"

Again he saw Dr. Mason handing the landlord of the Magpie Inn the fifteen pounds, and he shuddered as he thought of his indebtedness to the master of Littleminster.

"I ought never to have gone fishing, then it wouldn't have happened," he told himself bitterly, and derived some comfort from the thought.

If only he could go home; if only he could!

But he hadn't the money for the fare; he wouldn't be able to get leave. He'd got to stay at Littleminster and bear the insults that would be heaped upon him there as best he could.

He knew that the boys would soon get to hear that the Doctor had paid the landlord of the Magpie Inn that fifteen pounds. Then his life would be rendered more unbearable still. If only he could go home. If only—

Suddenly he sat bolt upright, with a gasp. Why shouldn't he go?

He could walk. It was a long distance, but what of that?

He was strong. He could manage it. He would see his father and explain.

The idea having once entered his mind, it took complete possession of it. And so he waited until the boys were all in bed, till the masters and monitors had made their rounds, and then, grabbing his cap, he slipped out of the window, and by means of the ivy and gutter descended, at the risk of a broken neck, to the ground below.

Overhead the clouds were fleeting swiftly, with behind them the screened light of the silvery moon.

An owl hooted. A dog barked. Bats flew screaming near.

He paused and listened, and then, having assured himself that all was safe, he made his way to the high boundary wall that enclosed the school-grounds, pulled himself up, dropped into the road beyond, and set off with his back towards the school, his face set for home, in the thick mist that hung between the avenues of trees that lined the road.

John Challis was bound for home.

JOHN CHALLIS FINDS A FRIEND.

HAD any of the boys of Littleminster who had constituted themselves John Challis's enemies seen the boy trudging onward through the night, with grim and determined face and tight, set lips, counting his steps up to one hundred, then beginning again, hundred after hundred, until his head swam with the dull monotony of his self-appointed task, they would have pitied him, perhaps even have admired him.

Onward the boy went, blundering through the night, glad when the walls of hedges and trees that shut him in on each side of the road opened out, or he entered a village to find the street-lamps burning, and other indications that he was still within a living world.

Challis made good progress. Keeping up a steady five-miles-an-hour gait, and continuing without a break, he found himself at dawn twenty-six and a half miles from Littleminster.

As the grey streaks of the coming day showed in the east and lightened there he drew in to the side of the road, and threw himself down on the dewy grass with a muttered groan.

For the first time he felt spent, tired, sleepy, aye, and prodigiously hungry, too.

He had brought nothing to eat with him, nor had he provided himself with any money.

The grey turned to yellow, the yellow to gold, the morning sunshine warmed the earth and absorbed the dew.

"Twenty-six and a half miles," thought Challis. Well, that was better than he had anticipated. But he had still more than the same distance to cover before he reached home, and he began to dread a renewal of the journey, for his feet were tired and beginning to blister, and he was suffering from the reaction of the big effort he had made during the night.

Still wondering when he would get to the end of his journey, he lay back upon the grass, and, soothed by the glorious sunshine, fell fast asleep.

"Hello, me lad, wake up! What be you a-doing theer?"

Such were the words which echoed in the schoolboy's ear as he came back from the land of dreams, and, rubbing his eyes, struggled into a sitting position.

For a moment he saw nothing, and then, as he glanced upwards with clearing eyes, became aware that a burly waggoner was standing in front of him, with arms set akimbo and whip in his hand, eyeing him critically.

Challis, only half-awake, made truthful answer.

"I am going to Doddington," said he.

"And where may you be coming from?"

Challis did not answer.

"You be a schoolboy, beant yer?" asked the waggoner.

"Yes."

"H'm! And that be a Littleminster cap you're wearin', beant it?"

Challis sprang to his feet, reddening visibly.

"Look here," he flashed; "it's no business of yours who I am or where I'm going. But I'll tell you the truth. I've run away from Littleminster. I'm going home to see my father. I want him to give me some money so that I can pay a debt I owe at the school, and as it is a big sum, I wish to

(Continued overleaf.)

explain. I don't intend to go back to the school until I've got the money, so if you think of telephoning to the Head and telling him of my whereabouts, you'll waste your time."

The waggoner grinned broadly.

"You be a lad of sperrit," he cried. "But don't be afraid. I'll not tell on 'e. P'raps you'll tell I your name?"

Challis liked the look of the man. He answered instantly.

"My name is John Challis."

"And you come from Doddington?" The question was asked eagerly.

"Yes."

"H'm! And is your father George Challis, the fighting man, might I ax?"

The boy frowned gloomily.

"Yes, he is," he cried.

"Dang me if I didn't think so the moment I heard your name," cried the waggoner, slapping his thigh. "Why? I seed your feyther fight when he was only a novice. He come to Grimthorpe, and won a novices' competition. I were in that. Thowt as it were a gift for me. But George he knocked I out in foive rounds. That was long afore he won the championship of England."

The waggoner spoke with enthusiasm. His face glowed, his eyes flashed fire, his lips were curved in a broad grin that revealed almost every tooth in his head.

"And so, my lad," the good-natured countryman went on, "if you be going to Doddington, I'll give 'e a lift 's fur's Grimthorpe; that be twelve 'n'arf moiles on the way."

"Thank you," cried the tired boy gladly, and he glanced at the waggon.

It was a cumbersome vehicle, empty at the moment, save for some tarpaulins and some goods that occupied a corner of it. A team of three stout horses was harnessed to it.

"I've bin taking a load o' tarnips to market," explained the waggoner, "and be going back wi' some stores. Jump up, my lad, and take it easy loike."

John needed no second bidding, but was in his place beside the driver's seat in a flash. The waggoner clambered up, cracked his whip, and the waggon lumbered heavily on.

"I guessed you wor in trouble the moment I saw 'e lying ther beside the road," said the smiling waggoner, as they jogged along. "Knew 'e wor a schoolboy. And now I'm helping George Challis's son. That be something to be grateful for."

He pulled out a spotted handkerchief, and, untying it, revealed a meat pudding and some bread and cheese.

"I reckon," he smiled, warming John's heart with his kindness, "you'll be wanting summat to eat."

HOME.

AFTER eating John felt better, and as the sturdy team drew the lumbering vehicle along the country roads he told the story of his flight from school and the reasons that had led to it.

The waggoner eyed him thoughtfully, scratching his chin with the butt of his whip.

"It seems to me that you've had a hard time, lad," he remarked; "but, then, life is hard for some of us. And we can make it harder, too. When you go back to school take my tip, and try to make friends with the boys. Work ain't the only thing to be thowt of in loife, young master. There be play, too. None of us is much good wi'out a bit o' play. Now, where'd I be, if it warn't for the bowls I play o' Satterday night? A dull dog I'd be, and no mistake about it."

"And you think I'd have a better time if I mixed with the boys in their games a bit?"

"I'm sartin' of it," cried the waggoner, whipping up his team. "Now where would your feyther have been if he hadn't been fond of a bit o' boxin'? Play games wi' the boys, and they'll end by liking 'e for it, specially if you beats 'un. Whoa there! Where be you going to?" as the team swerved at a bend in the road.

And so they talked, John listening gravely and thinking hard.

So this sturdy, good-natured countryman held the same views as Mr. Evans, as Perc Grainger, the captain of the school, and the others who had twitted him about not joining the clubs?

Perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps he ought from the first to have taken part in the school sports. Had he not been so sensitive, so shy, so shrinking, it would probably have been a great deal better for him, and he almost made up his mind before the waggon rattled into Grimthorpe that he would change his habits when he got back to Littleminster.

But—here a thought struck him for the first time in all seriousness—he had broken school, and the Head might refuse to have him back.

What if they were to send him down?

It was a very sober John Challis who shook hands with the burly waggoner, wished him good-bye, while thanking him for the lift.

"Don't 'e mention it," said the burly countryman. "Just 'e remember Mr. Coverdale to your feyther, and 'mind 'u the fight 'e 'ad when he won the novice competition at Grimthorpe sixteen yea ago."

(To be continued.)