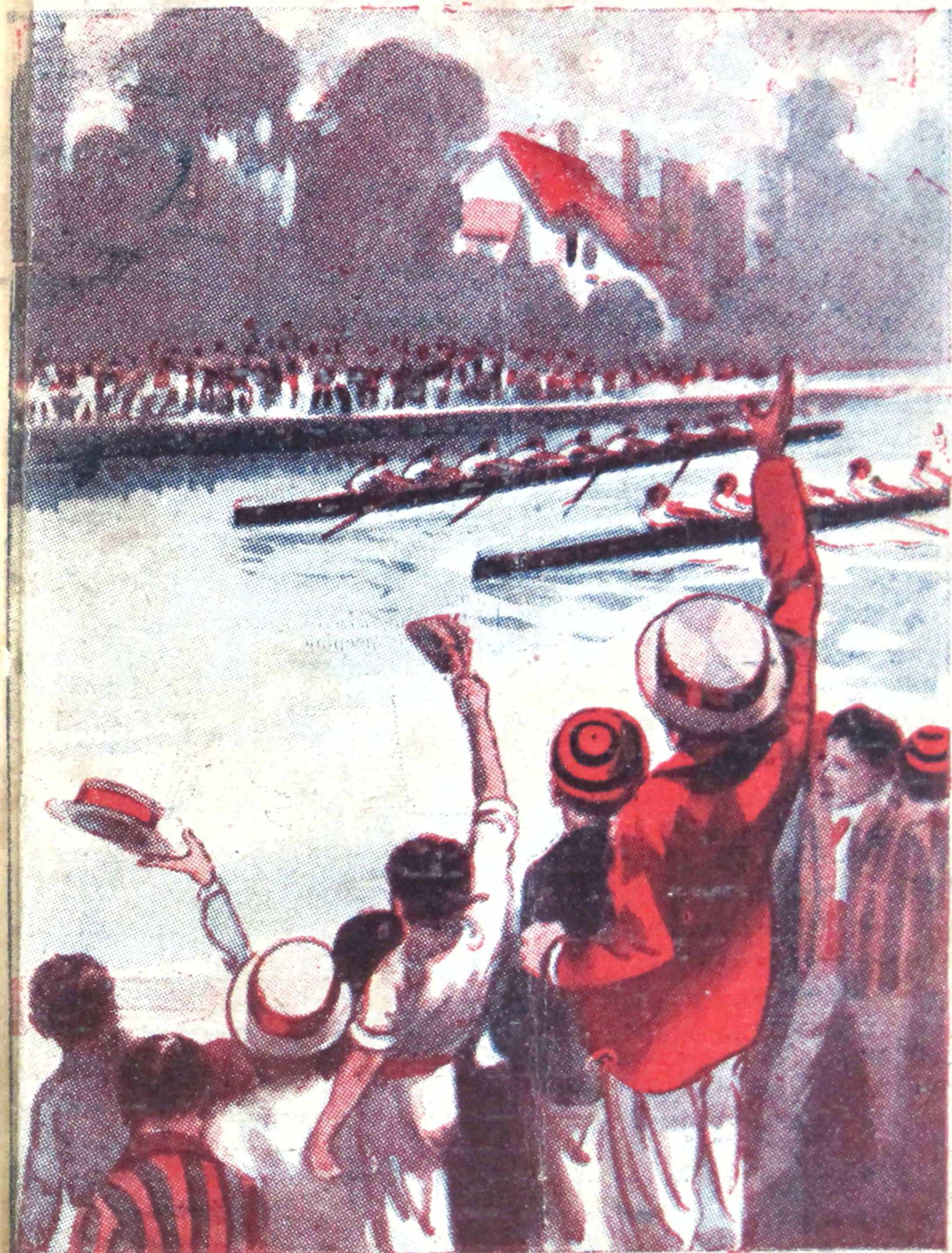


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THE BOATRACE MYSTERY!



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," "The Coming of the Serpent," etc.

(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

PRACTISING FOR THE RACE—CHRISTINE AND CO. ARE GLOOMY—BUT PITT ISN'T.

TOM BURTON, of the Remove, nodded confidently.

"Oh, Ancient House will win all right," he declared. "Souze me! We can't lose, messmates. It'll be a walk-over."

"Or, rather, a row-over," grinned Tommy Watson.

We were discussing the Junior Boat-race, and, being members of the Ancient House, we naturally took it for granted that the Ancient House Eight would win.

And there were other reasons.

For some little time past the rival eights had been practising on the River Stowe, which ran past the bottom of the St. Frank's playing-fields. The Stowe was quite an important river in its way, and the course for the boat-race had been well chosen. It was a broad, straight stretch which reached from the school to the old stone bridge at Bellon. The bridge was the winning-post.

Being skipper of the Ancient House Remove, I was stroking the Ancient House boat. I had taken my men over the course many times within the last few days, and they were well-nigh perfect. According to all timing records we should beat the College House by a full length—easily. So there was every reason for us to be confident.

The Bo'sun—as Tom Burton was always called—was one of my very best men. He could row far better than I could when it came to sheer strength, and, without boasting, I think I can say that there were few fellows at St. Frank's who could beat me at rowing.

Burton, however, had not a very polished style, having been accustomed to sea craft all his life, for he was the son of a retired Mercantile Marine skipper. When it came to river boats he was not exactly at home. But I had had quite a lot of experience in my time, and the Remove had unanimously

agreed that I was the best fellow to stroke the Ancient House boat. I meant to pull off the race.

My crew was of the first quality. In addition to Burton, the other members were Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, De Valerie, Owen major and the Duke of Somerton, and Yakama was coxswain.

"But we mustn't be too confident," I said. "Christine has been keeping his men hard at it, and, for all we know, he may be keeping things dark. When it comes to the actual race we shall——"

"Win!" remarked Sir Montie placidly.

"No doubt about it at all," commented Watson. "The very look of Christine's face is enough. He looks worried, and the very mention of 'boat-race' is enough to send him into a bad temper. Poor chap, he knows he's booked for a failure."

"Well, College House won last year, so he can't grumble," I remarked. "As a matter of fact College House has won for three or four years in succession. It's time we had a look in."

"You weren't here last year, old boy," said Tregellis-West. "There's an amazin' difference in the Ancient House now. We've been beatin' the Monks in everythin'—we have, really. Christine is out-generalled, begad!"

It was Sunday evening, and, having an hour to ourselves, Watson and Tregellis-West and I had gone for a walk—all dressed up to the nines, as Tommy put it. Strolling back, we had met Burton and De Valerie, and we were now chatting in the evening sunlight, against the hedge which divided the Triangle from Little Side.

Naturally, the conversation had turned upon the forthcoming boat-race, which would be rowed on the Wednesday. It was quite a separate affair, but decidedly important. The Senior Boat-race had taken place a fortnight before, and it had been a victory for the Ancient House. This was another reason why we were extra anxious to win.

During the St. Frank's Regatta there had

been races of all descriptions, of course, but they were principally sculling contests and Form competitions. The annual boat-race was given a day to itself.

"We shall practise to-morrow," I said. "Wet or fine, we'll have an hour on the river. It's necessary to keep our form at the highest pitch. Christine will work his men like Trojans between now and Wednesday, and I shall do the same."

Sir Montie sighed.

"It's a frightful bore, but I suppose I shall have to go through with it," he said resignedly. "You're such a beggar for keepin' our noses to the grindstone, Nipper, dear fellow. Don't you think we're good enough? Is it really necessary to train any longer?"

"You lazy bounder!" I grinned. "I'll leave you out, if you like——"

"Oh, good!"

"But you'll be left out altogether——"

"Eh?" said Tregellis-West.

"If you want to slack now, I shall give your place to Hubbard," I said, with a wink at the others. "Hubbard's been bothering me for days to chuck you out and give him your place."

Sir Montie gazed at me in dismay.

"Begad! Hubbard's a shockin' duffer at rowin'!" he protested. "I fail to see how—— You awful bounder! You're rottin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you want to give your place to Hubbard——"

"You silly duffer!" shouted Sir Montie. "I have the honour of the Ancient House at heart. I wouldn't dream of desertin' you at the last moment, old fellow."

"Oh, don't mind me!" I said generously. "The race doesn't depend on you, Montie. We shall pull it off quite easily without your noble assistance——"

"You are jokin' again!" said Tregellis-West stiffly.

He walked off, his pince-nez set at a determined angle. And we grinned as he made his way across the Triangle. Sir Montie's dignity was easily upset, but he would be as serene as ever again within five minutes.

As it happened, however, Montie was the very opposite of serene on this occasion. He chanced to hear sundry noises proceeding from the direction of the bicycle-shed, and he paused, frowning.

"Begad! Is it possible that somebody is mendin' a bike—on Sunday evenin'?" he murmured severely. "I shall have to look into this—I shall, really!"

The idea of some fellow committing such a terrible crime was quite startling. Tregellis-West was particular, and he did not approve of bicycle-repairing on Sunday evening. Besides, it was against the school rules.

He approached the little window of the shed, meaning to glance inside and to give expression to stern remonstrances. The culprits should be made to realise the enormity of their wickedness.

But Montie's approach at that moment was disastrous—for him. The window was wide open, and a particularly noisy whisper gave

Tregellis-West an inkling as to the identity of the speaker. There was only one person in the whole of St. Frank's who possessed a whisper of that quality—and that person was Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove.

"I must really say a few words——"

Swish!

Tregellis-West gave a gasp of absolute horror. Before he could move, before he could utter a word of warning, a volume of water came flying through the window and drenched the elegant Removite from head to foot in the most complete manner.

"Yaroooh!" howled Tregellis-West wildly.

He spluttered and staggered back. Unfortunately his heel caught on a stone, and he sat down in the puddle just created by the rush of water.

Squelch!

The ruin was complete. Sir Montie's elegant clothes—his extra-special Etons—were destroyed beyond hope—at least, in Sir Montie's eyes. His glistening topper went bowling over the gravel, and its appearance was not at all improved.

"Oh, begad!" moaned Tregellis-West dazedly.

"Hallo! What was that yell?" said a voice at the window. "Some silly ass making a noise on Sunday-eve—— Great pip! What the dickens are you doing there, Tregellis-West?"

Handforth stood at the window, and the faces of Church and McClure appeared a moment later. Montie looked at them dully.

"Oh, my goodness!" he murmured. "Who—who did that? I'm in a frightful state——"

"What did you want to sit in that puddle for?" demanded Handforth, in astonishment. "Of all the silly asses——"

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

"You—you awful ass!" gasped Sir Montie, struggling to his feet. "You've drenched me, Handforth! I was just comin' to the window——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Handforth. "Did you get in the way of that water?"

"It looks a bit like it!" grinned McClure.

"You—you dangerous lunatic!" panted Montie wildly. "It's Sunday evenin', otherwise I should insist upon thrashin' you on the spot. To-morrow, Handforth, I shall have the pleasure of knockin' you down——"

"You silly ass!" snorted Handforth. "How the dickens was I to know that you were outside the window? I'm not supposed to know what you're doing, am I? I've just been mending a puncture, and I had to chuck the water somewhere!"

"Mendin' punctures on Sunday evenin' is utterly wrong, Handforth!" exclaimed Tregellis-West, quivering with indignation and wrath. "But that is nothin'! You have utterly ruined my clothes, an'——"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "You're only a bit wet. Run round the Triangle until you're dry. Your collar looks a bit crumpled, but that's nothing much."

Sir Montie was speechless. In his own opinion his clothing was of no more use

whatever; and to hear Handforth say that it was "nothing much" rendered him incapable of adequate reply. He stamped off furiously and fled into the Ancient House.

Meanwhile, Handforth and Co. continued their surreptitious puncture-mending, chuckling hugely. They could see nothing shocking in the "destroying" of Montie's garments. As Handforth said, he shouldn't have been such an ass as to get into the way.

To Montie's dismay he ran right into Christine and Co., of the College House, as he fled towards the Ancient House. The three Monks regarded him in some astonishment.

"What's the idea?" asked Yorke politely. "Have you been sitting in the fountain, Tregellis-West?"

"Pray allow me to pass, dear fellows——"

"Hold on! We're thirsting for information," said Christine. "I'm surprised at you, Tregellis-West! Making an exhibition of yourself like this—on Sunday evening, too!"

"Shocking!" said Talmadge severely.

Sir Montie quivered with indignation.

"I shall have no less than four fights on my hands to-morrow!" he exclaimed, nearly bursting with anxiety and humiliation. "I have already undertaken to thrash Handforth for this outrage, an' unless you allow me to pass immediately I shall have no alternative but to administer further thrashings——"

"Speaks nicely, doesn't he?" remarked Christine thoughtfully. "But the most interesting part, to my mind, is the changing hues of his face. It's really wonderful how—— Gerroff! You—you ass!"

Christine gasped with dismay as Montie charged him. A considerable portion of the mud from Tregellis-West was transferred to Christine, and then the swell of the Ancient House got free. Christine boiled with indignation, and his chums roared.

"I'm smothered!" gasped Christine hotly.

"Well, you asked for it, I must say," was Yorke's sympathetic remark. "My dear chap, you're hardly touched. Wait a tick, and I'll wipe you down. Where's your handkerchief, Talmadge?"

"Christine's will do!"

Yorke deftly pulled Christine's handkerchief out of his pocket, and before any protest could be made by that infuriated youth, the delicate white linen was being severely soiled. It was a show handkerchief, only used on Sundays.

"Good thing he didn't dirty me more!" growled Christine, who found, after all, that the damage was not very severe. "Nice goings-on on Sunday evening! Those Fossils don't seem to care anything for Sabbath!"

And the College House trio marched off to their own side of the Triangle. On an ordinary weekday it was a somewhat perilous undertaking for a solitary Monk to wander in the near vicinity of the Ancient House—and the same applied the other way about. But on Sunday all House rows were distinctly off.

On the College House steps Christine and Co. ran into Reginald Pitt, the new junior

in the Remove. Talmadge sniffed the air sharply.

"You've been smoking, you rotter!" he exclaimed.

"Have I?" said Pitt calmly. "How shocking!"

"You'd better let me catch you at it!" snapped Christine. "You wouldn't smoke again in a hurry, I can tell you!"

Pitt grinned.

"I never do smoke in a hurry," he said cheerfully. "There's no fun in doing that. The way to smoke a cigarette is to——"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Christine.

He and his chums passed the new boy, who chuckled to himself and thrust his hands into his pockets. Pitt always took delight in offending his schoolfellows.

"I say!" he called. "Just a word!"

"Rats!"

"It's about the boat-race——"

"Eh?" Christine turned. "What about the boat-race?"

"What do you think of our chances?" asked Pitt. "I'm not in the eight, but I take an interest in House matters. I rather fancy we shall win on Wednesday."

"What you fancy won't make any difference to the race!" snapped Christine. "We shall lose! It's no good trying to think anything else. With Nipper and Burton in the rival boat we haven't got a dog's chance."

"Well, that's candid, anyhow," said Pitt. "And you won't win if you start the race with those ideas. Why don't you show some ginger? We've got to win—and, what's more, we're going to win!"

"I suppose you're a prophet?" said Yorke sarcastically.

"I'm willing to bet a pound to a shilling that we do win!" said Pitt calmly. "I've got faith in my side, even if you haven't. What do you say? A quid to a shilling——"

"Go and eat coke!"

And Christine and Co., thoroughly disgusted, passed indoors. Betting was had enough at all times, but to indulge in it on Sunday evening was rather beyond the limit.

Reginald Pitt, with a chuckle, strolled across the Triangle, and was apparently very pleased with himself. He knew well enough that the chums of Study Q would not take on any bet, whatever the odds.

Pitt's position was somewhat curious.

The previous week he had boasted to Christine and Co. that he would make the College House soar above the Fossils. In short, he undertook to secure a great victory over the rival House. Christine had given him a week—which would expire on the following Thursday.

At present it seemed extremely doubtful as to whether Reginald Pitt would make good his boast. He had done nothing, and apparently meant to do nothing.

He seemed to be solely interested in the forthcoming boat-race, and was confident that the College House juniors would win—in spite of Christine's own forebodings. And if anybody ought to know, Christine was the fellow, since he was the stroke of the College House boat.

Pitt's confidence, however, was so serene that he had even gone to the length of wagering a pound to a pound that his side would pull off the race. This bet had been made with Fullerton, of the Third—a rascally young scamp in the College House.

Fullerton considered that his money was perfectly safe. But, somehow, Pitt's confidence was rather uncomfortable. Why was he so certain that the Monks' boat would win?

Perhaps Reginald Pitt knew something which the others didn't!

CHAPTER II.

HANDFORTH IS INDIGNANT—A LITTLE EXPEDITION—RATHER SUSPICIOUS.

TUESDAY evening—the evening before the race—was somewhat dull and cloudy. But the barometer in the Ancient House lobby had been steadily rising all day, so there was every prospect of a clear half-holiday on the morrow.

I was extremely optimistic—both as regards the weather and the race. Just as it was getting dusk I came into the Triangle with my chums, having been indulging in a final hour of practice. This wasn't really necessary, but it was just as well to keep our form at the highest standard.

The Ancient House was more confident than ever now. Indeed, the result of the race was a foregone conclusion. We simply couldn't lose, for Christine and his men were miles below our form—and they knew it, too.

But they only admitted it amongst themselves. To all rival inquiries they darkly suggested that we should wait and see. They meant to do their best, of course, in order to make their defeat as small as possible, but they had no real hope.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I were all flushed and warm as we entered the Ancient House. Tregellis-West, by the way, had thought better of engaging in mortal combat with Handforth. The latter had expressed great regret, and the matter was settled. Handforth had not apologised because he feared the consequences of a fight—he was ready to scrap with anybody at a second's notice. But Handforth, with all his faults, was a very decent fellow, and he was always ready to admit that he was wrong when he knew that he actually was in the wrong. And he certainly had been hasty in hurling a pail of water through the bicycle-shed window without seeing if the coast was clear.

After we had changed out of our shorts we adjourned to Study C for prep. One minute later the door opened violently, and we knew that Handforth was paying a visit. Church and McClure, his faithful chums, were with him. Some humorous fellows had frequently asked whether Handforth and Co. were fixed together by strings.

"I've been thinking," announced Handforth grimly.

"Rather a change, isn't it?" I asked. "You don't seem to be any the worse for it, Handy. A bit pale, perhaps—"

"I don't want any rot!" said Handforth, glaring. "I've been thinking!"

"Begad! A second time?" asked Sir Montie mildly.

"Are you going to listen to me, or not?" roared Handforth.

"My dear chap, we can't do anything else," I said. "The whole House must be listening to you. Don't you notice how the doors shake when you release your beautiful baritone?"

"Well, my voice is pretty good, I know," said Handforth modestly. "A good voice always—What the dickens are you grinning at McClure?"

"I—I was looking at Tregellis-West!" stammered McClure hastily.

"Awfully kind of you, old boy," beamed Sir Montie. "But I must be allowed to remark that you're a frightful fibber. You were distinctly lookin' at Handforth."

"Well, get on with it!" I broke in. "We've got prep. to do, Handy, and we don't want you here all the evening. What have you been thinking about? What terrific problem has been exercising your mighty brain?"

"It's about the boat-race," said Handforth. "You seem to have overlooked the fact, Nipper, that I'm the best oarsman in the House—excepting yourself and Burton. I will say you can whack me, and so can the Bo'sun. As for the rest, my form is miles above 'em!"

I sighed.

"Didn't you mention all this to me yesterday?" I asked. "It's stale news, Handy—"

"You walked away when I was talking to you yesterday," said Handforth tartly. "I want to know if you are going to give me a place in the eight."

"I 'ate to refuse you, Handy—"

"Oh, great pip!" gasped Tommy Watson. "Don't start those awful puns here, Nipper! Handforth's face is enough, without you adding to the misery we're suffering!"

"I give you one minute!" roared Handforth. "Am I going to be included in the crew, or not? That's a plain question, and I want a plain answer."

"That's fair enough," I replied. "The fact is, Handy, we're bound to win, so there's no need for you to worry yourself. If you were in the eight we might win by three lengths, but two lengths will suit us all right. If it were a really vital question, I might consider your proposal. But victory is assured without you."

Handforth looked gratified.

"Well, I'm glad you recognise my capabilities," he said. "I thought you were sharing the general idea that I can't row."

"Horrible thought!" I exclaimed, in a

shocked voice. "Yes, Handy, if you were included in the eight we might win by three lengths. Even more impossible things have happened. It's far more likely, though, that we should be beaten to the wide. You see, you'd probably row the wrong way, and that would upset all the other fellows in the boat——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth snorted.

"You've been pulling my leg?" he shouted.

"Go hon!"

"It's always my fate!" said Handforth bitterly. "My good qualities are never recognised. I've made up my mind to row in the Ancient House boat, and I'm not going to be put off with any of your fatheaded excuses. Understand?"

"Not exactly, old fellow," said McClure. "They just pushed you, that's all."

"I'll—I'll slaughter 'em!" roared Handforth, leaping to his feet. "I'll smash 'em—— No, I won't!"

The change in his manner was so abrupt that Church and McClure gazed at him with some apprehension. They knew, in a moment, that their great leader had been struck by another idea. And, from past experience, they knew that more trouble was to follow.

"Come on!" said Handforth thickly.

He strode into his own study, which was next door to ours, and switched on the electric-light. Church and McClure followed him. In Study C we grinned with appreciation. Indignation meetings of that sort, with Church and McClure as the audience, were frequent occurrences.

DON'T THROW THOSE NUT SHELLS AWAY!

Nut shells and fruit stones are urgently needed to make charcoal. You don't know what charcoal is? Well, it's stuff that is saving our soldiers' lives. Charcoal is used in the British respirator for protection against Poison Gas. So by collecting as many fruit stones and nut shells as you can you are actually keeping some chap "out there" alive. It's worth doing, you see.

The next thing is what to do with the stones and shells you collect. Yes, any sort of fruit stones—plum, date, prune, cherry, etc.; and any sort of shells—hazel-nut, cob-nut, walnut, coco-nut, etc. The best plan is to form little "Stone and Shell" Clubs, each member of which binds himself to collect every week as many stones and shells as he can. Then having got your collection, you must make it up into two parcels, one of stones and one of shells. Labels will be sent you if you apply to the Director-General of National Salvage, Caxton House, Tothill Street, S.W. 1. And you can give your parcels in at the nearest post-office. The postage costs you nothing. You might get your greengrocer to put a sack outside his shop, into which all you collectors can put your stones and shells. It doesn't matter how you do it, so long as the stones and shells get collected. It's your chance, boys, to help to win the war. The soldiers are asking for your fruit stones and nut shells.

"I wouldn't dream of putting you off, Handy," I said soothingly. "I'm going to try something else. Instead of putting you off, we'll put you out. It'll save a lot of trouble, and it's quicker!"

Tommy Watson obligingly opened the door.

"You—you asses!" howled Handforth. "What the—— Yaroooh!"

Handforth made his exit hurriedly, and sat down in the passage with a considerable amount of force. Church and McClure, with rare thoughtfulness, had slipped out in advance.

Slam!

Handforth gazed up at the closed door of Study C in a dazed fashion.

"I've been chucked out!" he exclaimed faintly.

"I've been insulted!" said Handforth, with deadly calmness. "Study D's been insulted. We've got to wipe it out—and there's only one way of doing it!"

"In blood!" suggested Church.

"I don't want any of your funny remarks!" snapped Handforth. "Can't you realise that this is a serious matter? I don't mind being chucked out of Nipper's study—that's nothing. But he's as good as told me that I can't row."

"Well, he let you down gently," said McClure. "You can't do everything, Handy. And just because you can't row——"

"You babbling idiot!" bellowed Handforth. "I can row anything! I can beat nearly every chap at St. Frank's!"

"Oh, my mistake!" gasped McClure. "Well, what about it?"

"What about it?" snorted Handforth. "We're going down to the river—now. We're going to practise——"

"It's nearly dark, you fathead!" yelled Church.

"What does that matter? It's just as easy to row in the dark as it is in the daylight," said Handforth grimly. "My idea is to get my form up to Nipper's. Then, when I show him what I can do in the morning, he'll be bound to give me a place in the boat!"

Church and McClure could only gasp. Handforth's ideas were always weird, but this was surely the limit. And the extraordinary part about it was that Handforth was in deadly earnest. To argue with him was an impossible task.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't go for a trip on the river," said McClure carelessly. "But you'd better be careful, Handy. Church and I are going to do our prep. now, so——"

"You're coming with me!" snapped Handforth. "You miserable traitors! Do you mean to say that you'd desert me at a critical hour like this? Chuck those books aside and let's get down to the river. We can put in a full hour's practice. It won't take me long to beat Nipper's form!"

"You—you madman!" yelled Church. "You couldn't equal Nipper if you went into training for six months! And now you're talking about doing it in a single hour! You're off your rocker!"

"You don't know me!" said Handforth briskly. "When I really get going I can learn things at a terrific rate. My sculling is already first class, but I want to put a polish on to it. Drop all arguments and come with me!"

Both Church and McClure were inclined to break into a revolt for a moment. They were forced to fall in with Handforth's hare-brained ideas as a rule, but there was prep. to do now, and if they missed it Mr. Crowell would shower lines upon them in the Form-room.

But Handforth's long-suffering chums followed him wearily into the passage. They realised that the best thing to do was to get it over as quickly as possible.

By the time they had crossed the Triangle, and were well on their way to the boat-house, Handforth's enthusiasm began to ooze away. It certainly was rather dark, and it would be difficult to handle a boat on the river. But Handforth would not have admitted his real feelings for worlds. His dignity prevented him from backing out now.

The boat-house was reached at last. Although not quite dark, the river was gloomy and cold-looking. The absurdity of the expedition occurred to Handforth now, but he persisted, with all his usual obstinacy.

A small, light boat was got out and placed on the river. Then the three juniors got into their places, and Handforth took the

oars. Church and McClure knew well enough that their trip would be of the briefest duration. There was nothing like bitter experience; it was about the only thing which convinced the ram-headed Handforth.

"Better go easy," murmured McClure. "The river's rather deep here, you know, and there's a pretty stiff current."

"Steer over to the other bank," said Handforth. "The water's shallow there, and we don't want any accidents."

"Don't you think we'd better go back now?"

"Rot! We'll row as far as Willard's island, anyhow."

Handforth put his back into the rowing, and the boat shot away at good speed. Except for the fact that it was rather difficult to see where they were going, the trip was far more pleasant than Church and McClure had anticipated. Handforth was doing all the work, so there was nothing much to grumble at.

All went smoothly for about seven minutes. Then Handforth began to get tired. This wasn't surprising, for he had been pulling with terrific energy. He rested on his oars and breathed heavily.

"Not bad, eh?" he asked breathlessly.

"Splendid!" said McClure. "Why, you've beaten Nipper already! Hadn't we better get back, Handy?"

"Oh, if you like!" snapped Handforth, glad of an opportunity. "I thought what it would be—grumbles from your chaps all the while. Well, you've forced me into it!"

Church and McClure grinned in the darkness, and the rudder was put over, and Handforth pulled for all he was worth.

He was too energetic, however. Before the boat was fully round it was sent shooting towards the bank. Church pulled the rope sharply, in order to prevent the nose from digging into the bank. Unfortunately Handforth was bending forward at the same moment, and the boat gave a giddy swerve.

"Hi! Look out!" yelled Handforth, in alarm. "Oh——"

Splash!

Handforth shot head first out of the boat as neatly as possible. It almost looked as though he had done it on purpose. He disappeared completely. There was a wild thrashing of the water, and then Handforth appeared again. As he was sitting on the bottom, with his head just above water, there was not much fear of a tragedy.

"You ass!" gasped McClure. "You've got wet now!"

This remark was entirely unnecessary, and Handforth attempted to make an adequate reply. As he had a mouthful of water, this was somewhat difficult, and he only succeeded in swallowing the water.

"Oh, my goodness!" he muttered faintly. "This is what comes of bringing silly fat-heads like you with me! Lemme climb

aboard! You'll have to row back, Church! I'm done!"

Handforth blundered on board clumsily, splashing his chums until they were nearly as wet as himself. They had been expecting a most unholly burst-up, and Handforth's subdued manner was a decided relief.

As a matter of fact, Edward Oswald was just about used up. This ducking, right on top of the energetic rowing, had taken all the aggressiveness out of him, and all he wanted to do was to get back to the boathouse without a second's loss of time. His common sense told him that this was a most inopportune moment to commence an argument.

Church and McClure were only too willing to comply, and the journey back was accomplished with hardly a word being uttered.

And it was just when the boathouse came within sight that a somewhat surprising incident occurred. Church was rowing. McClure was steering, and Handforth shivered. Their boat made but very little noise, and even that was drowned by the rustling of the leaves in the stiffish wind.

And suddenly a bright light streamed out quite near the bank against the boathouse. It was so unexpected that McClure uttered a little gasp of astonishment. Church ceased rowing and stared round.

And there, bending over a thick clump of reeds, was Reginald Pitt! He appeared to be faking something out of the reeds, and almost at once he switched off the light and strode away. Handforth and Co. distinctly saw him break into a sharp trot as he went back towards St. Frank's.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said McClure. "That was Pitt! What the merry dickens was he up to?"

"I don't know!" chattered Handforth. "Why don't you row, Church? I'm freezing!"

"What was Pitt up to?" said McClure, in a startled voice. "He didn't know that we'd spotted him—he didn't even know that we were on the river. There's something jolly uncanny about this!"

Handforth uttered a growl.

"Do you want me to freeze?" he demanded, shivering.

"Oh, shut up a minute——"

"You—you hard-hearted rotters!" gasped Handforth. "You don't care a hang what happens to me! I shall sit here and catch pneumonia, or measles, or something! I shan't be fully appreciated until I'm dead!"

"No need to go to such lengths as that, Handy," growled Church, as he commenced rowing again. "We'll soon be ashore."

Church and McClure would have been extremely sorry if Handforth had pegged out, for they really liked him immensely. But a slight cold, necessitating a few days in the "sanny," would not be at all amiss. Church and McClure would welcome a few days of peace and quietness in Study D.

But Handforth, in the words of McClure, was a hardy beast. A ducking was not likely

to affect him seriously. And when they had got ashore and pulled the boat into the boathouse, they commenced running towards the school at a brisk pace.

Handforth's blood became warmed up.

"Not a word of this to the fellows, mind," he said warningly. "We don't want the whole house cackling at us——"

"At you, you mean!" said Church.

"Oh, rot! We're all in it," snapped Handforth. "We'll sneak in by the side door and change our togs. If the chaps get to know about the affair we'll be chipped no end!"

"I wonder what Pitt was doing——" began Church.

"Bother Pitt—rats to Pitt—let him go and eat coke!" snorted Handforth. "Do you think I care what that beastly Serpent does? He ain't in our House, anyhow!"

And, so far as Handforth was concerned, Reginald Pitt was completely disposed of. But Church and McClure could not help remembering the mysterious movements of the new College House junior.

And later on that incident was to be recalled.

CHAPTER III.

PITT'S NEW FRIENDS—NELSON LEE HAS AN ADVENTURE—A MYSTERY!

MEANWHILE, Reginald Pitt was striding rapidly across the playing-fields towards St. Frank's.

He chuckled once or twice as he walked, and appeared to be in the best of good humours. The new boy of the College House was something of a novelty, for he had seemed perfectly at home during his very first hour, and his cheek, according to everybody who had encountered him, was truly colossal.

He reached the Triangle in the deep gloom, and made straight over towards the bicycle shed. Before he reached the building, however, three forms loomed up from the direction of the Ancient House and barred his path.

"That you, Pitt?" came the inquiry.

"Hallo!" said Pitt calmly. "What's the trouble?"

The three figures were those of Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell—the leading Nuts of the Ancient House Remove. They had been watching Pitt's progress since his arrival at St. Frank's, and it struck them that he was a fellow of their own calibre.

"No trouble," said Fullwood. "We'd just like to have a word with you, that's all. I hear you're rather interested in the boat-race that's coming off to-morrow?"

"Who told you that fairy-tale?"

"So you're not interested?" asked Bell.

"Not particularly. Why?"

"Well, I was talking with young Fullerton, of your House, and he swore blind that you had bet him even that the College House Eight would win the race. One of Fullerton's lies, I suppose?"

Pitt shook his head.

"No, it's true enough," he said calmly.

"But, my dear ass, you'll lose your bet!" exclaimed Fullwood.

"Think so?" asked Pitt. "Opinions differ, don't they?"

"They do in this case," replied Fullwood. "You must be dotty. Haven't you taken any notice of the practice? The Ancient House simply can't lose—it'll be a giddy walk-over!"

Pitt grinned.

"I'm not exactly a millionaire, so I can't afford to chuck money about," he said. "Fullerton will get a quid of mine if my House loses. But I'm not worrying. In fact, I mean to bet you an even fiver that the Ancient House loses!"

Fullwood and Co. exchanged glances.

"You're jokin'," remarked Gulliver.

"Not at all. I can be staunch to my own House I suppose?" said Pitt smoothly. "You'll probably call me an ass, and all the rest of it, but I'm a fellow who sticks to an opinion. And I'm willing to back my opinion to any extent you like."

"I'll take that bet!" said Fullwood promptly. "A fiver. It'll come in handy at the end of the week!"

"Don't you make any little mistake!" grinned Pitt. "You'll see no fiver of mine, Fullwood."

"Why, you little beast! Do you mean to say you won't pay——"

"My dear chap, I'll stand or fall according to the race," interrupted Pitt. "You won't see my fiver, because I shall collar yours! The College House is going to win, my sons!"

"I suppose you've got enough tin to pay out?" asked Fullwood.

"Well, I'm good for ten quid, at least," replied Pitt.

"What price a bet with me, then?" asked Gulliver.

"How much?"

"Three quid."

"I'll take you on," said Pitt calmly.

"I'll have the odd quid, unless you can make it more," said Bell eagerly. "Is it a go?"

Reginald Pitt chuckled.

"Money for nothing!" he exclaimed. "I'd like to make it a fiver all round, but my resources won't run to it, and I never make a bet without having the money in my pocket to pay out in case I lose. But I shan't lose, and if you like to risk——"

"No, we're satisfied," grinned Fullwood. "But, mind you, there'll be no backin' out after you've lost! If you try any of those games on, my son, we'll kick you until you can't stand."

And Fullwood and Co. walked off, intensely satisfied with the result of their transaction. They were frankly astounded. That Pitt should be willing to throw all his money away like that was extraordinary. For it would be throwing it away. Under no circumstances was it possible to believe that the College House would win. Fullwood and Co. set Pitt down as a reckless young ass.

"This means a fiver for me, three quid for

you, Gully, and a quid for you, Bell," said Fullwood comfortably. "We shall be in funds this week, and no mistake!"

It was rather remarkable that Pitt at that very moment should be calculating that he would rake in the precise sum of ten pounds on the following afternoon after the race. His confidence in the success of his own house was unbounded. Yet there was no apparent reason for Pitt's optimism. To all appearances, it seemed as though he had deliberately thrown away all his available cash.

He chuckled as he fetched his bicycle out, and was soon riding away in the direction of Bellton. Barely five minutes later Nelson Lee came briskly out of the Ancient House, attired in Norfolks.

The schoolmaster-detective went straight to the bicycle shed, took out his machine, and pedalled off. Push-cycling was not much in the gov'nor's line, for he and I had always been accustomed to racing motor-cars and fast motor-cycles. But at St. Frank's those articles would have been unnecessary. The gov'nor often took an ordinary bike-ride just for the sake of exercise.

On this occasion he was on his way to Bannington, with the intention of interviewing Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington Police. There were a few questions which Lee was anxious to put. For the detective was keenly determined to investigate the affair of the forged currency notes.

An official from Scotland Yard had asked Nelson Lee to look into the matter. It was known that a great amount of false currency was being uttered from the neighbourhood of Bannington. The police had set many traps, but the crooks responsible were wary, and not a false note had been seen during the period of official investigation.

Yet Scotland Yard was quite sure that the culprits had not flown, and that they were still busy in the same district. Nelson Lee had consented to look into the matter, but he frankly confessed that there was a supreme difficulty in the way of commencing operations. For Lee had no starting-point, and to manufacture one for himself would be no light matter.

Luck, however, was to favour the gov'nor in a really sporting way. He had never hoped for such a splendid chance; but, having obtained it, he struck to the trail like glue.

I'll just describe how it came about.

Nelson Lee's object in going to Bannington was to see Inspector Jameson, as I said. But the visit was not at all important, and Lee had no real hope of obtaining any good result. He was right.

Inspector Jameson received him courteously and gave him all the information available—which practically amounted to nil. Lee had only put a few questions regarding certain shady residents of Bannington. All these gentlemen were proved to be above suspicion, of this particular charge, at all events.

It was quite dark when Lee commenced to ride home. As a matter of fact the gov'nor was somewhat worried. I had wagered him a new pair of boots that he would have the

criminals by the heels within a month. And he was quite anxious to lose that wager, which meant that he would collar the rotters within the thirty-one days. For the guv'nor, in accepting the wager, had bet me a penny-worth of toffee that he wouldn't expose the criminals within the time limit. Therefore, if he did, he naturally lost; and, as I said, he was quite anxious to lose. This is just about as clear as mud, but if you take five sheets of paper and work it out you'll find that I'm right. You'll probably get mixed up in the process; but don't blame me.

The lane from Bannington to Bellton was somewhat narrow in places, and there were several minor hills, and, at one point, a rather sharp corner.

Nelson Lee was coasting down the long slope to this corner, thinking of anything but cycling. The lane was deserted, so far as he could see—which wasn't far. He banked round the sharp curve gracefully, remaining strictly to the near side of the road, quite in accordance with highway rules.

Crash!

It was all over in two seconds. Before the guv'nor was fairly round he saw the bright light of a bicycle bang in front of him, moving at great speed. There wasn't time for him to shift, and the two bikes collided with really beautiful force.

It was the other fellow's fault entirely. He had been coming down the opposite hill, the sharp corner being at the bottom of the little valley, on the off-side of the road, which was quite wrong.

A collision was unavoidable. Nelson Lee picked himself up, rather shaken, but not even scratched. His bicycle lamp was still alight, although feebly flickering before finally expiring. And the shaft of light lay full upon a tied bundle of papers near the writhing man on the ground. At the first glance Nelson Lee saw that those papers were one-pound Treasury notes, and there were at least a hundred of them, all brand new.

Now, there was nothing particularly startling in this. But Nelson Lee's mind was full of the forgeries, and it was remarkable, at least, that a whole bundle of brand new notes should have fallen from this man's pocket. People don't generally carry such an amount of unused currency in their pockets.

"You—you madman!" gasped the stranger hoarsely.

He staggered to his feet, his wrist bleeding, and his clothes torn in more than one place. Except for these slight mishaps, however, he appeared to be unharmed.

"Really, my dear sir, I am afraid the fault was yours," said Lee gently. "You must allow me to point out that you were cycling on the wrong side of the road—"

"Confound, you, sir," raved the other, making a quick movement and grabbing up the currency-notes. "Confound you! A man cannot ride peaceably along a quiet country road now without being blundered into by an infernal noodle on a bicycle which he can't ride! I have a mind to prosecute you for damages!"

Nelson's eyes gleamed.

"It is not my intention to quarrel with you," he said coldly. "You will oblige me, however, by curbing your insolent tongue. If you had the slightest rudiment of knowledge concerning the rule of the road you would be well aware of the fact that all blame attaches to yourself."

The man trembled with rage.

"Hang the rule of the road!" he snarled. "You were riding furiously, and you did not even ring your confounded bell before turning the corner. Clear off before I knock you down!"

"Perhaps it would be as well to attempt the feat at once?" suggested Lee. "This argument is quite pointless, and I, for one, have no wish to prolong a discussion with a man who so obviously disregards all gentlemanly conduct."

Nelson Lee picked up his bicycle and wheeled it a few yards away. One of the pedal cranks was bent and the handle-bars were buckled, but the machine was still rideable. The other bicycle had scarcely suffered the slightest injury.

Under ordinary circumstances Nelson Lee would certainly have demanded full compensation for the damage—and he would have got it, too. But this affair was quite different.

One fact was quite obvious to him.

The stranger's wrath was not occasioned by the accident itself, but by the exposure of those notes. The fellow was absolutely furious. Why? Not because he feared Lee; not because he feared that he would be robbed.

The only possible explanation was that he was alarmed, and that his alarm was caused by the exposure of the currency notes.

If they had been genuine products of the Treasury the stranger would have had no fear. Therefore Nelson Lee was as good as certain that he had blindly stumbled upon the starting-point he so urgently desired.

Further words would have been useless, so Lee applied a match to the fore and aft lamps on his machine and quietly rode off. He was well aware of the fact that the stranger was standing quite still, gazing after him.

Lee rode to the top of the hill, but he had no intention of continuing his way to St. Frank's. An opportunity of this sort was far too good to be missed. The very instant he was hidden from the valley by a curve in the lane he jumped from his machine and extinguished both the lights. Then he silently pedalled back until he reached the brow of the hill. He knew that he was quite invisible against the heavy background of trees. The other man, of course, fondly believed that Nelson Lee had ridden completely away.

But the detective, wheeling silently to a handy tree against the bank, held himself there and waited. He could see right down the short hill. At the foot the ill-tempered cyclist was struggling with his lamps. One of them, at least, had gone wrong.

The delay was only brief, however. Within three minutes the stranger mounted his

machine and disappeared round the bend. Nelson Lee allowed himself to glide forward.

His own bicycle was of the finest quality, and it was a perfectly noiseless machine. As both his lamps were out he was invisible in the now intense darkness. Even if the stranger suspected a trick he would never detect the attentions of such an experienced shadower as Nelson Lee.

But the man was evidently satisfied that no suspicions had been caused. He had just reached the top of the hill when Lee got to the bottom, and the detective pedalled up swiftly and smoothly. He was grim now. He suspected those notes, and meant to discover this man's destination, at all events.

The fellow had lost his head, of course. Otherwise he would have apologised profusely for the accident, and would have made some jocular reference to so much money lying on the road.

The very fact that he had said nothing except abuse proved that he had given way to intense alarm. And the only reason for alarm that Nelson Lee could see was that the notes were "duds."

It would be a clear starting-point to find out where the fellow finished up his ride. But it was most necessary for Lee to be cautious. If the stranger got the slightest inkling that he was being followed he would lead his shadower a lively dance.

So Nelson Lee was careful. He kept some little distance to the rear, and always saw that some background lay behind him—a hedge, or a clump of trees. This was quite easy, for the Bannington lane was thickly overshadowed by trees all the way to the outskirts of the town. The detective gave his quarry no opportunity of discovering the truth.

It would be somewhat more difficult in Bannington itself. But the police, who all knew Lee, would take no notice of his extinguished lamps. A word of explanation to the inspector afterwards would be sufficient.

As it happened, however, the chase ended almost at once.

The man did not enter Bannington at all, but turned down a narrow side-road which led into the Caistowe road further on. After about three hundred yards Lee's quarry dismounted and quickly entered a large gateway set in between masses of tall trees. No house was visible to Lee, who had dismounted.

He silently pushed his bicycle into a deep, dry ditch and then crept forward. This particular spot was very quiet, although actually within the town of Bannington itself. Just a little further along the other road the street lamps commenced.

But here all was dark and silent. Reaching the gate, Nelson Lee peered between the bars, for it was a high one, and he saw a large, old-fashioned house with bay windows. One of the windows was closely curtained, but several rays of light showed through at the top. Upon the gate, Lee saw, was the name, "The Hermitage."

The sound of a door banging round the side was sufficient evidence that the ill-tempered stranger had entered the house.

Nelson Lee was not satisfied, and he stepped back a few feet, saw that the coast was clear, and slipped into the front garden.

Then he edged his way round, keeping to the cover of a thick hedge, until he was in a position to see a small side-door set deeply into the wall. He waited for some little time, but no incident occurred.

He hesitated before venturing further into the garden, and finally decided to leave the premises at once. This was not a suitable opportunity for careful investigation. It was satisfactory enough to know that a man connected in some way with the forgers either lived in this house or used it. Nelson Lee did not believe in rushing ram-headed into a thing.

He slipped away, and had just reached the gate when he heard the door open. Lee ran lightly over the grass and dropped into the dry ditch. Here he waited, and within a minute he saw a slight form emerge from the gateway pushing a bicycle.

At first he thought that the cyclist was the man he had been following. But this was not the case. The bicycle was different, too. Nelson Lee was quite certain that this newcomer was a boy. But it was too dark to see the boy's features. Indeed, Lee was only permitted to gain one glance at his back.

The detective remained in the ditch for a full five minutes. He was not interested in the boy. And when he fished his bicycle out and started on the ride home he was very thoughtful.

He completed the journey fairly swiftly, being a rapid cyclist. And he was within the Triangle just in time to see Reginald Pitt emerging from the bicycle-shed.

The Removite was panting heavily and his fallow face was unusually flushed. Instantly Nelson Lee called to mind the boy who had left that dark old house in Bannington. Was there any connection here? The coincidence was certainly remarkable.

"Where have you been, Pitt?" asked Nelson Lee. "I am not your Housemaster, but you must be aware that the gates were locked up some little time ago."

"Yes, sir," said Pitt. "I told Warren. He's going to report me to Mr. Stockdale, I believe. I've only been down to the village, sir."

Lee regarded the junior closely.

"Only to the village, Pitt?" he asked.

"That's all, sir."

"Very well; you may go."

Pitt walked off, and Nelson Lee wheeled his own bicycle into the shed and extinguished the lamps. Then he drew a small electric-torch from his pocket, and flashed the light upon the bicycle which Pitt had used. It was the property of another Removite, but Pitt had borrowed it.

Nelson Lee made no mistake about the machine, for the lamps were warm. His examination was quite brief, but there was a hard glint in his eyes when he turned towards the door.

"Why did Pitt lie to me?" he murmured, frowning. "'Only to the village,' he said:

and yet the bicycle bears positive evidence that Pitt has just ridden from Bannington. H'm! I must remember this."

Lee's deduction had been quite simple. There were distinct mud-splashes—recently made—upon Pitt's machine. The detective had noticed that the road on the outskirts of Bannington had been watered, that strip of surface having just been repaired. The road to Bellton from the school was dusty and dry.

There was nothing whatever to show that Reginald Pitt was the boy who had left the Hermitage, and Nelson Lee did not take that fact for granted. He just stored the affair away in his mind.

There was another point which had significance. Why had Pitt mentioned the village only? He would receive a much lighter punishment from his Housemaster if the latter knew that Pitt had come from Bannington. No excuse would suffice for being late from the village.

In fact Nelson Lee was morally certain that Pitt was the boy who had left that strange house. There was no actual proof, however, so the detective allowed his mind to remain open.

But what could it mean?

In what manner could Reginald Pitt be connected with the scoundrels who were uttering base currency?

CHAPTER IV.

THE MORNING OF THE RACE—THE START—AN AMAZING RESULT!

BOB CHRISTINE regarded the sky critically.

"Going to be a fine afternoon," he observed. "A bit of wind, but that won't hurt. It doesn't matter much to us, anyhow. This is going to be one of our black days!"

Yorke and Talmadge nodded.

"Cheer up!" said Yorke. "We can't win every year, Christy. Besides, we may pull it off, even now. By the way you talk, anybody would think that we were a set of rank duffers——"

"So we are," said Christine. "I wouldn't say that to anybody else, but we're alone for the moment. Rank duffers—compared with the Fossils. It's sickening. How the dickens was I to know that the bounders would have such a stroke as Nipper? He's frightfully hot stuff, and I ain't ashamed to admit it—to you chaps. There's the Bo'sun, too. Why, he's as strong as a horse, and can pull like——"

"Oh, ease off!" snapped Talmadge. "What's the good of rubbing it in? Even if we're going to lose we needn't go about with faces a mile long. You're looking awfully serious, old man. Grin, and make the fellows think that we're going to win."

Christine and Co., in fact, were pessimistic. They were standing on the steps of the Col-

lege House, and the knowledge that they were in for a failure that afternoon did not tend to make them cheerful.

Morning lessons were over, and the half-holiday promised to be fine, although somewhat chilly. An east wind was blowing.

Pitt lounged out of the College House and nodded to the three gloomy leaders of the Monks.

"Somebody going to be buried?" he asked politely.

"Buried?" repeated Yorke, staring.

"You look as if you're just going to a funeral," explained Pitt. "I thought, perhaps, that——"

"You silly ass!" snorted Christine.

"Awfully sorry," grinned Pitt. "But why are you looking so awfully lugubrious?"

"So which?" demanded Yorke tartly.

"That means mournful," said Pitt. "But I thought St. Frank's was a seat of learning. It's quite an ordinary English word I can assure you. The word lugu——"

"You'll look lugubrious before we've done, if you ain't careful," snapped Christine.

"Buzz off—go and eat coke! You've got a fat lot too much to say for a new kid!"

Pitt grinned again.

"I was just about to offer sympathy," he said calmly. "Of course, you're looking pretty sick because you think you're going to lose the race? My dear chaps, it's the biggest mistake you ever made. We sha'n't lose——"

"We?" repeated Talmadge. "What the dickens have you got to do with it, you cheeky ass?"

"Well, I naturally stick up for my own House," said Pitt. "You wouldn't like me to go yelling about that the Ancient House will win, would you?"

"You can yell what you like," said Christine, who had taken a strong antipathy towards the new fellow. "Only don't yell here. We're getting rather tired of your voice, Pitt. It's a pity you don't——"

"At last!" said Reginald Pitt smoothly. "Do you know, I've been expecting to hear that pun for days past. Don't glare at me! I've been quite harmless, and I am as true as steel to the College House. Do you want to hear my opinion about the race?"

"No!" said Christine and Co., in one voice.

"That's a pity, because you're going to hear it, all the same," observed the Serpent. "College House, my sons, is going to win by a whole length—perhaps more. If you haven't got faith in yourselves, I have. You'll simply romp home!"

And Pitt thrust his hands into his pockets and strolled across the Triangle. Bob Christine and his chums looked after him thoughtfully. He spoke with such sublime confidence that it was almost possible to credit what he said.

"Blessed if I can understand that chap," said Christine slowly. "He knows jolly well that we shall lose—so what's the good of jawing like that? There's no reason for it."

If some of Nipper's men were unexpectedly off colour, or if they were kept away from the race, I could understand it. But they're not off colour, and the whole eight will turn up smiling and ready to knock us into next week. Oh, I can see it coming. We're going to be whacked clean!"

There was a different spirit amongst the Fossils. We were absolutely confident of victory, and had excellent reason to be. My crew were at the top-notch of their form, and nothing stood between us and victory.

This was further demonstrated after dinner. I took my men for a final practice—for the race was not due to start until three-thirty. We still had an hour and a half.

We beat our own record over a measured course, and then took our frail craft to the starting-point—which was exactly opposite the boathouse, this being the nearest point to the school grounds. The course lay between here and the Belton Bridge.

Christine and his men were also out, but, after watching them keenly, I came to the conclusion that they didn't stand an earthly. Our boat was a regular flyer, and we could handle her sweetly. Yakama, as cox'n, was just the fellow.

Billy Nation was steering the College House boat, and their eight consisted of Christine—who was stroke—Talmadge, Yorke, Freeman, Turner, Page, Oldfield, and Harron. The Ancient House eight was as follows: Myself—stroke—Watson, Tregellis-West, Burton, De Valerie, Owen major, Hubbard, and the Duke of Somerton. The duke was comparatively a new boy, but he was a bit of a wonder in the athletic line, and fully deserved inclusion in the eight. It was a big honour for him, and he fully appreciated it.

"Well, we're all ready," I remarked comfortably, as I slipped a light overcoat on over my flimsy rowing tugs. "Race starts in half an hour, my sons. How's everyone feeling?"

"Dear old boy, we're top-hole," said Sir Montie. "At least, I am, but the others are looking frightfully energetic—they are, really. The whole thing's a most shockin' lag, but it's no good grumblin' at these little trials."

I grinned. Tregellis-West, in spite of his assumed languor, could display far more energy, when he liked, than a great many other fellows in the Remove. After the Bo'sun, he was about my best man.

"Who's that silly idiot?" asked Watson suddenly.

"Handforth. I suppose," I remarked absently, without looking round.

"Eh? What's that?" demanded Handforth, who was standing near by. "What do you mean—'Handforth, you suppose'?"

"When anybody talks about a silly idiot, I naturally assume he means you, Handy," I explained blandly. "There are other silly idiots, of course, but it would be rather difficult to beat you at the game."

"Why, you—you—" Handforth com-

menced to roll up his sleeves. "I'll trouble you, Nipper, to step behind the boathouse," he added grimly. "I'm not standing any rot—"

"Dry up, there's a good fellow," I interrupted. "No time to scrap now. Handy. What's that you were saying, Watson?"

"It's Pitt!" declared Tommy. "Well, of all the silly asses! Bathing on a special afternoon like this—and with such a cold wind blowing."

Sure enough, Pitt, of the College House, was swimming easily up the river. He drew near the bank against the landing-stage, and grinned as he saw us watching him.

"Come out of that, you ass!" shouted Christine sharply. "You can't bathe now, Pitt! The banks will be swarming with fellows soon—seniors and masters, too."

"Keep your hair on," said Pitt genially. "Just having a dip before the race. No law against it, I suppose? All ready for the start now?"

"Yes," replied Christine. "But come out of it!"

Pitt nodded, and proceeded to give us an exhibition of his swimming prowess—and he certainly could swim, too. Finding that nobody took any particular notice of him, he swam off, and presently appeared attired as usual.

"I should think so, too!" said Talmadge. "Bathing ain't the thing this afternoon. Hallo! Here comes old Stocky. The excitement'll begin presently."

It was getting near the time for the start of the race. The sun was shining brilliantly, but the east wind prevented the day from being particularly hot. For a boat-race the weather couldn't have been better, and we knew that the result of the contest would rest entirely upon ourselves.

As Talmadge had said, Mr. Stockdale had put in an appearance. Other masters came along, too, including Nelson Lee himself. Mr. Crowell was with him. And, a few minutes later, the Head was observed in company with Mr. Paget and Mr. Langton—masters of the Fifth and Sixth respectively.

Fags were present in great numbers, and they were all hugely excited. Any number of seniors were there, too, looking on with a kind of bored interest, and trying to make us feel that they were conferring a great favour by coming along at all.

"Go it, the Blues!" yelled the Ancient House fags.

"Buck up, the Greens!" roared the College House fags in reply.

The College House colours were olive-green and yellow; whilst the Ancient House colours were blue and red. For short, they were always referred to as the "Greens" and "Blues."

Handforth grinned.

"It looks to me as if the Greens have got the blues!" he said humorously.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church and McClure loyally.



Suddenly a bright light streamed out from the bank, and the juniors could dimly see the figure of Reginald Pitt.—(See page 7.)

This prompt laugh was necessary. When Handforth made a joke—or what he thought to be a joke—his chums were, in duty bound, compelled to recognise it.

"Pity I'm not in the eight, though," went on Handforth. "We shall win, of course, but it would have been a lot better if we could have romped home by about eight lengths!"

"In the rear, you mean—what?" asked De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, I didn't mean in the rear!" roared Handforth, glaring.

"Oh!" said De Valerie. "My mistake, Handy. You should make yourself clear, an' then these little misunderstandings couldn't happen. Hallo, what's that, Nipper?"

"Time to get to our place," I said briskly.

Fenton, of the Sixth, had consented to act as starter, and we didn't want to keep him waiting. The race was to commence precisely at three-thirty.

So, without any further ado, the rival boats were paddled out into midstream, and we prepared for the start amid general enthusiasm. I was quite gratified. I hadn't thought that a junior contest of this sort would excite so much interest.

"We've got to pull like the dickens," I said, as a last word. "Christine and Co. are on their mettle, and they'll work like Trojans to get home first. Just because we're certain of success we mustn't be too confident."

Christine, at the same time, was urging his men to superhuman efforts. As he explained, if they were to be whacked, they could, at least, be whacked honourably.

Crack!

It was the starting-signal.

"Go it, ye cripples!"

"The Blues—the Blues!"

"Greens—Greens!"

"Pull, you lubbers!"

There was a regular pandemonium of yells, but we took no notice of them. We started in splendid style, developing a quick stroke which carried us through the water at a terrific pace.

I had no time to see how the Greens were facing at the commencement, for my chief anxiety was to set the stroke of my own boat into an even, rapid rhythm. Everything depended upon stroke in a boat-race, of course.

"Ancient House leads!" came a yell from the banks. "Keep it up—keep it up, the Blues!"

"Our esteemed boat is not performing the magnificent glide!" murmured Yakama, his face betraying keen signs of anxiety.

I had discovered the same thing. Just for a second I thought that my men were not pulling properly, being over-confident—and I yelled out to them to put their backs into it, quickening my stroke to thirty-three to the minute.

"Great Scott!" I muttered. "What's the matter?"

For some unearthly reason our boat was pulling heavily, as though unwilling to go at all. As Yakama had said, she was not performing the magnificent glide.

And yet the thing was staggering. We were in perfect form, every man of us. The boat, as I knew, was in splendid fettle itself. Why, only half an hour before we had tested her, and found her as sweetly running as ever before.

But now, try as we would, we couldn't move her at the same rapid pace as she had attained at practice. There was something sluggish in her movements, as though she had suddenly become double the weight.

"Souise me!" gasped the Bo'sun. "There's something wrong, messmates! We shall never win at this rate!"

"Pull like the deuce!" I shouted desperately.

We pulled in real alarm now. When victory had seemed so certain, there was now a distinct chance of our being beaten. It was the most unaccountable thing I had ever struck.

The only thing to do was to put all our strength into the job, and this we did. But the College House boat, half a length in the rear during the first hundred yards, began to creep up ominously. Christine didn't possess eyes in the back of his head, but he quickly learned from Billy Nation, the cox'n, that we were not getting away as anticipated.

"They're slow!" roared Nation excitedly. "Pull, boys—pull for all you're worth! We'll beat the bounders yet! Put your backs into it, my sons!"

Christine and Co. responded, and they were worked up to such a pitch by the hope of victory that they did wonders. Christine, obeying Billy Nation's order, quickened his stroke to thirty-four—a really killing pace.

As for myself, I knew that our expected victory stood a chance of being wrenched out of our grasp.

And, by a great effort, I increased my own stroke to thirty-six, and the crew fell in swiftly and easily.

Our muscles stood out in knots and perspiration streamed down our faces. But our boat was in an ugly mood; she wouldn't shift for toffee, or for anything else.

"The Greens are gaining!" roared the on-lookers. "Go it, College House! You'll win yet! Greens—Greens!"

An answering howl came from the Fossils.

"What's the matter, you asses?" they roared. "Pull! Don't go to sleep!"

We were certainly not going to sleep, but the fact couldn't be denied that the College House boat was already half a length ahead. Crowds of cheering juniors were running down the towing-path, following us up. The excitement was tremendous. The Monks especially were nearly off their heads.

Reginald Pitt was amongst the foremost

fellows on the towing-path, and with him were Fullwood and Co.

"What did I tell you?" grinned Pitt. "Looks like a College House win, eh?"

"Hang you!" snapped Fullwood anxiously.

"I'm afraid I shall have to trouble you for a siver—"

"Rot!" snorted Fullwood. "The Blues ain't whacked yet!"

But Fullwood and Co. were extremely anxious. They were far more anxious about their money than about the honour of their House. As it happened, they wouldn't have seen even the colour of their money in any case, for Reginald Pitt was worth precisely fifteen shillings! He had made his bets with no money to back them. Which only proved that he had been positively certain of a College House win.

And it was an undoubted fact that matters were looking black for us. I worked as I never worked before, and my men responded nobly. By quickening my stroke once more I succeeded in reducing the College House lead considerably, but it was only a temporary gain.

When at last the winning-post was reached the Greens shot past a clear two lengths ahead!

Amazing at it seemed, Christine and Co. won!

CHAPTER V.

EXTRAORDINARY—NOTHING WRONG WITH THE BOAT—HANDFORTH'S CLUE!

CONSTERNATION reigned supreme amongst the Fossils.

The Monks, on the other hand, yelled themselves hoarse with triumph and excitement. The most astounded fellow of anybody, I think, was Bob Christine.

"Well, I'm blessed if I can understand it!" he panted. "What the dickens was the matter with you chaps?"

I took a deep breath.

"What you can't understand, Christine, isn't half what we can't understand!" I replied grimly. "It was a fair win for you, and I wish you joy. But I'll bet anything you like that my crew wasn't to blame."

Christine stared.

"Then who was—or what was?" he asked.

"I don't know!" I replied.

"Don't know?"

"I'm rather bowled over," I explained. "It's absolutely a mystery. I'm going to have our boat out of the water in two minutes. I believe there's something wrong with her."

We were ashore now, just below the bridge, and the rival crews were surrounded by scores of excited fellows on the bank. Fullwood and Co., were looking particularly heated, although why they should take such an interest in the race rather puzzled me.

"Fine chaps, ain't you?" sneered Fullwood furiously. "You've let your House down, you beastly slackers!"

I turned on him with an angry glitter in my eyes.

"You'd better shut up, Fullwood!" I snapped.

"Oh, had I!" roared Fullwood. "I'm going to state my mind—"

"Out of it, you rotter!" said Handforth grimly.

He seized Fullwood, swung him round, and sent him staggering. Just at that moment Pitt stepped forward and got into the way. This was most unfortunate—for Pitt.

Fullwood crashed into him, and Pitt blundered forward. His foot caught against a tuft of grass, and he pitched headlong over the bank into the deep water against the bank.

Splash!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Serve him right!" snapped Handforth unfeelingly. "He shouldn't get in people's way!"

Pitt went right under, and remained under for quite a time. Then he came up, puffing and blowing. Everybody was grinning. It even gave me pleasure to see Pitt receiving a ducking; I was just in the mood to be pleased at anybody's discomfiture.

He was helped ashore by several fellows, who expected him to be in a snappy mood. A ducking with all one's clothes on is never exactly pleasant. But Reginald Pitt took the whole thing calmly.

"Who pushed me?" he inquired. "Fullwood, wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't!" snapped Fullwood tartly. "It was that fatheaded idiot, Handforth!"

"More of an accident than anything else, I suppose," said Pitt. "Least said about it the better. I'll run along and change."

And Pitt went off. Fullwood and Co., I noticed, were talking together some little distance off, with long faces. But I knew very well that they were not cut up about the failure of their side. They had some other game on.

Nelson Lee and some of the other masters had arrived at the bridge by this time. They were all somewhat surprised to learn the result of the race. There was no need to get the opinion of the referee, for the Monks had romped home by a couple of lengths. It was, as they gleefully declared, a regular walk-over.

"Hard luck, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "It only proves that you cannot be too sure in these matters."

"There's something wrong with the boat, sir," I said doggedly. "I know jolly well that the fault wasn't with my crew. We did splendidly at practice just before the race."

"He's right, sir," put in De Valerie. "We can't understand it at all. The boat seemed to drag, just as though we were towin' another boat."

The Bo'sun nodded at once.

"Souise my maindeck!" he exclaimed. "You've hit it on the head, shipmate. That was just the exact feeling. We seemed to be hauling another craft behind us."

"But that is obviously impossible," objected Nelson Lee. "As the boat has not been touched since you finished the race, you can make an examination and clear away any doubt without delay."

"That's what I'm going to do, sir," I replied grimly. "I've got more than an idea that there's a mass of reeds, or something, got entangled on the keel. It sounds rather impossible, but there's nothing else to account for the sluggishness."

Christine looked rather alarmed.

"Oh, that's rot!" he said. "It ain't fair to suggest things like that, Nipper. College House won properly——"

"My dear chap, I'm not disputing that," I said. "We're going to examine the boat for our own satisfaction. If we do find some beastly reeds or rubbish clinging to the keel it'll be our misfortune. But I can't see how it's possible, even now."

The matter was soon decided.

Amid a surging crowd of interested juniors the crew of the Ancient House boat went to the bank and lifted the frail craft out of the water. Then we turned her upside down on the grass.

At the very first glance I saw that nothing was wrong. Certainly no reeds had become entangled in the rudder, or on any other portion. The boat, in fact, was as clean as a whistle.

Every member of the crew expressed his astonishment.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "It's more than I can understand, dear fellows. Most of the chaps think that we didn't pull hard enough, or somethin' like that. But they're wrong. We pulled harder than we've ever pulled before, an' the boat went slower. Ain't it a frightful mystery?"

"I don't like it!" I said irritably. "If there was something to account for it I shouldn't care a toss. But now everybody will think that we were over-confident. You did wonders, Christine, but your best speed wasn't so good as our trial trip before the race."

Bob Christine shrugged his shoulders.

"Then how do you account for the result?" he asked.

"I can't account for it!" was my reply.

"Better let the thing drop," said Christine shortly. "It's not exactly good taste to make out that your boat was held back by something you can't account for."

And Christine, rather indignant, walked away to his own boat, followed by the members of his crew and an excited crowd of Monks. We Ancient House fellows were left in a crowd round the overturned boat.

The mystery, to my mind, was extraordinary. No fickleness of the river current could account for the sluggishness of our boat during the race. We had been forced to work terribly hard, and the result had been heartrending.

I wasn't satisfied by a mere cursory glance. I examined every inch of the boat, and found her perfect. This seemed to prove that the fault had been ours. But I couldn't believe it. In spite of the utter lack of ex-

planation, I still felt that the boat itself had been mainly responsible.

"Look here," I said briskly. "There's nothing wrong with the boat now——"

"There never has been," put in Handforth. "The fact of the matter is, I expected you to lose all along. Now, if you had included me in the Eight, we should have romped home. In fact, if there was justice in the land I ought to have stroked the boat——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This isn't the time for making funny remarks, Handy," I snapped.

"They ain't funny!" roared Handforth. "I say that I ought to have stroked the boat——"

"My dear ass, you couldn't stroke a tub!" I retorted. "This is a serious matter, so please go away and talk to the atmosphere—or to Church and McClure."

"Always the case!" said Handforth bitterly. "I can't open my mouth an inch without somebody butting in!"

"In where—your mouth?" grinned Watson.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, of course you'd make a fatheaded joke about it," sneered Handforth heavily. "I expect it. But I'll tell you straight away that there's nothing wrong with the boat, and never has been. Any ass can see that!"

"Why, even you can!" said the Duke politely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth snorted and retired, feeling that the odds were too heavy against him. I breathed a sigh of relief, for, to tell the truth, I was not feeling at all in the mood for laughter.

"There's nothing wrong with the boat now," I repeated. "And we're all rather fagged. What do you say to a run over the course again? By all rights, seeing that we are fairly exhausted, we ought to go like a funeral. It'll be a good test."

"I'm game," said everybody.

"Morrow is somewhere about, isn't he?" I went on. "He's got a stop-watch, and he knows exactly how long we took to cover the course in the race, because he timed us. We'll get him to time us again."

Morrow, of the Sixth, was quite agreeable, being a good-natured fellow. He frankly told us that we were young asses, and that we couldn't possibly improve on our previous time. As he pointed out, most of the energy had been taken out of us. We paddled up the river to the starting-point, and we all noticed that the boat was moving with her usual easiness. No comment was made, but the fact was rather startling. Why had the boat moved so heavily during the race? She hadn't been touched by a soul, and was in perfect condition. It was an amazing problem.

There were only a few spectators now. The fags and the seniors had cleared off, and only a handful of Ancient House Removites remained. The Monks had vanished to a man, and I compressed my lips with vexation as I realised that they were celebrating at St. Frank's.

All the evidence went to prove that the boat had not been affected in any way. But, in spite of this, I was positively certain that something had affected it—and affected it seriously, too. And the absence of any explanation worried me greatly.

This conviction of mine was practically proved to the hilt. My crew had shared my view, and they were not particularly surprised at the result of the fresh trial, although everybody else was astounded.

We slipped over the course beautifully, in spite of our fagged condition. And Morrow, who had followed us along, announced in a somewhat startled voice that we had beaten the time of the College House boat by many seconds. In short, we had done better than Christine and Co., even after our tiring performance during the race itself.

"There's only one thing to think," said Morrow. "You must have been lazy, although, goodness knows, you seemed to be pulling hard enough. What the thunder was the matter with you?"

"There was nothing the matter with us, Morrow," I replied quietly. "It was the boat. Don't ask me what was wrong, because I can't tell you. There's no explanation."

And for the moment we had to be content with that.

I was quite determined, however, to make very close investigations before admitting that we had been fairly beaten. Watson and De Valerie and all the other members of the defeated crew were looking glum. And we were not made more cheerful by the fact that numerous sarcastic remarks were fired at us by cheeky fags when we arrived back at St. Frank's.

It was tea-time now, and we could distinctly hear the enthusiastic shouts and laughs from the College House. Christine and Co. were celebrating—which wasn't very suprising.

After having changed, we adjourned to our various studies for tea. Sir Montie and Tommy had very little to say. Watson, however, remarked that he was compelled to express the view that the fault must have been ours, after all. It was ridiculous to suppose that the boat itself could have been responsible.

A heated little argument followed, and matters were by no means improved when Edward Oswald Handforth appeared on the scene. He walked into Study C with his usual assurance—having done his utmost to break the lock in entering.

"Outside!" I said shortly.

"Look here——" began Handforth.

"Outside!" said the three of us in unison.

"Begad! We really can't stand you just now, Handy," added Sir Montie. "We ain't physically fit for it—we ain't, really! You conversation is always so exhaustin', old boy."

Handforth closed the door deliberately, apparently unaware of the fact that McClure was on the point of entering. Some confusion was apparently caused in the passage,

for several bumps and numerous cries floated in through the keyhole. The next moment the door burst open afresh, and Church and McClure appeared—McClure holding a handkerchief to his nose with much tenderness.

"You silly ass!" he roared. "What the dickens did you do that for? You nearly knocked my nose——"

"Oh, blow your nose!" snapped Handforth crossly.

"It strikes me that McClure's nose is too sore for blowin' operations," remarked Sir Montie languidly. "You shouldn't be so impulsive, Handforth. You'll lose the friendship of your two best pals one of these days. An' then you'll be like a lost lamb!"

"Like a lost donkey!" I snapped. "I'll just give you one minute, Handy. But if you've come to talk about the race, I'll only give you three seconds! Go ahead!"

Handforth grinned.

"As a matter of fact, I have come to talk about the race, and I'm going to talk about it for more than three seconds, too," he said calmly. "It's my belief that we lost because you foolishly ignored my offer——"

"Chuck him out!" said Watson grimly.

"Anythin' to oblige, old boy," said Sir Montie, getting up.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Handforth, backing away. "Don't be such asses! I want to talk about Pitt, too."

"Rats to Pitt!"

"Hang Pitt!"

"I daresay he'll be hanged before he's done—he's that kind of snaky rotter," agreed Handforth, nodding. "But that's not the point."

"We shall get to that in about an hour," I said wearily.

"That's just where you're mistaken," retorted Handforth. "I'm a chap of few words, and when I say a thing I say it."

"I wouldn't dare to deny it, old fellow," murmured Montie.

"And I don't want any sarcasm, either," went on our aggressive visitor. "The fact is, I've been thinking."

"Oh, I thought something was the matter," I said. "So that's the trouble? My dear Handforth, you shouldn't think—your brain ain't capable of the strain——"

"You silly fathead!" roared Handforth.

"Why do you let him think?" I went on, appealing to Church and McClure. "You're his keepers, ain't you? Why don't you keep him chained up? Lunatics are generally held in check somehow or other. It wouldn't be a bad idea to have one of the box-rooms padded——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth turned upon his roaring chums.

"What the dickens are you cackling at?" he bellowed. "If you think all this is funny. I don't!"

"No, you wouldn't!" grinned Watson.

"But lunatics have to be humoured."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Let's understand one another," he said grimly. "You keep calling me a lunatic, and it's a wonder I don't chuck you all out

of the study. It's only my good temper that prevents me from doing it. I'm going to ask you a straight question. Do I look like a lunatic?"

"Yes!" said everybody, with singular promptitude.

Handforth was taken aback.

"All right!" he said with deadly calmness. "That settles it! I won't tell you what I've been thinking—I won't tell you what happened the other night on the river! I won't tell you a giddy thing. Rats to you. You can go and find out from somebody else that Pitt was messing about amongst the reeds in a suspicious fashion!"

I chuckled.

"Is that what you call not telling us?" I asked pleasantly. "My dear old Handy, you're a queer chap, but there's nothing much wrong with you. These signs of lunacy only appear at certain times. Now, what's all this about Pitt?"

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"You heard what I said!" he retorted, turning to the door.

"I suppose you know all about it, McClure?" I asked.

"Of course," replied McClure. "It was like this: Handforth got a potty idea into his head to go and practise in the dark——"

"Look here!" bellowed Handforth, glaring at his chum. "If there's any spouting to be done, I'll do it! Like your cheek, taking the thing out of my hands!"

"Why, you said you weren't going to——" began McClure indignantly.

"Rot!" snorted Handforth. "We were on the river," he added, turning to me. "No need to go into details—you wouldn't understand, anyhow."

"Details ain't necessary," murmured Church.

"We were on the river," repeated Handforth, ignoring the interruption. "It was as dark as anything, and we were just coming back to the boathouse, when a light flashed out near the bank. And we saw Pitt doing something among the reeds, just against the bank."

"What was he doing?" I asked.

"How the dickens do I know?"

"Oh, I thought you were going to tell us," said Watson. "I suppose the silly ass was paddling."

Handforth glared.

"Paddling!" he echoed witheringly. "Of course, a chap would paddle in the darkness, and in amongst a lot of dry reeds, wouldn't he?"

"Well, what was he doing, then?" demanded Watson shortly.

"That's what I've been wondering," said Handforth. "It looks jolly queer to my mind. And have you noticed Pitt this afternoon?"

"No. What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"Nothing particularly wrong, but he looks as though he's come into a fortune or something," replied Handforth. "As pleased as a dog with two giddy tails."

"Nothing much in that," I remarked.

"He's a College House chap, and he'd naturally be pleased. But that bit about the river is jolly interesting, and it requires some thinking over. Did Pitt know that you'd spotted him, by the way?"

"Hadn't any idea of it," put in McClure.

"We only just caught a glimpse of him, you know. Probably he was doing nothing at all, but Handforth seems to have a potty idea in this head that Pitt's been plotting—about this race, I mean."

"You only caught a glimpse of him, you say?" I remarked. "Are you sure it was Pitt?"

"Positive."

I puckered my brow, and thought carefully. Then, suddenly, I gave a jump. Two facts connected with the afternoon's events had sprung into a position of prominence in my mind. And they were of such significance, in the light of this clue of Handforth's, that a vague suspicion almost became a certainty.

I banged my fist upon the table with great force.

"By Jupiter!" I shouted tensely. "I've got it!"

CHAPTER VI.

INVESTIGATIONS—THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED—CHRISTINE'S RAGE.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST focussed his pince-nez upon me.

"Begad!" he exclaimed mildly.

"Have you really, Nipper? But may we inquire what you have got?"

"An idea!" I replied. "We been jolly puzzled about the race, haven't we? Well, I'll bet a fiver to a tin-tack that those College House rotters have been up to some shady trickery!"

"Christine and Co.?" gasped Watson.

"No. I think they're above that sort of thing," I replied. "But there are other chaps in the College House—and Pitt's one of them. Handforth's piece of news set a train of thought into motion, and there's no telling where it'll end. Anyhow, Pitt's movements were suspicious this afternoon—tremendously suspicious."

Handforth nodded.

"It's always the same," he observed. "You can't get on without me. I ain't a boastful chap, goodness knows, but I think you'll admit that I'm pretty cute. I'll have some of that bread-and-butter, if you don't mind," he added, helping himself liberally.

"Have what you like—have the plateful—have the giddy lot!" I exclaimed generously. "Rats to the bread-and-butter! I'm full up with this mystery. We've got to investigate at once. Understand? Delay is generally fatal. With these clues in our hands we shall probably be able to bring the guilty rotters to book!"

Tregellis-West looked at me admiringly.

"Doesn't he do it well?" he asked, addressing the others. "It must be Mr. Nelson Lee's training, I suppose. But, after all, this talk about investigatin' an' clues an' evidence

is frightfully confusin'. What does it mean, in plain English?"

"It means this," I replied grimly. "So far as I can understand, Pitt is the main-spring of the whole plot——"

"Somebody's wound him up sort of thing?" suggested Handforth.

"Don't try to be funny, now!" I snapped. "Pitt, I believe, is the chief mover in the game—probably the only fellow involved. And I'll tell you why I have come to that conclusion."

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "That's frightfully interestin'. I really couldn't work it out in my own head. I'm in a most shockin' muddle—I am, really. I don't mind admittin' it, either."

"And I hope you won't mind drying up!" I said severely. "I'm doing the jawing, Montie. Now, look here, I'll point out two very significant facts. If you'll cast your memory back, you'll call to mind that Pitt was bathing in the river just after we got back from our practice trip, before the race."

"What about it?" asked Watson. "Nothing criminal in bathing, is there? I don't see how——"

"Don't be in such a hurry!" I interjected. "Pitt was in the river for some little time. And when the race was over he accidentally fell in—just against the boat."

"Fullwood blundered against him," remarked Church.

"Did he?" I asked keenly. "I didn't take much notice of it at the time, but it now strikes me that Pitt shoved himself in the way. He meant it to look like an accident, and he did the trick jolly smartly, too."

"You—you ass!" roared Watson. "Are you suggesting that Pitt fell into the river on purpose—just for the fun of getting his clothes wet?"

"Precisely!" I agreed. "If you'll add to those two facts the remaining fact that Pitt has been prophesying a College House victory all day, you'll understand the true position."

"Nothin' simpler," remarked Sir Montie. "We've got brains like electric shocks—we can see everythin', begad! But my everythin' happens to be shockin'ly small!"

"Yes; explain yourself," said Handforth tartly.

"Can't you reason it out for yourself?" I asked. "What does all this evidence point to? Why, that Pitt prepared some trick contrivance to fix on to the keel of the boat, so that it would run sluggishly. He was concealing it among the reeds when you chaps spotted him, in readiness for this afternoon."

"A—a contrivance?" asked Watson, staring. "Oh, that's rot! Do you mean to say that we shouldn't have spotted it?"

"We couldn't," I replied. "Pitt was as cunning as a monkey. Why did he bathe this afternoon—of all afternoons? So that he could drag that thing under water and fasten it to the keel. We never suspected it, of course, and we didn't know it until we were actually rowing the race. Oh, the trickery of it!"

Handforth shook his head.

"I can quite believe that Pitt's a snaky beast. And I believe he's capable of any rotten game. But you're on the wrong track, Nipper. Didn't you haul the boat out of the water five minutes after the finish of the race? There was nothing on the keel then—and that knocks your theory into a cocked hat!"

I bent over the table.

"Does it?" I said grimly. "Why did Pitt fall into the water?"

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson.

"Why did he remain under for ten or fifteen seconds, instead of about two?" I went on, thumping the table. "I'll tell you why. Because he heard me say, half a minute before, that I was going to yank the boat out of the water to examine it! That's why he ruined his clothes, because he knew the trick would be exposed unless he acted on the instant."

"But Fullwood bumped into him!" protested Church faintly.

"He didn't!" I retorted. "Pitt seized the chance, because it would have been too obvious if he had fallen in deliberately. Oh, he's a cunning bounder! And I'll bet you anything I've got that I've hit the right nail on the head."

There was silence in Study C for several seconds.

"Dear boys, Nipper's right!" said Sir Montie at last. "He's always right, begad! The way he reckons these things out is simply amazin'. Pitt's been up to some tricks."

"The boat went like a dream before the race, and it went like a dream just after!" I went on. "It only dragged during the race itself, and Pitt had been in the water on two separate occasions!"

"Immediately before and immediately after the race!" said Handforth breathlessly. "By George! What a rummy thing I didn't think of that myself! As a matter of fact, I did have inklings——"

"Yes, we know all about them!" I cut in. "It was you who put us on to the right track, anyhow, Handy. Good for you, old son! You ain't quite such a lunatic, after all!"

"Here, I say——"

"No time for arguments now!" I said crisply. "Stop gobbling down that bread-and-butter; we're going to make investigations. And if my theory's right I'll simply slaughter Pitt!"

There wasn't "if" about it in my mind. I had reasoned out the affair in just the same manner as Nelson Lee would reason out a murder mystery—at least, I had followed the gov'nor's methods. If I was on the wrong trail I should feel decidedly insignificant. But, for the life of me, I couldn't think of anything else which would fit in with the facts. The boat had had something dragging astern, beneath the water, completely out of sight. It had been a trick to make us lose the race. I didn't know at that time that Pitt had collected ten pounds from Fullwood and Co. and a Third-Former, as a result of the College House win.

We left our tea at once and hurried out. The Triangle was deserted, for all the fellows were in their studies. Handforth and Co. were just as keen as I was. And in a very short time we arrived at the boathouse and carried our graceful craft out and laid her keel upwards upon the grass.

"Look at that!" I exclaimed quickly.

"Which?" asked Handforth.

I pointed to something which had been of no significance to us before. It was a small, circular hole in the keel, heavily bound with copper. It was obviously provided for the purpose of slinging the boat up when not in use. Looking at it closely, I distinctly saw several bright scratches, recently made, which told their own story. Some other metal object had been scraping against the copper-work.

It was some few moments before my companions fully grasped the significance of those slight scratches.

"It may be good enough to satisfy us," said Handforth, shaking his head. "but you can't call it evidence."

"No, we're going to find the evidence now," I said crisply. "Yank out one of those small boats. We're going down to the bridge. Half-a-tick, though. We shall want some tools."

"Tools?" repeated Watson.

"To drag the river-bed," I explained.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Well, you are a goer, and no mistake!" said Handforth, with frank admiration. "Drag the river-bed! That's a ripping stunt. Do you think we'll find anything?"

"All depends how deep the water is," I replied. "There's some thick rope in the boathouse and a lot of hooks. We'll fasten some hooks on to ropes and drag the whole affair along the bottom. They ought to fish up something, anyhow."

It was a rough-and-ready contrivance; but we knew the exact spot where Pitt had "accidentally" fallen in, and he must have dropped his own contrivance there.

Within ten minutes we were just below the Belton Bridge. Nobody was about, and we set to work quickly and systematically. It was pure luck, of course, but we got a "bite" within a minute.

Leaning over the bank, I gingerly raised the improvised drag and hauled its catch into the light of day. A chuckle came from my companions when we saw that the object was a rusty metal bowl, battered and useless.

"Try again," grinned Handforth.

I smiled.

"No need to," I said calmly. "We've got it, my sons!"

"Got what?"

"The thing which Pitt used to make our boat sluggish—"

"You—you ass!" roared Handforth. "That fat-headed bowl?"

"Yes, this bowl!" I replied grinsly. "Can't you see? It's the very thing I was looking for—or something of the same style. Oh, the caddish rotter!"

My theory was proved to the hilt. The

bowl had four ropes affixed to it, these ropes all joining up with a thicker one—something after the style of a parachute, if my meaning is clear. There was a stout iron hook at the end of the thick rope—which had simply been pushed into the copper-sheathed hole in the boat's keel.

The result was inevitable. As soon as the boat had gained a little speed the bowl swung astern, with its inner surface facing the resistance of water. It acted like a powerful brake, and accounted for the astoundingly sluggish behaviour of our craft.

"Neat, eh?" I remarked calmly.

"Neat!" repeated Sir Montie. "Begad! I—I am at a loss for words, old boy. It's a shockin' business. Pitt ought to be thrashed!"

"He's going to be, too!" I said grimly. "We're going straight to Christine now. I can't believe that he had anything to do with this rotten affair. In any case, that race must be rendered null and void. We shall have to re-row it on Saturday."

"And win!" said Tommy Watson, with great satisfaction.

"No need to let any of the masters know," I went on. "There'd be a frightful hubbub if this came out. Pitt would probably be sacked straight away—and it would serve him right, too. But we'll settle it amongst ourselves, I reckon."

"No, it wouldn't be the thing to sneak," agreed Handforth. "As for Pitt, I don't mind taking him on—I should just like to give him a thundering good licking—"

"Leave that to your uncle," I interrupted. "Come on, we'll hear what Christine has to say about this matter. It's a pity to spoil their celebrations in the College House, but there's no help for it."

We got into the boat and rowed back with all speed. By the time we arrived in the Triangle again the dusk was getting thick and numerous lights were gleaming in the College House. I hinted to Handforth that it was not really necessary for him to accompany us, and there was some slight delay on the College House steps. Having pointed out to Handforth, however, that there was no real necessity for him to punch my nose, we proceeded to Study Q.

We found that apartment crowded. In addition to its rightful occupants, Christine and Yorke and Talmadge, there were three visitors in the persons of Oldfield and Clapson and Nation. By the time we got in the study was fairly packed.

"Come for sympathy?" grinned Christine. "We've got heaps to give away. Or perhaps you'd like us to teach you how to row a boat? We willingly give lessons—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He laughs best who laughs last!" said Handforth sagely. "You wait a bit, my cackling fatheads! We've brought evidence, and this is where you hide your heads in shame!"

"What's the ass talking about?" remarked Yorke wonderingly. "And what's that dirty—"

looking thing you've got, Nipper? Don't bring it near me, you ass——"

"We're not joking—honest injun," I interrupted quietly. "It's a serious matter, Christine. Don't fly into a rage, but do you know that your victory was worked?"

"Worked?" ejaculated Christine blankly.

"Yes," I said. "Our boat was deliberately tampered with, and the whole race was unfair——"

"You—you rotter!" shouted Christine angrily.

There was an immediate uproar, and I was quite satisfied that Christine and Co. knew nothing whatever about Pitt's rascality. By the time they had calmed down five minutes had passed. Handforth was then being firmly held into a chair by Church and McClure. Incidentally, Watson was sitting on his lap. This was most necessary, for Handforth positively insisted upon fighting every College House fellow on the spot. The question of odds never occurred to him.

"Lemme gerrup!" he roared, struggling wildly.

"It's all right, Handy," I said. "These chaps were naturally indignant and excited. When we've explained everything to 'em they'll calm down—and they might even apologise to you!"

Order was restored with some difficulty. But at last I was permitted to explain my suspicions about Reginald Pitt, and how I proved my case up to the hilt. Christine and Co. were bound to admit, much against their will, that the race had been grossly unfair.

"Of course, we'll row it again on Saturday," said Christine, without hesitation. "It's the only thing to be done. We can easily get permission without giving Pitt away. But, by jingo, he'll get it in the neck for this!"

"We'll kick him out of the House," said Yorke hotly.

"Well, that's your affair," I remarked. "I think I've convinced you that our boat was tampered with. The evidence is complete. It's hard lines on you, Christine, and I think you're jolly decent to take it so nicely. I'm awfully sorry this has happened."

Christine and Co. hadn't much to say, for it was a fellow of their own House who was involved. And when we left them, highly satisfied with the result of our inquiry, we had the impression that Reginald Pitt was booked for a warm time—quite apart from my own intentions.

The chopper, as it happened, was destined to fall at once!

CHAPTER VII.

PITT IS PLEASED WITH HIMSELF—KICKED OUT—A CAD'S REWARD.

BOB CHRISTINE breathed hard as soon as we had taken our departure. His chums looked serious and upset. This knowledge had completely bereft them of the joys of victory, and the blow was a hard one.

"Now we know why I was so jolly certain of a College House win!" said Christine grimly. "Oh, my hat! What a come-down for us—and all because of a cad of a new kid! If we don't hang, draw, and quarter him, it'll be a standing wonder!"

"He ought to be sacked!" said Oldfield fiercely.

"Yes, but we can't sneak," objected Christine. "Nipper has been jolly decent over it, remember. He came straight to us before saying a thing. The masters needn't know anything——"

There was a tap at the door, and Pitt entered.

"Hallo!" he said cheerfully. "What's the trouble? You're all looking rather blue."

"Are we?" said Christine, making a sign to the others to keep quiet. "What do you want here, Pitt? Come to tell us how we managed to win the boat-race?"

Reginald Pitt nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "You may remember that I promised to make the Ancient House fry sing small within a week. Well, I've done it—I've kept my promise. Nipper and his pals are simply whacked."

"Oh! That's news!" said Christine, with deadly calmness. "Anything else? Haven't you got any more to say?"

"Quite a lot," replied the Serpent, taking a seat on a corner of the table. "It's like this. The Greens won the race because of me—I gave you the victory."

"Did you?" said Christine thickly. "Go on!"

"You see, I remembered that promise of mine," continued Pitt. "So I set my wits to work, and thought out a really stunning wheeze—a gorgeous idea."

"A—a gorgeous idea?" gasped Yorke, hardly believing his ears—hardly crediting that Pitt meant to explain his villainy. "Well, what about it? What was this stunning wheeze?"

"Just this," answered Pitt. "I managed to fix a patent contrivance of my own invention beneath the Ancient House boat—without the asses knowing anything about it. Oh, it was lovely! They didn't suspect anything. But this contrivance held the boat back, and enabled you to romp home first! See?"

Christine could only stare. Was it possible? Could it actually be? Was Pitt boasting about his contemptible trick? Did he imagine that these juniors would uphold him—that they would approve of his beastly caddishness?

It was astounding—but it was the truth!

Pitt was mad enough to think that Christine and Co. would commend him for having won the race so splendidly. He could see nothing wrong in it himself, and he thought that other fellows would share his perverted opinions. He fully expected Christine and Co. to commend him and to glory with him in his "triumph."

"Personally," he went on, "I reckon that

I dished the Fossils in a really masterly fashion. What do you think?"

"Why, you—you——" exploded Talmadge.

"Hold on!" said Christine quickly. "Let's have this thing clear. Do I understand, Pitt, that you deliberately fouled the Ancient House boat, with the object of providing us with a victory?"

Pitt nodded.

"You couldn't have won squarely, could you?" he asked. "Don't glare at me. You ought to be jolly pleased. Haven't you won the boat-race? Think of the honour for the College House!"

"The—the honour?" gasped Christine.

"Certainly."

"What do you know about honour?" roared Yorke.

"It seems to me that you chaps are thundering ungrateful," snapped Pitt impatiently. "I've shown you that I won the race for you, and you don't seem to like it! What more do you want?"

Christine put his back against the door.

"You've had your say, you cad, and now I'll have mine," he exclaimed, with ominous quietness. "I think you're the biggest rascal we've ever had in this House——"

"Eh?" said Pitt, with a start.

"You're a worm—a miserable, plotting hound!" shouted Christine, his wrath blazing out. "As it happened, we knew all about your beastly scheme, but we didn't expect you to come here and boast about it! Boast about it! Ye gods and little fishes! It's a wonder you ain't squashed to pulp!"

"He will be, in a minute!" said Oldfield hotly.

Reginald Pitt looked alarmed.

"Don't be such asses!" he exclaimed. "What the deuce is the matter? Didn't you win the race? Haven't I proved to you that I'm capable of working out stunning wheezes? And what do you mean by saying that you know all about it?"

"Look at this!" roared Christine.

He fished out the rusty bowl from beneath the table, and Pitt started again as he gazed upon it.

"How did you find that?" he asked sharply.

"We didn't find it—Nipper brought it to us!" snorted Christine. "He found out the whole rotten plot, and we're going to row the race again on Saturday——"

"Row it again?" asked Pitt, staring. "What for?"

"What's the good of talking to a chap like this?" shouted Yorke. "He doesn't know the difference between right and wrong. He's an absolute criminal!"

"Kick him out!" shouted the other juniors.

Pitt breathed rapidly.

"Don't be mad!" he gasped. "Do you call this fair? Six of you against one? Lemme go, Yorke, you cad——"

Pitt was grasped firmly and jammed against the wall.

"This isn't a case of bullying," said Christine grimly. "You've dishonoured the fair

name of the College House—and you're going to be kicked out. Those Fossils know all about this beastly affair, and I mean to show them what we think of it! If there's an inch of you without a bruise by the time we've finished you'll be lucky!"

Pitt struggled in alarm, all his assurance gone.

"You idiots!" he raved. "Lemme go!"

"Are you sorry you acted like a criminal?" demanded Christine.

"No, hang you!"

"Smash him!" roared Talmadge.

"You fools! I've done nothing!" gasped Pitt. "Didn't you win the race? What more do you want? Haven't I proved that my ideas are first-class——"

"Oh, I'm sick of him!" said Christine disgustedly. "Open the door, somebody! Look here, Pitt, we're going to deal with you lightly this time, because you don't seem to know what decency is. We're simply going to kick you all along the passage, across the lobby, and into the Triangle!"

"Is that all?" asked Pitt. "Don't you think you'd better kill me and have done with it? There's a knife on the table——"

"The nerve of the rotter!" panted Yorke. "Out with him!"

Pitt's very coolness, in the face of such a fate, exasperated Christine and Co. beyond measure. The new fellow, having recovered from his momentary alarm, was as calm as ever again.

He hardly remembered exactly what happened next.

Many other juniors had been attracted to Study Q by the din, and when the door was opened quite a crowd clamoured out in the passage. They didn't make inquiries; the fact that Pitt was being ragged by Christine and Co. was sufficient for them. They took part in the game with gusto.

Reginald Pitt progressed down the passage towards the lobby in a most erratic fashion. The juniors were excited, and Pitt was treated in no light manner. Whatever he received, however, he thoroughly deserved. Christine and Co. had the pleasure of hurling him forcibly out of Study Q. By the time he regained his feet he was bowled over again, and went down the passage violently.

By the time he got to the lobby he was pretty well bruised all over, as Christine had prophesied. And he was hurled forth from the College House into the darkness of the Triangle.

"And if you show your nose in here again," panted Christine, "you'll get kicked out with more force than ever! Understand? We don't want rotters like you in this House!"

"I shall come in when I like!" gasped Pitt defiantly.

"Try it on, and see!" retorted Christine.

"And if you sneak to any of the masters we'll give it to you hotter than ever! We've finished with you!"

And the incensed Removites turned back, and surged into the common room, where

Christine proceeded to explain matters in detail to those juniors who were in ignorance of the facts.

Meanwhile Reginald Pitt sat on the cold steps recovering his breath. He was hardy and wiry, and could take blows with ease. When he picked himself up and walked across the Triangle his eyes were glittering evilly. At the same time he couldn't understand why he had been treated in such a manner.

He really believed that he had been treated with gross ingratitude—after his great services to the College House Junior Eight! And there was a spirit of bitterness and hatred in his heart as he mooched beneath the elms.

Three forms loomed up before him, and he made no attempt to avoid them. Those three forms belonged to Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. We were, as a matter of fact, looking for Pitt. We had no idea then as to the fate he had met at the hands of Christine and Co.

"Somebody here, dear boys," remarked Montie. "I say, old fellow, have you seen anythin' of Pitt?"

"Yes, he's here," said Pitt calmly.

"The very chap I wanted to see!" I said, striding forward and facing Pitt squarely. "I want just five minutes with you, Pitt. What have you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by playing that foul trick upon our boat?"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Pitt roughly. "What's the good of making a fuss about it? I thought I was doing Christine a good turn. No harm in taking a rise out of you fellows, is there?"

"Doing Christine a good turn!" I repeated blankly. "Did you tell Christine that?"

"Yes, I did!"

"And what did he say?"

"What's it got to do with you what he said?" snarled Pitt. "Go away, confound you! You're an interfering brute, that's what you are! What's it got to do with you? Who told you to fish up that bowl?"

I stared at him wonderingly.

"What's it got to do with me?" I repeated. "I'll show you! You're a scheming cad, and if you'd had your way this plot would never have come to light. Thank goodness, I found it out!"

"Oh, hang you!" growled Pitt, turning away. "It's a pity you can't mind your

own business. But I can't expect anything else, I suppose, considering that you were originally picked up in the gutter by a low-down detective!"

I simply shook with fury. I had been quite prepared to let Pitt down lightly. But those words of his stung me into instant action. With a jerk of my hand I swung him round. **Smack!**

My fist struck his mouth with terrific force, and he went down with a crash.

"If you get up again I'll give you another!" I said, breathing hard. "And if you ever say anything like that again, I'll thrash you until you can't see!"

Pitt scrambled to his feet, trembling violently.

"Try it on now!" he hissed. "You're a gutter-brat, and you were picked up by a rotten, blackmailing detective——"

Pitt didn't get any further. He lunged at me while he spoke, but I got in my blow first. He fought like a tiger, and for several minutes we were at it as hard as we could go. Although a cad of the first water, Pitt was certainly not lacking in pluck. He stood up to me without flinching.

But I soon settled him. One heavy punch sent him staggering back, and he collapsed, muttering threats still. His nose was bleeding, his left eye was closing up, and his mouth was cut. But I hadn't an ounce of pity for him. The fellow was a rotter to his finger-tips.

Tommy and Montie said nothing, and as I brushed my clothes down, Pitt slowly rose to his feet and stood facing me.

"You'll be sorry for this!" he panted thickly. "You'll wish you'd never made an enemy of me before I've done!"

He turned on his heel and slunk off.

"Dear boy, he fully deserved it," said Sir Montie quietly. "But you've made a frightfully vindictive enemy. Take my advice, an' be on your guard! It'll be necessary!"

As events turned out, Montie's warning was fully justified! I hadn't done with Reginald Pitt by a long way!

Incidentally, the boat-race took place—fairly—on Saturday afternoon. The Ancient House won by a clear three lengths, and Bob Christine was decent enough to congratulate me afterwards. He took his defeat in the right spirit.

As for Pitt, well, I've got quite a lot to tell of him—but that's another yarn.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

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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. Later on Challis runs away from school in order to get some money from his father. A kindly farmer gives him a lift in his cart.

*(Now read on.)***THE MEETING.**

THEN in a whisper the waggoner asked the boy whether he could lend him "a bit o' siller" to enable him to train to Doddington.

But John was proud. He refused, and went resolutely on his way, though his muscles were stiff and his feet sore.

So, heartened by the kindness he had met with, John Challis set out upon the last stage of his journey. Before he left the streets of Grimthorpe the tired feeling had almost worn away and he was stepping out boldly again.

On he went, watching eagerly for the milestones, and four hours later, dead-beat, hungry, dragging his steps, and thoroughly done up, he came within sight of his father's house.

At fifty yards away from it he paused.

What would his father say? Would he condemn his rash action as madness, or would he sympathise? And what would his mother say?

Even while he paused hesitatingly he received his answer.

The door of the little house was opened, and a man twice Jack's size came rushing out.

He ran to where the boy stood, caught him in his arms, and half-supported, half-carried him back with him.

"Jack, my dear lad," he cried, in a voice that shook with emotion, "I've been waiting home from business for you. Dr. Mason telegraphed saying you'd left school, and asking whether you'd come home. I've had a letter from him, too. My poor boy! My poor boy!"

"Father!" said John, choking. "I——"

"Not a word. Not one word till you've had a bite and a sleep and feel yourself again, my boy," cried the father eagerly. Then, as he caught sight of a woman's pale and anxious face just beyond the door, he roared: "Here he is, my dear—our Jack! And safe and sound, thank God!"

John's mother ran forward and kissed her son, with the tears welling into her eyes. Then he was borne into the dining-room and sat down.

Food was brought and placed before him, and his boots were taken from his blistered feet.

The boy's heart leapt into his throat. He felt that he was unworthy of such love as this.

"Father," he said brokenly, "if you've read Dr. Mason's letter, you know why it is I have come home. I just had to! And——"

"He says he's paid fifteen pounds for a boat that got smashed up, Jack, my boy," said George Challis, retired professional boxer and sports provider. "And I'll just ask you one question. Was the boat smashed up through your fault?"

John met his father's gaze fearlessly.

"No, rather," he replied.

"Ah! I knew it wasn't. Now say no more about that, my lad. How did you get here?"

"I walked——"

"Walked from Littleminster?"

"Most of the way. But a waggoner gave me a lift. He was a splendid fellow. His name is Martin Coverdale, and he says he once fought you at Grimthorpe."

Mr. Challis's smiling eyes twinkled.

"Ah, I remember! It was in the heavy-weight novices' competition, and a rare lot of trouble he gave me, too, before I knocked him out. A fine fellow; but I knew too much for him. And now, my boy, you get to bed and have a good sleep, and we'll talk about business in the morning."

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

THE RETURN TO LITTLEMINSTER.

HOW John Challis slept after he'd got to bed, to be sure. It was not until a little after seven o'clock the following morning that he awoke with a start, to fancy he heard the school bell ringing.

A glance at his surroundings told him otherwise, and he got up, went down to the bath-room, had a cold tub, and dressed himself.

At breakfast he was himself again, with every trace of fatigue gone from him. And while he ate the appetising meal he told his mother and his father of the loss of the punt, and the events that had followed it.

"I was so worried about the money, father," he said, "that I couldn't remain at Littleminster. I had to come home. I know how hard you have to work for the money to pay my schooling, and——"

The retired boxer laughed a deep-throated and happy laugh.

"Ah, times are hard, to be sure, Jack, lad," said he. "And we have to pinch and scrape a bit at times. But business is improving. So far, this is the best year I've ever had. My new boxing-glove has caught on. I've taken on three more hands, and have a manager to look after the shop when I'm away. The fifteen pounds is waiting at the bank for you. And I can afford to send you to the best school in England now!"

Jack leapt to his feet, his cheeks flushing, his eyes sparkling with joy.

"Then the fees won't be a drag on you any more!" he exclaimed. "And—and, father, do you think I could go in for the sports? It will mean clothes and shoes and kit, you know, and——"

"Go in for anything you like, Jack—and hang the expense! Only be careful with your pocket-money, my boy, and don't pledge your old dad's credit needlessly, that's all I ask."

The effect upon the boy by his father's words was almost magical. He drew himself up, squared his shoulders, and seemed a different lad.

Then his face fell.

"Here, my son, what ails you?" asked Mr. Challis.

"I was wondering what I should do if—Dr. Mason were to send me down!" John murmured, hanging his head.

"He won't punish you, my boy. You shall take him a cheque for fifteen pounds with my compliments, and I've already had a talk to him over the telephone. He bears no malice, but he wants you to go back at once, and I want you to start for Littleminster by the twelve-thirty train. You'll be at the school by three o'clock."

At half-past twelve Mr. Challis saw his son off, and as he pressed the boy's ticket into his hand he added a purse containing money.

"Drive to the school; don't walk," said he, with a nod. "And see Dr. Mason at once. And, mind, if there's any more trouble at school, Jack, don't bolt, but send for me, and I'll come down. Good-bye!"

Jack, leaning out of the window, waited there, waving his hand until the station was left behind. Then he threw himself down on the padded seat and marvelled at the difference between his return journey and that long walk home.

At ten minutes to three he arrived at Littleminster, leapt out, and, answering the porter's salute with a wave of the hand, ran out and climbed into the first open cab he saw.

A minute later he was being swept along the dusty road in the direction of the school. On the way he passed by groups of the boys, who were making their way towards the town and river, for it was half-holiday, and their astonishment at seeing the "cad" driving to school at his ease left them almost speechless.

Of course, they had heard about the "cad's flight." They had talked of nothing else ever since the news leaked out.

They had looked upon it as a good thing for the school, a stroke of luck, which had saved Littleminster the ignominy of having one of its boys "sent down."

That Challis would ever dare show his nose at Littleminster again, much less stay at there, never entered their heads. And yet here he was, trundling along like a lord, in a hired fly.

"Great Scott!" yelled Ponsonby, as the fly vanished in a cloud of dust, "that takes the biscuit! But, thank goodness, Dr. Mason will soon pull his ear for him. He'll kick him out as soon as he gets back."

At three o'clock to the minute the fly dashed into the school grounds, and created no end of excitement there. Myers, Ryder, Chalfont, Digby, all John's enemies, in fact, witnessed his return.

They stared aghast. Already they had pronounced their opinions as to why the cad had bolted.

"He'd got the blue funks." "He knew he wasn't wanted, and had done the decent thing." "He'd bolted to escape being prosecuted by the landlord of the Magpie Inn for smashing up that punt." "He'd run away to avoid the disgrace of being sent down."

And now here he was back again!

"Never mind!" sneered Myers, scowling. "He won't be here long. If Dr. Mason doesn't kick him out we'll soon make the school unbearable for him, and then he'll bolt in sober earnest."

With more than ordinary curiosity they followed the progress of the fly, and stared as it drew up outside the Head's house.

Challis leapt down, paid the fare, and walked in.

"Is Dr. Mason at home?" he asked of the trim maid who opened the door to him.

"Yes. What name, please?"

"Challis."

A deep voice hailed him.

"Come in, Challis."

Challis obeyed, and a moment later stood

(Continued overleaf.)

before the Master of Littleminster, who eyed him sternly.

"Your father notified me of your return," he said sharply. "Now tell me why you went?"

Challis, flushing hotly, and feeling profoundly uncomfortable, gave his reasons in simple, direct language. He did not ask for pardon. Handing his father's note to the Head, he said:

"There is a cheque for fifteen pounds in the envelope, sir. I could not bear to be indebted to you for paying for the damaged punt. I had to go home to get the money. And and"

Dr. Mason opened the envelope, extracted the cheque, and read the brief note that accompanied it. That done, he looked again at the boy.

"Challis," he said, "you did a very serious, I may say an almost unpardonable thing when you left school of your own free will. I cannot tolerate such defiance of discipline. At first I seriously thought of expelling you. However, Mr. Evans has spoken very strongly on your behalf, and so you shall remain. For how long will depend upon how you behave yourself. But you will be punished. You will not be allowed out of bounds for one month from to-day, and you will write one hundred lines a day every day, with the exception of Sunday, until the period of your punishment has elapsed. You can go."

"Thank you, sir," said John, and the next moment he found himself outside the room.

He went straight over to Evans's, mounted the staircase that led to his room, unconscious of the fact that heads were peeping round every angle of stair and passage way, opened the door, and entered.

The door shut with a bang.

It was then that Myers dashed down into the open, his face flaming furiously, his eyes flashing fire.

"Then he's not expelled!" he yelled. "He's come back to stay! It's a shame! It's a disgrace to the school! The Head must be mad!"

Percy Grainger, passing by, heard and stopped, looking hard at Myers.

"Can you think that," said the captain of the school drily, "why don't you go and tell him so?"

BASIL'S FIND.

THOUGH the return of John Challis to Littleminster caused no end of a stir among those who chose to constitute themselves his enemies, the incident of his voluntary absence from the school was soon forgotten. The Head had seen fit to mete out severe punishment, and justice in a measure was satisfied.

Besides, such boys as Myers, Ryder, and Digby preferred to have Challis back, so that they might gloat over his disgrace, and jeer and laugh as they thought of the daily punishment task that had been inflicted.

As for Basil Hood, he was overjoyed. At the first available opportunity the youngster made his way to Challis's room and, opening the door, timidly entered.

John was busy writing out those lines, but looked up with a bright smile.

"Well, young'un!" he cried; and it seemed to the fag that there was a joyous note in the deep, rich voice that had been absent before. "And how are you?"

"All right, thank you, Challis. And, I say, can I help you at all?"

"Help me? How?"

Basil reddened to his hair.

"With those lines!" he cried eagerly.

"Look here, I write pretty well. I can manage to imitate your handwriting, I think. I know it must be an awful handicap to have to write all that stuff out day after day. I'll do some of it while you go on with your studies, and Raymond and Fawcett say they'll lend a hand too." (These being two boys in the fag's class with whom he had chummed up, and who, though overawed by the seriousness of the bigger boy, had got to like him because they were beginning to look at Challis through Basil's eyes.)

Glancing towards the door, John saw two shy heads peeping.

"Come in!" he cried, and the two boys in question entered timidly.

"So," said the big boy, leaning back. "you two want to help Basil to write out my lines, eh?"

"Yes, if you please," they said.

Challis rose, smiling humanly.

"It's jolly good of you, and I sha'n't forget it," said he. "But I won't let you do it, thanks. No. It is a just punishment, and I intend to work it out, every word, myself. It wouldn't be right not to do so, you see."

"We all do it," answered Basil boldly. "It's a common practice, you know. And even if the masters suspect, they never say anything."

"No. I wouldn't have the Head think that I'd be mean enough to get a lot of youngsters to make things easy for me. I can manage all right, thanks."

"But what about your studies, Challis?" asked Basil.

"I can manage that too. Now run along, there's good fellows. I'm working against time, and I've a lot to do before I turn in to-night."

(To be continued.)