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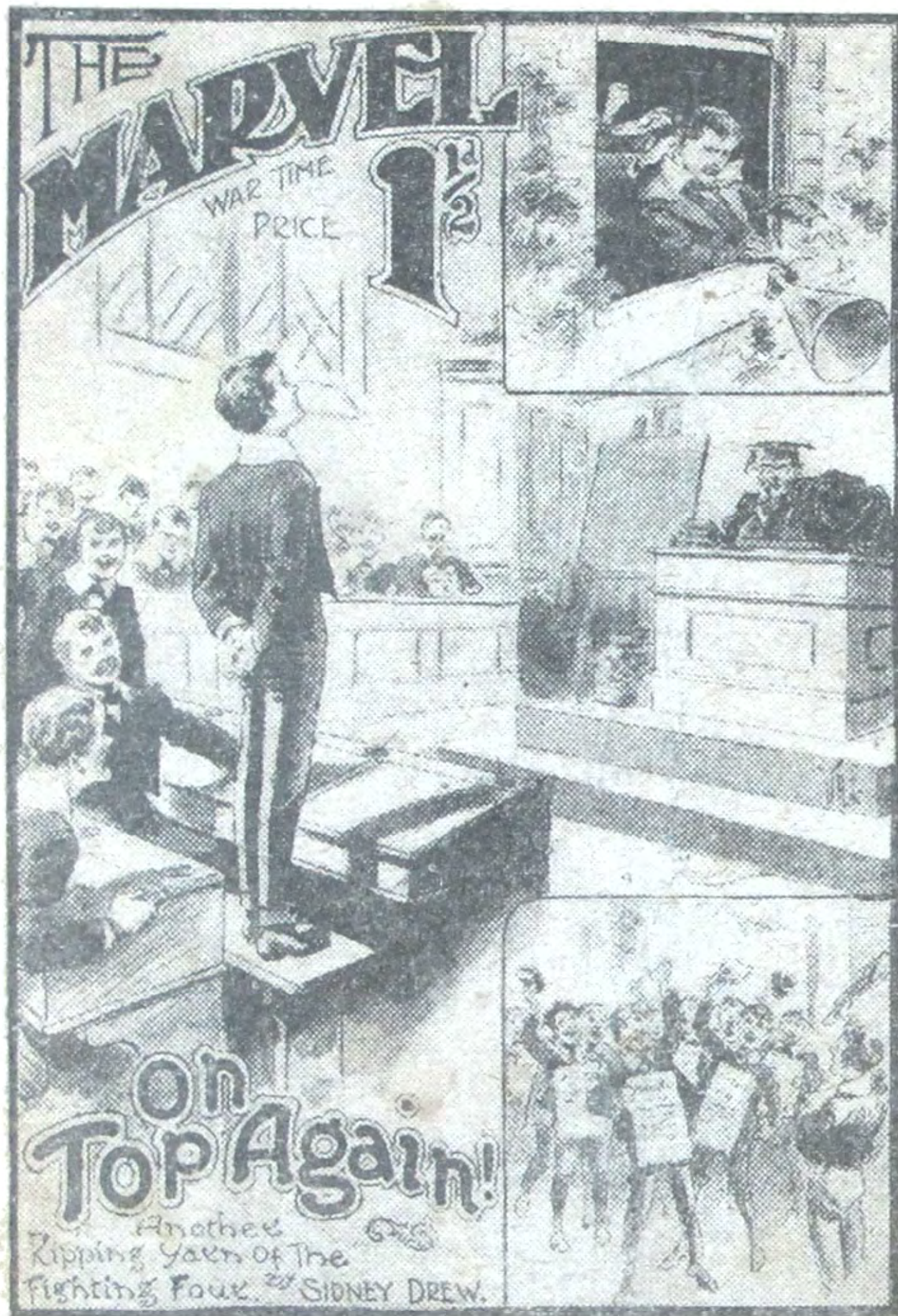
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The flashily-dressed man produced a letter. It was the one Nipper had written to Pitt!

“NIPPER IN DISGRACE!”

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 "The Coming of the Serpent," "Handforth—Detective," "The Boat-Race Mystery," etc. Sept. 21, 1918.



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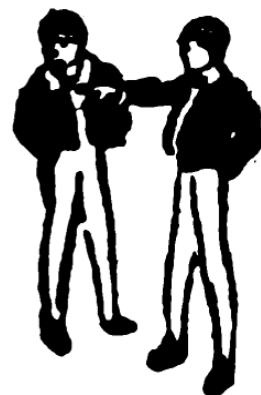
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By the Author of "The Coming of the Serpent,"
"Handforth—Detective," "The Boat-Race Mystery," etc.



(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

NOT WANTED—THE ORDER OF THE BOOT—
PITT'S CUNNING.

JUSTIN B. FARMAN, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, eyed Reginald Pitt rather severely.

"Say, I guess you'd better vamoose, Pitt," he remarked. "This ranch ain't kinder safe for a doggone feller of your sort. Take my tip, an' quit while you're safe."

Pitt, of the Remove, grinned.

"Awfully good of you to welcome me so sweetly," he said, with perfect composure. "But you needn't be alarmed. I shan't get into any trouble. I've come to stay!"

"Gee whiz! I guess you've made a heap big mistake this trip, sonny. I'll allow you may have come to stay, but I've a notion that you won't be around this lay-out for more than five solid minutes. We ain't no use for cads in the Ancient House. Do you get me?"

"I don't know whether you really expect me to understand your language, but I don't!" remarked Pitt calmly. "And as for my staying five minutes—well, we shall see about that."

And Pitt marched into the lobby of the Ancient House as though he owned the place. The American junior stared after him with some wrath. Pitt's coolness was always irritating.

Considering the record of the new College House junior, it wasn't likely that he should be tolerated in the Ancient House. Only the previous week Pitt had deliberately attempted to ruin the annual junior boat-race, and he had actually succeeded in carrying his plan through. It had only been by careful investigation that I had rooted out the truth and exposed Pitt for the cad he was. Owing to his scheming, the Ancient House had lost the race; but as it had been rowed again a day or two later, and considering that we had won, the matter had been allowed to drop.

Christine and Co., the celebrated leaders of the Monks, had meted out punishment to the fellow who had besmirched the fair name

of the College House. Pitt had been hurled forth, and had been told not to come back. This, of course, was impracticable, for Pitt boarded in the College House. But he was shown very plainly that his presence was resented, and he was virtually sent to Coventry by every decent junior in the House.

And now, to take him at his own word, he had come across the Triangle to the Ancient House—to stay! Justin B. Farman was quite justified in being highly incensed. Pitt was renowned for his insufferable audacity, but this was surely the limit.

Pitt was evidently in earnest, too. He calmly marched down the Remove passage and entered Study E. This apartment had been empty since the beginning of the term. But Pitt took possession of it with all the assurance in the world.

He was joined very shortly by Marriott, whose usual abode was Study G. He grinned as he nodded to Pitt. Marriott was one of the Ancient House Nuts and a follower of Fullwood and Co.

"Managed it, then?" he remarked pleasantly.

"Dead easy!" said Pitt. "You're changing from your own study. I understand? Jolly decent of you, Marriott. I don't see why we shouldn't get on well together."

Marriott looked thoughtful.

"There'll be trouble, of course," he exclaimed. "Nipper won't allow you to stop in like this without kicking up a fuss, you know. He's captain of the Remove on this side, and the beast is always interferin' with us."

Pitt shrugged his shoulders.

"Let him interfere," he said shortly. "It'll take more than Nipper to shift me from this House. You might lend me a hand with my books and things, Marriott. We'll fetch them across at once."

"Right-ho!" said the other junior.

He opened the door as he spoke. Just at that moment Handforth and Church and McClure were entering their own study, which was next door. Edward Oswald Handforth paused.

"Hallo! What are you doing in there?" he demanded. "That study's empty—"

"You're mistaken," said Marriott. "Pitt's in there!"

"Pitt!" shouted Handforth. "My only hat!"

"Like his thundering cheek!" snorted McClure. "They won't stand him in the College House, so it's jolly certain we're not going to put up with him here!"

Pitt lounged out of Study E.

"Sorry to upset you," he said coolly. "But you needn't worry; I shall prove to be a very quiet neighbour. And I shall expect you to consider me in the same way. I hate a noisy crew next to my study!"

"Your—your study!" gasped Handforth, hardly able to believe his ears. "Why, you—you—What the dickens do you mean? Clear out of this House, you beastly Monk!"

"That's the second mistake you've made," replied Pitt. "I got tired of being a Monk. They don't appreciate me in the College House. I'm a Fossil now. I've decided to change houses."

Handforth became ominously calm.

"Oh!" he said deliberately. "You've decided to change Houses, have you?"

"Deaf?" asked Pitt politely.

"No. I'm not deaf!" roared Handforth. "And if you think I'm going to stand any of your tommy-rot, you're off-side! A Fossil! Great pip! We wouldn't own you for worlds!"

"That doesn't matter to me. I don't want to be owned," said Pitt easily. "Run along, there's a good chap. You're liable to become a nuisance, Handforth!"

The famous leader of Study D nearly fainted.

"You—you cheeky rotter!" he gasped. "If you ain't out of this House in two seconds, I'll sling you out on your neck! By George! I'm jiggered if I don't sling you out, anyhow! Back me up, you chaps!"

And Handforth, having rolled up his sleeves, lunged forward and grabbed hold of Pitt. Church and McClure, nothing daunted, made sure of Marriott at once, holding him securely.

Needless to say, there was a terrific uproar in the Remove passage in less than five seconds. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I were just finishing tea in Study C. and, not being quite deaf, we overheard the rumpus.

"Who's being slaughtered?" asked Watson. "I can hear Handforth, at least—Why, great Scott! That's Pitt's voice! Pitt, in our House! Of all the giddy nerve!"

"Dear fellows, this is where our peace comes to an end," observed Tregellis-West, with a sigh. "I thought it was too good to last—I did, really. We've been lollin' about for an hour, and we can't expect law an' order to reign for ever. Shall we go an' see what the trouble is?"

As a matter of fact, Watson and I had already gone, and Sir Montie strolled through the open doorway, securing his pince-nez more firmly upon his noble nose.

"Begad!" he exclaimed mildly. "Is it a free fight?"

Tregellis-West's inquiry was excusable. Outside the door of Study E a writhing mass of juniors was swaying to and fro. Handforth was still slinging Pitt out on his neck. He hadn't got far—about a yard—but he was as determined as ever.

Pitt, being strong and wiry, was resisting. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell had come to the rescue of Marriott and Pitt, and it seemed highly probable that somebody else would be slung out, and not Pitt.

However, Watson and I arrived just in time to prevent this catastrophe. We sailed in enthusiastically. Any scrap with Fullwood and Co. was welcome. The Nuts did not stand up to us for more than ten seconds; then they backed away down the passage.

Handforth was still clutching Pitt's collar in a deadly fashion, quite regardless of the fact that the unfortunate junior was now half-choked. Edward Oswald's hands were large, and one of them was thrust down Pitt's back, and this naturally had the effect of pressing the front of his collar into his windpipe. Pitt was already looking rather purple in the face.

"I say, chuck that!" I exclaimed sharply. "You don't want to choke the chap, do you, Handy?"

Handforth turned on me furiously.

"Doesn't he deserve choking?" he roared.

"Very likely," I replied, "but you can't commit murder in the Remove passage, Handy. It's a bit too public; and, besides, you'd only get choked yourself, at the finish. Being hanged ain't at all a pleasant sensation!"

Handforth relaxed his grip abruptly.

"Why the dickens didn't he say he was being choked?" he demanded warmly. "How was I to know? I'm going to chuck him out!"

Pitt backed away, gasping.

"You—you dangerous madman," he said huskily. "You might have hurt me by doing that!"

"I wanted to!" retorted Handforth. "Hurting you, though, doesn't seem to do much good. Are you going to get out of the Ancient House quietly, or shall I use the toe of my boot?"

Pitt scowled.

"Hang you!" he snapped. "Mind your own business!"

Handforth looked round dazedly.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, as though he believed we were all deaf. "Mind my own business! If it ain't my business, whose is it? This frightful rotter has the utter nerve to walk into the study next to mine—and tells me to keep quiet! Why, I wouldn't have Pitt in a next-door study for all I could see!"

I grinned.

"You've made a mistake, Handy," I said. "How can Pitt come into Study E? He's a College House fellow—"

"Kats!" snapped Pitt. "I've changed over. I'm a Fossil now!"

"Glad you admit it!" said Handforth fiercely. "You'll be a Fossil for about two minutes longer, I expect, and after that you'll be too jolly sore to know what you are! You'll simply want to go away in some corner and die!"

"These murderous ideas won't do, Handy," I put in. "We've got to take the thing calmly. If you had your way, every cad at St. Frank's—and there are a good few, worse luck—would be taken into a remote apartment and quietly put to death. Or you might introduce a rack, or a thumb-screw—"

"Or boilin' oil?" suggested Sir Montie mildly. "I've heard that boillin' oil is very effective, begad! But I should imagine that it would be shockin'ly painful!"

"Jolly funny, ain't you?" sneered the Serpent. "But I don't care a rap for the lot of you. I've changed into the Ancient House, and you're not going to frighten me out. Understand?"

"The one good point about you, Pitt, is that you always make yourself clear," I said smoothly. "As it happens, I can speak plainly, too. I'm skipper of the Remove, and I'll point out, straight away, that we don't want you in this House, and that we wouldn't have you if you begged on your knees for admittance. You've just got two minutes to clear out!"

Pitt laughed unpleasantly.

"That's my answer to you!" he exclaimed.

And he deliberately snapped his fingers in front of my face. It was an open insult, and a murmur of anger passed through the crowd which had collected. I couldn't let it pass unheeded.

"Out you go!" I said grimly. "Clear the way, you chaps!"

I simply grabbed Pitt by the back of his collar and the seat of his trousers, swung him round bodily before he realised my intention, and ran him down the passage.

He resisted fiercely, but I had all the advantage, having secured my grip firmly. Reginald Pitt simply shot through the lobby and went hurtling through the open doorway down the steps. In plain language, he had been forcibly ejected.

He picked himself up, white with fury.

"We'll see about this!" he snarled. "I'm a member of the Ancient House, and I'm coming back."

"You'll get chucked out again, then!" I retorted.

"I give you fair warning!" panted the Serpent. "I'm not a sneak, but I'm hanged if I'll be bullied. If you lay a finger on me again I'll yell for help—and then I'll complain to the Housemaster!"

And Pitt, with the most amazing cheek, ascended the steps and roughly pushed past me into the lobby. He was deliberately asking for trouble—and he found it! Transferring into the Ancient House wasn't quite such

a simple matter as he had evidently supposed.

Many pairs of hands grasped him, and he carried out his threat. He simply yelled for help at the top of his voice, and just as he was hurled out into the Triangle again Morrow, of the Sixth, appeared on the scene.

"What's all this infernal din?" he demanded angrily.

"Pitt!" roared Handforth. "We've just chucked him out, and we'll chuck him out again if he—"

"No, you won't," interrupted the prefect, frowning. "I'm not going to allow all this confounded noise. I don't know what your quarrel is, but you'll have to wait until you're in a quieter spot. If you want to come in, Pitt, you'd better do so!"

Pitt strolled in carelessly, looking very triumphant. Morrow was a very decent fellow, but he didn't understand this affair. And he gave me to understand that any further commotion would mean a liberal distribution of lines.

"Do you think we're going to stand it?" bellowed Handforth, turning to me. "That cad's in! And we can't touch him! Why don't you do something, you silly fathert! Ain't you the leader?"

"I shall do something before long," I replied, biting my lip. "It's no good being in a hurry—"

"Oh, isn't it?" snorted Handforth. "We'll jolly well see about that! I'm going to the Housemaster—now!"

"You can't sneak, Handy," said Church.

"Rot!" retorted Handforth. "It's not a question of sneaking at all. Morrow's allowed Pitt to come in, and I'm going to appeal above Morrow's head. If Nipper hasn't got the gumption—"

"My principle, Handforth, is quite sound," I said quietly. "I never appeal to the masters until everything else has failed. You can go to Mr. Lee if you like. Perhaps it's just as well, on this occasion. We'll all go."

"Good!"

And, without further ado, about eight of us marched down the passage, led by Handforth. I was Captain of the Remove, but I was not troubled with any great ideas of dignity. If Handforth liked to do the spouting, I was quite agreeable.

We arrived at Nelson Lee's study for my respected guv'nor, as everybody knows, was the Housemaster of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. And, incidentally, he managed to combine quite a lot of criminal investigation and research with his scholastic labours.

"Come in!" he called, in answer to our knock.

We went in, and Nelson Lee raised his eyebrows in some surprise. Having finished his tea, he was lolling in an easy chair, and enjoying a smoke.

"Boys, what is the meaning of this invasion?" he asked. "And, I may point out, it is quite unnecessary for you to glare

at me in that fashion, Handforth. I trust I have done nothing to earn your displeasure?"

Handforth was rather confused.

"Was—was I glaring, sir?" he stammered. "I—I'm awfully sorry. I think you're the most ripping Housemaster we've ever had. In fact, you're absolutely a sport. I—I mean——"

"Oh, so this is just a little testimonial?" asked the gov'nor.

"I—I didn't mean that, sir!" said Handforth. "It's about Pitt, you know. Pitt's an awful beast—— That is to say, he's a regular rotter! We want you to kick him out, sir!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I am afraid that I cannot comply with your wishes, Handforth," he said. "Pitt is not under my control, being a member of the College House. I really cannot see why you are so concerned——"

"He's changed Houses, sir!" shouted everybody.

"Marched in and calmly said that he was going to take up his quarters here," I explained. "We don't see why we should stand it, gov'nor. Handforth decided to appeal to you, as Housemaster."

Nelson Lee frowned.

"Handforth was quite right," he said. "Pitt must be made to understand that he cannot do just as he likes. He cannot change from one House to the other without the express permission of the Headmaster. We will soon settle this matter, boys. Please fetch Pitt here at once."

Watson and Farman and two or three others hurried off at once, and we waited for about five minutes. Then Reginald Pitt calmly strolled into Nelson Lee's study, looking perfectly serene and confident. We waited gleefully. Pitt wasn't likely to get much change out of Nelson Lee.

"Ah, Pitt, I understand that you have taken it upon yourself to change into this House?" began the gov'nor. "Is that correct?"

"I have become a member of the Ancient House, sir," said Pitt calmly. "Nothing wrong in that, is there? I'm going into Study E, and Marriott's going to take up his quarters with me."

"You are surprisingly confident, Pitt," exclaimed Nelson Lee grimly. "You will please understand that you must obtain the Headmaster's permission before——"

"Yes, I know that, sir," interrupted Pitt.

"You know it?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then why have you had the audacity to transfer without that permission?" demanded Nelson Lee curtly.

"I haven't, sir," said Pitt. "I've got it!"

"Got it!" roared Handforth, glaring.

"Of course I have!" replied Pitt smoothly.

"I went to the Head this morning, and he gave me full permission to change from the College House into the Ancient House!"

CHAPTER II.

PITT IS SARCASTIC—A HUMOROUS LETTER—A TRICKY MANŒUVRE.

NELSON LEE looked at Pitt sharply. "Are you telling me the truth?" he asked. "You say that you have obtained the Headmaster's permission?"

"Of course, sir! I shouldn't have come across without," replied Pitt, eyeing Handforth triumphantly. "I can't see why these fellows are so excited."

"You—you awful rotter!" exclaimed Handforth hotly. "You knew jolly well that we were coming to Mr. Lee! Why the dickens didn't you prevent us bothering him?"

Pitt grinned.

"I didn't ask you to come," he exclaimed sneeringly. "If you bothered Mr. Lee, that's his look-out—and yours."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Quite so," he said smoothly. "You admit, Pitt, that you were aware of Handforth's intention?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you allowed him to come here, knowing that you would be able to make a dramatic little scene?" pursued the gov'nor. "In short, you knew that I should be bothered needlessly?"

Pitt smiled.

"I didn't ask the asses to come, sir," he replied.

"Nevertheless, you refrained from informing them that you had the Headmaster's permission," said the Housemaster. "Under those circumstances, Pitt, I can only conclude that you deliberately wished to cause me trouble. Since I am now your Housemaster, you come within my jurisdiction, and you will please write me two hundred lines before supper-time."

"What for, sir?" demanded Pitt warmly.

"It is not necessary for me to give my reasons," replied Nelson Lee. "However, since you appear to be in ignorance, I have inflicted the punishment for studied impertinence. You may go!"

Pitt turned on his heel without a word, and left the study. We took our departure a moment later. The knowledge that Pitt was now a member of the Ancient House did not tend to improve our tempers, but there was considerable satisfaction amongst us at the result of the interview. Pitt couldn't do as he liked with Nelson Lee!

"It's a disgrace!" declared Handforth indignantly, when we reached the Remove passage once more. "I reckon the Head is a silly old duffer! We don't want Pitt in this House!"

"It's no good growling," I said. "We've got him, and we shall have to stand him. If he tries any of his tricks on, though, he'll soon find that we aren't to be trifled with. I can't understand why the Head hasn't told Mr. Lee anything about Pitt's transfer."

"The Head's been out all the afternoon," remarked Watson. "I suppose he forgot it."

As I found out afterwards, this was actually the case. The Head told Nelson Lee all

about it that evening. It was a rather unusual occurrence, and the Head was quite amused. Pitt had calmly come to his study, and, with serene coolness, had asked for a transfer. The Head, who knew nothing of Pitt's character, had granted his request at once. Pitt was a new boy, and hadn't settled down. And if he preferred the Ancient House, there was no reason why he shouldn't board there.

In Study C I regarded my chums thoughtfully.

"I'm going to have a word with Pitt," I declared. "Now that he's on our side we shall have to stick him. But I'll give him to understand, right away, that he'll have to behave himself."

"Wouldn't it be like a lecture, old boy?" asked Sir Montie doubtfully. "I hate lecturin', you know. It ain't right for one fellow to jaw to another——"

"I sha'n't lecture him, Montie," I interrupted. "I'm skipper of the Remove, and it's up to me to give Pitt a gentle hint. If he transgresses afterwards, that'll be his look-out. He's not going to say that he wasn't warned."

"But what are you going to jaw him about?" asked Watson.

"You'll see."

We left the study and went along to Pitt's new quarters. He wasn't there, so we went out into the Triangle, where the dusk was settling down thickly. As it happened, Pitt was just coming across from the College House, carrying an armful of books.

"Half a minute, Pitt," I said, approaching him.

"Sorry, I can't stop," said Pitt shortly.

"That's unfortunate, because you're going to," I replied, placing myself in front of him. "You're a member of the Ancient House Remove now, and I reckon it's up to me to give you a word of advice."

"You can keep it!" snapped Pitt. "Let me pass!"

His expression was not one of love. On the contrary, a decidedly vindictive light gleamed in his dark, shifty eyes. He probably nursed the memory of a little fight which had taken place the previous week, when I had thrashed him soundly.

"People have to take advice when they don't want it sometimes," I remarked, without moving. "You're going to get some now. I'm Form captain, and if you don't listen to me it's your look-out."

"Form captain is only a figure-head, anyhow!" sneered Pitt.

"Is he? Not in the Remove!" I replied grimly. "But I don't want to waste a lot of breath over you, Pitt. I'll say what I've got to say, and finish."

"Good!"

"I've heard that you indulged in some betting over the boat-race last week," I continued. "It wasn't ordinary betting, either; it was an absolute fraud. You knew that the College House would win, because you faked

our boat, and you staked heavy sums on the result, knowing that you would win."

"Well, what about it?" demanded Pitt gruffly.

"I haven't said anything to you before, because you weren't in my House," I continued. "But you are now, and I'll give you fair warning that if you're discovered in any of those tricks again you'll catch it in the neck—hot! Betting is a disgraceful——"

Pitt laughed sneeringly.

"You going on for ever?" he asked. "I haven't got time to listen to you now. If you'll care to write me a formal letter, asking for an interview, I'll probably grant it," he added with heavy sarcasm. "I'm at home any time between six and eight, so make your appointment accordingly. I shall be quite pleased to grant you a hearing."

And Reginald Pitt walked round me, and went on his way to the Ancient House.

"Cheeky rotter!" growled Watson.

"Still, he'll remember what I said," I remarked. "And I've a jolly good mind to take him at his word, too! It would be rather interesting to see what he did. But we'll reverse it; we'll ask him to come to our Study!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Watson. "He wouldn't come."

"I don't know," I answered. "He's got cheek enough for anything."

We marched indoors again. I wasn't satisfied with the result of our talk with the Serpent; I felt that he had taken a rise out of me. And a fellow who does that doesn't crow for long.

Pitt's sarcastic suggestion that I should make an appointment by post was just the sort of thing he would say. And I certainly thought it would be rather rich if I took him at his word.

"I'll do it!" I declared, when we were in Study C again. "Chuck over that writing-block, Tommy. And I'll bet you my share of margarine that Pitt will turn up."

"Really, old boy, don't be so perfectly ridiculous," protested Tregellio-Went. "We don't have margarine nowadays—that frightful period is over—an' Pitt ain't worth writin' a word over. Besides, what's the sense of postin' a letter, an' wastin' three-halfpence, when Pitt lives next door but one, an' in the same House?"

I grinned.

"That makes it all the richer," I replied. "He'll never think that I'm going to write a letter, and, as I told you, I shall be interested to see if he takes any notice of it. It's my opinion he'll turn up as bold as brass."

"Supposing he does?" asked Watson.

"Why, we'll tell him a few home-truths, and then hoof him out," I replied. "Now, let's see. We only want a few words—short and sharp."

I didn't take much trouble over the important communication, but simply wrote the following, without putting any formalities such as "Dear Pitt," or anything of the

sort. Pitt wasn't dear, by any means. The note simply ran:

"Study C,
"Ancient House,
"St. Frank's College.

"If you will care to call at the above address, at seven-thirty to-morrow evening, I shall be most pleased to discuss the subject of betting with you. I understand that you are greatly interested in the matter, and I am anxious to give you the benefit of a few tips which may be of use to you. We shall probably have quite a nice little interview, from which I hope you will derive much profit.

"NIPPER, Remove Captain."

Tommy Watson grinned as he read the epistle.

"Not at all sarcastic, is it?" he inquired. "My hat! You've beaten Pitt at his own game. The profit he'll derive will probably take the shape of a few hefty kicks—on the seat of his trousers!"

"It wasn't necessary to explain that," I remarked cheerfully. "Now, let me see. The box has been cleared, hasn't it?"

"Half an hour ago," said Watson.

"Oh, well, it'll go in the morning," I said, "and it'll be delivered during the afternoon—mid-day probably. It only has to come up from the village."

I slipped the note into an envelope, stuck it up, addressed it, and affixed a three-half-penny stamp.

"Who'll post it?" I asked. "Don't both speak at once!"

"Rats!" said Watson. "No hurry for that. We'll slip it in the box when we go out to the gym. Let's do our prep. now."

An hour later, preparation being finished, we sallied out to the gymnasium. We didn't forget the urgent letter, and dropped it in the box as we passed through the lobby.

"If Pitt doesn't want these sort of things he shouldn't ask for them," I remarked genially. "Perhaps it'll teach him not to be so jolly sarcastic next time. We shall have to look out for the postman to-morrow."

And we passed out into the Triangle and walked over to the gymnasium. As soon as we had left the lobby Reginald Pitt emerged from the open doorway of the cloakroom. He stood looking after our retreating figures, and nodded to himself.

"So that's the giddy game, is it?" he murmured. "Lucky thing I happened to be in the cloakroom. Thinks he'll take a rise out of me, I expect. We'll see about that!"

Pitt remembered his sardonic invitation to me to write for an interview, and it didn't need much brain fag on his part to guess that I had actually done so. He was rather surprised, and it was unlucky that he had got wind of the joke.

For Pitt was now prepared, and he was not the fellow to sit quietly by and do nothing. He saw no reason why he shouldn't improve on the occasion.

Accordingly, the new fellow in the Ancient House decided upon a plan at once. But

nothing could be done until the following afternoon. For the present, Reginald Pitt settled himself down in Study E and gave no trouble whatever. He was on his best behaviour the whole evening. Already, however, he was on the very best of terms with Fullwood and Co.

The bets I had referred to had been made with Fullwood and his chums—to the extent of nine pounds. They had paid up unwillingly after the race. But as soon as they discovered that Pitt had been up to trickery they indignantly demanded the return of their money.

Reginald Pitt was no fool. He handed the cash over without hesitation, assuring Fullwood and Co that he had only been joking. And the bets were called off completely.

For a day or two relations were somewhat strained between Pitt and the Nuts, but now that he was a member of their own House they took him to their hearts, so to speak. He was one of their kind; he took particular pleasure in smoking and gambling. Unfortunately, Pitt's funds were low, his whole finances amounting to twelve and sixpence. But for the discovery of the plot he would have been pounds in pocket.

The following afternoon—that is, before lessons commenced, Pitt was active. It was just about the time when Mudford, the local postman, would appear with the mid-day letters. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and I were lounging against the gates, being anxious to see if Mudford had the letter for Pitt, and, if possible, we wanted to see it delivered. It was only a trifle, but somewhat amusing.

Pitt, however, was not in sight at present. To tell the truth, he had cut across the playing-fields and had entered the lane half-way between the school and the village.

Mudford was plodding up the dusty road even then, and Pitt strolled forward to meet him. Although an absolute bounder, Pitt had a most engaging manner.

"I say, Muddy, got a letter for me?" he asked cheerfully. "If so, you might as well hand it over now."

The postman looked at Pitt.

"I don't rightly remember ye, young gent," he exclaimed. "Ain't you a new boy at the school?"

"I'm second-hand by this time," grinned Pitt. "You've seen me lots of times, Muddy. I'm Pitt, of the Remove."

The postman nodded.

"Ah, yes, I remember ye now," he exclaimed. "It so 'appens that there is a letter for you, Master Pitt. It don't matter to me if you take it now, or 'ave it at the school."

He searched in his bag and produced the letter. Pitt took it, glanced at the handwriting, and then nodded.

"That's the chap," he said. "Thanks, Muddy. Oh, if anybody asks you if you've got a letter for me—or if you had a letter—say 'No.' Just a little joke," he added, with a chuckle. "Some of the chaps have been

clipping me, and I want to get my own back."

Mudford didn't understand, and didn't particularly want to. But what he did understand was that Pitt dropped a shilling into his palm. According to Mudford's reckoning, that shilling represented exactly four extra drinks at his favourite "house" that evening. Mudford wasn't a boozier, but he liked his drop, as he frequently explained.

"Thank ye, young gent," he said. "I'll mind wot ye say. You boys will 'ave your little jokes, I s'pose."

Pitt nodded, and nimbly hopped over the stile and walked along the footpath. Mudford continued his way to St. Frank's. Pitt soon quickened his pace, and by running hard arrived in the Triangle while Mudford was some little distance away.

"Hallo, here's Pitt coming now," remarked Watson. "If he comes over to the gates he'll just meet Muddy nicely. I want to watch his face when he gets that letter."

Pitt had come from the direction of the playing-fields, and we certainly had no idea that he had encountered Mudford only five minutes before. It seemed as though he had just strolled upon the scene, unconscious of the fact that the postman was coming.

But Pitt's idea was merely to deprive us of the pleasure we should derive from seeing him open the absurd letter. He had no intention, then, of anything more ambitious.

He strolled to the gates carelessly, and Handforth and two or three others came over, too.

"Hallo, postman coming," remarked Handforth. "I expect he'll have a letter for me. It ought to have come this morning, but the post-office people seem to be half asleep nowadays."

"What's your letter, Handy?" asked McClure.

"Why, that competition, of course——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's all you do—cackle!" snapped Handforth. "I don't see why I shouldn't win the first prize as well as anybody else. If that letter doesn't come for me, with a cheque for twenty quid inside, I shall be jolly surprised."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

One of Handforth's weaknesses was competitions. On one famous occasion he had won the enormous sum of five shillings, and ever since then he had had periodic outbursts of enthusiasm. He still firmly believed that he would carry off the first prize in all sorts of contests. Church and McClure, who were permitted to see the efforts which Handforth turned in, held totally different opinions. They really couldn't understand why he had ever won the five shillings.

Mudford halted before the gates, and smiled at the juniors.

"Got one for me, Muddy?" asked Handforth. "You might as well chuck it over now. There'll be twenty quid in it——"

"There ain't any letter for you, Master Handforth," replied the postman, shaking his head.

"Oh, rot! There must be one!"

A careful search, however, failed to reveal it, and Handforth retired in some confusion. The chuckles of Church and McClure did not tend to improve his temper, and the sounds of blows from near by convinced me that an argument was in progress.

But I was more interested in Mudford. There was a letter for me, and one for Sir Montie. Pitt was still lounging near by, and didn't even trouble to ask if there was anything for him. And Mudford made as if to enter the gateway.

"Hold on," said Watson; "haven't you got one for Pitt?"

"Master Pitt?" Mudford shook his head. "No, Master Watson, there ain't a letter for Master Pitt."

"Sure?"

"That I am," declared Mudford. "I ain't got a letter for a young gent o' that name in the whole o' my bag."

Mudford passed within, and my chums looked at me with real surprise. Why hadn't that letter been delivered?

One glance at the Serpent's face convinced me that he knew more about it than we did. He looked quite serene, but there was a mocking expression in his eyes.

I should have been somewhat startled could I have known the actual nature of the little game which he was intent upon playing!

CHAPTER III.

A BARGAIN WITH FULLWOOD—PITT'S PROGRAMME—MY LETTER IS HANDY.

STUDY A. in the Remove passage, was the abode of Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell. Tea was in progress there, when the door opened and Reginald Pitt entered.

"Feeding?" he asked pleasantly.

"Oh, no," said Fullwood. "We've just put these things on the table because they look nice. You're welcome, Pitt, if you don't ask silly questions. Squat down."

"I've had my tea, thanks," said the visitor. "I just came in for a little chat. Thought it would be a good opportunity. Don't mind me smoking, do you?"

"Not in the least," said Fullwood easily.

Pitt lit a cigarette, sat down in an easy-chair, and regarded the three Removites thoughtfully. Fullwood and Co. were dandies, and they generally had heaps of ready cash. The condition of their tea-table was ample evidence of their affluence, for it was heaped with luxuries of all descriptions. The Nuts believed in doing themselves well.

"What's wrong?" asked Gulliver, looking at Pitt curiously, and noting his somewhat abstracted expression. "Want to borrow some money? You look as if you want to say something, but daren't."

Pitt grinned.

"No, I don't want to borrow any money," he replied, putting emphasis on the "borrow."

"Do you want to beg some, then?" asked Fullwood.

"No."

"Oh, then you're going to steal it?" grinned Bell.

"No," replied Pitt. "I want to earn it!"

Fullwood and Co. stared.

"Earn it?" repeated Fullwood.

"Yes."

"Who from?"

"You!"

"That's something new, ain't it?" asked Fullwood, pausing in his eating. "I didn't know I was an employer before. How much do you want an hour? I've got to do a hundred lines for Crowell, and I'll hand 'em over to you if you're anxious to earn an honest penny."

Pitt chuckled.

"I'm not open to accept commissions of that kind," he said calmly. "My idea is quite different. The fact is, I didn't begin at the beginning. Before I go into details, I want to ask you fellows a few questions."

"Fire ahead," invited Fullwood.

"But, first of all, I don't want you to jump up and kick me out of the study," Pitt proceeded. "I might say some things you won't like. If so, just you sit tight and wait until I've finished. Even if we have a thundering row we shall come to terms sooner or later. So why not at once?"

"Where did you come from—before you arrived at St. Frank's?" asked Fullwood politely.

"A school in the Midlands—why?"

"Sure it was a school—and not a lunatic asylum?" asked Ralph Leslie, as his chums grinned. "By the way you're talkin', I should say that you were off your silly rocker!"

"A fellow who introduces new ideas and new schemes is always regarded as a maniac," explained Pitt smoothly. "I'm going to introduce some new ideas—but I'm not a maniac. I haven't been at St. Frank's long, but I've discovered that the Ancient House is in a shocking condition."

"Oh, have you?" said Bell, glaring.

"It seems to be run by Nipper and his set—I'm talking about the Junior School, of course," went on Pitt. "So far as I can see, you fellows are doing nothing. You allow yourselves to be squashed, you never introduce any new notions, and you're practically under Nipper's thumb. In fact, Study A is a nonentity!"

Fullwood and Co. rose to their feet.

"Open the door, Bell!" said Fullwood thickly. "We'll hurl this rotter outside—"

Pitt didn't move a hair.

"Don't be such an ass!" he interrupted calmly. "What's the good of chucking me out? I knew you'd get wild—and I can tell you why. Simply because I told you the truth just now."

Fullwood and Co. stared.

"Isn't that right?" went on Pitt. "Can you show me how you've done anything to wipe Nipper off the map? Of course you

can't! You simply go about in your own little way, accepting the fact that Nipper's top dog, and you're underneath!"

"You silly fool!" roared Fullwood fiercely.

"The truth is generally unpleasant," said the Serpent. "You're only making yourself silly by getting wild. You know as well as I do that Nipper is absolutely top-dog in the Remove."

"You're mad!" snapped Bell savagely.

"No, I'm not. I'm the only fellow with any 'go' in the Remove," replied Pitt. "And I'm anxious to give you the benefit of my brains—or, at least, sell it. This is just a business proposition. You're up against Nipper, aren't you? Well, I'll conduct a campaign for you against him—and send him toppling!"

"You'll send him toppling?" sneered Fullwood.

"Easily!"

"How do you think you're going to do it?" asked Gulliver sarcastically. "You've got a fat lot too much to say, my son. You've got swelled head!"

"Not at all," denied Pitt. "My head's quite normal. I've merely got active brains, and it's up to you chaps to reap the benefit of them. What do you say?"

For some little time Fullwood and Co. had nothing to say. They were momentarily at a loss. A proposition of this kind had never before been put to them. It was something new—something rather startling. Fullwood's dearest wish was to defeat me—by fair means or foul. But I had always proved too wary for him, and he had given up trying. But the wish remained all the same.

"Well, what do you say?" repeated Pitt.

"I suppose this isn't a joke?" asked Fullwood suspiciously.

"No, I'm quite serious."

"And how do you propose to begin this—this amazin' campaign?"

"I'll tell you that as soon as we've come to an arrangement," said Pitt coolly. "The object to be gained is to discredit Nipper and his pals, and to deprive them of all their power. It will be quite simple—and, as a commencement, I'll force Nipper to resign the captaincy of the Remove within three days!"

Fullwood smiled scornfully.

"I don't believe in this boasting—" he began.

"If I haven't carried out that part of the programme by the end of the three days, you'll have a perfect right to say that I'm boasting," said Pitt. "As it is, you've no right at all. Take me on trial, if you like—I'm open to reason."

"By gad! You're a queer chap, anyhow," said Fullwood, taking a deep breath. "I'm hanged if I don't believe that you are in earnest! As a matter of fact I'd give anything to see Nipper overthrown."

Reginald Pitt jumped up.

"Good!" he exclaimed heartily. "That's what I've been waiting for you to say. Now we can talk business. I'm up against Nipper myself, but you've got more reason to hate

him than I have. And you can afford to pay the expenses."

"What expenses?" asked Fullwood.

"Mine."

"What do you mean—yours?"

"Exactly what I say," replied the Serpent calmly. "You fellows happen to be rolling in cash. I'm not. I'm hard up—always have been. My pater doesn't allow me much pocket-money."

"I suppose you try to increase it by playing low-down tricks like that boat-race affair?" asked Gulliver sourly.

"Exactly! But you needn't look so shocked," Pitt remarked. "You'd have done the same yourself, in similar circumstances. I reckon we're all about the same standard. We're not above a little shady work, now and again."

"Speak for yourself!" snapped Fullwood.

"That's what I am doing; and I'm speaking for you, too!" smiled the Serpent. "My good chaps, what's the use of pretence? Why not be frank with one another?"

"By gad, you astonish me!" admitted Fullwood frankly.

"I thought I was going to."

"What's that you were saying about money?"

"Oh, yes," said Pitt. "I'm generally hard-up, and I hate being in that state. My idea is for us to work together. I'll provide the ideas—the brains, as it were—and you'll provide the cash."

Fullwood looked up sharply.

"Are you suggesting that we haven't got any brains?" he demanded.

"What a touchy boulder you are!" grinned Pitt. "Of course you've got brains—of a kind. They're not organising brains, if you understand what I mean. I'm not boasting, but I think you'll find that I'm capable of disting anybody when it comes to finesse."

"To which?" asked Bell.

"To dexterity and strategy," explained Pitt. "As for the financial question, I shall come to you for any money I require, and I shall expect you to pay me ten bob a week while the campaign lasts."

"You're not greedy, anyhow," remarked Gulliver.

"Ten bob each, I mean," said Pitt. "Marriott is in with me, so that'll be two quid a week in my pocket, clear of all expenses. If I've failed at the end of the first week, you needn't pay me. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"I thought you were going to squash Nipper in three days?" asked Fullwood.

"I didn't say that."

"You said that you'd make him resign the captaincy—"

"That's not squashing him," interjected Pitt. "That's only a preliminary round, so to speak. Before we start the real business we want to rob those cads of their prestige. And by forcing Nipper to resign we shall deliver a hard blow. Our programme must be mapped out carefully—"

"That's all very well," put in Fullwood.

"But what do you propose to do, anyhow?"

"Get the rotters kicked out of the school!"

"Sacked?"

"Exactly," said Pitt calmly. "We can't sail in blindly, though. We shall have to take 'em one at a time. And everything will be arranged in such a way that we shall be safe always."

"Oh, you're mad!" said Bell. "How can you sack Nipper?"

"That's not the question under discussion," remarked Pitt. "The first move is to force Nipper's resignation. Are you game? Do you accept my terms?"

Fullwood and Co. looked at one another.

"No result—no pay," Pitt reminded them.

"Hang it all, it's—it's queer!" exclaimed Fullwood. "I don't much care for the idea of paying you, Pitt. It seems to be— Well, it's deucedly rotten."

"Are you so particular?"

"No, I'm not exactly particular," said Fullwood. "But I draw a line somewhere. This idea of yours is like hiring a chap to commit a crime for you. It's—it's beastly!"

Pitt stretched himself.

"All right; I don't care," he yawned. "Take it or leave it—I'm not particular. I thought you wanted to see Nipper chucked out, though. My mistake. I'll buzz along if I'm in the way—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Fullwood hastily. "I'll accept your proposal, anyhow; and I know Gulliver and Bell will follow my lead. But we sha'n't pay you thirty bob a week."

"Rather not!" said Gulliver.

"Well, I sha'n't lower my price—"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Fullwood uncomfortably. "If you want any tin we'll advance it. We don't want any fixed price, as you call it. Come to us when you require a loan—and we sha'n't expect you to pay us back. How does that suit you?"

Pitt grinned.

"It comes to the same thing," he replied. "I didn't know you were so jolly thin-skinned, Fullwood. When you've finished your tea we'll go into details. Don't mind me; I'm in no hurry. Thanks, I'll take a cup of tea."

Fullwood and Co. were still rather startled by Pitt's strange proposal. It was something entirely new to them—and that's why they were startled. By the time tea was over, however, they had grown more accustomed to it.

And Ralph Leslie Fullwood's eyes glittered as he thought of the prospect of gaining power again. He would use Pitt now—he would make Pitt do all the dirty work, so to speak—and then, when the coast was clear, he would step in.

Certainly Reginald Pitt was something of a novelty. He was troubled by no scruples apparently—the affair of the boat-race practically proved that. And he was cool, level-headed, and capable of any amount of

"rotteness." He was, indeed, just the very fellow for the disgraceful work under discussion.

"As for the first move in the game," said Pitt, when the tea-things were cleared away, "I'll just explain an idea that's come into my head. Of course, I shall rely on you fellows for suggestions when you get them. See if you can improve on this."

And Pitt proceeded to outline a scheme which filled Fullwood and Co. with admiration. At the finish they roared.

"By gad, it's a rippin' stunt!" declared Fullwood admiringly. "An' the whole joke of it is that you'll be usin' Nipper's own fat-headed letter!"

"Exactly," agreed Pitt. "That's the beauty of it. He can't deny having written it, because it's his own handwriting. The silly ass has put himself completely in my hands."

"But he'll say that he sent the letter to you," objected Bell.

"I shall deny it," said Pitt coolly. "Oh, you needn't worry about that. It won't even be necessary to alter a single word in the letter—not even a pen-stroke."

Pitt chuckled as he took the letter from his pocket. The envelope was intact, for the flap had not been stuck down with any great security. Pitt took up his ink-eraser, and proceeded to rub out his own name and address. Then he carefully wrote another name and address, and chuckled when he had finished.

"Any used envelope would do, of course," he remarked. "But this has got the Bell-ton postmark on it, and that's necessary."

"Couldn't you post it in the ordinary way—in a new envelope?" asked Gulliver.

"Well, I don't know that it wouldn't be enough," replied Pitt. "But it'll be better to deliver the thing with my own hands—I shall know it's all right then. Besides, I'm not quite sure of the exact address; and we don't want a thing like this to go astray."

"My only hat! Rather not!"

"And I'm going to Bannington this evening, too," added Pitt.

"You'll have to buck up, then——"

"Oh, I sha'n't start until after lights-out," said Pitt easily. "That's one reason why I changed houses. It's jolly difficult to get out of the College House after lights-out, but fairly easy over here, by what I can understand."

"What are you going for?" asked Fullwood curiously.

Pitt laughed.

"I might tell you one day," he said coolly. "It all depends how we get on together. Judging from the start, I reckon we shall hit it off nicely."

And, for the time being, the discussion was brought to a close. One thing was certain: Pitt and his new friends were determined to make some sinister use of my innocent, half-humorous note—which had only been written in a spirit of sarcasm.

What was this cunning plot?

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER LIGHTS-OUT—WE LEAVE OUR BEDS—AND FIND TROUBLE

ELEVEN chimes sounded from the old clock-tower at St. Frank's, and Reginald Pitt sat up in his bed, in Remove Dormitory. He looked round cautiously.

"Anybody awake?" he asked.

Silence.

Pitt slipped out of bed after listening to the regular breathing of the juniors for a moment or two. Then he commenced dressing rapidly and silently.

I watched him, puzzled and grim.

His whispered inquiry had awakened me on the instant. I'm generally a light sleeper, and I was extra light that night. I hadn't answered because I had recognised Pitt's voice.

Fullwood and Co. were asleep, and I wondered what was in the wind. Why was Pitt dressing? This was his second night in the Ancient House—and he was apparently intent upon breaking bounds!

I knew very well that Pitt was a rascal; but I had no evidence, so far, that he was addicted to the habit of breaking bounds after lights-out. Even Fullwood and Co. rarely indulged in the dangerous pastime. It had to be a very special attraction to make Fullwood and his Nuts brave the dangers of "a night out."

And here was Pitt, by all appearances, making ready to venture out on his own! I lay very still, watching him and thinking deeply. I wondered what his mission was.

A visit to the White Harp, in Bellton?

Hardly, I concluded. Pitt hadn't been at St. Frank's long, and in the Ancient House only just over a day. Nobody in the College House, to my knowledge, visited the White Harp. Therefore there was little chance of Pitt knowing the genial Mr. Porlock, who owned the disreputable little public-house.

No, this affair struck me as being queer—very queer, indeed. And something I saw prompted me to look into it. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have dreamt of shadowing Pitt, or any of the other fellows. But Nelson Lee had dropped one or two hints which made me regard Pitt suspiciously. He wasn't an ordinary junior by any means.

The something I saw was this.

Having partially dressed, Pitt took his coat and waistcoat, his collar and tie, and his boots. Then he padded softly over to the door. I knew exactly what he meant to do.

Fearing that some of the fellows would wake up he intended finishing his dressing operations in his study below. Then he would get out of the window and scoot off on his mission.

The very instant the door closed I sat up.

I was out of bed in a jiffy, and I shook Sir Montie and Tommy gently but firmly. They were awake at once.

"Not a sound!" I warned. "Get up!"
 "Begad! What on earth for, old boy?" murmured Montie. "It ain't risin'-bell yet—"

"It's only just after eleven," I breathed. "Pitt's just gone out, and we're going to follow him."

"Whatever for, dear fellow?"

"Because I say so!" I retorted impatiently.

"Begad! That's good enough, then!" sighed Tregellis-West. "If you say so, there's no arguin—"

"Sssssh!"

A sound had come from the other end of the dormitory, and we were all quiet. But nothing developed, and we went on dressing rapidly. One of the sleeping juniors had evidently turned over in bed. But we had to be cautious: we didn't want the whole dormitory to be awake.

"Mad idea I call it!" muttered Watson sleepily. "Just as I was dreaming lovely things! Peace had been declared, and Germany wasn't on the map—"

"Rata to Germany!" I muttered. "We should all like to see Germany off the map; but this isn't the time to talk about that. Don't trouble to dress properly—it's not cold to-night."

"But, dear old boy, I must put my trousers on!" protested Montie.

"What the dickens is the matter?" snapped Watson irritably. "Blow this darkness! I believe I've got my trucks on the wrong way about. Something's horribly wrong, anyhow!"

I grinned.

"Can't stop to put 'em right!" I said. "Puck up!"

Watson was struggling and writhing with his clothing, and evidently getting into greater difficulties than ever.

"Hold on!" he gasped. "I can't go like this! My trucks are back to front, as I thought!"

"That's all right!" I breathed. "You can walk backwards way, and that'll make it even!"

"You—you silly ass!" hissed Tommy. "What's the sense of going, anyhow? I don't care about Pitt! Rata to Pitt! Let him go and eat coke! What do we want to bother about Pitt for?"

"Ready?" I asked, ignoring his remarks.

"No, I'm not ready!" he snapped. "My giddy braces have got entangled with my legs now! I'm in a frightful mess!"

I lent Watson my aid, and in a few seconds discovered what was wrong, and then bundled him out of the dormitory while he was still fastening buttons up with frantic haste. Montie was already dressed, and, considering the short time at our disposal, we had done remarkably well.

Out in the passage all was silent.

"Creep down behind me," I whispered. "If Pitt's in his study, we shall be able to follow him without trouble. But if he isn't, we'll get back to bed."

"I jolly well hope he ain't there!" muttered Watson grimly.

"There's Boz, though," I went on. "That little dog may lead us on the track—"

"Oh, rot!" snorted Watson.

I hadn't really meant it, and I grinned in the darkness. Pitt certainly wasn't worth very much trouble. But I felt it almost a duty to discover what his game was—or at least to make the attempt.

We descended the stairs quickly but silently, slipped across the dark lobby, and entered the Remove passage. The Ancient House was very quiet, for even the masters had gone to bed. Nobody kept very late hours at St. Frank's—except, perhaps, Nelson Lee. And we shouldn't care a jot even if we did meet him. That's the best of having a Housemaster like the guv'nor.

I judged that Pitt would be in no particular hurry, so there was a distinct chance of finding him still in his study. We should be able to see, without opening the door, whether he was within. For he would certainly be using a light of some sort.

But when we arrived outside Study E we were disappointed—at least, I was. Watson was extremely glad. The door stood ajar, and all was darkness beyond.

I gently pushed open the door and peered round. Faint starlight came in at the window—which was partially open. That was enough for me. Pitt had already gone.

"Oh, rata!" I muttered.

Without further precaution I crossed over to the window, and peered through the panes. Almost the first object I saw was a dark figure crossing the Triangle towards the stone wall.

"By jingo, he's only just gone," I whispered tensely. "We're in time, my sons. Come on—follow your uncle!"

"You—you ass!" gasped Watson. "I haven't got my boots on!"

"Put 'em on, then, you fathead!"

I pushed up the sash as I spoke, and was just preparing to climb out when something rather startling happened—something which was, at least, totally unexpected.

The electric-light was switched on with a snap. Instinctively I pulled the heavy curtains to and faced round.

"Collar the cads!" exclaimed a sharp voice.

The next instant a battle royal was in progress. In short, Fullwood and Co. were there in force—and their obvious intention was to prevent us following Pitt.

Tommy had been taken quite unawares, and he was bowled over and held down. So all the others piled on to Tregellis-West and me. The result was a complete defeat—for us.

In addition to Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, Marriott was there, and also Merril and Noys. The six of them would not have held us but for the fact that they attacked by surprise. Once down, however, they easily kept us down.

"Caught you nicely!" panted Fullwood.

"Better not make too much noise, or you'll have a swarm of prefects down on us, and then you'll get it in the neck just the same as us."

"We sha'n't yell!" I exclaimed curtly. "But what's the meaning of this, Fullwood?"

I knew the meaning of it well enough without asking. That sound we had heard in the dormitory had probably been caused by Fullwood, or one of his pals. They had watched us take our departure, and had instantly followed—for they were all attired in pyjamas—of various loud patterns—except Fullwood who sported a dressing-gown which outrivalled the tail of a peacock as regards colour.

"What's the meaning of it?" said Fullwood. "I'll soon tell you that, you beastly spy! You were going to follow Pitt, and we thought we'd stop your beastly game."

"And these are the chaps who pretend to be such good little boys!" sneered Gulliver. "Breakin' bounds at night on purpose to spy on somebody! Yah, you rotten hypocrites!"

Sir Montie breathed hard.

"I'll trouble you to remind me of that remark in the mornin', Gulliver," he said. "I shall then have the greatest pleasure in punchin' your nose. Begad, I shall give you a frightful thrashin'—I shall, really!"

Fullwood scowled.

"Keep that idiot quiet!" he snapped. "We shall have to decide what to do with 'em, too. We can't very well keep our present seats—they ain't exactly comfortable."

Fullwood and Co. were sprawling all over us, and his words were undoubtedly true.

Personally, I was furious. But I wasn't foolish enough to let the Nuts see this. They would only have jeered the more. Fullwood's intervention had spoilt everything.

I could easily have followed Pitt otherwise. And now he had managed to get away, and was far beyond reach already. I decided that it would be better to admit defeat outright. We could easily get our own back at some future date.

"Look here, Fullwood," I exclaimed. "There's no sense in keeping up this rot. Take your confounded carcass off me. We'll all go back to the dormitory."

Fullwood laughed unpleasantly.

"I'm not so green," he sneered.

"I give you my word——"

"Keep it!" snapped Fullwood. "Do you think I'd believe you? Not likely!"

"You're judging my standard of honour by your own!" I said tartly. "All right! Do as you like, and be hanged to you! You'll only have to pay for it the more heavily afterwards."

"Begad! Rather!"

"Better take Nipper's word, I think," said Marriott. "They can't follow Pitt now, anyhow. He's half a mile away by this time."

"I'm running this show!" said Fullwood, with keen satisfaction. "It's not often we

got the chance of strikin' a blow like this. It'll be a good start of the campaign, too."

"What campaign?" I asked.

"You shut up, an' mind your own business!" said Fullwood politely. "Jerk that table-cloth here, Bell."

"What for?"

"I'm going to bind this cad up. After that we'll attend to the other beasts and stuff 'em all into the cloakroom an' lock the door." Fullwood chuckled. "It's nice an' cold there, an' they'll take about three hours in gettin' free. Rich—what?"

"Oh, rippin'," chuckled Gulliver.

Smack!

My fist banged into Fullwood's face with great force. I had managed to take it from beneath me, and Fullwood was momentarily off his guard. He fell over backwards with a gasping yell. The next moment I was on my feet, and Gulliver went flying, crashing into the table.

Before he could recover I seized Marriott by the back of his neck and dragged him off Sir Montie. My noble chum, thus relieved, did the rest for himself. And in the confusion Tommy Watson struggled with his two assailants and got free.

"Into the passage!" I exclaimed sharply.

We backed out, fighting fiercely. The study was too confined for a decent fight, but in the passage we had plenty of elbow-room.

"Smash 'em!" snarled Fullwood furiously.

We were completely outnumbered, but our backs were to the wall now, and we were highly incensed by the treatment we had received. It wasn't necessary to plan revenge for a future occasion—we had it at once!

Fullwood and Co. were punished severely. Again and again they attempted to beat us by sheer force, but they were driven back, bruised and battered, every time. And in the midst of a fierce tussle, in which Fullwood's nose started bleeding, he suddenly backed away.

"Cave!" he hissed. "Somebody's coming!"

The Nuts fled like rabbits to their holes, and simply scooted upstairs at the double. Tregellis-West and Watson and I were left in sole possession of the field. We were somewhat bruised, but undoubtedly the victors.

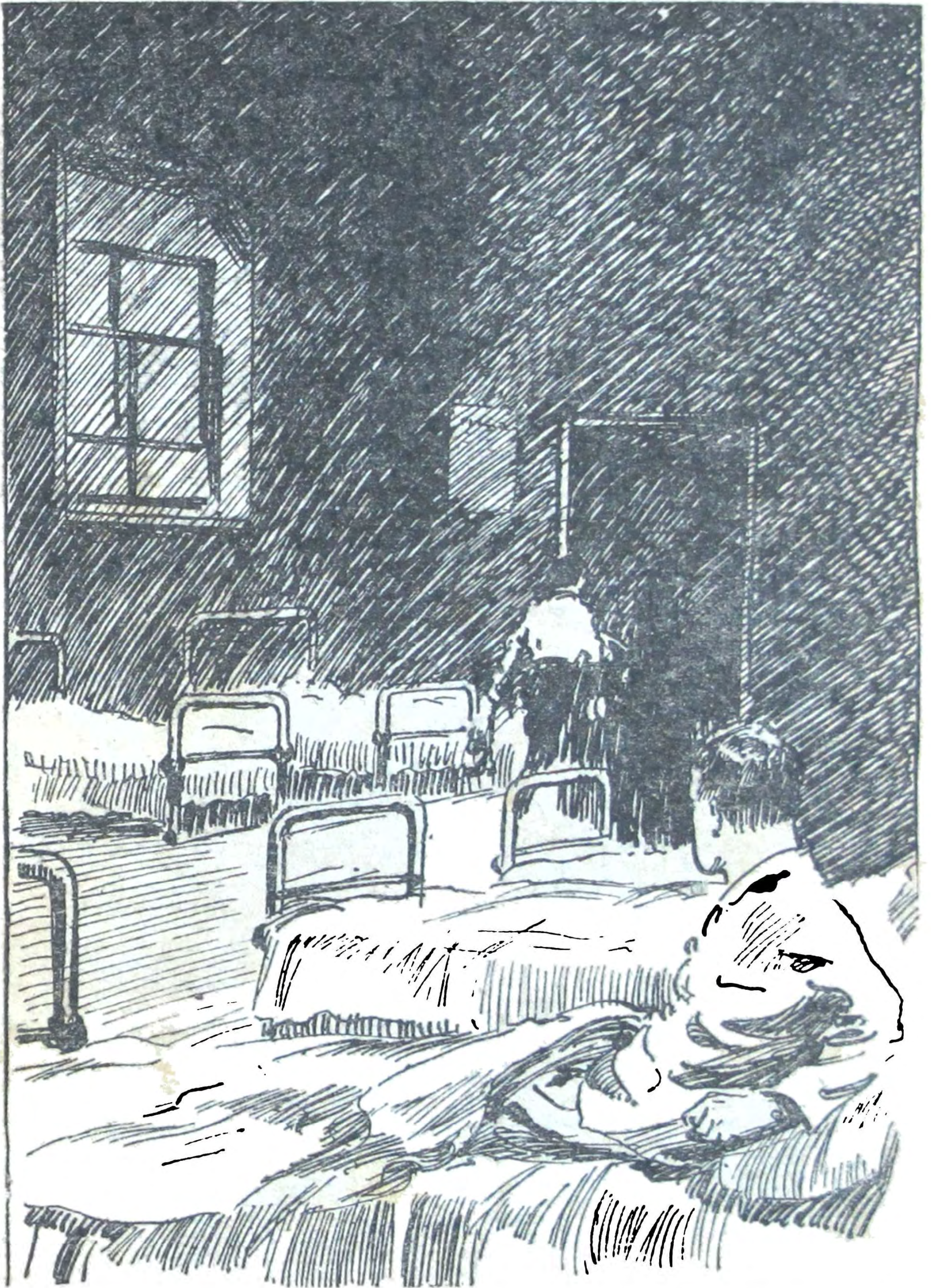
All was silent, and I laughed breathlessly.

"Not a bad dodge of Fullwood's," I remarked. "It was better than admitting defeat, anyhow. He didn't hear anything at all; it was just a trick to end the fight."

"Well, we've won," panted Watson, dabbing his nose.

The Remove passage was a long way from the sleeping quarters, and, although we had exchanged hard blows, there had not been much noise. Even the Nuts had refrained from yelling when hurt—a most unusual occurrence. But they had had no desire to bring masters on the scene, for the punishment would have been severe.

"Begad! It was really worth gettin' out of bed for!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "I punched Gulliver's nose four or five times, old boys. It'll be a shockin' size in the mornin'. But what's the programme,



Sitting up in my bed I watched Platt creep unsuspectingly towards the door!—(See page 10.)

Nipper? I'm afraid we can't follow Pitt now, can we?"

I shook my head.

"Too late for that," I replied. "Confound Fullwood! He's spoilt everything to-night. But we haven't got much to grumble at, considering. Let's go back to bed!"

And we made our way to the Remove dormitory. Reginald Pitt had gone off, and he would be allowed a free hand. We had done our best, but Fate had been against us.

We could do nothing but wonder what the exact nature of the game could be.

CHAPTER V.

IN BANNINGTON—NELSON LEE MAKES DISCOVERIES—THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE.

MEANWHILE Reginald Pitt was cycling to Bannington. He was quite unaware of the excitement which had been occasioned by his departure, and he little realised how near he had come to being closely followed.

But even then—even if Montie and Tommy and I had got out—we should have been faced by a great and unforeseen difficulty. So perhaps it was just as well that we had been stopped.

For Pitt was cycling, and we hadn't reckoned on that.

The cunning junior had prepared for the trip beforehand. The bicycle-shed, of course, was always kept locked at night; Warren, the porter, saw to that.

Pitt's plan had been quite simple. He took his bicycle out and concealed it in a dry ditch next to the playing-fields. It was completely hidden, and, after getting out of his study window, he simply fetched the bicycle and rode off.

Upon his return he would lay it in the same hiding-place, and take it back to the bicycle-shed in the morning. Perfectly simple, but cunning, nevertheless. It was a little point which proved that Pitt looked after the details.

He chuckled as he rode on his way. The road was lonely, and he had it quite to himself. Bannington, he knew, was a sleepy old town, and it would also be deserted.

But there would probably be one or two policemen about. And these worthy minions of the law, although not renowned for their intelligence, would certainly know that St. Frank's juniors had no right abroad at such an hour.

Pitt, therefore, was wearing a light overcoat over his Etons, quite concealing them. And he wore a soft felt hat. In the gloom anybody would mistake him for a smallish man. He certainly did not look like a junior schoolboy.

Pitt was rather glad that the Bannington Town Council had believed in strict economy. The majority of the street lamps were out, and the others were only at quarter-power and considerably obscured.

Everything was quiet when Pitt arrived.

He cycled into the High Street, and then turned sharply down a narrow lane. Presently he came to the low quarter of Bannington, where dingy houses lined the streets, and almost took on the appearance of slums.

Pitt was obliged to dismount from his bicycle in order to ascertain the name of the street he particularly wanted. But he discovered it at last. And then he searched for a particular house. Locating it after some little trouble, he took from his pocket the letter he had prepared in Fullwood's study and pushed it under the door, there being no letter-box.

"That's done, anyhow," he murmured. "Old Smale will think that the postman delivered it by the ordinary morning post. The stamp is defaced, and everything. If he cares to examine the postmark he'll only think that the letter was a bit delayed."

Pitt remounted his bicycle and rode slowly away. He was quite unconscious of the fact that an exceptionally keen pair of eyes had been watching him for some little time.

Those eyes belonged to Nelson Lee.

The schoolmaster-detective was not of the same material as the country police; Pitt's "disguise" was utterly useless against the experienced eye of Nelson Lee. My esteemed gov'nor, in fact, had recognised Pitt on the instant, and had followed him.

Perhaps you'll want to know what the dickens Nelson Lee was doing in Bannington at such an hour? But that's an easy one. The gov'nor was intent upon making a few investigations, and he had had no idea that Reginald Pitt would appear upon the scene. That was a development which had come as a surprise.

Nelson Lee had come over on his bicycle. But at the moment of spotting Pitt he was dismounted and his bicycle-lamps were extinguished. Pitt saw nothing of him, but he saw the junior. And he had followed the Serpent from that moment.

Lee's mission in Bannington was to make a few quiet investigations with regard to the issue of large numbers of forged currency notes. He had been asked to look into the matter by a high official from Scotland Yard, and had already made some progress.

The police had been unable to arrive at any result. They only knew that the base currency was being uttered in the neighbourhood of Bannington. The crooks were wary fellows, and had remained very quiet during the police investigations.

And now a ruse was being "tried out," as Farman would have expressed it. The police had apparently given up the search as hopeless. Indeed, they were quite inactive.

But Nelson Lee wasn't.

The detective was working quietly and secretly. His greatest difficulty had been lack of a direct starting-point. But this had been overcome more by luck than anything else.

While cycling to Bannington, Nelson Lee had been run into by another cyclist. Both men had been thrown from their machines, and Nelson Lee's quick eyes had noticed that

a bundle of brand new Treasury notes dropped from the pocket of the stranger. There was nothing very particularly startling in this, but the man's behaviour had been significant. He had lost his head, in fact, and had given Nelson Lee the direct clue.

Instead of remaining calm and apologising—as he should have done, since the accident had been caused by his own carelessness—he had stormed at Nelson Lee in a blind fit of fury. The detective was well aware that this fury was occasioned by the exposure of the notes, and not by the mishap.

Nelson Lee had followed the man, and had seen him enter a big, rambling house on the outskirts of Bannington, known as the Hermitage.

Lee, although having no actual proof, was certain in his own mind that he was on the right track. While watching the Hermitage, Lee had witnessed the departure of a boy—and had not recognised him. Upon arrival at St. Frank's, however, he found that Pitt had just got home from Bannington!

This, in itself, was not particularly startling, for the juniors frequently cycled to Bannington of an evening. But Pitt, for some reason best known to himself, had lied, telling Lee that he had only been to the village.

Even now there was no direct proof that Reginald Pitt was connected with the Hermitage, but the supposition was most likely. Nelson Lee was in no hurry; the famous criminologist did not believe in rushing things. Whenever possible, he conducted a case quietly and deliberately.

And to-night he had cycled over to Bannington with the intention of doing a little scouting. He had already been rewarded in a manner which was quite unexpected. But what was Pitt, of the Remove, doing in this low quarter of the town? It was far removed from the district where the Hermitage was situated.

Pitt cycled on his way back to the High Street, quite unconscious of the detective in his rear. Nelson Lee was after greater game than Reginald Pitt, but he did not make the mistake of ignoring the affair. Pitt might only be a pawn in the game, but he was certainly a factor to be reckoned with.

Nelson Lee did not worry himself as to the reason for Pitt's movements in Bannington; he simply followed him, and left all problems until he could think them out comfortably. He needed all his attention upon the business on hand.

Pitt glanced back once or twice after he had cycled into the High Street, but he saw no sign of Nelson Lee. This was not surprising, for the detective's machine was carrying no lights, and he took care to ride in deep shadow.

Contrary to his expectations, Pitt did not ride straight back to St. Frank's. He turned down a side road, and made his way to the Hermitage.

"So I was right, after all!" murmured Nel-

son Lee grimly. "I wonder how this boy is connected with the business? The case is growing quite interesting."

Pitt wheeled his bicycle into the gateway of the Hermitage, and disappeared among the heavy trees. And Nelson Lee, having dropped his own machine into a ditch near by, crept forward.

Within a minute he was inside the Hermitage grounds.

There was a side-door in the old house, and it was easily reached from the front garden. Nelson Lee had thoroughly reconnoitred the position beforehand, and he had found a means of reaching this side-door silently and in complete cover. There were many bushes growing near by, and the detective crept along behind them, and at length faced the doorway.

Reginald Pitt was standing there.

It will perhaps be wondered why he hadn't heard the movements of Nelson Lee. Anybody who knows the guv'nor, however, also knows that as a shadower he was second to none. He could creep after a quarry almost upon his heels without being seen or heard.

In the present instance he was rather astonished. He had fully expected to find the side-door deserted. But here was Pitt, standing in the doorway, and he had apparently made no attempt to knock or ring. Instead, he was searching his pocket.

"Confound the rotten thing!" Lee heard him mutter.

There was another slight delay, and then Pitt gave a little exclamation of satisfaction. Without further delay he pressed the bell-push which was affixed to the doorpost.

Quite distinctly Nelson Lee heard the ring within the house. It was not an ordinary ring, but consisted of five erratic jerks—evidently a prearranged signal.

The door opened after a few seconds' delay and a dim light streamed out. This was quite concealed from the road, however, owing to the door being at the side, and because of the intervening shrubs and trees.

"Here again, Field," said Pitt pleasantly.

"You know the word?" asked the man who stood in the doorway.

Pitt made some reply, but Nelson Lee could not catch it. But the detective was using his eyes, and he was astonished to see that Reginald Pitt was wearing a cloth mask which concealed his face to his mouth! This was certainly a surprising thing.

The door closed, and all became quiet.

"Well, upon my soul!" breathed Nelson Lee. "What can be the meaning of this? A junior schoolboy visiting a house which I am convinced is the abode of counterfeiters at the hour of midnight! That, in itself, is startling. But why the mask?"

This was really extraordinary. St. Frank's boys did not usually visit strange houses at the dead of night wearing masks. Such an event, indeed, had never before occurred within the memory of St. Frank's.

Nelson Lee was not given much time to think. While still crouching there, footsteps sounded upon the path. A man halted

against the doorway, fumbled with his head for a few moments, and then rang the bell—in precisely the same manner as Pitt had rung it.

The door opened once again.

"The word?" asked the doorkeeper.

"Silvertown," replied the newcomer.

He was admitted, and the door quietly closed. Three minutes later there was another arrival, and the formula was just the same. And both men were masked.

Nelson Lee's theories began toppling.

He frowned with perplexity.

"H'm! I certainly cannot understand this!" he told himself. "Perhaps I am wrong in supposing that this house is the birthplace of the forged currency notes. Whatever it is, there is no honest business being transacted; of that I am certain."

Another man arrived. He was also masked, and gave the password "Silvertown" without hesitation.

After that there were several departures. Men came out, and cast off their masks almost at once. They walked away quietly, and went in various directions.

"If it were not actual reality I should be inclined to suspect that the whole thing was a dream," muttered Leo grimly. "This queer procedure suggests a secret society. But that is preposterous! A secret society in Buntington!"

The idea certainly was farcical, but Nelson Lee had to take into account the proven facts. Men had come disguised, they had given a secret password, and had been admitted.

Nelson Lee had no intention of letting the matter rest at this stage. He was fully determined to investigate further. And he wondered whether there was any object to be gained by remaining within the Hermitage garden any longer. As events proved, there was an object to be gained; and quite an important one, too.

The door opened once again, and a slight form passed out.

"Haven't stayed long to-night, sir," remarked the doorkeeper pleasantly.

"No," said Pitt. "It's rather late. I shall be here again next week—Tuesday, I expect. And I might bring some friends along with me. They're all reliable."

"Tuesday, you say?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the password?"

"Oh, hang! said Pitt. "There's no need for that beastly formality, Field. My chivvy is hidden, but you know me all right——"

"My orders, sir," said Field stiffly. "And if you're bringing some friends it's all the more important. The password for Tuesday will be 'Something fresh.' Understand, sir?"

"Well, what is it?" asked Pitt.

"Why, I've just told you——"

"No, you didn't," said Pitt impatiently. "You only said that the password would be something fresh. Well, I knew that all along. It's bound to be something fresh——"

The doorkeeper chuckled.

"You've misunderstood, sir," he said. "They are the actual words to be used. 'Something fresh.'"

"Oh, I see," grinned Pitt. "How was I to know? That's a fatheaded password, anyhow. Still, it's as good as any other, and it's quite easy to remember."

"You'll have to come on Tuesday, though," said Field. "The password is changed every night, and I couldn't admit you on Monday or Wednesday, say."

"That's sheer rot," said Pitt. "You know me——"

"We can't be too careful, sir," said the doorkeeper.

"All right, I'll come on Tuesday," remarked Pitt. "Good-night, Field."

"Good-night, sir."

The door closed, Pitt removed his cloth mask, and took his bicycle from among the bushes. Then he wheeled the machine to the gates and rode swiftly away.

Nelson Lee, who had heard everything, remained perfectly still. He was looking rather grim.

"Very interesting!" he told himself. "So Pitt is coming again next Tuesday—with some friends, if you please! I am beginning to suspect the true nature of this place. Unless I'm very much mistaken, it is nothing more nor less than a glorified gambling-den. But I am rather surprised at the elaborate precautions."

The detective chuckled to himself.

"Not so very elaborate, after all," he went on. "The password for next Tuesday is 'Something fresh.' Well, it is an undoubted fact that something fresh will certainly occur on that evening! For I shall risk my skin and gain admittance into this building. I would do so to-night, but it is too late. Everybody is departing, and I am also in need of a mask."

Nelson Lee remained while several other men emerged. His thoughts were busy. Yes, he would certainly come on the following Tuesday. But he would take precautions; he would not rely upon a mask alone. Underneath the mask he would wear a disguise, in case of emergencies.

The whole adventure was interesting, and Nelson Lee was keenly determined to ferret out the actual truth in as short a space of time as possible.

But exciting events were destined to occur at St. Frank's before Nelson Lee visited the Hermitage in disguise!

CHAPTER VI.

A VISITOR FOR STUDY C—RATHER A SHOCK—IN DISGRACE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH stared. He certainly had some cause for indulging in that rude behaviour. Church and McClure stared also, and Reginald Pitt grinned. In fact the little group of Ancient House juniors standing on the steps were all interested.

A visitor had arrived.

The time was just after seven-thirty, and the Triangle was rather gloomy in the deep dusk of the autumn evening. And a slight altercation was in progress between Warren and the visitor, in the centre of the Triangle.

"You must 'ave made a mistake," Warren was saying.

"You shut your lip, my good feller!" exclaimed the newcomer politely. "I'm Josh Smale, an' I don't take no back answers from common porters! See? You show me the way to Study C, in the Ancient 'Cuse, or I'll report you for hinsolence."

Handforth stared harder than ever.

"The man's dotty!" he declared. "Study C! What the dickens does that beery-looking rotter want with Nipper?"

"Better ask Nipper," said Pitt coolly.

He strolled forward, and the other juniors followed him: At close quarters Mr. Josh Smale was even less prepossessing in appearance than the juniors had supposed.

He was a small man, but his face was coarse and bloated, and a cheap cigar stuck out of the corner of his mouth. At least, Handforth judged it to be cheap, by the smell.

Mr. Smale was dressed in an extremely flashy manner. His clothing was shabby, but he managed somehow to give himself a smart appearance. That is, smart from his own point of view. Tregellis-West would have been on the point of fainting just to look at him. His suit was of a loud pattern, and the trousers gripped his legs tightly, giving him a horsey appearance. A light-coloured bowler sat at a rakish angle upon his head.

"P'raps you young gents can put me right?" suggested Mr. Smale. "I'm lookin' for Study C—a young gent o' the name of Master Nipper. Him an' me wants to talk business!"

"Nipper!" gasped Handforth. "Oh, rot! Nipper wouldn't want a chap like you in his study! 'Tain't likely. You'd better clear off before you're chucked out, my man!"

"Rather!"

"Buzz off!"

Mr. Smale looked round aggressively.

"I don't want none o' your sauce!" he said coarsely. "I'll give some of yer a swipe on the ear if you give me any more o' your lip! I'm a gentleman, come to see another gentleman—"

"That's all right," said Pitt calmly.

"You want Study C?"

"That's the ticket."

"Follow me—I'll lead you there," said Pitt.

He walked towards the Ancient House, and Mr. Smale followed him. Handforth and Co. and the other juniors gazed at one another indignantly, but did not attempt to interfere.

"Nipper will soon chuck the beast out!" said Hubbard, of the Remove. "He's Smale,

of Bannington—a beastly bookmaker chap—about the lowest rotter in the town!"

"Jolly queer, anyhow," said Marriott, with a sneer. "What does he want with Nipper? Looks to me as if Nipper ain't such a saint as he pretends to be—Yarroooh!"

Marriott sat down on the gravel abruptly.

"Say anything like that again, and you'll get it worse!" roared Handforth, whose huge fist had performed the operation. "Nipper ain't your class, you cad!"

"You wait and see!" howled Marriott furiously.

By this time Mr. Smale was within the lobby, and Pitt conducted him quickly to Study C—in case any of the masters should be encountered. And a large crowd followed, including Fullwood and Co. and half the Remove. Pitt indicated Study C.

"That's your destination, Mr. Smale," he said pleasantly.

"Thank ye, young shaver," remarked the visitor. "Nice-spoken kid you are. No swank about you, an' that's wot I like. This 'ere door? Good enough!"

He entered without knocking.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I were in the middle of prep, and I didn't trouble to look up.

"Busy!" I said curtly. "Outside!"

"I'm looking' for Master Nipper," announced Mr. Smale.

The beery voice broke upon my ears coarsely, and I looked up in sheer astonishment. A gasp came from Montie, and Watson blotted his exercise hopelessly.

"Who—who is it?" he asked faintly.

"Weren't you expecting him?" grinned Owen major. "He came about ten minutes ago and inquired for Study C. Warren wouldn't tell him, so Pitt obliged."

I rose to my feet, suspecting an ill-tempered joke.

"There's a mistake," I said quietly. "Who are you?"

"My name's Smale—Josh Smale," replied the visitor. "You're Master Nipper, I s'pose?"

"Yes."

"Then you're the gent I want to see—"

"Sorry, but I have no great inclination to see you, Mr. Smale," I said smoothly. "You've made a bloomer, I think. Wasn't it Study A you wanted—or Study E, perhaps?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Funny, ain't it?" snapped Fullwood furiously.

"If you'll go along to those studies," I went on, "you'll be on more favourable ground, Mr. Smale. You're a bookmaker, I think? I believe I saw your name in the local newspaper recently—in connection with some betting affair?"

Mr. Smale scowled.

"No need to rake that up!" he snapped. "I've come 'ere in answer to your letter, an' I don't want no hinsults! Wot did you want to send me a letter for—"

"Begad! The poor man's dreamin'!" murmured Sir Montie. "You haven't been

writin' letters to bookmakers, have you Nipper? You bet me a jam tart to a lump of sugar that it wouldn't rain to-night, but I didn't know that you went in for anythin' more serious!"

There was a chuckle from the passage.

"It's some fatheaded jape, of course!" snorted Handforth. "I vote we kick this boozy rotter out! He's making the air simply horrid! Supposin' some of the masters come along?"

"That'll be awkward for Nipper—eh?" sneered Fullwood.

I laughed.

"I don't mind if a dozen masters come along," I said. "I haven't written this man any letter, and I've never spoken to him before. There's no need for us to quarrel, Mr. Smale. There's been a mistake, and I should really like this interview to close. You won't mind shutting the door after you, will you?"

"But don't bang it!" added Watson politely.

Mr. Josh Smale scowled again.

"If you think I'm goin' to stand this 'ere treatment you're mistook!" he exclaimed roughly. "If you didn't mean wot you said in that letter, you ought to be 'orsewhipped. I'm a busy man, an' I can't afford to waste my time in comin' over for nothin'. See?"

"No, I don't see," I replied. "I've asked you to get out quietly, and if you can't take a hint, I shall adopt different measures. You'll get chucked out, Mr. Smale!"

"That's right!" said Pitt. "Turn on your old pal! I can see the meaning of this game all right."

"What do you mean?" I demanded fiercely.

Pitt grinned.

"Nothing simpler," he said. "You wrote to Smale, making an appointment or something, but you didn't expect him to come so jolly publicly, did you? You're trying to get out of it——"

"That's what you're going to do!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "You're going to get out of it—you cad!"

Pitt did! When Handforth started, there was no stopping him. And the majority of the juniors were on his side, and they cleared a way rapidly. Pitt was ejected from Study C with much force.

He hit the opposite wall with a bang and slithered over. But he was on his feet again in a second, calm and smiling.

"A fellow who has the courage to show up a sneaking hypocrite always gets hard knocks!" he said coolly. "You'll find out the truth before long, and be sorry that you touched me!"

He was howled down, and the interest of the crowd was once more centred upon the events within Study C. A visitor of this description had never before been seen within the old walls of the Ancient House.

"Well, what's goin' to be done?" demanded Mr. Smale aggressively.

"Quite a lot—if you don't clear out!" I replied.

"Oh, I'll clear out!" said the bookmaker. "I don't want nothin' to do with a young shaver o' your class. But I'll trouble you for my expenses, which amount to fifteen bob. You'll have to pay for this funny joke o' yours!"

"Don't be an idiot!" I snapped. "You won't get a farthing out of me, I can tell you."

"Ho, won't I?" roared Mr. Smale.

"No, you won't!"

"We'll see about that!" snarled the man. "If you don't dub up within a bloomin' minute I'll go straight to your 'Eadmaster. Understand? I'll go an' give you away."

"My dear man, you can do what you like," I replied. "I don't think you'll come out best in an interview with the Head. But you might as well be ejected one way as another. Decide quickly, though."

Mr. Smale trembled with rage.

"You'll find I ain't the kind o' man to play tricks with!" he shouted. "Wot about this 'ere letter? Wot will your 'Ead say to that? You signed it, an' you can't deny it!"

He tore a letter from his pocket and waved it savagely. There was a murmur from the fellows out in the passage. Owen major and Handforth pressed forward.

"Did you write this letter, Nipper?" demanded Handforth.

"Don't be an ass!" I snapped crossly. "Of course I didn't—I don't know anything about the rotten thing."

Mr. Smale opened it out with shaking hands.

"There it is, young gentles!" he exclaimed, turning to the door. "Look at it for yourselves! I ain't a 'ard chap to git on with, but I'm blowed if I'll stand any nonsense!"

Handforth took the letter and glanced at it. His expression changed abruptly, and a good many other fellows looked over his shoulder.

"It's Nipper's handwriting!" yelled Fullwood.

"By Jove, so it is!" said De Valeric.

Handforth looked over at me.

"I'm the most loyal chap in the Remove, Nipper," he said slowly. "I'll stick to you right along, but why the dickens did you deny writing this? It wasn't quite the thing."

He turned the letter round so that I could see it. I had been growing very angry. But now I started, and Tregellis-West and Watson started, too. For the letter which Handforth held in his hand was the sarcastic note I had addressed to Reginald Pitt!

I knew that the juniors were watching me, and they must have seen the startled expression in my eyes. I could hardly blame them for misunderstanding.

"Great Scott!" I shouted. "How—how did you get that letter, Smale? Pitt gave it to you, I'll bet a quid."

The bookmaker looked blank.

"Oo's Pitt?" he asked, looking round.

His gaze passed right over Pitt, and I am absolutely certain that he had never met the junior until this evening. It was not a clever piece of acting.

"I'm Pitt," said the Serpent. "Don't take any notice of him, Mr. Smale. He's trying to get out of it, that's all."

"Let me look at that letter!" I said quietly.

"Don't you give it to him!" exclaimed Smale. "I don't want it tore up! 'Old it so's he can't reach it!"

Handforth did so, and I saw that the letter was exactly the same as I had written, with one exception. Reginald Pitt had evidently improved upon his first idea, for he had added "Dear Mr. Smale," and the handwriting was absolutely identical with mine. He had had plenty of my writing to copy from in the letter itself; but the work was executed with great cleverness. Under a microscope false strokes would probably be detected, but the members of the Remove were not so particular as all that. It looked like my writing, and they took the rest for granted—especially in the light of what immediately followed.

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "This is shockin', old boy."

"Rot!" I said. "It's just a beastly joke. That letter wasn't meant for you, Mr. Smale

"Oh, ain't it? Then why's my name on it?"

"I didn't put it there!" I retorted hotly.

There was a yell from the fellows—particularly from Fullwood and Co.

"Did you write the letter?" shouted Gulliver.

I hesitated.

"He's afraid to answer!" sneered Bell.

"No, I'm not!" I said quietly. "I did write the letter——"

"You did?"

"Yes—but I didn't send it to Smale!"

"Oh!"

It was a long-drawn-out expression of disbelief, and quite a dozen fellows gave vent to it.

"Don't you believe me?" I shouted angrily.

"No, I don't!" said Fullwood. "Haven't you just admitted that you wrote the letter?"

"Yes, but——"

"But, rats! Do you take us for a set of idiots? You admit writing the letter, an' Mr. Smale brings it here. An' now you have the utter cheek to say you didn't send it to him!"

It certainly sounded rather steep, on the face of it, and I gritted my teeth as I realised the cunning nature of the plot. Pitt, of course, was responsible. I understood now why that letter had not been delivered as we expected. Pitt must have got hold of it beforehand and sent it to Mr. Smale. The latter gentleman, being a bookmaker, had naturally assumed that somebody had wanted to do business with him. He was generally

in a half-drunken condition, otherwise he would have known that the whole thing was preposterous.

The wording of the letter itself, now I came to think of it, was exactly suited to the purpose for which Pitt had used it. The other juniors, reading it, could not help being shocked.

To all intents and purposes I had written to Smale, asking him to come over, being evidently anxious to make betting arrangements with him and to give him some tips. Possibly the drunken fool had believed that I had some direct tips concerning racehorses, out of which he could make much profit. But the whole thing was absurd.

If the fellows had remained calm they would have known it was a put-up job; they would have known I should never have been so mad as to invite Smale to the school.

But they didn't remain calm.

Everybody was extremely excited, and they only looked at the evidence as it stood, without troubling to argue out the probabilities. It was decidedly exasperating, and I felt like doing some heavy nose-punching. But I kept my head and remained calm.

"Look here, Nipper," said Handforth grimly. "Did you write that letter?"

"Yes—except for the first three words."

"What do you mean, the first three words?"

"Oh, rats!" I snapped. "I'm not called upon to make any explanation, I suppose? The whole thing's a caddish trick, and you're all dotty to take any notice of it. The best thing you can do is to take Pitt out and duck him in the fountain."

"I was expecting that," said Pitt calmly. "You're cornered, and you're trying to turn the blame on to somebody else. All hypocrites do that. You're found out, you cad!"

"I should think he is!" shouted Fullwood. "Just look at what he says in this letter! There's lots of you haven't seen it!"

Many of the juniors pressed forward, and the letter was passed round from hand to hand. Mr. Smale, meanwhile, stood looking on with an air of injured dignity, rendering the air of the study foul by his ghastly cigar-smoke and beer-laden breath.

"Why, Nipper can't get out of this!" shouted Hubbard, who had the letter. "He doesn't try to, anyhow; he's admitted that he wrote it, and that's good enough for anybody."

"Smale came at seven-thirty, too," yelled Owen major. "Nipper asked him to call at Study C, didn't he? It's all down here. He says he wants to discuss the subject of betting."

"My only aunt!"

"Says he's anxious to give Smale the benefit of a few tips!" went on Owen Major.

"Oh, I say, this is a bit too thick!"

"Rather!"

"Make him explain!"

"Nice kind of Form skipper, ain't he?"

"Kick him out!" roared Fullwood.

Sir Montie looked at me queerly.

"Things are gettin' hot, old boy," he re-

marked. "Yet it's so frightfully silly—it is, really. If only the fatheads would keep calm it would be all right."

"Explain—explain!" roared the juniors.

I looked at them grimly.

"I'm not going to explain here," I replied, perfectly calm. "If you had any sense amongst the lot of you you wouldn't want any explanation. But I don't blame you. You're too jolly excited to think clearly. Before I do anything else, Mr. Smale is going to be escorted off the premises. Then we'll talk!"

"Gimme that letter!" roared Mr. Smale.

Fullwood passed it over, and Handforth took it. He held it out to Mr. Smale, and then changed his mind.

"No: I'm blessed if you'll have it!" he bellowed. "Nipper says he didn't send it to you, and I believe him! Understand? I believe him—and I'll punch every fellow's nose who says he doesn't!"

Handforth glared round aggressively, and nobody came forward to have their noses punched. Handforth calmly put the letter in his pocket, and nodded.

"Yes, that letter's going to be burnt," he went on in a loud voice. "Why, you silly idiots, can't you see it's all a lot of rot? I ain't particularly brilliant, goodness knows!" he went on, with surprising candour. "But I can tell a fake when I see it. Nipper's all right, and I'll stick to him, too!"

"Hear, hear!" said Church and McClure loyally.

But their voices were almost drowned by the yells which came from the excited throng behind.

"Thanks, Handy," I said quietly. "I knew I could rely on you. But if we ain't careful we shall have masters here, or prefects——"

"Afraid of 'em comin'?" jeered Fullwood.

"Not at all," I replied grimly. "But an affair of this sort wants to be kept to ourselves. I've got nothing to fear, but Pitt has, and I'm not going to have anybody saying that I sneaked by letting the masters know all about it."

"Quite a good little boy!" said Pitt sneeringly.

Smack!

"And you'll get another one in a minute!" roared Handforth. "Who let this rotter in again? Out you go!"

Pitt, having received Handforth's fist on his nose, disappeared backwards through the doorway. His plot, at all events, was not working quite so smoothly as he had evidently planned.

"Seem to 'ave forgotten about me, ain't yer?" said Mr. Smale roughly. "Gimme that letter, young shaver."

"Rot!" snapped Handforth. "It ain't yours!"

Mr. Smale swore heavily.

"I won't shift from this room till I've got that letter, an' fifteen hob on top of it!"

"You're mistaken!" said Handforth grimly. "Back up, you chaps!"

Mr. Smale was seized. The next moment there was a wild struggle in progress, and

Mr. Josh Smale was bundled out of Study C, hustled down the passage, and hurled into the Triangle. It was probably the most rapid exit he had ever made from any building. He arrived in the Triangle on his head, and staggered to his feet, foaming with rage. A string of oaths escaped his lips—and that settled it.

Even the juniors who were inclined to believe the worst of me backed Handforth up in throwing the blackguard off the premises.

He was simply rushed across the Triangle, shot through the gateway, and deposited in the centre of the dusty road.

"And if you attempt to come back, to sneak to the masters, we'll slaughter you!" bellowed Handforth. "That's clear, ain't it?"

It was so exceedingly clear that Mr. Josh Smale picked himself up and slunk away into the darkness, making a resolve, then and there, to give St. Frank's a very wide berth in future!

CHAPTER VII.

THE REMOVE MEETING—FORCED TO RESIGN—HANDFORTH'S CHANCE.

I REGARDED Tregellis-West and Watson with a grim expression in my eyes. The storm was over—at least, the first squall. We could still hear echoes of it from the Triangle.

Study C had been left to itself by the crowd, and I had closed the door.

"This is what comes of writing sarcastic letters!" I exclaimed. "I was a fathead to send that letter to Pitt. But how the dickens was I to know that he'd make such a rotten use of it?"

Sir Montie shook his head.

"Pitt's frightfully cunnin', dear old boy," he remarked. "An' he's deep, too—he is, really. He's so shockin'ly deep that we don't know really what a rascal he is. Begad! He's capable of all sorts of plottin'!"

"I can understand what he did," I said quietly. "He took advantage of an innocently worded letter to use it for his own purposes. Although he's a beast, I can't help admitting that he has displayed quite a lot of cleverness in this affair. It had to be worked carefully or it wouldn't have panned out at all."

"But I don't understand——" began Watson.

"It's as plain as daylight," I went on. "Pitt got that letter from Mudford, down the lane, I expect. He must have known that we'd posted it, and meant to steal a march on us. Then, when he read the letter, he saw that he could make use of it in another way."

"How?"

"He simply put it in another envelope and sent it to Smale," I explained. "That's the cunning part of it. If Pitt had forged the whole thing I could have denied having written it. But I was forced to admit I

wrote this, and the fellows will think that I'm telling a lot of fibs to whitewash myself."

"You've only got to explain," said Watson hotly. "We know jolly well that you never wrote to Smale, so what does it matter?"

"It might matter a lot," I replied. "The Remove's seething, and the fellows are off their heads with excitement. We can't expect them to be reasonable. And, when you come to think of it, they'll find it hard to swallow the yarn about that letter being sent to Pitt. He must have thought of that, too."

"Well, what's going to be done?" asked Watson.

I looked grim.

"Well, I'm going to take the bull by the horns," I replied. "If the Remove wants an explanation, I'll let 'em have it. There's no reason why I should stand on my dignity. And if I refuse to say anything, it'll only make matters worse. I'll call a meeting of the whole Form at once!"

"The very thing I was goin' to suggest, dear boys!" said Tregellis-West. "It'll be far better in the end. Misunderstandin's are always so frightfully awkward."

Just then the door opened and Handforth appeared. He was looking dusty and untidy, but quite determined.

"He's chucked out!" he said briskly. "Now, what's the matter, Nipper? What's all this fatheaded rot? Tell me all about it, and you'll be as right as ninepence!"

I grinned.

"Ninepence isn't enough for me, Handy," I replied. "Awfully good of you to stand up for me, of course. I'm so grateful that the words choke in my throat. But the fact is every chap with any sense will see that there's been some trickery. You've got sense, Handy—you've proved it. I wasn't quite sure about it until this evening!"

"You—you ass!" snorted Handforth, glaring. "Of course, I've got sense—sense enough to stand by you, anyhow. But what's to be done? Some of the fellows are kicking up a terrific row."

"What do you suggest?" I asked drily.

"Why, there's only one thing to be done," replied Handforth. "We'll take off our jackets, roll up our sleeves, and sail in. There's only one way of knocking sense into some people, and that's with your giddy knuckles!"

"Quite a good idea, Handy," I replied, "but a bit too drastic. No, we'll hold a meeting of the Form in the common-room. If you chaps love me, buzz round and give the word. I want to tell the Remove exactly what happened."

Handforth agreed, after some little demur. He couldn't quite see why force shouldn't be applied. Handforth was always ready to use his fists, and was quite impartial. He would scrap with foes or friends at a moment's notice.

However, a Remove meeting was the best thing: and ten minutes later the common-room was packed. Every fellow in the Re-

move—Ancient House juniors, I mean—was there.

"There's no need for us to waste much time over this," I said briskly. "I'm called upon to make an explanation, I believe?"

"Yes, you are!"

"You can't make one!"

"That remains to be seen," I said grimly.

"The charge against me is that I wrote a letter to Smale, the bookmaker, asking him to come here in order to discuss betting with me. Now, on the face of it, should I go and do a thing like that?"

"We don't want any of those politician tricks!" roared Marriott. "You're trying to get round the question. It doesn't matter to us what you might do; we jolly well know that you did write to Smale!"

"Rather!"

"Own up, you rotter!"

Quite a number of the fellows were against me; juniors I had always been on the best terms with. They had simply allowed their excitement to get the better of their judgment. On the morrow, probably, they would scoff at the very idea of my committing a rotten action, whereas now they were ready to believe it.

"All right," I went on calmly. "We'll take the thing as it stands. I've admitted that I wrote that letter. Well, I'll admit it again. I did write it, but I posted it to Pitt."

"Liar!" shouted Pitt.

My eyes blazed.

"I'll settle that point with you later on!" I said. "How you've got the utter nerve to stand there, Pitt, is more than I can imagine. But, after that boat-race affair I shouldn't think the Form will take your word against mine!"

There was an immediate roar of approval, and Pitt backed away, scowling.

"I'm skipper of the Remove, and I thought it my duty to tell Pitt a few truths about betting," I went on. "Everybody here knows how dead against betting I am——"

"Pretend to be!" cut in Fullwood.

"So I decided to give Pitt a few words," I continued, ignoring him. "Pitt didn't like it, and sarcastically suggested that I should write him a letter, making an appointment. Well, I was a silly ass, and did it. The letter you've seen, the one which got into Smale's hands, was the letter I wrote to Pitt. Tregellis-West and Watson saw me write it, and they'll corroborate my statement."

"Of course they will!" sneered Gulliver. "We shouldn't expect 'em to do anything else. But that doesn't prove anything!"

"Begad! We must really have an interval here, dear fellows!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Gulliver has practically accused me of bein' a liar, an' I feel compelled to thrash him on the spot——"

"Don't take any notice of him, Montie," I interrupted. "I expect we shall be called liars again before we've done. We can't stop for such trifles——"

"Trifles!" gasped Sir Montie.

"Well, leave the thrashing until afterwards," I amended. "The point is to con-

since these asses that the whole thing is another of Pitt's plots. That letter, I repeat, was sent to Pitt. But I didn't write 'Dear Mr. Smale' at the beginning. Pitt added that himself."

"Let's have a look at the letter!" called out Owen major.

Handforth produced it, and it was passed round. Most of the fellows, I could see, were sceptical. Pitt had done his work well, and the juniors found it difficult to believe that the words had been added afterwards.

"Look here, Nipper, I'm on your side," said the Duke of Somerton calmly. "But what's the meaning of this, old chap? It's got 'Dear Mr. Smale' here as clear as daylight. It could have been added afterwards, I'll admit. But what puzzles me is that nothing has been rubbed out—the paper's perfectly clean."

"That's just the point of it," I replied. "It wasn't necessary to rub anything out. I didn't put any formal address, like that."

"Didn't you put 'Dear Pitt'?" asked Owen major.

"He isn't dear!" I retorted. "I put nothing at all."

"Oh, I say, that's a bit thick!" protested Merrell. "He expects us to believe that he started the letter without putting 'Dear Sir,' or anything."

"What's the good of talkin'?" said Fullwood acidly. "Nipper wrote the whole thing—it's obvious. Blessed if I can make you chaps out. Why don't you use your brains? How could Smale get the letter if it was addressed to Pitt?"

"That's easy," said Handforth. "Pitt couldn't give it to Smale, I suppose?"

"He hasn't been to Bannington," sneered Gulliver.

"Oh, hasn't he?" I said grimly. "Where did Pitt go to last night, then? He got up at eleven, after lights out, and I followed him with Tregellis-West and Watson. He went to Bannington last night. It's as clear as daylight."

"You're dreaming," said Pitt calmly. "I didn't move out of my bed last night. You'd better try another one, Nipper!"

I looked at him in astonishment. That he should have the audacity to profess innocence was rather startling. I hadn't said anything to the other fellows because there was no need to make a big fuss. This was the first that had been heard of it.

"You—you awful liar!" roared Tommy Watson. "You ought to be kicked! Didn't you go out through your study window? And didn't Fullwood and his beastly pals drop on us just as we were following you?"

Fullwood lounged forward.

"Don't take any notice of all these lies!" he said calmly. "It's a pure invention of Nipper's. I didn't shift out of my bed last night, and neither did the other chaps."

"Rather not!" agreed Gulliver promptly.

All the other Nuts took their cue, and

uttered a flat denial. The rest of the Remove had slept through the affair, and knew nothing. So it was just a question of believing Fullwood and Co. or me.

Watson and Tregellis-West and I were staggered. We had never believed it possible that Fullwood and Co. could lie so thoroughly.

"Well, I've said all I've got to say," I exclaimed grimly. "I've told you the truth about that letter, and you've heard what Fullwood says about last night's affair. Whom do you believe?"

"Why you, of course!" roared Handforth.

"Of course!" agreed the Bo'sun. "Why, souse my scuppers! Haven't we found Fullwood and Co. lying dozens of times, mess-mates? I believe everything Nipper's said."

"Guess I'll join the company," remarked Farman. "Say, that letter was faked by Pitt. Guess it's dead easy. I'll allow Pitt's a heap smart feller, but he's sure some crook!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's all very well," exclaimed Reginald Pitt. "You seem to forget that you've only got Nipper's word to go on. He hasn't been able to prove anything. It's just what I expected of him—he's trying to get you over on his side by painting himself white. As for my story, there's nothing to tell. I didn't receive any letter from Nipper, but Smale did. That is proof—positive proof. You've either got to believe something which has been shoved before your eyes, or believe Nipper—who hasn't got a leg to stand on. That's the position. Accept his word, or accept the actual proof about the letter."

There was an immediate murmur of approval. Pitt had cunningly got some of the waverers on his side, and he hadn't finished yet, either.

"I submit that Nipper hasn't brought forward a shred of evidence to show that he's innocent," Pitt continued. "And a chap of that sort isn't fit to be Form captain. I call upon him to resign—now!"

There was a tremendous buzz. The affair was developing into a sensation, and a chorus of shouts sounded.

"Resign—resign!"

"All right!" I shouted, white with anger. "If the Remove decides that I'm not fit to be captain, I'll resign with pleasure. We'll take a count at once!"

Excitement reigned supreme. Hands went up in favour of my resignation. Within five minutes the result was known. By a majority of three I was ordered to resign the captaincy.

"That's good enough!" I said quietly.

"Dear boy, this is shockin'," exclaimed Sir Montie, with keen anxiety. "Who's goin' to be captain now?"

"The Form must decide that," I replied grimly.

Watson, as a member of Study C, was asked to accept the captaincy. He refused. Montie refused. De Valerie and Somerton and Farman refused. They were staunch to me, and didn't want to step into my shoes after what had occurred.

"This is rot!" roared Handforth, jumping on the table. "Every decent fellow in the Remove is refusing the captaincy. What's the result? Why, Fullwood will be elected! That'll be a fine finish to this rotten affair, won't it?"

"Get down!" roared Pitt. "Fullwood's going to be elected!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Fullwood—Fullwood!"

The common-room simply seethed with excitement.

"I appeal to all the decent chaps here!" bellowed Handforth. "The captaincy is in danger of being given to the biggest cad in the Form. That would be an absolute disaster. I call upon you to elect me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle!" thundered Handforth. "As a matter of fact, I ought to have been elected months ago—it's just my job. But this is a critical position. You've got to choose between Fullwood and me. Who'll vote for me? Mind you, I've got a distinct

policy. I stand by Nipper to the death, and I think you're a lot of idiots for voting against him. If you elect me—if you back me up—I'll undertake to prove Nipper's innocence and rout the Nuts! Now let's have the vote!"

I watched grimly. It was decent of Handforth to make the attempt to save the situation. He stuck to me like glue, in spite of the general feeling in the Remove. But I didn't expect for a moment that he would get a dozen votes.

But the unexpected happened.

Edward Oswald Handforth not only got a dozen votes, but he was elected! And elected by a decent majority, too! I think he was the most surprised fellow in the common-room, but he rose to the occasion, and made a stirring speech—the main sense of which was that he would make things hum. I could quite believe it!

That evening was long remembered in the Ancient House. Handforth's victory was regarded as a joke more than anything else—except by Fullwood and Co. And Nelson Lee made my mind easy. In a little chat with me he calmly told me that Reginald Pitt would soon get his deserts, and that I merely had to wait.

But quite a lot was to happen before I became captain of the Remove again!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

WILL BE ENTITLED

"Expelled From St. Frank's!"

It is Another Magnificent Yarn of
NIPPER and Co. and the Mysterious
NEW BOY PITT.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

WAR-TIME PRICE—THREE-HALFPENCE.

GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIAL!

The Chums of Littleminster School.

A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

The First Chapters.

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

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGGIN** are two bullies who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Challis takes Hood fishing in a punt, and saves his life. A day or two after he runs away from school to obtain money from his father to pay for the damaged punt. Hood and two other boys, named Fawcett and Raymond, offer to do his lines for him. He refuses.

(Now read on.)

BASIL'S DISCOVERY.

SO he dismissed them, none too graciously, and they retired, to pass out into the sunlight and the fun that awaited them there. For it was half-holiday and the playing-fields were full.

"Pretty rough, John Challis fagging away at all that rot," cried Fawcett sympathetically, as he glanced up at the window of John's room. "But jolly brickish of him not to take us on, wasn't it? Catch any of the others doing it."

"I think some of 'em might, if none of their own Form offered," grinned Raymond. "I say: coming to have a swat at the nets, Basil?"

"No, thanks," answered the fag, turning away. "I don't feel like cricket. And I'm such a duffer at it."

"So long, then. See you later. Ta-ta!"

Basil wandered idly, thoughtfully, through the school grounds, and taking the road that led to the Avie, walked onward until he reached the river. Here, turning along the towing-path, he at length came to the place where the punt had been moored on that ever-memorable day when John had taken him fishing.

The small boy glanced at the pines, and at the swiftly flowing stream, above which myriads of flies were swarming. He fell

deep into thought, and knew, as he looked, that the punt could never have broken away of its own accord. Who, then, was the enemy who had served such a dirty trick upon John Challis?

For a minute or more he looked vacantly at the flowing water, and then as he half turned, fancying he heard a sound, the moving leaves passed a flash of sunlight that revealed a shining object lying upon the ground.

What was it that lay there, inches deep in the grass? He moved to the spot, groped, but could not find it. Again the leaves danced and the sunbeams flashed, and again the glint of silver caught his eye a few inches from his feet. Stooping, he picked up the thing that lay there, and found that it was a coin with a tiny silver ring attached.

He held it in his palm, and, turning it over, wondered where he had seen it before.

It was a coin the size of a shilling, and it suddenly occurred to him that he had seen a similar one dangling from a heavy silver watch-chain that Myers wore. He caught his breath. The coincidence struck him as peculiar, sinister.

If it belonged to Myers, then Myers must have visited the spot.

The coin lay close to a bush which grew near a clump of willows that overhung the river.

With blanching cheeks the boy repelled the thought that flashed across his mind.

Suddenly there was a breaking of twigs, and someone sprang towards him.

Starting back, Basil saw Myers confronting him. The boy was livid.

His eyes were big with fright, and he threatened Basil with his fists.

"Give me that!" he cried menacingly.

"Why?" answered Basil. "I've just found it! Is it yours?"

"None of your cheek! I say, give it me, or else——"

Basil closed his palm, and Myers, guessing that the fag did not intend to part with the coin easily, sprang at him and caught him by the throat.

"Give it me!" he hissed. "Or I'll thrash the life out of you!"

(Continued on p. lii of cover.)

HOW THE FAG FOUGHT A BULLY.

BASIL writhed, choking, in the steel-like grip.

"Don't, Myers!" he pleaded. "I've never done you any harm."

"Yes you have, you sneaking cad! You're in with that brute Challis! Now give me that coin, it belongs to me."

"Don't! You're hurting me!"

Myers flung him away, and rolled up his sleeves.

"I've owed you one for a long time!" he hissed. "Now I'm going to pay my debt in full! I'll teach you to give up fagging for me, to go and toady to a cad like Challis!"

Basil was timidly afraid, and yet rebelled against the other's bullying. Poor little chap, he had always been taught not to quarrel or fight, and since he had come to Littleminster he had been made to realise that it's far better for a boy to take his own part and stand up to his enemies. Then he does stand a chance of being left alone.

"Are you going to give me the coin?" threatened Myers.

"How do I know it's yours?"

"I've told you so. I lost it here the other day!"

"Which day?" flashed Basil, and Myers's face crimsoned hotly.

"I mean to-day. Just now. Just before you came."

"It's got pretty dull. It must have been lying in the grass some time," challenged Basil.

Myers started.

"What do you mean by that?" he yelled.

"Nothing. Only——"

It was enough. Myers, waiting no more, rushed at him, striking savagely at the fag's face. Several cruel blows got home in swift succession, and Basil tumbled into the grass. Blood showed upon his face, and the flesh was cruelly bruised. Myers was twice his size, twice as strong. It was nothing like a fair match between them.

Now a strange thing happened, for as he lay Basil's fear changed to courage. His heart seemed to swell within him. Drawing a deep breath, he thrust the coin into his pocket as he rolled over, and then sprang upon his feet, facing his enemy defiantly.

"You cad! You bullying brute!" he cried. "You call Challis a cad, but he'd never strike a boy smaller than himself! I don't believe he'd strike anyone unless he had the gravest cause. You sha'n't have the coin! I'm going to keep it! I'm going to try to find out when you lost it here, and——"

But Myers was at him with a howl of rage, and the cruel fists got to work again.

This time the bully did not have matters all his own way.

Basil ducked, side-stepped cleverly, seeing what a novice he was at boxing, and as Myers came after him drove his right fist with all the strength he could muster into his enemy's face.

Myers staggered, recovered balance, and made at him again.

Basil's blood was up. Without knowing what he was doing he struck out, struck to hurt, and blows were freely exchanged until Myers, livid with anger, closed with him and tried to wrestle him down.

Round and round, up and down in the grass they struggled, without either gaining the advantage, until at last Myers got Basil with his back to the stream and forced him down the sloping bank, so that he had the advantage.

The fag's feet were slipping, his back was bending. His heart, beating like a sledge-hammer, rose into his throat. Everything about him faded into a black nothingness. He knew that he could not keep up the unequal struggle much longer.

With a cry of triumph Myers struck him in the face.

"I'll teach you!" he panted. "I've never allowed a kid like you to raise his hands against me, and it's going to be the first and last time!"

Just then Basil's eyes cleared, and half-turning his head he saw the river below him. As he thought of the swift current, and the depth of water near the bank at this spot, he shuddered.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help! Help!"

Myers responded with a shout of triumph. Gathering all his strength, he began to push the boy towards the brink. Another moment and Basil would be over.

But just at that moment running feet came speeding towards them, an athletic figure burst into view, and the new-comer, with a cry of dismay, stood for a fraction of a second watching the unequal fight.

Then, with a roar, he leapt towards them.

"Stand back there, Myers! Let the kid go!" he thundered; and Basil, feeling the grip that held him relaxed, dropped panting to the ground.

AT THE NETS.

WHAT'S the meaning of this?" cried Grainger, the captain of Littleminster, sternly, as he stood between Myers and his victim.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself for attacking the kid like that!"

Myers recoiled before the flaming indignation of the captain's eyes, and picking up his cap brushed it surlily.

"He cheeked me! It served him right! I won't stand any of his sauce, even for you, Grainger!" He growled the words mechanically, but dared not look into the stern, accusing eyes that were bent on him.

Percy Grainger, stooping, raised Basil up. The fag was as white as a sheet, and near to fainting, yet managed to conjure up a smile.

(Continued overleaf.)

"It's all right," he managed to say. "I didn't mean any harm. And I wouldn't have fought him if he hadn't hit me first."

Supporting Basil the captain turned to Myers.

"Did you mean to throw him into the river?" he demanded, and his voice was like ice.

"No!"

Myers was very white, and hung his head. "Well, it looked like it. It seems to me lucky that I happened to be near. You were driving the kid that way. Now, I want to know what the row was about."

Myers, forcing a smile, edged away, shrugging his shoulders.

"It was nothing more than I told you," said he off-handedly. "The kid found a coin in the grass, and wouldn't hand it over when I asked him."

Percy Grainger, with raised eyebrows, glanced at Basil.

"What coin was that?" he asked quietly.

Basil drew it out of his pocket and showed it.

"This?" said he.

"H'm! And is the coin yours, Myers?"

Thus challenged the bully, concealing his uneasiness with a forced laugh, moved another step away.

"No," said he. "I just wanted to have a look at it, and he wouldn't let me, that's all."

Basil was astonished. Why, Myers claimed the coin just now! Besides, the fag felt sure he had seen it on Myers's watch-chain. Why should he deny it now?

"And you consider that sufficient cause for brutally fighting a boy half your size, do you?"

Myers showed his teeth in a malicious grin.

"He's Challis's fag!" he returned defiantly.

Grainger pointed along the towing-path.

"Get out!" he cried. "You're a disgrace to the school! I shall have to consider whether it is not my duty to report this to Mr. Evans, or the Head. If I hold my tongue it will only be on condition that I don't catch you at this sort of thing again. If I do, I'll show you no mercy, Myers."

Grainger gazed gloomily at Basil.

"H'm! And what's all this about the coin? Does it belong to Myers?"

Basil's heart leapt within him. He wanted to tell the school captain of the ugly suspicions that were passing through his head.

Yet, perhaps the coin after all did not belong to Myers.

Or, even if it did, he might only have dropped it there that day. To accuse Myers of having cast the punt adrift would be a very serious thing. Basil felt that he ought

to make sure about the coin before he said a word, and so smilingly shook his head.

"I don't know," he answered. "I don't think so. Perhaps I would have given it him, had he asked me properly. But he's always had his knife into me. He didn't like my going to fag for John Challis."

"H'm! Well, he used you pretty roughly, that's all I can say, young 'un, and you showed grit in sticking up to him. I'm glad to see you marked his face a bit. Now, what do you say to a walk back to the school?"

By the time they reached the school Basil had forgotten all about his suspicions of Myers, in the entertaining gossip about sport and training with which Percy Grainger entertained him.

Together they passed the gates, and as they approached the cricket-field, they paused for a moment to watch a crowd of boys who were staring and gaping at the practice that was going on in the nets.

"Going to say anything about your fight with Myers, kid?" asked the school captain.

"No, sir."

"H'm! How will you account for those bruises then?"

"Say I had a tussle with one of the other chaps in my Form."

Grainger nodded.

"I see," he cried. "Hallo, Ponsonby, what's the matter with you?"

Ponsonby had hailed him, and now came rushing up, his face betraying the liveliest excitement.

"Why, a miracle's happened!" he replied. "Here! Do you see that crowd of gaping idiots?"

"Yes! What are they staring at?"

"Challis has come down to have a bit of batting practice. Did some bowling, and fielding, too. He's standing up to the fiercest grounders that Ryder, Digby, Chaloner, Chalfont, and Mobbs can send in, and they lose no time, either. But I'm blest if they can beat him! Look at that!"

The captain, glancing towards the nets, saw the fielders part like magic, and the ball go hurtling across the level of the cricket-field.

His eye kindled as he realised the strength and judgment there must have been behind that hit.

When Challis finished Grainger spoke to him.

"I say," he said, and there was a kindly ring in his voice that caused Challis to stare, "it looks as if you can wield a bat, after all. Hallows has gone crocked. We haven't found a substitute for him yet. Will you play for the Next Sixteen against the School Eleven?"

(To be continued.)