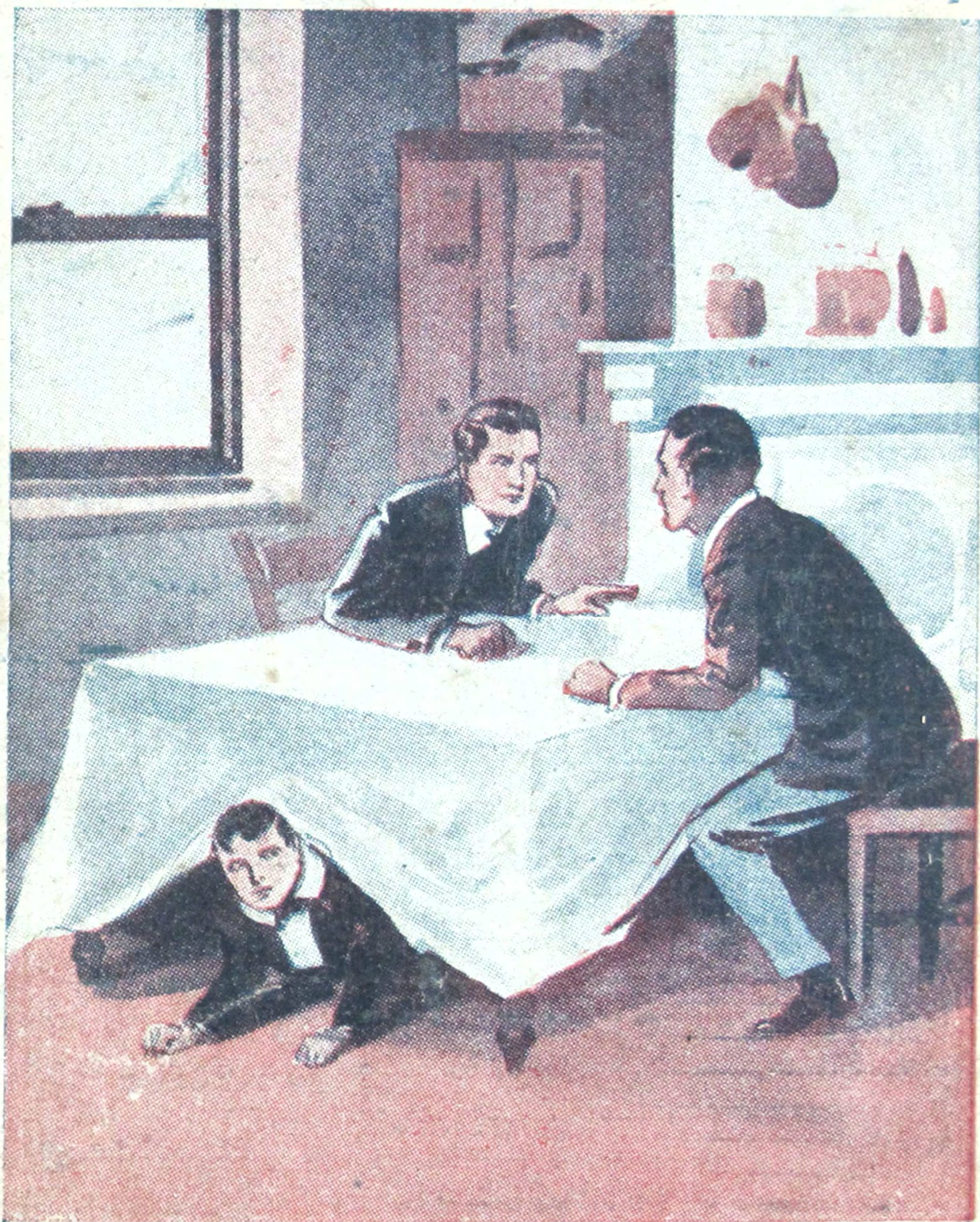


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A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Nipper in Disgrace," "Expelled from St. Frank's," "The Remove on Strike," etc. *October 12, 1918.*



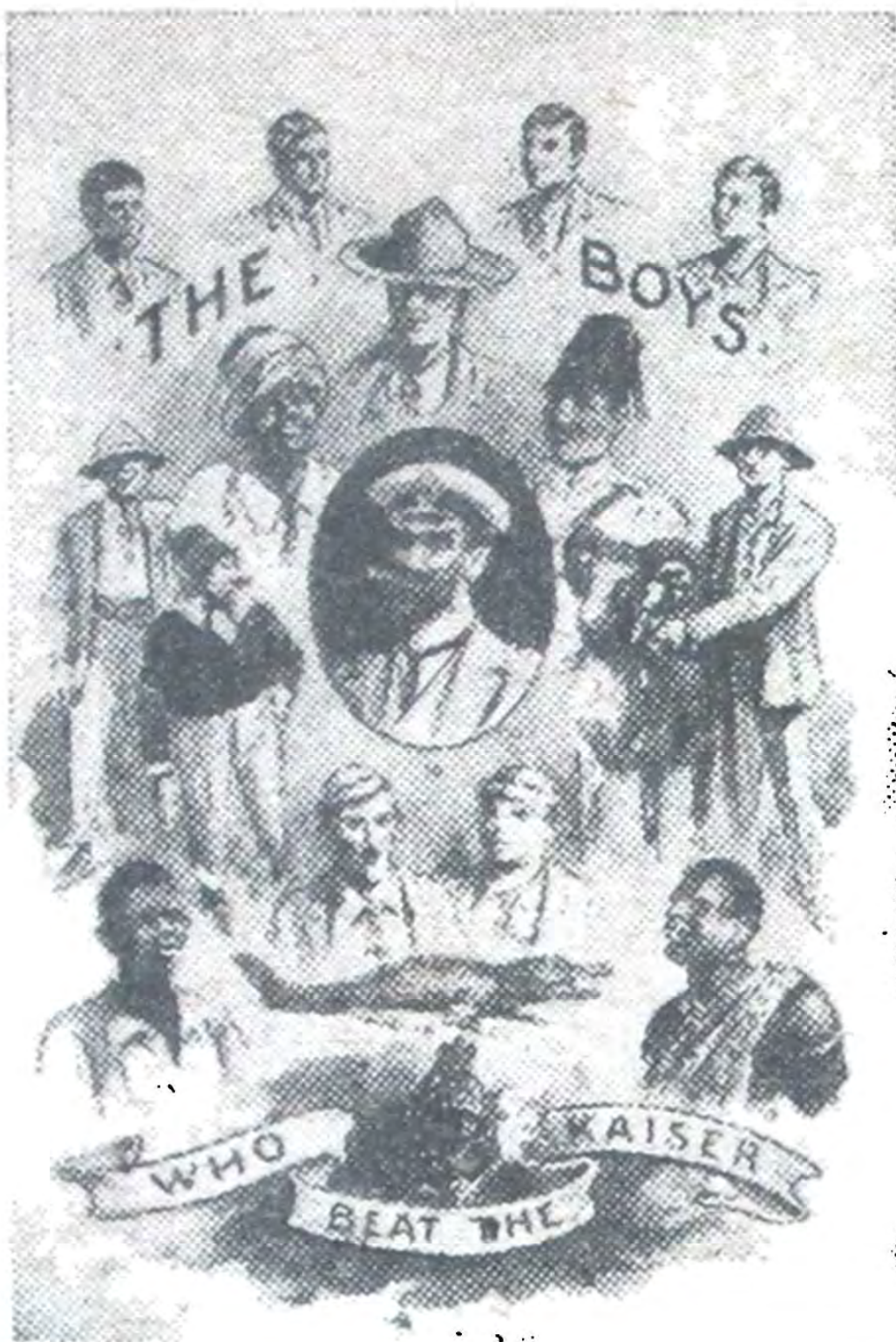
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(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

## CHAPTER I.

### ROUGH ON HANDFORTH!

**R**ALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD pushed his teacup aside and produced a handsome cigarette-case.

"This strike is becoming a beastly nuisance!" he remarked, as he lit a cigarette. "I'm fed up with havin' lessons in the Form-room with only you fellows with me. Old Crowell's a touchy beast, too. Handforth's riding for a fall, in my opinion."

"My dear chap, Handforth will soon take his departure from St. Frank's," declared Reginald Pitt. "Yes, I'll have one of those cigs. Thanks! I mean to get Handforth hoofed out this week!"

"I don't see how you're going to do it," said Gulliver bluntly.

"Well, there are ways and means," replied Pitt. "Tregellis-West butted against me, and he was expelled just over a week later. Handforth will follow by the same route!"

There was something sinister in Pitt's tone. And even Fullwood and Co., young rascals though they were, felt somewhat uneasy. It was so confoundedly snaky—so relentless. In some vague manner his very eyes appeared to flash evilly.

"And what about Nipper?" asked Fullwood, as he puffed at his cigarette. "Nipper's the chap who's been against us more than anybody. I suppose you're afraid to tackle him?"

Pitt shook his head.

"No, I'm not afraid to tackle him," he replied. "But there's a time for everything—and it's not time to interfere with Nipper yet. He's quiet now—Handforth's in the limelight. When Nipper starts his usual game, he'll find that I'm more than his equal!"

Fullwood granted.

"I'm not a very particular chap," he said. "But, hang it all, you send a giddy shiver down my back, Pitt! You speak as though Handforth an' all the rest of 'em are like so many insects, to be stamped on. You're a queer beast, you know!"

"Thanks!" said Pitt calmly. "But I manage to do things, don't I? If any fellow crosses my path—he suffers! I don't allow anybody to get the better of me and boast about it afterwards!"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Bell.

Pitt lay back in his chair and laughed.

"What's the good of being scared?" he asked. "I always take care to make my own position secure—and you fellows haven't got anything to worry about. Now this strike is getting a bit too hot—and it's got to stop. And the only way to stop it is to get Handforth out of the way. If he does something which will earn him the sack, the other fellows won't have the heart to keep it up."

"But he won't do anything to earn him the sack!" objected Gulliver. "Handforth's an ass, but he knows when to stop!"

"You leave it to me," said Pitt. "I've already promised you that Handforth's days at St. Frank's are numbered—and I think you've found that I generally keep my word. By the way, Fullwood, you might lend me half a quid, if you've got it to spare."

Fullwood passed over the required sum with a somewhat bad grace. Pitt had made a bargain with the Nuts, and he was taking full advantage of it. The Serpent—as Pitt was known in the Remove—had started a campaign against Fullwood's enemies, and it had been agreed that the Nuts should supply Pitt with pocket-money. He had seen to it that he never went short.

And while this little conversation was going



on in Study A, in the Remove passage at St. Frank's, Tommy Watson and I were taking tea with our noble chum, Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

This may sound surprising, considering that Tregellis-West had been expelled from St. Frank's during the previous week. And, to look at his smiling countenance, it could certainly not be said that he was unhappy in his exile.

"Dear fellows, I'm not worryin' in the least—I ain't, really!" he said languidly. "Mr. Lee is doin' his best for me, an' I know that everythin' will come out all right before long. So why should I mope, begad!"

"It's a jolly sensible argument, old son," I replied. "When you come back to St. Frank's you'll be given a royal welcome. Why, even now the fellows all believe in your innocence—except a few who don't count."

Sir Montie nodded.

"It's decent of old Handforth to stick up for me," he said. "But, really, dear boys, it's shockin' bad form to have a strike. Handforth is such a forcible chap, begad! He'll go an' do somethin' serious if he ain't careful!"

I grinned.

"We're keeping our eye on Handy," I remarked. "Leave it to us, old man. Handforth is captain of the Remove for the time being, and he's having a run for his money. And I must admit that he's been doing jolly well, considering. I never thought the old ass would blossom out so strong!"

"An' when is the strike goin' to end?" asked Montie.

"Blessed if I know!" I replied. "The Head doesn't seem to care tuppence about it. He ignores us completely, and we're allowed to go our own sweet way."

"Rather surprisin', ain't it?"

"We can't make it out," said Watson. "The Remove chaps don't like it, either. They feel that they're being made to look silly—and I'm not sure they ain't right."

"The Head's a wily old bird," I added. "A strike in a junior Form is something rather startling, and the Head knew jolly well that harsh treatment would only make matters worse. By ignoring the whole thing he's proving his astuteness. His idea is to tire us out—and before long the Remove will get fed up."

"We've already advised Handforth to chuck it up," said Watson. "But you know what Handforth is—as obstinate as a fat-headed mule. He's talking about forcing the Head's hand or something. He'll get it in the neck if he ain't careful."

Tregellis-West chuckled.

"Handforth's a good sort. He's a frightful ass, of course; but even frightful asses can be good sorts. You're a good sort, Tommy."

Watson glared.

"Are you calling me a frightful ass?" he demanded warmly.

"Begad!" grinned Sir Montie. "Fancy you takin' a compliment in that way. But, seriously, old boys, I shall be awfully glad

to get back in Study C again, although Mr. an' Mrs. Ridgeway are treatin' me splendidly. They're bricks, both of 'em!"

At that very moment we were all seated in the drawing-room at the Mount, the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Ridgeway. They were friends of the gov'nor's, and Mr. Ridgeway had been only too willing to invite Sir Montie to stay there during his temporary absence from St. Frank's.

For it would be temporary, of course.

Tregellis-West had been sacked for gambling and smoking and generally disgraceful conduct. Of course, he was quite innocent. But the Head had caught Sir Montie red-handed—to all appearances. And he was really not to blame for having acted so drastically.

Pitt had engineered the plot—Pitt, the Serpent of the Remove. And he had done his work so cunningly that Tregellis-West's guilt had seemed overwhelmingly evident.

Nelson Lee not only thought that Montie was innocent, but he positively knew it. But the only way of obtaining the necessary proof was to expose Pitt for the young rascal he actually was.

The gov'nor could do that at any moment he liked; but he wasn't ready yet. That's why Sir Montie was still staying at the Mount, unknown to any St. Frank's fellows except Tommy Watson and myself.

The gov'nor had a splendid reason for delaying action.

He was hot on the track of a gang of rascals who were mixed up in some forgery business and who ran a gambling-house at Bannington. Pitt was pally with them—or at least connected with them in some way or other.

By stating that he had seen Pitt plotting within the gambling-house against Sir Montie, Nelson Lee could establish Tregellis-West's innocence at any old time. But that would mean exposing his hand. It would mean that the crooks would get to know that Nelson Lee was engaged upon the case. And if they did know that they would probably take fright and bunk.

And this was not to be thought of. Nelson Lee was only waiting to obtain the concrete proof he needed, and then he would strike. I had an idea that he would bring off his coup very shortly now.

But during the period of waiting some surprising things had been happening. Edward Oswald Handforth, who was captain of the Remove—quite temporarily—had conceived the astounding idea of going on strike. The Remove had backed him up, and a strike had been the result. It had been going on for some days.

Handforth demanded that Tregellis-West should be reinstated with full honours and freely pardoned. This was a somewhat tall order, for the Head believed that Tregellis-West was guilty. But then, of course, the Head didn't know anything about Pitt, and that made all the difference.

Handforth was inclined to be impatient,



He considered that the Head needed bucking up. The inactivity was getting upon Handforth's nerves, and he was beginning to realise that the strike was not quite a success.

True, no punishments had been meted out, and the Remove had been allowed to do as it liked. But at the same time the Head had given no indication that he meant to meet the strikers' demands. To be quite frank, it looked very much as though the strike was fizzling out. And anything in the nature of a frost didn't suit Handforth at all.

Tea in Study D had been a somewhat stormy meal. Handforth was in a grumpy mood, and Church and McClure, his faithful chums, had had some little difficulty with him.

"Oh, ease up!" snapped McClure, after Handforth had made a particularly long speech. "Your voice may sound all right in your own ears, Handy, but it's not exactly musical!"

"You leave my voice alone!" snapped Handforth. "I tell you, I'm getting fed up with doing nothing. Why hasn't the Head made any statement?"

"Don't ask me!" said Church shortly.

"It's no good asking you anything!" retorted Handforth cuttingly. "I've been thinking, and I've got a new idea——"

"What, another one?" asked McClure wearily.

"Yes," replied Handforth, with grim determination. "I don't see why we shouldn't call out the Fifth."

Church and McClure stared.

"Call out the Fifth?" said Church blankly.

"Exactly!"

"Call out the Fifth?" repeated McClure.

"What do you think you are—a couple of parrots?" snorted Handforth. "How many more times do you want telling?"

"But what the dickens do you mean?" demanded McClure.

"I mean exactly what I say," said the Remove captain. "We're on strike, ain't we?"

"I've heard so!" said Church sarcastically.

"We're on strike, and we haven't had our demands met," said Handforth. "Well, I dare say you've read in the papers that rail waymen, or dustmen, call out the bakers in sympathy when they're having a strike."

"I've never read anything like that," said McClure. "Why the dickens should dustmen call out the bakers?"

Handforth thumped the table.

"Well, if it isn't exactly that, they do something of the same sort," he said. "Some fatheaded wheeze, anyhow. Personally, I don't see what a strike has got to do with anybody else."

"Then what's the idea of calling out the Fifth?" asked Church blandly. "I always thought you were an ass, and now I know it!"

Handforth glared.

"You've got no brains!" he roared. "Ain't

the Fifth the same as us? Ain't they members of the Ancient House?"

"Not all of them," objected McClure. "Some of them board over in the College House——"

"Look here, you're simply making all these objections in order to annoy me!" bellowed Handforth. "My idea is to call out the Fifth, and then, if that doesn't have any result, to call out the Sixth!"

"The—the Sixth?" gasped Church.

"Why not?"

"You'd jolly soon find out why not if you asked 'em!" retorted McClure. "Don't be such a fathead, Handy. Hallo! Who's that? Come in!"

A tap had sounded at the door.

"Rats!" roared Handforth. "Keep out! We don't want any intruders in the middle of an argument—— Didn't I tell you to keep out, Kemp, you rotter?"

Kemp, of the Remove, entered the study, closely followed by Clifton. They were both unimportant juniors—that is to say, they seldom took part in any activity, being mild youths and not over strong. Just at present they were looking the worse for wear.

"We've come to tell you about that cad Starke," said Kemp nervously.

"I don't want to hear anything about Starke——"

"He's been bullying us," said Clifton. "I say, Handforth, you're Remove skipper, you know. It's a bit thick when a beast like Starke charges a fellow and bangs his head against the wall. I can hardly see straight, and I've got an awful bump!"

"I heard him yelling," explained Kemp. "And Starke turned on me when I went to see what was the matter. The rotter tore my collar off and tried to ram it down my back!"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Oh, did he?" he said grimly. "Starke's been playing the giddy ox, has he? When did this happen?"

"Just now."

"And where's Starke?"

"Gone to his study, I think," said Kemp.

Handforth regarded the two juniors benevolently. He felt rather flattered because they had come to him for protection. As Remove captain he considered that it was up to him to get busy.

"My dear kids, you shall be revenged!" he said kindly. "I'll tell you what, I'll go along to Starke's study this giddy minute!"

"You fathead!" said McClure in alarm.

"Eh?"

"You'll get kicked out on your neck——"

"It would take more than Starke to kick me out!" snapped Handforth.

"Well, it's quite likely that there will be more than Starke there," remarked Church.

"Kenmore, for example."

"Do you think I'm going to allow Remove chaps to be bullied by a beastly rotten prefect?" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "Not likely! I'm going to give Starke a piece of my mind!"

And Handforth went off, full of determina-



tion, leaving Church and McClure discussing his probable fate. For Starke, of the Sixth, was a prefect and a bully of the worst type.

Nobody else but Handforth would ever dream of going to Starke's study single-handed. Church and McClure would have backed their leader up if they had thought it any good. But they knew Handforth, and they knew that he would scoff at their offer. Handforth never counted the odds, and experience of the most bitter nature never made any difference to him.

He arrived in the Sixth-Form passage, and marched boldly into Starke's study after giving a sharp knock.

"I've heard that you've been bullying——"

Handforth broke off abruptly, discovering that he was addressing his remarks to the thin air. Starke's study was empty.

"Silly ass!" muttered Handforth. "Why the dickens couldn't he be here when I wanted him?"

He passed out into the passage again, and discovered that Starke was striding towards him even then. The prefect regarded Handforth unpleasantly.

"What have you been doing in my study?" he asked curtly.

"I was looking for you," replied Handforth. "Look here, Starke, I've just heard that you've been bullying——"

"Sorry," said Starke. "I can't stop!"

He went into his study and slammed the door, leaving Handforth gazing indignantly at the panels. This was past all bearing. For a Form captain to be treated with such brusqueness was altogether scandalous. Handforth wasn't going to stand it.

He reached his hand out for the door-knob, and then paused, rather startled. A terrific howl had come from within the study.

"Why, what the——" began Handforth.

"Yaroooooh!" bellowed Starke frantically.

"Ow! I'll—I'll slay somebody for this!"

Handforth opened the door.

"Anything wrong?" he inquired, rather needlessly.

Starke turned on him in a fury.

"So it was you, was it?" he bellowed.

"You cheeky young cub!"

"Kh?" gasped Handforth. "Are—are you talking to me?"

"I'll teach you to put tacks on my chair!" raved the prefect, grabbing Handforth's collar viciously. "I might get blood-poisoning through this, you murderous young sweep!"

"Leggo!" panted Handforth, struggling violently. "Yow! You're hurting my neck! How the dickens can I talk to you properly while you're—— Oh! You—you beast! Oh, my only hat!"

There was excellent reason for Handforth's gasping cries. Starke, thoroughly enraged, was hitting Handforth right and left. This was certainly hard lines on Handforth, who was absolutely innocent of placing tacks upon Starke's chair. Some other humorous fellow must have performed that operation; but he had not guessed that Handforth would turn up at such an inopportune time.

"You—you rotter!" shouted Handforth furiously.

He was a big fellow, and he delivered several hard blows upon Starke's face. This only enraged the prefect more. And Starke was a Sixth-Former, years older than Handforth and much bigger.

The result was inevitable. Handforth, after having his head banged against the wall, and after receiving many violent blows upon his nose and chin, was left lying upon the floor of the passage.

"That's taught you a lesson!" panted Starke viciously.

He re-entered his study and slammed the door.

Handforth, out in the passage, blinked up at the ceiling, and vainly endeavoured to count the stars which danced before his vision. There was no doubt that Handforth had got it in the neck—and a good few other places, in addition!

## CHAPTER II.

### NOT ACCORDING TO PLAN.

**T**OMMY WATSON paused with his hand on the door-knob of Study C.

"What's that noise?" he asked curiously.

"Sounds like somebody dyin'," remarked De Valerie, who was just passing. "I heard it before you came into the passage. It ain't exactly musical—what?"

"I believe it's Handforth," I said, frowning. "Sounds like his voice, anyhow. What the dickens is the matter with him? Hi, Church!" I added, as Church and McClure emerged from Study D.

"What's wrong?" asked Church.

"That's what I want to ask you," I replied. "Do you happen to know if Handforth has been half-murdered? He's groaning somewhere, and I was wondering if—— What are you grinning at, McClure?"

"Oh, nothing," said McClure. "Church and I have been expecting Handy back—half-slaughtered. He went to Starke's study, you see, with the idea of giving Starke a piece of his mind. Silly thing to do, but it was no good arguing with him——"

"Hallo! Here he is!" remarked Church.

We looked up the passage. Edward Oswald Handforth had just turned the corner. He was holding his face in his hands, and strange sounds came from him. It was rather unfeeling, but we all grinned.

"Anything the matter, Handy?" asked Watson needlessly.

Handforth uncovered his face, and revealed a cut lip, a swollen and bleeding nose, and a much-bruised left eye.

"Oh, no!" he said, with bitter sarcasm.

"There's nothing the matter at all. I did all this myself—I like it. I'll make your face so that it'll match mine if you like!"

"Well, we warned you——" began Church.

"I don't want any of your sneers!" roared Handforth. "Come into my study, you



chaps. We've got to plan revenge. If Starke ain't found murdered this evening, it'll be a wonder!"

We followed Handforth into his study, looking as solemn as owls. Tommy Watson and I had just come in, and we were in no hurry. There was no reason why we shouldn't listen to Handforth's tale of woe.

The door was closed, and Handforth took a deep breath. De Valerie had followed us in, and he was greatly interested.

"Look at my face!" said Handforth huskily.

"That's rather a tall order—what?" asked De Valerie. "We've looked at it once, and we're still alive! But a second look might prove fatal——"

"You—you ass!" roared Handforth. "Who asked you to come in here?"

"I thought you did," said De Valerie mildly. "But if I'm in the way I'll retire. And you mustn't worry about your face, you know. It's not your fault that you were born ugly——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean these marks!" hooted Handforth.

"But you said you did all that yourself," I remarked innocently. "I thought that you had been realising what a silly ass you are—and punched your own face by way of a change!"

Handforth became deadly calm.

"This is what comes of asking fellows into my study," he said bitterly. "All you can do is to sneer and gibe and make fun of me. All right, I don't care! Clear out, the lot of you!"

"Only a bit of fun, Handy!" I said soothingly. "Shut up, you chaps. Can't you see that this poor fellow is on the point of exploding? I'll bet Starke did this awful deed——"

"Yes, Starke did!" roared Handforth. "I just went to speak to him, and he went for me like a whirlwind. Accused me of putting tacks on his chair! I wish they'd been nails!" he added darkly.

McClure whistled.

"Did you shove tacks on Starke's chair?" he asked. "Well, of all the silly fat-heads——"

"I didn't know anything about it!" bel-lowed Handforth. "Do you think I've got nothing better to do than to shove tacks on people's chairs? Starke thought I'd done it——"

"And smashed you?" asked Watson.

"Ain't you got any eyes?" snorted Handforth. "He grabbed hold of me before I could wink, and knocked me about like a straw. I never knew he was so beastly strong!"

And Handforth proceeded to go into details. Then he sank into a chair and dabbed his face. There was no doubt that Handforth was hurt; in fact he was put out of action for the time being. His head was singing like a top and he still felt dizzy.

"Of course, Starke had no right to assume that you had put those tacks in his chair, although your coming out of his study

at the moment looked suspicious," I remarked. "I think this is a case for reprisals, my sons. Starke needs a lesson!"

"I'm going to give him one, too!" declared Handforth fiercely.

"You leave it to us, Handy," I said. "You're in need of a rest. We'll see that the foul deed is avenged. We're not going to have our skipper ill-used, I can tell you!"

Handforth looked at me suspiciously.

"None of your rot——" he began.

"My dear chap, I'm serious," I said solemnly. "Starke must be punished—and we'll punish him, too. But the job will have to be done cautiously. Starke is a beast, but he happens to be a prefect. And prefects have to be dealt with carefully."

Handforth snorted.

"Why not collar him and bump him?" he suggested grimly.

"That's your chief failing, my son—precipitancy," I said.

"Which?" demanded Handforth.

"Precipitancy," I repeated firmly. "If you look in the dictionary, you'll see that it means 'haste in carrying out a purpose,' or something like that. And that's your failing—haste. You're so ram-headed. You don't stop to consider things."

"What's this—a lecture?" asked Handforth tartly.

"No, my son, it's good advice," I replied. "If you had been more careful ten minutes ago you wouldn't be suffering from black eyes and swollen noses now."

"How many noses do you think I've got?" roared Handforth.

"Just a figure of speech," I explained patiently. "Starke is a rotter, and he deserves punishment. He'll get it. But it's no good going to work in the wrong way. I'll see that Starke suffers; and you can sit in your chair, Handy, and recover. I'll report in twenty minutes."

Handforth was still suspicious.

"Look here, I don't believe in this rot——" he began.

"It doesn't matter what you believe in," I interrupted. "You stay here and entertain Church and McClure with your delightful conversation. They'll enjoy—— What's that, McClure?"

McClure winked at me heavily.

"Oh, nothing," he said in a careless voice. "Only—only Church and I would rather like to lend a hand in this business."

"Rather!" said Church promptly.

"In other words," put in Handforth, who was a great deal sharper than his chums gave him credit for being—"in other words, you'd rather leave me alone? You don't like my conversation? All right! Clear out—I don't care! Clear out, and cackle over my woes. And you needn't kid yourself that I didn't see that wink, Arnold McClure!"

I grinned.

"I wouldn't dream of taking your faithful chums away, Handy," I said. "Watson and De Valerie and I will attend to the affair. Trust us, old fellow. We'll wipe out the stain."



I turned to the door and passed out into the passage. Tommy Watson and De Valerie followed me. We all grinned as we entered the next-door study—our own.

"By gad! What's the game?" asked De Valerie. "You ain't really going to wipe up Starke, are you?"

I nodded.

"Of course," I replied. "But we shall have to do some scouting first. We can't attack Starke himself, so we'll try another dodge—the ancient, venerable dodge of fixing up a booby-trap. It's the oldest wheeze in creation, but it's a good 'un. Starke must be taught that he can't indulge in bullying Form-captains with impunity. Starke has been asking for trouble for a long while, and now he'll find some."

"But how are we going to do it?" asked Watson.

"Leave it to me," I replied. "You fellows have merely got to keep watch. It wouldn't be wise for the three of us to crowd into Starke's study—it's a one-man job. So while I'm setting the trap you fellows will stay out in the passage, on guard. If Starke comes along before I've finished you'll both start whistling 'Down Texas Way' for all you're worth. Then I shall hop out of the window while I'm safe."

"He'll think we're dotty—both whistling the same tune at the same moment!"

"Let him think what he likes," I grinned. "There's no law against the whole House whistling 'Down Texas Way,' if it comes to that. Now, we shall want some cinders——"

"Eh?" said De Valerie.

"Cinders," I repeated, "and some ink——"

"Ink!" roared Watson.

"Exactly!"

"What the dickens for?"

"Didn't I just say that we were going to set a booby-trap?" I asked patiently. "It's no good taking gentle measures with Starke. He wouldn't understand a hint; he wants a thorough lesson. And ink and cinders, with the addition of a little mud, perhaps, will convince him that the Remove is still capable of offensive measures."

"Very offensive—what?" grinned De Valerie.

I made for the door.

"We'll do the scouting first," I said. "If Starke isn't in his study, I'll just pop in and get the lie of the land. Then we'll prepare the mixture. By the way, isn't there half a tin of squiffy sardines in the cupboard, Watson? Every little helps, you know, and it's a pity to throw good food away!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We went down the passage, chuckling. By great good fortune we passed Starke going in the direction of the lobby, and safely assumed that he was bound for the Triangle—particularly as he was wearing a cap.

"Dead easy!" I murmured. "We'll do that scouting stunt straight away. You chaps keep guard, and I'll have a look round. We might as well use Starke's coal-scuttle for the job; there's no reason why we should make ours in a mess."

"No reason at all!" grinned Watson.

Within two minutes we were in the Sixth-Form passage, and De Valerie and Watson took up their stand. I calmly walked into Starke's study and closed the door. The coal-scuttle, I saw, was empty, and I grabbed hold of it at once. Then, just as I was having a look round, the strains of "Down Texas Way" sounded very urgently.

"Great Scott!" I muttered. "Starke's coming back!"

It was no time for conjecture, although it was fairly obvious that Starke had forgotten something and was coming back for it. I laid the scuttle down and slipped over to the window. It would be easy enough to escape into the Triangle, for the Sixth-Form studies, similar to those of the Remove, were on the ground floor.

But the window wouldn't budge!

I suppose it was my haste, for the sash jerked up a few inches and then jammed. All my efforts failed to move it from that position—and I didn't happen to be possessed of the qualities of a genie, so it was impossible to squeeze through an aperture three inches high.

"This is where I get collared!" I muttered with a grimace.

But I wasn't done yet. The fact that Starke was talking to somebody else told me that I should have no chance whatever if caught. And I simply slid beneath the table and crouched there. The cloth, fortunately, was of ample proportions, and I should remain undiscovered unless Starke deliberately looked under the table.

Meanwhile the whistling was continuing with great vigour outside. Starke remarked upon the fact.

"Clear off, you young asses!" I heard him exclaim. "Go and make that infernal din in your own passage. I'll clout your heads if you don't shift!"

He opened the door as he finished speaking, and came in. The whistling ceased at once. Watson and De Valerie obviously thought that their duty was done, and they believed, no doubt, that I had made my escape.

"What's the idea, Starke?" asked the voice of Kenmore, another prefect, and Starke's bosom pal. "Why couldn't you speak to me in the Triangle?"

"Too private," said Starke mysteriously. "Squat down."

I felt rather uncomfortable. I didn't want to hear this private business of Starke's. But there was no help for it—unless I came out and revealed myself. I knew that the two Sixth-Formers would give me a great deal more than Starke had given Handforth, and I was not particularly anxious to be made sore all over. So I stifled my feelings and lay still. It was a case of eavesdropping under pardonable circumstances—particularly in the light of what I overheard.

"Private?" repeated Kenmore curiously. "Oh, you mean about that bet the other day——"

"No, I don't," interrupted Starke. "I've fixed things up with Pitt."



"Pitt?" repeated Kenmore, staring.

"Exactly."

"But he's a Remove kid!"

"I know that," said Starke calmly. "But Pitt's a keen young beggar, I can tell you. Don't you remember that I gave you a hint the other day? Pitt knows something about a gambling-house at Bannington—a ripping place, where they play roulette——"

"Rot!" said Kenmore. "That's all a yarn!"

"I thought so at first," agreed Starke. "But it isn't a yarn. And I've arranged with Pitt to introduce us to-night. I'll tell you what, Kenny, we shall have a topping time!"

I listened grimly. So this was the private matter! Pitt was bent upon introducing these two rascally Sixth-Formers into the gambling-house! I felt fully justified in being beneath the table, and kept as quiet as a mouse.

"I don't quite like it," remarked Kenmore slowly.

"Don't like it? What the deuce do you mean?"

"Well, it may be a trick," said Kenmore. "How do we know that it isn't some fat-headed wheeze of those Remove kids? They're up to all sorts of dodges, you know."

Starke shook his head.

"Pitt's not that sort," he declared. "You can take it from me, Kenny, that this is the straight goods. And I've arranged everything with Pitt for to-night. Rather a loss of dignity, of course, arranging such a thing with a mere junior. But that can't be helped. And, from what I've seen of Pitt, he's rather hotter than we are."

"What have you arranged?" asked Kenmore.

"As soon as it is dark we'll slip out and shove our bicycles into a ditch in the corner against the playing-fields," replied Starke. "Pitt's going to do the same. And we're to meet him at exactly a quarter to eleven."

"He'll get collared, sneaking out——"

"Rot!" interrupted Starke. "Pitt's broken bounds after lights-out a good many times since he's been at St. Frank's, so he told me!"

"He told you?" repeated Kenmore in surprise. "You—a prefect? Well, he's got a tidy nerve, I must say."

"The cheekiest kid I've ever come across," said Starke. "Told me all about it as bold as you please—boasted about it, in fact. But he knows we sha'n't do anything, because he's going to let us into the game. I've never played roulette, and I'm jolly keen to try my luck. It's a ripping opportunity."

"Rather!" agreed Kenmore.

They talked for a few moments longer, and then left the study. I waited until the sounds of their footsteps had completely died away. Then I emerged, slipped out of the room, and made my way to Study C. I found Watson and De Valerie waiting for me.

"Where the dickens did you get to?" asked Watson. "We went out into the triangle, but you weren't there——"

"I was in Starke's study," I said grimly.

"By gad! You don't expect us to believe that, do you?" asked De Valerie. "Starke and Kenmore went into the study—and you ain't looking any the worse for wear."

"I was under the table," I explained. "The window wouldn't open, and I slipped out of sight. They didn't know I was there, and went off after a few minutes."

Tommy Watson whistled.

"Jolly narrow squeak!" he remarked. "You're lucky!"

"Luckier than you think!" I replied grimly. "I overheard something, and I don't mind admitting it, either. Look here, my sons, Starke and Kenmore have got a little game on to-night, and we are going to take a hand in it!"

"Any old thing!" said De Valerie cheerfully. "But how are we going to do it?"

"That's what we're going to decide—now!" I answered crisply.

### CHAPTER III.

#### PREPARING THE OFFENSIVE.

**M**CCLURE entered Study D rather crossly. Handforth had asked him to go along and see how the reprisal was going.

"Well?" said Handforth, who was lolling in the armchair. "You're not looking very satisfied, McClure. Nipper said he'd come and report within twenty minutes—and that was over half an hour ago. What's he got to say?"

McClure snorted.

"I searched all over the shop for him, and then found him next door, in Study C!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Watson and De Valerie and Yakama and some other chaps are there, too. They are holding a meeting or something."

"And what about Starke?" demanded Handforth.

"I don't know," replied McClure. "They hoofed me out before I could ask any questions—hoofed me out!"

Handforth rose to his feet.

"Oh, did they?" he said ominously. "Well, there'll be some more hoofing before long! I'm going to ask 'em what the dickens they mean——"

"Better not," remarked Church.

"Why not?"

"Well, you've had one dose this evening, and there's no sense in deliberately asking for another," explained Church. "Besides, Nipper was only speaking figuratively. don't suppose he actually meant twenty minutes. Give him until supper-time, anyhow!"

Handforth sniffed.

"It's no good relying on other people when you want something done," he said tartly. "I'm blessed if I'll bother about it at all. Rats to Nipper! I'll get even with Starke on my own account."

"How?" asked Church interestedly.

"Well, I'll challenge him to a scrap——"



"You'll do what?" yelled Church.

"Look here, don't you shout at me, because I won't stand it!" roared Handforth, in a voice about twice as loud as Church's. "I don't believe in bawling at people!"

"Not at all!" sneered Church tartly. "Bawling ain't loud enough for you, Handy. Sometimes I think that you've got a giddy megaphone inside your mouth!"

"Well, we won't waste time over that!" snorted Handforth, who knew that any argument on that point would go against him. "What was I saying? Oh, about Starke. I'll challenge him to a fight behind the gym."

"Of course, if you're particularly anxious to be wiped up, that's your look-out," snapped Church. "Why, you silly fathead, Starke could whack you with his little finger! And, besides, do you think a prefect would accept a challenge from a junior? Talk sense, for goodness' sake!"

"It's impossible!" said McClure absently.

"What's that?" roared Handforth, glaring.

"It's impossible, Handy," replied McClure. "You know it is!"

"Oh, do I? Impossible for me to talk sense——"

"Oh, my hat!" grinned McClure. "I didn't mean that, Handy, although it sounded like it. It's impossible for you to challenge Starke—that's what I was thinking about!"

Handforth looked suspicious.

"Well, I'll take your word for it," he said graciously. "But I'm not going to be insulted by my own chums! And as for Starke refusing the challenge, I'll see to that! Of course, my form ain't quite good enough yet——"

"Glad you know that, anyhow," said Church. "Be reasonable, Handy, old chap. Starke's three or four years older than you, and you wouldn't stand an earthly."

"Starke is always smoking, and he never takes any exercise," argued Handforth. "If I go into training I shall be able to whack him hands down. Anyhow, I've decided to spend an hour in the gym every evening—and I'm going to start to-night! Think of the glory for the Remove if I won the fight!"

Church and McClure did not trouble themselves to picture such a dream. If Handforth were an ass, there was no need for them to be asses too. They looked at one another rather hopelessly. Argument was useless. Handforth had made up his mind, and there was an end of it.

"Come on!" he said briskly.

"Eh? Where to?" asked McClure.

"Why, the gym., of course!"

"What about prep.?" demanded McClure carelessly.

"If you think you'll catch me like that, you're jolly well mistaken," snorted Handforth. "Prep.! Ain't we on strike?"

"I—I forgot that!" said McClure weakly. "And, besides, Church and I ain't going into training, Handy——"

"You can come and watch me, I suppose?" asked Handforth grimly.

In order to get the thing over as quickly as possible, Church and McClure consented. They confidently expected Handforth to chuck up his training after the first half-hour—possibly sooner. He was always enormously enthusiastic to begin with, but eased off after the novelty had vanished. And training was hard work.

When they arrived at the gymnasium it was gloomy, and the electric lights were glowing within the building. Owen minor and several other Third-Formers were in possession.

"Clear off, you fags!" said Handforth sharply.

"Rats!" panted Owen minor, who had two Indian clubs in his hands.

"I said clear off!" roared Handforth. "Do you think I want a lot of kids bothering about me while I'm exercising?"

"They haven't made you a prefect by any chance, have they?" asked the Third-Former sarcastically. "We've got as much right here as you have, and don't you forget it!"

"Why, you—you——"

Handforth paused as he was about to hurl himself at Owen minor. Those Indian clubs looked dangerous—and so did the other Third-Formers. Handforth knew quite well that the fags would not hesitate to lay hands upon him—Handforth, captain of the Remove!—without the slightest compunction. So he shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, you can stay," he said indulgently.

"Thanks," grinned Owen minor—"for nothing!"

"And don't get in my way!" roared Handforth. "Here, gimme those clubs! Like your chcek, using them when I want 'em!"

"Oh, let him have 'em!" said Church wearily.

Owen minor nodded, and surrendered the Indian clubs. Handforth proceeded to swing them about in the most alarming manner. He wasn't an expert in their manipulation—although he fondly believed that he was. As a result, one of the clubs banged against the other, and they both flew out of his hands.

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth.

"Yaroooh!" howled Lemon, of the Third. "You—you dangerous maniac!"

The fag danced about wildly. One of the clubs had struck him in the waistcoat, but he wasn't particularly hurt.

"Well, you shouldn't stand there!" said Handforth. "It was your face which put me off my stroke, anyhow. Your face is like your silly name, Lemon—sour!"

"You leave my face alone!" shrilled Lemon indignantly.

"I wouldn't touch it for worlds, my dear kid," said Handforth. "I'm rather particular, and I like to keep my hands clean."

He picked up the clubs again, and continued his gymnastics. Within ten seconds every fag had vanished, and Church and McClure took refuge in a protected corner.

Five minutes later Farman and Hubbard



strolled in. They strolled out far more quickly, conversing on the subject of lunatics and padded cells. Other juniors looked in, too, but they didn't stay long. Handforth at gymnastics looked dangerous—and was dangerous.

At the end of half an hour almost every fellow in the Ancient House Remove knew that Handforth was going in for nightly exercises, between seven and eight. And it was generally agreed that Handforth should have the gym. to himself during that hour.

Church and McClure, seizing an opportunity, managed to slip away, and when Handforth finished he realised that he was alone. He snorted rather breathlessly, feeling very much as though he had just come off Little Side after a gruelling game of footer—although, for that matter, Handforth didn't know much about football.

The Remove eleven had been practising keenly of late, under my guidance. Although Handforth was captain of the Form, the eleven positively refused to recognise him as footer skipper.

He went indoors, and found Church and McClure lounging in Study D, reading. He regarded them sorrowfully, and remarked that they were poor sorts of chums for a fellow to have.

Church and McClure went on reading, apparently unconscious of their leader's bitter observations. Handforth was always drastic, and, in order to gain their attention, he switched off the electric light.

"Now go on reading!" he said grimly.

"You fathead!" growled McClure. "I'm just in the middle of an exciting part! Sexton Blake is just collaring an awful scoundrel, and if you leave the light out much longer he'll escape!"

Handforth switched the lights on again.

"I suppose you think that's funny?" he asked pityingly. "Blow Sexton Blake! You've got to come along with me to Nipper's study. I want to know what he's done about Starke."

"Well, we ain't stopping you!" snapped McClure rebelliously. "Dash it all, Handy, you can go without us, I suppose? I want to get this yarn finished before bed-time—"

"My dear ass, it doesn't matter to me what you want!" said Handforth. "Are you coming or not? Can't you see that I'm used up? I shall want you to stand up for me, in case those asses get playing the giddy ox!"

Church looked surprised.

"But I thought you'd just been training?" he asked.

"So I have."

"Then you ought to be a lot stronger—"

"You ass! I'm feeling as weak as a rat!"

"Then it's a poor look-out for you when you challenge Starke!" said Church. "If you're weaker, Handy, after one hour of practice, you'll be like a giddy reed when the fight comes off!"

Handforth made no attempt to argue. He proceeded to turn his cuffs back—as an

indication that he wasn't nearly so weak as he tried to make out. And his chums, knowing that further reading was quite out of the question, rose from their chairs and sighed.

"All right," said McClure, "we'll come. Anything for a quiet life!"

They all went out of their study and marched into the apartment next door. At that moment I was talking to Watson and De Valerie and Tom Burton and the Duke of Somerton and Yakama. They were all grinning, and I was grinning.

"What's the joke?" asked Handforth.

"Little boys shouldn't intrude!" I said, looking up. "And it's generally the rule, Handforth, to tap on a door before entering. You shouldn't forget these little—"

"Look here, I don't want any of your sneers!" roared Handforth. "What about Starke?"

"Oh, I haven't forgotten Starke," I replied, grinning.

"What about your promise?"

"My dear chap, I did my best to fulfil it, but Fate was against me," I explained. "And we're just planning a nice little surprise for Starke—and Kenmore will be included, too. Don't you worry, Handy—you'll be avenged. Starke's going to suffer horribly to-night."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle about!" said Handforth tartly. "What's the wheeze? Explain, you grinning asses."

I shook my head.

"You'll know all about it to-morrow," I said kindly. "Just run away now, Handy, and have patience. Your uncles will see to it that Starke pays the price!"

Handforth deliberately closed the door, and then planted himself in front of us. There was a very grim expression upon his face.

"You seem to forget that I'm captain of the Remove," he said firmly. "And you won't mind my pointing out that I'm ready to punch the nose of any fellow who butts up against me. Starke played a dirty trick on me, and he's got to get it in the neck. And yet you have the terrific nerve to leave me out of the wheeze. Now, I ask you, quite calmly, is it playing the game?"

"Well spoken, O Cæsar!" I grinned. "As a matter of fact, I was only rotting, Handy. If you hadn't come in just now we should have sent for you. To work this wheeze without your invaluable assistance would have been a disaster."

Handforth nodded.

"Exactly!" he agreed. "And I'm very pleased to find, Nipper, that you've got the decency to admit your fault. My opinion of you has improved wonderfully."

"Oh, good!" I said. "Now we'll get to business. First of all, Handy—and you other chaps, too—you've got to understand that I'm going to let you into a secret. At short, you'll have to become parties to a sinister plot."

"Wouldn't it be better to explain?" suggested Handforth pointedly.

I did explain—to a certain extent. I told Handforth, as I had already told the others,



what had occurred in Starke's study. And for the first time Handforth and Co. learned about the gambling-house at Bannington, run by two men named Field and Sales.

I hadn't known much about the gambling-house myself until recently—until Nelson Lee had let me into the secret. And I knew that these juniors would not betray the confidence. Besides, I didn't tell them much, in any case.

By the time I had finished Handforth and Church and McClure were grinning. There was a light of keen enjoyment and anticipation in their eyes.

"Thundering good!" declared Handforth. "In fact, it's so jolly good, Nipper, that I couldn't have thought of anything better myself!"

"Don't!" I said pleadingly. "You'll make me conceited, Handy! If you couldn't have thought of anything better, then the idea must be good!"

"I am not of the opinion that the preposterous Starke will think tremendously of the superb wheeze!" remarked Yakama, beaming. "Indeed, he will probably declare that the idea is of the most painfully rotten description!"

"I shouldn't be surprised!" I grinned. "But then, you see, Starke will look at it from a different point of view—and that makes all the difference."

The Duke of Somerton nodded.

"Rather!" he chuckled. "We think it's funny; but Starke won't, old chap!"

"Well, don't forget the details," I said. "Everything depends upon us working together, and we mustn't make any blunders. So let's put our heads together and go over it again."

And for the next ten minutes there was much whispering in Study C. Meanwhile Starke and Kenmore were in their own apartment, looking keenly forward to their night out.

They wouldn't have been half so keen if they could have foreseen exactly what was to actually happen!

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE SPOOFING OF STARKE AND KENMORE.

TEN-THIRTY boomed out solemnly.

St. Frank's was asleep; or, at least, should have been asleep. That is to say, the boys, seniors and juniors, were supposed to be snugly in their beds at that hour.

Starke and Kenmore, of the Sixth, shared a small bedroom. Being prefects and Sixth-Formers, they were privileged in this way. And as the half-hour struck Starke got up from his bed.

"Time for us to make a move, old man," he said pleasantly. "Switch that electric torch of yours on—and don't show it on the window."

There was no reply, and Starke grunted. Both he and Kenmore were fully dressed, and had been lying on the outside of their

beds until now. Kenmore apparently had fallen asleep.

Starke groped his way across and shook him. Then he found the electric torch and switched it on; it wouldn't have been wise to turn on the ordinary electric light, for all the masters were not yet in bed, and even seniors were not supposed to have lights burning at ten-thirty.

Kenmore yawned.

"Think we'd better go?" he asked sleepily. "The wind's a bit high, by the sound of it, and pretty cold, too. And it might rain, Starke. I loathe cycling in the rain——"

"The night's as clear as a bell, you idiot!" exclaimed Starke. "But if you like to stay here, I don't mind. I thought you wanted to have a go at that roulette table?"

"I suppose we'd better go," said Kenmore, without enthusiasm.

The precious pair were soon ready, and then they crept out, carrying their boots in their hands. Being prefects, they were supposed to be model youths; but Starke and Kenmore were only models of rascality. Hitherto their night jaunts had been down to the White Harp, in Bellton, where they played billiards for money. But this was to be something quite different—something of a novelty. And Pitt, of the Remove, was to introduce them to it.

They got out without mishap, and silently crossed the Triangle to the secluded corner against the playing-fields. It wasn't quite a quarter to eleven yet, but a dark form was waiting against the trees.

"Here in good time," he remarked calmly. "All the better. We shall be able to start at once and get there in heaps of time for a spell of excitement."

"You're sure it's safe, Pitt?" asked Kenmore, recognising the junior's voice. "I mean, we sha'n't get collared?"

The Serpent gave his soft, oily laugh.

"As safe as eggs!" he declared. "Why shouldn't it be? We shall be wearing masks, so there's no fear of us being recognised. In fact it would be as well to put your masks on at once—in case a master spots us. I've got mine on, anyhow."

Starke and Kenmore peered forward.

"You young ass!" grinned Starke. "You look like a giddy burglar!"

"I believe in being on the safe side," said Pitt.

"So do I; but there's no sense in going to extremes," said Starke. "Why, if the village bobby flashed his light on us as we passed he'd have a fit. Take the silly thing off!"

Pitt laughed, but didn't accept the advice. Instead he walked along the hedge and felt for his bicycle. Starke and Kenmore obtained their machines a moment later, and then the three started off down the road towards Bellton. They didn't light their lamps until they were some little distance from the school.

"We're in your hands, remember," said Starke, as they rode along. "If this place



ain't what you've described, Pitt, you'll get slaughtered. And you haven't told me much about it, anyhow. Whereabouts is the house, to begin with?"

"Walt and see!" said Pitt easily.

"You cheeky young bounder——"

"Oh, don't be dotty!" said the Serpent.

"We don't want to talk about it on the open road, do we? Let's ride quietly."

This was really good advice, and Starke and Kenmore realised it. They offered no further comment as they cycled along. Pitt led the way, and only made one or two remarks concerning the weather—in which Starke and Kenmore were not at all interested.

At last Pitt slowed down.

"Here we are," he announced.

"But we haven't got to Bannington yet," said Starke, looking at the dark trees which grew on both sides of the road. "Bannington's half a mile further on."

"All the better," said Pitt. "Follow me, and I'll lead you to the spot."

He jumped off his bicycle just in front of a big gate. Looming beyond was a fairly large building, and Starke vaguely remembered having seen it before.

"Why, it's Farmer Stock's old barn!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Look here, Pitt, what's the idea?"

Pitt laughed.

"Didn't you ask me to take you to the gambling-house?" he said softly. "Well, wait until you get inside this old building before you start grumbling. Have you got any money on you? You ought to have two or three quid——"

"That's all right," said Starke. "I've got over a fiver; but I'm not going to risk the lot of it. I'll watch some of the others playing first. But how the deuce can a roulette-table be run inside a barn?"

"Seems a bit queer," commented Kenmore.

"Oh, come on!" said Pitt impatiently. "Where did you expect the roulette-table to be—in the saloon of a public-house? You seem to forget it's against the law."

"Oh, all right," said Starke. "Lead the way!"

"What about our bikes?" asked Kenmore.

His machine was a brand-new one, and he took particular care of it.

"We'll leave them against the hedge, just inside the gate," said Pitt. "They'll be quite safe there, and handy when we leave."

Kenmore grumbled, but left his bike against the hedge. Then Pitt led the way round the back of the barn and paused in front of a small door at the rear.

"Shove your masks on!" he said softly.

"Oh, my hat!" said Starke. "I'd forgotten!"

He and Kenmore hastily donned the cloth masks which they had manufactured early in the evening. They were intensely curious, and couldn't quite understand how a roulette-table could be run successfully in this old farm building, which, to all appearances, was completely deserted.

Pitt gave five curious raps upon the door. It was opened almost at once, and a form in a long overcoat stood revealed in the gloom. He, too, was masked, and wore a big slouch hat. He peered forward.

"Welcome, friends!" he said in a deep voice. "You know the password?"

"Three Castles!" said Pitt promptly.

"It is well!" remarked the doorkeeper. "Pass, friends!"

They all entered, Starke and Kenmore much impressed. The two prefects had visions of a wonderful underground gambling-den, hidden from the light of day—for they had enough sense to realise that a roulette-table could scarcely be run in a barn which was constantly used for farm-work.

"Here, I say, it's awfully dark!" muttered Kenmore. "Where the deuce are you, Pitt?"

There came a low, fiendish chuckle.

"Trapped!" hissed a voice. "Trapped! Ha, ha!"

"Up with the lights!" exclaimed another voice.

Four electric torches blazed out, and Starke and Kenmore stood in the centre of the glaring beams. They were thoroughly startled, and blinked in the light in a bewildered fashion.

"On 'em!" came a sharp order.

Before the two prefects could fully grasp what was happening several of the masked figures piled upon them and bowled them over. Starke fought like a demon.

"It's a trick!" he roared. "By George, we've been tricked!"

"Very neatly!" grinned Reginald Pitt, who was sitting on Starke's chest. "Hurry up with those ropes, you fatheads—I mean comrades!"

"Keep your giddy hair on!" came a bellow.

Starke uttered a roar.

"Handforth!" he panted. "I'd know that voice anywhere!"

"Silly ass!" came several hisses. "You'll give the whole show away!"

"Rot!" said the bellow. "Do you think this beast can recognise my voice? Not likely! I've disguised it!"

"You silly fathead!" said Pitt hotly.

Meanwhile Starke and Kenmore struggled in vain. In a very short time they were roped up securely. They had caught one or two glimpses of masked figures, but had not recognised anybody. They had, however, recognised one certain voice. They knew that Edward Oswald Handforth was a member of this party—and that gave them the direct clue. They had been spoofed by Removites!

"By gad! I'll make you pay for this, Pitt!" snarled Starke savagely. "I'll make your life a misery——"

Pitt chuckled.

"That wouldn't be fair!" he said. "As it happens, I ain't Pitt at all—that's why I wore the mask from the start. So don't come down heavy on Pitt for this affair."

He had changed his voice whilst speaking.



and Starke and Kenmore realised how completely they had been duped. And although they were satisfied that the fellow wasn't Pitt, they couldn't determine his actual identity, which made them rave.

Of course, I expect it's been guessed long ago that Pitt was actually an enterprising junior of the name of Nipper—in other words, myself. Anyhow, that's the truth. It was I who had met Starke and Kenmore at the corner of the playing-fields.

I'm not in the habit of blowing my own trumpet, and so I won't do it. But all the other fellows asserted that my imitation of Pitt's voice was first-class. And when I altered my tone I didn't use my own voice—that would have been silly.

The other conspirators were Watson and De Valerie, Yakama, Burtou, and the Duke, and Handforth and Co. As usual, Handforth had put his foot in it. But this didn't matter so much, for Starke and Kenmore would have guessed the truth in any case. And they would know better than to punish Handforth for what had occurred. They wouldn't want this affair to come to the ears of the Head.

"You young rotters!" snarled Kenmore. "We'll find out the truth of this!"

"I fancy you've found it out already!" I grinned. "The truth is, you've been dished! We don't allow prefects to visit gambling-dens; and that's why you've been brought here."

"If you don't release us at once we'll half-kill you to-morrow!" said Starke violently. "We'll find out your names!"

"Threats ain't very alarming," I replied calmly. "I told you to wait until you got inside before grumbling, didn't I? Well, you can grumble now till your hearts are content! And I hope this will be a lesson to you!"

Starke nearly choked.

"Ain't—ain't you going to set us free?" he panted.

"Not likely!" exclaimed three or four voices.

"We're going to leave you here, to ponder over your misdeeds," I explained sweetly. "I dare say you'll be released after an hour or two; but it'll be too late then to go to any beastly gambling-house. You ought to thank us heartily, Starke."

"Listen to him thanking us!" grinned De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Starke was raving, and Kenmore proved an able second. But their threats were idle and their efforts to get free were useless.

"Yes, you ought to thank us," I went on. "Think of the money we've saved you! At that gambling-house you would have lost the lot—so you ought to be jolly grateful!"

"You—you young cubs!" snarled Starke furiously.

"Wouldn't it be as well to change the subject?" suggested Watson. "You've been calling us names for two or three minutes, and it's getting stale. Why not resign yourselves to the fact that you're dished? I vote we give the cads a lesson," added Watson,

turning to us. "A flogging would do them good!"

"If you touch us," exclaimed Starke, "we'll skin you——"

"Threats won't make any difference," I interrupted. "But, as it happens, we're not going any further, Starke. This ought to be a lesson to you. Ain't you ashamed of yourself? Ain't you ashamed of leading Kenmore into such evil habits?"

Starke writhed helplessly.

"You wait!" he panted. "I know who you are—you're De Valerie!"

"Oh, by gad!" said De Valerie from the rear.

"I'm De Valerie, am I?" I grinned. "You're guessing, Starke—and so we'll leave you to guess the rest of it. And I hope that this little experience will warn you to be a good little boy in future."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Starke simply couldn't contain himself any longer. He roared out a string of threats, and in the midst of it all the lights were put out and we made for the door. This place wasn't actually the barn itself, but a small portion divided off at the back and used as a chaff-cutting department, or something like that. And the only exit was by means of a stout door of the stable type—made in two pieces. Both halves were fitted with secure fastenings on the outside.

We closed the doors and made them fast.

"Unless they're rescued, they'll be in there when the farm chaps come to work in the morning," remarked Handforth. "I say, fancy those fatheads recognising my voice, after I disguised it, too!"

"The only way to disguise your voice, Handy, is to make it inaudible!" I said grimly. "I told you not to speak!"

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth. "I don't see why I should be shut up! Starke can't do anything to me, anyhow! Besides, I'm going to challenge him to a fight before long!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am of the glorious opinion that the ludicrous Handforth will receive it splendidly in the neck!" remarked Yakama. "He will suffer the extreme defeat, and it will unquestionably serve him correct!"

"I suppose you mean serve him right?" grinned the Bo'sun.

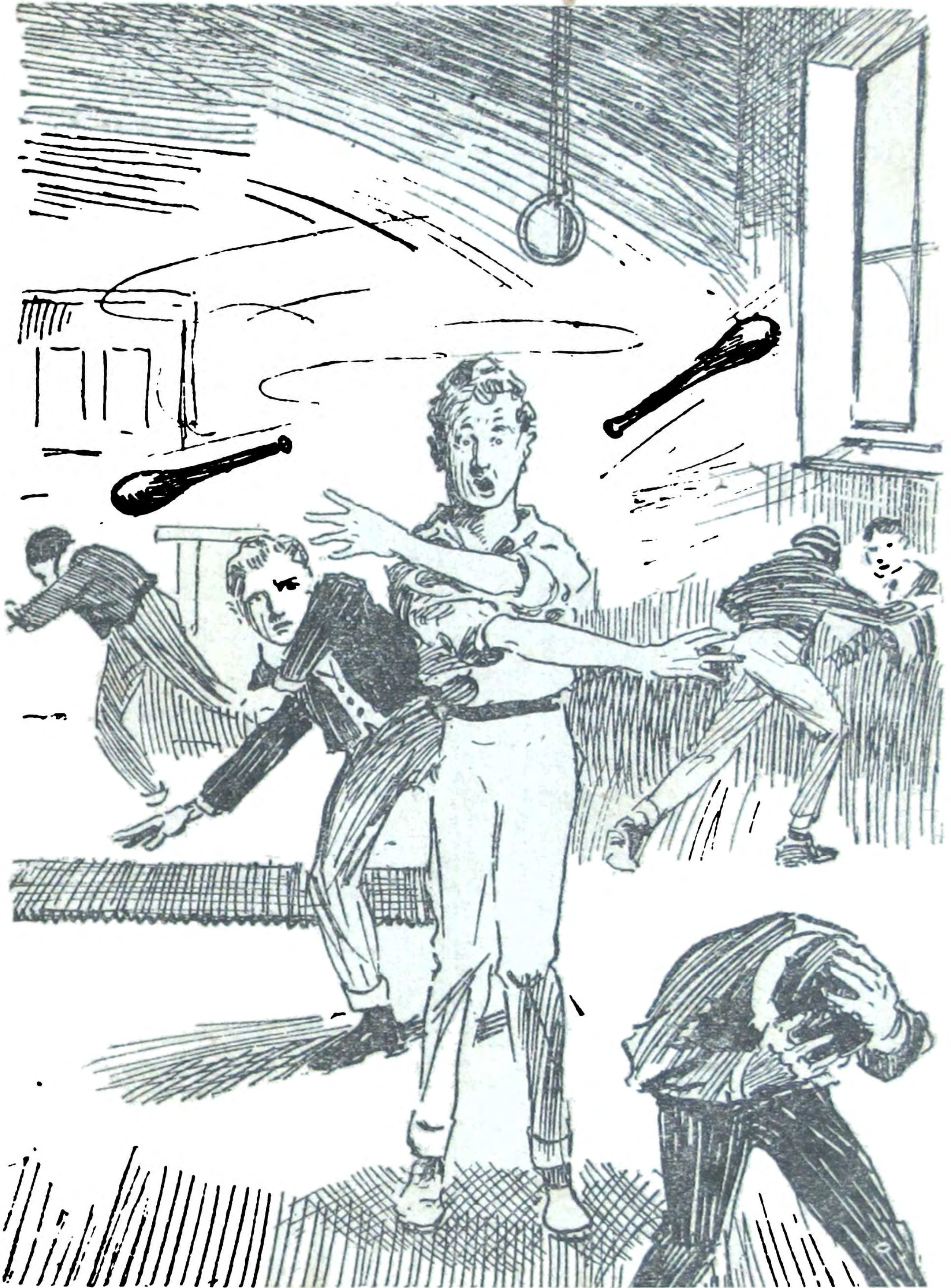
"Is not the wonderful English easy of comprehension?" asked Yakama. "I constantly take enormous pride in the fact that I converse the English with unqualified and stupendous perfection. Is this not the truth, my absurd chums?"

"Oh, perfectly true," I said solemnly. "The only fault about your English, Jappy, is that you know too much of it! I'm blessed if you don't know a lot more long words than all the other fellows!"

"By hokey, Yakama's hot stuff!" grinned the Bo'sun. "He's taught me some words, anyhow. Souse me! I've learned more from Yakama than from all the grammar books in the school!"

"Well, let's be getting on!" I said. "This is no time to be talking about





Handforth was not an expert; and as a result the clubs banged against one another and both flew out of his hands.

"Great pip!" he gasped, and the juniors scattered.—(See page 8.)



grammar. Starke and Kenmore are using quite a lot of it even now!"

The conversation which was going on within the shed was of the most violent description, and we took our departure, grinning. The game had been entirely successful. The two prefects had been prevented from visiting the gambling-house at Bannington—and this jape was far better than a dozen booby-traps.

Three minutes later we were on our bicycles, riding back to St. Frank's at full speed. It was already half-past eleven, and we were anxious to get back to the dormitory.

But there was another duty to perform beforehand.

Having concealed our bicycles—in readiness for transferring to the cycle-shed in the morning—we made our way to the woodshed. Here we found Justin B. Farman. He was standing on guard outside the door, rather fed up. There had been a toss-up as to who should perform the necessary duty of remaining on guard over Pitt—and Farman had lost.

"Guess the doggone hobo has been raising old Harry!" said the American junior. "Say, I'm real glad you've got back. I allow this job of mine has been kinder wearisome."

"Everything's gone swimmingly," I remarked. "Rough luck for you, Farman, but it couldn't be helped. Let's go and interview Pitt!"

We had been speaking in low tones, so that the Serpent should not overhear our voices. Farman, like the rest of us, was masked. We didn't fear Pitt, but it was just as well to do the thing thoroughly and make it as mysterious as possible.

The door of the woodshed was opened, and I flashed my electric torch within. Reginald Pitt lay upon a pile of old, dry sacks. He was bound with some of Warren's rope, and a thick scarf formed an excellent gag. He glared into the light of the torch maliciously, being quite unable to see anything beyond.

"The time has come for you to be released, varlet!" I said in solemn tones. "Know also that your fellow-rotters, Starke and Kenmore, are imprisoned in the shed at the back of Farmer Stock's barn, along the Bannington Road. Go thither and release them!"

"Oh, rather!" agreed Watson. "Go thither at once, you rotter!"

There came a chuckle from behind, and Pitt glared afresh.

"Release the prisoner!" I ordered.

As several of the others came forward, I switched the light off. Watson and De Valerie and McClure worked in silence in the darkness. Then they backed away behind me.

"The deed is done!" said Watson grimly.

I switched on the light again. The Serpent stood there, dusting himself down. I was confidently expecting a wild outburst—and, possibly, an attack. But Reginald Pitt was perfectly composed and quite calm.

"Very neat!" he said smoothly. "But you needn't think that I'm upset. And you'll have to pay for this affair before long, my disguised beauties. Where did you say I shall find Starke and Kenmore?"

"At the back of Farmer Stock's old barn."

Pitt walked out without another word and strode across the Triangle. He had taken the thing very coolly, and most of the fellows were rather disappointed. Pitt would certainly release the two Sixth-Formers—for his own sake, if not for theirs. For if they were allowed to remain there all night, Pitt would hear all about it in the morning!

"Well, I think we've done our duty," I said comfortably. "We've saved three silly asses from visiting a rotten gambling-den—only they haven't got the sense to thank us!"

"They might go even now," suggested Handforth. "It's all rot, in my opinion. We ought to have been more severe. It's no good treating chaps of that sort gently."

I grinned.

"I don't think they'll agree that they've been treated gently," I remarked. "And there's no fear that they'll visit the Hermitage, after all. It'll be well past midnight before Starke and Kenmore are released, and they'll come straight back."

And so, when we crept up to the Remove dormitory, we felt rather pleased with ourselves. The only fly in the amber, so to speak, was the fact that Handforth's voice had been recognised. But this had been his own fault, for we had warned him not to talk.

And very shortly Handforth was to pay for his carelessness!

## CHAPTER V.

### NELSON LEE OBTAINS EVIDENCE.

SOMETHING of a far more important character was going on while Starke and Kenmore were being spoofered.

Nelson Lee, in fact, was busy.

He was determined to obtain the necessary evidence concerning the currency note forgeries which would enable him to strike. So far he had not been very successful in obtaining the necessary proof that his suspicions were correct.

The guv'nor had entered the gambling-house on two separate occasions. During the second visit he had overheard the two men, Sales and Field, discussing the false Treasury notes—this being proof that the house was actually the home of the forgeries.

And to-night the schoolmaster-detective was bent upon going even a step further. He was anxious to get the whole matter settled, so that the stigma would be removed from Sir Montie. Moreover, it was full time that he made an important move.

More than once I had protested that I ought to be included in the affair, but the guv'nor had pointed out that there was really very little for me to do. If, however, some new developments arose, he would let



me do my bit. So I had to be content with that.

The gov'nor's mission to-night was an uncertain one. He had been within the house, and had not been very successful. On this occasion he determined to remain outside—on the watch.

The Hermitage was an old house, situated on the outskirts of Bannington. To all intents and purposes it was the residence of a highly respectable gentleman named Mr. Bernard Sales—which name, no doubt, was assumed.

Mr. Sales was greatly respected in Bannington. He had plenty of money, and had contributed largely to local charities. On several occasions he had provided garden parties for wounded Tommies in the spacious garden of the Hermitage. During these occasions visitors had had the complete run of the house, and it was generally acknowledged that a more open man than Mr. Sales did not exist.

Yet actually the Hermitage was a gambling-den, where roulette, faro, and other such games were played while decent folk were in bed. And Sales generally presided over the roulette-table himself!

The habitués of the place could be relied upon to keep quiet, since their own safety was at stake. None was admitted without introduction, and a password was always necessary. In spite of these precautions, however, the system was not perfect by any means, and Nelson Lee had obtained admittance without any trouble.

All said and done, the gambling-room was only a side-line. Sales was responsible for the issue of a great many "dud" Treasury notes. They were really wonderful imitations, and the police had been worried for some little time.

A new issue, so Nelson Lee gathered, was about to be uttered, and he wanted to trap the scoundrels beforehand. It was possible, no doubt, to raid the Hermitage, but the result would hardly have been satisfactory. Without positive information any raid would almost certainly be a failure. Moreover, the police would have no excuse for entering the place unless evidence could be placed before them.

Nelson Lee had taken up his stand in the rear of the old house. It was his plan to wait until all the gamblers had departed for the night. After that he would make a thorough search before morning came. He had no definite plan of action, but would rely upon circumstances—and chance. The detective knew that patience was of great value.

But luck was with him.

He had not been waiting long before a door opened in the rear of the house and a man emerged. Lee did not recognise him, although he knew that the fellow was a member of the little gang—otherwise he would not have emerged from that private doorway. In all probability he was one of the servants, for Sales had no women about the premises. Under the circumstances, this

was not very surprising. His servants probably were all parties in the game.

This man walked briskly down the garden path and turned through a little gateway which led into an adjoining paddock. There was no footpath to the road, and Lee was quite interested. Where was this man off to?

Nelson Lee thought it worth while to follow, and he crept forward without a sound. Arriving at the gate, he was just in time to see the man descending into a deep ditch which ran alongside the hedge. There was the rustling of bushes, and then dead silence.

"Dear me!" murmured Nelson Lee. "This is unexpected—and quite interesting!"

The detective's vigil had borne fruit already, and he took up his stand in a concealed corner and waited. The minutes passed slowly, but he remained as motionless as a statue. At the end of half an hour he was becoming somewhat stiff, but his determination was as strong as ever. Ten further minutes passed, and then came a sound.

The bushes rustled, and then the man emerged once again.

He climbed out of the ditch and waited. Lee then discovered that a companion was with him.

"It's all bunkum!" said one of them. "The exit is as clear as possible. Sales needn't have been nervous."

"Still, it's best to be on the safe side," said the other. "We were trapped up in Newcastle once—and all because of a fool mistake. If the police get busy round here we want to have a decent chance—although I fancy we shall be able to go on for months. They're dead asleep down here."

"You set the combination, I suppose?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Consequently——"

The two men were walking off, and Nelson Lee was not able to hear any more. The scrap he had listened to, however, was most enlightening, and he waited for fully ten minutes before making a move. Then he quietly emerged and dropped into the ditch.

Following the dry bed, he walked onwards to what seemed a cul-de-sac, for the high bank which divided the paddock from the road towered up in front of him, with a thick hedge at the top.

Bushes grew thickly on the steep side of the ditch, to say nothing of a profusion of ferns. The bed, however, was hard, and had been much used. Parting the bushes, Lee vaguely saw the brickwork of an ancient tunnel. It was no higher than four feet, and proportionately wide, and had evidently been built originally in order to accommodate the waters of a small brook—carrying it beneath the road.

For years, however, the brook had been dried up, or had been diverted on to another course. Until now Lee had known nothing of this tunnel, for there was no indication of its presence from the roadway.

A few Bannington boys, no doubt, knew of its existence, but none had evidently been



here for quite a long while, for, just inside the tunnel, Nelson Lee found a strong iron gate, with a heavy lock. It was of a commonplace type, however, and within two minutes the detective had conquered it.

He passed through, finding it necessary to crouch low. And he deemed it safe to flash his light down the tunnel. Any slight back-reflection would be hidden by the thick bushes at the entrance.

The tunnel was perfectly dry, and there were evident signs that it was used fairly frequently. It was not very long, for Nelson Lee could see the second grating at the far end—which, of course, was on the other side of the road.

This tunnel was actually very near to the house. Lee remembered this when he took his bearings. So far he could see no reason why the place should be used; but he very soon discovered the truth.

Exactly in the middle of the tunnel the brickwork was all crumbled away, and a jagged hole was revealed. And there, surprisingly enough, was another tunnel—leading towards the house. And it was guarded by an iron gate exactly similar to the others.

"Splendid!" murmured Nelson Lee genially. "We are getting on rapidly. I have half a mind to investigate straight away."

He knew very well that he was in no half-mind at all. And he quickly unlocked this second gate—for one key obviously fitted the thrice. The tunnel here was quite different from the other, for it had been roughly bored out of the earth, and was only supported by occasional props and planks. There had been no pretence of making it thoroughly.

For the most part it was five feet high, and sloped slightly downwards. Nelson Lee guessed—and he was probably right—that the tunnel had really been excavated on the surface—a deep trench. The roof had then been placed on and covered up with earth, concealing it from view. At least, this was possibly true with regard to that portion of the tunnel which lay within the Hermitage grounds.

Nelson Lee went forward cautiously. From the fact that the two men had left together, he judged that he had a clear field. But it was just as well to be on the safe side.

He passed occasionally, in order to listen. But everything was perfectly still and silent. And he came to a doorway, set right across the tunnel. Lee fully expected to find it locked and bolted; but it wasn't. It opened as soon as he touched the handle.

He switched his light off instantly, and held himself in readiness for anything that might occur. But he was needlessly cautious. There was not another soul down in these underground regions.

After waiting a few moments Lee switched on his torch again. He saw that he was in a small brick collar, with another door at the other side. This one was locked. And it appeared to be bolted, too.

"H'm! This is awkward," murmured Lee. "Just when things were getting interesting,

too! This tunnel is obviously a secret exit from the gambling-room—in case of a sudden alarm. But what was that about a combination?"

He looked round closely, a tense expression upon his keen, clean-cut face. It must be borne in mind that Nelson Lee was looking for something—something unusual. He didn't know what, but he half expected to discover it, all the same.

And within three minutes he was successful.

His trained, experienced eyes, roving restlessly to and fro, settled upon an old bookcase against one of the grimy walls. What was such an article doing here? A bookcase? The thing seemed out of place, and Nelson Lee was interested.

He crossed over to it, and flashed his light closely over the dusty old shelves. At least, he naturally expected them to be dusty. They were, on the contrary, perfectly clean.

"Curious!" he murmured wonderingly.

A short search proved enlightening. The bookcase wouldn't shift, although he tried to move it. He then noticed that the back was apparently disconnected from the sides—the whole thing in fact, was faked up in some way.

After another careful survey Nelson Lee discovered a very shiny portion of wood beneath the third shelf—shiny and greasy. He judged that dirty fingers—probably inky fingers—had pressed upon that spot very frequently. He applied his own finger, and pushed. That portion of woodwork was merely a cunningly devised catch, and the whole back of the bookcase swung outwards, being, in fact, a door.

And beyond this was another door—a door which looked as though it ought to have belonged to a bank's vault. It was a massive affair, fitted with a heavy combination lock.

"Excellent!" muttered Lee, almost hugging himself. "Without the slightest doubt the secret workshop lies beyond this door. I would willingly give a ten-pound note to learn the combination——"

He paused abruptly, thinking hard. By strenuous labours he would probably be able to conquer the lock—it was, after all, of a simple type—after several hours' work. But it would be most unwise to remain here all that length of time. The detective was thinking of something else.

One of these two men asked the other if the combination was set; and had received the reply, "Yes, consequently——" Lee had been unable to hear any more. But it suddenly struck him that "consequently" was the actual combination chosen—and Lee came to this conclusion mainly owing to the tone in which the man had spoken. He had said the word with an air of finality, as though it provided a complete answer.

At all events, it was worth trying.

Nelson Lee manipulated the milled knob quickly, and, having got the combination, he applied pressure to the stout lever near the edge of the door.



Click! Thud!

The door swung open as Lee pulled, and he could not refrain from uttering a little exclamation of satisfaction. All was darkness beyond, but Nelson Lee's torch revealed a large apartment.

He stood listening, and then strode forward, pulling out his revolver at the same moment. He knew what the result would be if he was caught down here.

He found himself in a big, square cellar. It was, of course, one of the ordinary cellars beneath the Hermitage, but the ordinary doorway had been built over and the others substituted. Even if the police had searched the place a dozen times the chances were that they would not have discovered this secret cellar.

Nelson Lee spent precisely three minutes within the apartment—and that was really two minutes longer than was actually necessary.

For he saw at a glance that his search for evidence was at an end. It was here—enough to convict the crooks a dozen times over. Printing-presses, and every appliance used in the manufacture of paper currency. There were also a considerable stock of paper and bundles of notes, all ready for passing.

Nelson Lee would have preferred to make a most thorough examination on the spot; but he knew very well that it would have been a most unwise proceeding. Trapped here, he would have very little chance of escape, for these men would be desperate.

Common-sense told him to get away as quickly as he possibly could, and he decided upon that course. Nothing had been disturbed during his short visit, and he quickly closed the door and then replaced the book-case.

He was rather surprised at the fact that there was no electric alarm fitted to the door; but the criminals were obviously fully satisfied that their secret would never be discovered.

Lee retraced his steps until he reached the iron gate, and then he passed through and placed his skeleton key in the lock. Even as he was turning it he distinctly heard voices in the distance.

The men were returning!

To get back into the new tunnel was impossible—and, indeed, would have been fatal. Lee realised the wisdom of his action in staying only those three minutes. Even now he might be caught.

It would be touch-and-go, at all events. He crept along the ancient tunnel until he arrived at the far grating. Here he lay down flat upon his stomach and waited.

Very fortunately for him the men came along without showing any light. They talked in low tones as they passed through into the new tunnel, and then their voices died away.

Without wasting a second Nelson Lee produced that handy key of his again and unlocked this third gate—thus proving that they were all of the same manufacture and

pattern. Two minutes later he stood in the open fields again, breathing freely.

"Quite a narrow squeak! But I think I may claim that my night's work has been fairly satisfactory," he told himself. "The next move will be to give the police very precise information."

And then?

Well, the schoolmaster-detective smiled as he thought of the great coup which would follow. His case was complete, and the only thing remaining was to act—and to act at once!

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE RASCALTY OF REGINALD PITT.

THE SERPENT dismounted from his bicycle opposite the gateway which led into the wide yard in front of Farmer Stock's barn. The night was dark and a stiff wind was blowing.

Pitt left his machine against the hedge, vaulted the gate, and rapidly made his way to the rear of the barn. He found the double door of the Sixth-Formers' prison without any difficulty, and grinned maliciously as he heard excited voices within.

"Hi!" came Starke's urgent call. "Let us out! We've been locked in here——"

"All right!" said Pitt. "Keep your giddy hair on!"

He unfastened the doors and swung them open.

"You—you beastly little worm!" raved Starke furiously. "What do you mean by this? You wait till we're free!"

"Yes, you young cad—just wait!" snapped Kenmore.

Pitt peered down at the gloomy forms.

"If you keep up that tone I sha'n't set you free at all!" he said calmly. "What's the idea of roaring at me? Do you think I wanted these rotters to mess up our little game like this? I was collared and bound up just like this—and you ought to be jolly thankful that I've come to release you!"

"Don't be a young fool!" exclaimed Starke viciously. "You ought to have been more careful——"

"It's all very well to talk like that!" interrupted Pitt. "I did my best, and was taken by surprise. You're a couple of nice beauties to be dished so jolly easily!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Didn't we arrange that you should meet me?" went on the Serpent. "Why didn't you smell a rat when you found out that I wasn't there?"

"I'm not sure that you weren't there!" snapped Starke. "Anyhow, the junior who met us was just your size, and he had your voice exactly. I believe you've been tricking us."

"My voice?" repeated Pitt curiously.

"Yes," growled Kenmore. "How were we to know?"

Pitt gave a soft laugh.

"It strikes me that we've been spoofed all



round," he said. "Well, what's the good of grumbling? I've discovered that the best plan is to take things calmly. It's no good making a song. We've been dished, and there's an end of it."

Starke rose to his feet, his ropes cut.

"An end of it, eh?" he exclaimed, rubbing his wrists. "By George, we'll see about that! I'll make those young cads pay dearly for what they've done to-night!"

"Did you recognise them, then?" asked Pitt.

"How the deuce could I?" snapped the prefect. "It's as black as ink, and they were wearing masks, too. But I know one of 'em—I recognised his voice."

"Who was he?" asked Pitt eagerly.

"Handforth!"

The Serpent whistled.

"Handforth, eh?" he repeated softly. "I had an idea that this was one of his dodges. All right! Handforth won't have the chance of playing any more of his little tricks!"

"What do you mean, you young ass?" asked Starke.

"You'll see—if you wait," replied Pitt. "We'd better get along back to St. Frank's now; it's too late to go to the Hermitage. Rough luck on us, Starke; but it can't be helped."

The two prefects glared at Pitt.

"I don't believe there is any roulette-table at all!" remarked Kenmore savagely. "It's all a yarn—and if we've got any sense, Starke, we'll give Pitt the hiding of his life!"

"After I've ridden all the way from St. Frank's to release you?" asked Pitt. "That would be rather nice gratitude, wouldn't it? We'll go to the gambling-house another night."

And so it was left at that. Starke and Kenmore were in vile tempers, and they rode back to the school without exchanging a word. Their machines were left where they had been previously hidden, and then the precious trio stole into the Ancient House.

Pitt entered the Remove dormitory like a shadow, and was soon snugly in bed. Everybody else was fast asleep, but the Serpent lay thinking for a full half-hour before closing his eyes.

All his enmity was now directed against Handforth. Pitt believed that Handforth had been the prime mover in the night's adventure, and all Pitt's venom would now be centred upon causing the downfall of the Remove captain. He had promised Fullwood and Co. that Handforth should be sacked—and Pitt had not been boasting.

The one fact which alarmed him was that Handforth knew about the gambling-house. He must know, otherwise the affair could never have been organised. And it was dangerous for Handforth to have such knowledge. The sooner Handforth followed Tregellis-West's footsteps the better.

And Reginald Pitt went to sleep firmly determined to use all his efforts. He had no settled plan of action, but he was an

ingenious youth, and was confident that he would be able to achieve his purpose.

In the morning Pitt was looking as calm and cool as ever. The juniors made no mention of the night's episode, although numerous grins and winks passed to and fro.

I knew that the gov'nor had been making an investigation during the dark hours, and Tommy Watson and I lost no time in going to Nelson Lee's study. We wanted to hear how the gov'nor had fared.

Of course, he wasn't there, and we had to consume our impatience. Meanwhile, Handforth was laying down the law in Study D. The strike was still proceeding, and Handforth was of the opinion that something drastic was necessary.

"The fact is, the whole thing is becoming unbearable!" declared Handforth firmly.

"I don't quite agree with that——"

"Are you presuming to argue with me, Arnold McClure?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because I don't allow it!" roared Handforth. "I say that this strike has become unbearable——"

"And I say that I don't agree with you!" snapped McClure. "What is it you can't bear, anyhow? The Head's as quiet as a lamb, and we're doing no work. From morning till night we do just as we like—an ideal life. And nobody's being punished. What more do you want, Handy? Some chaps are never satisfied!"

"Of course, a lazy fellow like you would gloat over the strike," said Handforth sarcastically. "But, as it happens, I'm not lazy."

"No?" said Church incredulously.

"No!" roared Handforth. "Lessons are necessary, and you've never heard me grumbling at 'em!"

"Never!" agreed Church and McClure, with singular promptitude.

"I've only expressed dissatisfaction occasionally," went on Handforth, waving his hand. "If old Crowell gives us too much work, that's another matter. It's time to say something then; but you couldn't call it grumbling!"

"Mad idea!" scoffed Church.

"What's a mad idea?" bawled Handforth, glaring.

"Why, for anybody to accuse you of grumbling!" explained Church blandly.

"Oh! I thought you meant something else!" said Handforth, calming down. "But where were we?"

"Goodness knows!" said McClure. "But I know where we are, and I know where we shall be in five minutes' time—having breakfast!"

Handforth curled his lip.

"Grub!" he roared. "That's all you can think about—stuffing your greedy tummies! Haven't you got any higher thoughts? Didn't we start this strike for the sake of Tregellis-West?"

"Did we?" said McClure innocently. "I thought it was because we wanted to get out of lessons and have a good old time."



What's the good of deceiving ourselves, Handy? We might as well be straightforward in our own giddy study!"

Handforth did not argue. He marched deliberately round the table, and his attitude left no doubts as to his intentions. McClure, who knew the symptoms, dodged round with surprising agility, and for the next minute or two a wild chase, accompanied by much dodging, was in progress in Study D.

Handforth got tired first.

"This is undignified!" he panted at last, realising that it was necessary to make some excuse for his failure. "Is it the right thing for a Form captain to be chasing his own pals round a study table?"

"I didn't ask you to!" grinned McClure breathlessly.

"Just you wait, my son!" roared Handforth darkly. "You wait till I get you in a corner! I'll pound your face to a jelly!"

"Haven't we got off the track somehow?" asked Church. "What's that you were saying about the strike, Handy?"

"Nothing!" snapped Handforth. "You can go and eat coke!"

"There's something better to eat than that!" grinned Church. "The brekker gong's just going!"

Handforth snorted, and stamped out of the study. As a rule he quelled his two chums easily, but when things went against him he always sought refuge in dignified retreat—at least, Handforth fondly believed that it was dignified. To judge from the laughter of Church and McClure a listener could scarcely be blamed for thinking otherwise.

The result of that early morning squabble was dire for Church and McClure. Their great leader kept his plans to himself, and left them in total ignorance of what he had decided.

It was Handforth who considered the result dire. Church and McClure were rather glad of it, for they were fed up with Handforth's plans—although it would have been dangerous to say so.

The Head's indifference was really worrying the energetic Remove skipper. The strike was becoming stale, and it seriously looked like fizzling out ignominiously.

The majority of the juniors were getting tired of the whole thing—exactly as the Head had expected. Dr. Stafford had no intention of allowing Tregellis-West to come back, for he believed him guilty. And he hesitated to use drastic measures with the striking juniors. The Head knew well enough that harsh methods would only aggravate the trouble. It was far better to appear indifferent.

That's just where Handforth realised his impotence. Unless he bucked things up the strike would peter out—a dead failure. And anything in the nature of a failure was horrible to contemplate. Handforth had his position as Remove skipper to think of. He wanted to achieve a great personal triumph. And the only way to do that was to get Tregellis-West back.

And Handforth, after much thought, de-

cided upon a bold move. He badly wanted to discuss matters with his chums, but his dignity was of such a character that he would not demean himself by so doing. He merely dropped hints—which, in reality, were quite enlightening. Handforth meant them to be mysterious.

"You'll see!" he said grimly, as he and his study mates stood on the Ancient House steps after breakfast.

"We shall see what?" asked McClure, who remembered the awful threats regarding his face.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking of!" said Handforth. "But I'm too busy to attend to you now. In fact I might let you off altogether," he added generously. "When I'm wild I say things I don't mean. But I'm blessed if I'm going to tell you my plans for diddling the Head."

"Oh, be a sport!" protested Church.

"No, I sha'n't be a sport!" said Handforth firmly. "I—I mean I sha'n't let you into the secret—I sha'n't tell you what I'm going to type!"

"Type?" repeated McClure.

"Ah! Now you're curious, ain't you?" sneered Handforth. "Well, you'll have to remain curious. I'm not going to tell you anything about the letter which the Strike Committee is going to send to the Head."

"Is there going to be a meeting, then?" asked Church.

"A meeting of what?"

"The Strike Committee."

"Of course there isn't going to be a meeting!" snapped Handforth.

"Then how can the Strike Committee send the Head a letter?"

"Because I'm going to type one in the prefect's room!" roared Handforth. "I'm going to tell the Head that— Well, never mind what I'm going to tell him. You can find out from somebody else, you traitors! And you'll be surprised when I send that letter through the ordinary post, won't you?"

"Not a bit!" said McClure.

"You won't be surprised?" said Handforth, staring.

"How can we be, when you've just told us you're going to do it?" asked McClure blandly. "You're a splendid chap for keeping secrets, Handy. In another two minutes we shall know all the workings of your mighty brain!"

Handforth snorted and walked off. He suddenly realised that he had been revealing too much. And he marched away, firmly determined to keep his own counsel. Church and McClure, with sad smiles, walked away to Little Side, and joined a crowd of other fellows at the nets. I was there with Tommy Watson, making hay while the sun shone, so to speak.

Edward Oswald Handforth meanwhile had boldly entered the prefects' room in the Ancient House. One would have supposed that he owned the place, for he sat down before the typewriter with a businesslike air and wrinkled his brow.

Such an opportunity as this seldom



occurred. The whole school—except the Remove—was at work, and so Handforth was permitted to remain in the prefects' room unmolested. At any ordinary time he would have been ejected with considerable force.

He regarded the typewriter uncertainly. It was a somewhat ancient machine, and had suffered from long usage in the prefects' room. Handforth, who knew about as much about typewriters as he knew about sewing-machines, was nevertheless confident that he could manipulate the keys with the greatest ease.

The only difficulty was that he couldn't find the letters, and even when he had managed to type his own name—by way of experiment—he discovered that no capitals had come out, and that the words were all jumbled together. Typewriting wasn't so easy, after all.

However, Handforth was a dogged fellow, and he persevered. At the end of half an hour he had managed to type a letter which, if not a perfect example of typewriting, was at least readable.

Many words had been crossed out, and commas were dotted about where they didn't belong. But in straightforward English, and shorn of most of the faults, the letter ran like this:

"Strike Committee Room.  
"Ancient House.

"Honoured Sir.

"In addressing you herewith we have no intention of disrespect. As a matter of fact we respect you highly, and hope you will grant our demands.

"Tregellis-West must come back without a stain on his character. If he does not come back, and if you refuse to grant our wishes, we shall be compelled to take drastic measures. In short, we shall immediately call out every other Form at St. Frank's and make the strike general. So please take warning and play the game.

"THE STRIKE COMMITTEE."

Handforth regarded the precious document with great satisfaction.

"The Head won't know who wrote the giddy letter, so he can't come down on me," he murmured. "I'm not quite sure about 'drastic,' but I think it's spelt right. Anyhow, all the other words are."

This only went to prove that Handforth was not exactly perfect when it came to spelling. He was thoroughly satisfied, however, and found an envelope and typed that also. Having placed the letter within, he sealed the envelope and then fixed on a three-halfpenny stamp.

"Good!" he murmured, as he made for the door. "This'll make the Head sit up, I'll bet!"

He walked out and went to his own study. Church and McClure were coming along the passage as Handforth turned into Study D, and his face hardened.

"It's no good!" he said, as they followed him in. "You needn't ask what this letter is, because I shan't tell you!"

"But you have told us already!" said Church, as Handforth placed the letter upon the mantelpiece. "It's to the Head, ain't it? My hat! Is that supposed to be typed!"

"I don't want any sneers!" roared Handforth, at the top of his voice. "That letter is typed, and I'm going to post it to the Head! I'm not going to stand any nonsense—see? It's an ultimatum!"

Handforth's voice carried far, and Pitt, who was going along the passage, paused outside Study D and listened.

"But it's stamped!" said McClure.

"Do you think I want the Head to pay threepence on it?" snorted Handforth.

"But what's the idea of posting it?" demanded McClure. "Why don't you go along and slip it in the Head's private box?"

"That's just where you show your little mind!" said Handforth pityingly. "The Head will be far more impressed if he gets the letter by the morning's post."

"But what's it about?" asked Church.

"I'm not going to tell you!" said Handforth firmly. "And if you dare to open the letter I'll slaughter you. I'm going down to the village after dinner, and I'm going to post it. Then to-morrow you'll see the result."

Church and McClure grinned.

"It'll be painful, I expect," remarked Church thoughtfully.

"What'll be painful, you grinning ass?"

"The result!" said Church. "But still, if you like to ask for a flogging, that's your look-out. I wouldn't dream of interfering."

"Blow your rotten letter!" said Church.

"Well, remember what I said—don't you touch the letter!" Handforth exclaimed, moving towards the door. "I'm going out to Little Side now—to show those chaps how to play football."

When Handforth emerged upon the passage it was empty, and he certainly had no idea of the fact that Reginald Pitt was aware of the fact that a letter had been written to the Head, and that it was to be posted in the village.

Handforth and Co. went out, and Pitt watched them from his study window. Then he calmly entered Study D, took down the letter from the mantelpiece, and opened it by means of a slim penholder.

One glance at the contents caused the Serpent to grin. He quickly took a sheet of blank paper, inserted it in the envelope, stuck this up again, and placed it back on the mantelpiece.

Pitt meant to substitute another letter for Handforth's, but he was cute enough to realise that the Remove skipper might return before the job was completed. If he did return he would not be unsuspicious. It was just a little precaution.

Pitt took the letter and went to the prefects' room. He was no more accustomed to typewriting than Handforth, but his wits were sharper, and he quickly got the hang of the machine. His effort was much shorter than Handforth's, and he was finished within ten minutes—a fresh envelope and all,



Pitt had a good memory, and he knew that Handforth had made one or two mistakes on the envelope. He repeated them on his. A three-halfpenny stamp was affixed and the missive sealed.

It was the work of two minutes to slip into Handforth's study and change the letters. The original one was burnt to atoms without delay, and when Handforth and Co. entered their study shortly afterwards they had no suspicion that a change had been effected.

Reginald Pitt, in fact, had suddenly conceived a rascally plan. Once the line of action had taken shape in his mind, the rest was simple. During the afternoon he was busy in an unobtrusive way—and his efforts for the most part were connected with the gymnasium.

At tea-time Handforth remained as secretive as ever, and Church and McClure were apparently quite indifferent. This wasn't actually the case. They were very curious, and not a little alarmed. Indeed, they decided to seize the letter and open it, careless of all consequences. But Handforth apparently suspected something.

For he pocketed the letter in the middle of tea, after Church and McClure had exchanged one or two incautious whispers. And as soon as the meal was over Handforth walked down to Bellton.

All unconscious of the change he posted the letter, and then returned, feeling that a very necessary step had been taken. There was nothing like being firm.

He met Church and McClure in the Triangle.

"You can clear off!" said Handforth coldly. "I'm ashamed of you, and you can go and eat coke! Fellows who can only sneer at my ideas ain't chums of mine. And I'm going to the gym. now, anyhow."

"That's good enough," said McClure. "If you're going to do some more exercises, Handy, Church and I will be safer a mile or two away. But there's just one thing I want to mention."

"What's that?"

"Don't break all the windows!" grinned McClure.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth's faithful chums strolled off, and the Remove captain, giving vent to one of his own particular snorts, marched into the gymnasium. Three or four other Removites were there, but they cleared off at once, deeming it safer to retire.

Handforth sniffed the air sharply.

"What a nip!" he remarked. "I'm blessed if I don't believe those asses have been cleaning a bicycle in here!"

He stared round suspiciously, but was not rewarded. So he went on with his exercises, having closed the door.

Pitt, watching from the window of Study E, smiled to himself, and at once made a move. Everything was going exactly as he had planned in his own mind—and the Serpent made his way to the Headmaster's study.

He tapped upon the door, and entered in

response to a quiet "Come in." Dr. Stafford was sitting alone, and he raised his eyebrows slightly as he saw the junior.

"Well, my boy?" he asked.

"May I speak to you, sir?" asked Pitt respectfully.

"It is not usual for me to grant interviews to junior members of the school," said the Head drily. "You are Pitt, I believe?"

"Yes, sir," replied the Serpent. "I don't exactly like coming, but I feel that it is my duty to give you some information—"

"One moment," interrupted the Head. "Do you wish to make a complaint, Pitt? If so, you must see your Housemaster."

"It's not exactly a complaint, sir," said Pitt calmly. "The Remove is on strike, as you know; but Fullwood and I and several other fellows didn't take part in it. It was only yesterday and to-day that Mr. Crowell refused to take us alone; and that wasn't our fault."

"Please get to the point, Pitt."

"Well, sir, Handforth is the leader of the strike," replied Pitt, "and I think it only right that you should know that Handforth is preparing to burn down the gymnasium—as an act of violence in order to make you give way, sir."

Dr. Pitt looked at Pitt grimly.

"I do not credit that statement, Pitt," he replied quietly, "and I shall punish you severely for making such an outrageous accusation!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### POOR OLD HANDFORTH!

THERE was a moment's silence in the Head's study, but Reginald Pitt remained perfectly calm.

"I'm sorry you don't believe me, sir," he said at last. "I shouldn't say such a thing unless I had every cause. Handforth is in the gym. even now, putting bowls of paraffin all over the place, with shavings over the top. He means to set fire to it after dark."

The Head looked grim.

"How do you know this, Pitt?" he asked sharply.

"I overheard Handforth telling one of the other fellows, sir," lied Pitt smoothly. "I'd rather not give the other boy's name, sir, because he tried to argue with Handforth. But if you don't take any notice of what I say the gymnasium will be burnt down this evening."

The Headmaster pursed his lips.

"Wait!" he said shortly.

He rang his bell, and when Tubbs came the page-boy was ordered to fetch Nelson Lee without delay. The Housemaster appeared within three minutes, and the Head went straight to the point.

"Pitt has come to me with a strange story, Mr. Lee. He declares that Handforth is planning to set fire to the gymnasium—as a means of forcing me to grant his so-called demands."



Nelson Lee laughed.

"The idea is preposterous," he declared. "Handforth has faults, like every other boy, but he is perfectly upright and honourable."

"All right, sir," said Pitt, shrugging his shoulders. "I only thought I was doing my duty. I shall take care, next time, to keep anything like this to myself——"

"Do not be insolent!" interjected the Head sharply.

"You needn't believe me, sir," went on Pitt. "If you'll take the trouble to go to the gymnasium you'll find Handforth there. I expect he's prepared the paraffin and shavings by this time."

The Head rose to his feet.

"I will go to the gymnasium!" he exclaimed grimly. "And you will come with me, Pitt. If I find that you have been telling me a cock-and-bull story I shall flog you with the utmost severity. Will you please come with us, Mr. Lee?"

"Certainly," replied Nelson Lee, regarding Pitt curiously.

They went out, and walked quickly across the Triangle. It was now growing dusk, but a good many fellows saw the trio and wondered what was wrong. Tommy Watson and I were just coming from the playing-fields, and we strolled over towards the gym.

"Looks like trouble for somebody," remarked Watson critically.

"And Pitt again, too!" I exclaimed. "I wonder what his little game is this time? Something rotten, I'll bet!"

The door of the gym. was closed, and so we were unable to see within. As luck would have it, the innocent Handforth had completely played into Pitt's hands—a stroke of chance which Pitt had not hoped for.

Handforth, in fact, was irritated by the strong smell of paraffin which pervaded the gym., and which he had noticed upon first entering. And now, by ail that was unfortunate, he was making a search. When the Head and Nelson Lee entered Handforth was in a far corner, bending over something behind a pile of folding chairs which was stacked there. He turned, his hands smothered in paraffin.

"Who did this?" he demanded warmly. "Who's been playing the giddy ox? Oh, my hat! I—I beg your pardon——"

"There you are, sir!" said Pitt softly. "I told you——"

"Silence, Pitt!" rapped out the Head in a terrible voice. "Handforth, what is that on your hands?"

"Paraffin, sir!" said Handforth warmly. "I can't make it out—there's paraffin all over the place, sir! And a lot of shavings, too!"

The Head was thunderstruck. He had come into the gym. in a sceptical frame of mind, and had actually found Handforth with his hands smothered in paraffin—and absolutely alone. On the face of it, it seemed as though Pitt's accusation was fully justified.

"What have you got to say for yourself, Handforth?" asked the Head harshly. "I

believed that Pitt was lying to me when he accused you of planning to set fire to this building——"

Handforth staggered back.

"Pitt—Pitt accused me of that?" he gasped. "Why, I'll—I'll punch him into——"

"I claim your protection, sir!" said Pitt promptly.

"You liar—you beastly liar!" roared Handforth.

"Silence, Handforth!" exclaimed Dr. Stafford angrily.

"I expected he'd try to get out of it, sir," said Pitt. "I dare say he'll deny having typed you a letter——"

"You rotten spy!" shouted Handforth violently. "He's planned this himself, sir," added the Remove captain, appealing to the Head. "I don't deny that I wrote you a letter, because I did. I typed it rather, and posted it only twenty minutes ago."

"Does anybody else know about that letter?" sneered Pitt.

"No, not a soul—except you," replied Handforth. "If I don't smash you for this, Pitt, you'll be lucky!"

"Come with me to my study at once, Handforth," said the Head sharply. "You too, Pitt. Mr. Lee, I am afraid that Handforth has been guilty of an insane act—or, at least, he was contemplating that act. Pitt was quite right in coming to me."

"Exactly," agreed Nelson Lee smoothly. "And I really think that Pitt may be allowed to go, Dr. Stafford. He can surely do nothing else to assist us."

"Very well—you may go, Pitt," said the Head.

The news was all over the school in five minutes—Pitt saw to that. Handforth had been found preparing to set the gym. on fire! Of course, hardly anybody believed it, but there was a great deal of excitement. Meanwhile Handforth was in the Head's study, rather dazed. Dr. Stafford had telephoned to the postmaster, requesting him to send up the letter by special messenger. A telegraph girl brought it almost at once, and the Head tore it open.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed furiously. "Just look at this, Mr. Lee!"

Nelson Lee took it, and then pursed his lips.

"Did you type this, Handforth?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Handforth innocently. "I—I didn't mean any disrespect, sir. But we want Tregellis-West to come back——"

"Disrespect!" thundered the Head. "Do not talk nonsense, boy. You know well enough that this letter would not be delivered until the morning in the ordinary course of things—until after the gymnasium had been burnt to the ground."

"I—I don't understand, sir," gasped Handforth helplessly.

"You wretched boy!" stormed the Head. "You shall be expelled from St. Frank's this very night——"



"Expelled!" panted Handforth, horrified.  
 "Yes, boy—expelled!"  
 "But—but I'm innocent, sir!" roared poor old Handforth, starting to his feet indignantly. "You don't think I put all that paraffin down, do you? It was Pitt—"  
 "Do not dare to place your guilt upon the shoulders of the boy who had courage enough to come to me!" said Dr. Stafford angrily. "The letter alone is quite sufficient evidence of guilt; and you have admitted writing it, Handforth. That is sufficient."  
 "The—the letter, sir?" said the junior dazedly.  
 "Look for yourself, my boy," said Nelson Lee, passing Handforth the letter.  
 And the Remove captain's amazed eyes read the following:

"Strike Committee Room,  
 "Ancient House.

"Honoured Sir,  
 "The gymnasium was burnt to the ground as a protest against the delay in agreeing to our demands. Unless Tregellis-West returns this week there will be another fire—but a bigger one!

"THE STRIKE COMMITTEE."

It is scarcely to be wondered at that the letter swam before poor Handforth's eyes. It was like a nightmare to him. And he was shrewd enough to realise that this was enough to get him the sack. The whole affair seemed perfectly plain. The letter was to have been delivered in the morning, after the gym. had been burnt down. Pitt, of course, had had no intention of causing a fire—his whole scheme had been to incriminate Handforth. The cunning manner in which he had made his plans was absolutely startling.

"I—I didn't write this, sir!" gasped Handforth wildly.

"You foolish boy!" said the Head, noticing Handforth's acute distress. "It is scarcely

surprising that you are bewildered. Two minutes ago you confessed that you did write the letter—"

"Not this one, sir!" roared Handforth.

"Enough!" said the Head sternly. "Your guilt is evident, and you will leave St. Frank's to-night!"

Handforth sat stunned—and then Nelson Lee spoke.

"Do not worry yourself, Handforth," he said smoothly. "I am quite convinced of your innocence, and it will not be necessary for you to leave the neighbourhood. The actual culprit in this affair is not you, but Pitt."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Oh, sir!" he panted. "You—you believe in me?"

"Perfectly, my boy."

"Are you mad, Mr. Lee?" exclaimed the Head sharply.

"No," replied the schoolmaster-detective. "I am not mad, Dr. Stafford, but I happen to know certain facts which are hidden from you—and Handforth is the victim of a despicable plot!"

Reginald Pitt fondly believed that he had triumphed. Edward Oswald Handforth left St. Frank's in disgrace. But he didn't go far; he joined Sir Montie Tregellis-West at the Mount.

And Nelson Lee made a positive promise that both the unfortunate juniors would be completely vindicated within three days. The school knew nothing of this, and thought that Handforth had been sacked.

The Remove strike, as a consequence, completely collapsed. The juniors were thoroughly staggered. But I wasn't. I knew that everything would come right the very instant Nelson Lee's plans were completed.

And Reginald Pitt's career was nearly at an end!

THE END.

## NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

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## GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIAL!

# The Chums of Littleminster School.

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## 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, which gets cast adrift. Later on Grainger, the Captain, sees Challis at the nets, and asks him to play for the next sixteen against the eleven. Meanwhile Basil suspects Myers of casting the punt adrift, since he found a coin belonging to him near the spot. Unsuspectingly he puts the coin in a drawer in his cubicle. It vanishes, and Basil suspects Myers. At dinner the next day Myers is caught talking.

(Now read on.)

## A MAN SHORT.

"**M**YERS!" called Mr. Evans, from the head of the table. "Stand up!" Flushed, shamefaced, Myers stood up for all to see.

"Was that you talking loudly?" cried the Master sternly.

"N-no—sir—"

"That is false. I heard you, and all you said. As you are going to play in the match to-day, I'll defer punishment. But you will write me out five hundred lines to-morrow."

Myers groaned and dropped into his seat. As if he hadn't enough lines to write out! He felt that he hated Mr. Evans, and was near to saying so, only that he saw the Master's stern eyes fastened on him, and did not dare.

He saw Basil grinning at him, and Raymond and Fawcett standing up to have a better view of him. In a rage he vowed that he would pay the fags out for this. And he would have his full revenge when Challis made a confounded ass of himself at the wicket. Wait till the cad turned out in his dirty tweeds, and then see.

The dinner ended, the boys broke up, and there was no end of a rushing and hurrying to and fro, while the air cracked with the din of echoing voices.

Rapidly the cricket ground began to fill. The juniors were the first on the field, of course, arriving in batches, each house unto itself, each house yelling defiance at the others, and marching to the best positions from which to view the game.

The stand filled rapidly. Round the ropes and the boundary lines the boys squatted.

In the pavilion some of the more eager and nervous of the players were already beginning to change.

The time drew nearer and nearer. Grainger arrived, accompanied by Ponsonby, Ryder, Moreash (one of the best bats the school had ever had), and Andrews, the fast bowler of the school team, of Hale's House.

Then the masters came along.

Most of the sixteen were already in the pavilion, among them Myers, Chalfont, and Digby of Evans's.

The excitement grew and grew. Some of the flannelled cricketers came out into the sun. Mr. Gray, of Gray's House, donned an umpire's jacket, and Mr. Evans did the same.

Basil began to feel breathless. So did Raymond and Fawcett, who were sitting next him. Their eyes roamed the field and rested on the pavilion, while they sought for a sign of John Challis. He wasn't there.

"Look!" said Fawcett breathlessly. "The captains are tossing for choice of innings, and I don't believe that Challis is on the field. My hat, if he should have forgotten all about it?"

"Oh, that's impossible! He must have heard them jeering at and chaffing him, and he's studied the names on the board again and again," protested Raymond.

Basil was silent, watching the group of players anxious-eyed.

He knew John better than these did, knew his absent-minded ways.

It was quite possible that the big boy had forgotten, and if so, it would do him no good to be rushed at the last moment. It would sort of upset his mental balance.

Basil rose to his feet.

"Where are you off to, old chap?" asked Fawcett.

"Going to see who's won the toss."

"Oh, Vernon has, for the sixteen!" cried Fawcett carelessly. "Look, the eleven are coming out to field."

It was as Fawcett said. Vernon—captain of the next sixteen, a real good man, of Gray's—was retiring into the pavilion, and

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)



the umpires and the eleven, led by Grainger, were coming out on to the playing-pitch, smiling in anticipation of the match to come.

Basil, darting across the field, sped for the pavilion.

He had crossed the pitch with a perfect lunge and cry from the schoolboys' lips echoing in his ears, when Grainger, seizing him by the collar, pulled him up.

"Hallo, young 'un! You're not allowed to roam all over the field while a match is on!" he said sternly, but not unkindly.

Basil glanced earnestly into his captain's eyes.

"If you please, sir," he pleaded, "I want to find Challis, I don't believe he's in the pavilion, and the sixteen are going to bat. If he's not turned up I'll go to his rooms and fetch him."

Grainger released the fag.

"H'm!" he frowned. "The beggar isn't going to sell us another pup, is he?"

"Oh, no! He's probably deep in his studies, and—he doesn't think of anything else then!"

"All right. Skip along. Fetch him. It will do him a lot of harm if he doesn't turn up," and Grainger waved the fag on.

Basil rushed madly across the pitch, dived into the pavilion, and cast a glance into the faces of all the boys who were standing there in flannels, eager and ready for the game. Vernon and Chalfont were strapping on their pads, for they were to be the first pair to bat.

As he had anticipated, Challis wasn't there.

Myers grabbed Basil by the collar and shook him roughly.

"You're not allowed in here," he shouted. "Get out!" And he brought his knee up roughly under the fag's body.

"Beast!" cried Basil, wriggling free, and turning to the others. "I say, isn't Challis here? No? Has anybody seen him?"

Myers' face lit up with triumph. 'Til then it hadn't dawned on him that the cad wasn't present.

"Seen him? Not likely," he sneered. "By Jove, he's funk'd! Sensible of him, too, seeing the rags he would have to wear."

Basil faced his enemy with clenched fists, his eyes flashing defiance.

"Challis hasn't funk'd, and you know it!" he cried. "And I'm going to fetch him."

And off he sped like the wind.

### A BIG SURPRISE.

**O**N reaching Challis's room, Basil knocked. There was no reply. He knocked a second and a third time, when a sharp voice cried, "Come in."

The boy then entered, to find Challis seated at table, his back to the light, books and manuals in front of him, a pen in his hand, his face set in an effort of concentration. His frown vanished when he recognised the intruder.

"Come in and sit down, young 'un!" he cried cheerily. "I sha'n't be long. When I'm finished we'll have a talk—eh?"

"John, have you forgotten all about the cricket match?" breathed Basil, wonderingly.

Challis sat bolt upright.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "I had! Clean forgotten it. Thought it was to-morrow. Still, there's heaps of time, isn't there?"

"No. You're late already. Vernon won the toss for the sixteen, and has sent the eleven out to field. He and Chalfont are going to open the innings, and if wickets fall quickly, they'll call on you. Don't let 'em serve you a dirty trick, Challis."

The pleading note in Basil's voice, the look in his eyes, touched Challis, who sprang erect, and thrust his books aside.

"I'm awfully sorry!" he cried apologetically. "I'm such an absent-minded beggar. I'm always forgetting things. Sha'n't be long, kid. Just wait here a tick."

Challis pounded out of the room, swinging the door to behind him, and Basil heard his steps echoing along the corridor as he ran for his room.

A proud smile curved the fag's lips as he waited. Good old Challis! Never mind what sort of clothes he wore, he was sure to justify his selection for the sixteen if he had the least bit of luck.

Five minutes passed slowly away, six, and then open swung the door, and in came Challis.

"Come along, young 'un!" he cried, and Basil gasped.

Never had he seen such a magical change in his life. Challis had run from the room wearing his old and much worn tweeds. He came back dressed in as smart and well-cut suit of flannels as it was possible to procure. His shirt of flannel, loose cut, was of the best. He wore a cap of the house colours, a tie to match, and a white flannel coat instead of a blazer. His feet were encased in soft white leather cricketing boots, nail-studded, and of good make.

And, marvel of marvels, he had oiled and brushed his hair.

Basil stared aghast, at a loss for words. Challis frowned, then murmured petulantly, "I say, don't rub it in, kid. I know I look an awful ass, and all that sort of thing, but—well, I felt I had to do it. I hate conventions, but you've got to toe the line to 'em. Got these things made and sent me from home. The dad's a brick. Had to oil my hair, too. Hate it. And now I suppose I shall be howled for a duck and give the chaps something else to store up against me."

Basil found his voice. His face fairly beamed with delight.

Challis, looking far more distinguished and manly than nearly every boy in the school, was fit to take his place on the cricket field, where his appearance would confound his enemies.

"Oh, John, I'm so glad!" he gasped. "Won't Myers and all that gang be sick?"

(Continued overleaf.)



And you won't make a duck, either. You'll justify your selection, I'm certain."

Challis grunted. "Hope so!" he muttered, casting a regretful glance at his books. Then with a sigh he turned, and they hurried out of the school-house and across to the cricket field, where the trial match was in full swing.

Nobody noticed their arrival. All eyes were concentrated on the field, where the batsmen were doing their best to hold up the school's bowling.

Basil cast a glance at the notice board and uttered a cry of dismay.

This is what it said: Runs, 9. Wickets, 2. Last man, 0. Bowlers, 3 and 7.

Two wickets for 9 runs! A glance at the pitch showed the fact that Vernon, the captain, had gone. Chalfont was still batting. He had not scored. The other batsman, Griggs, of Hale's, had 3 to his credit. By George, things were looking bad, and no mistake!

"We're only just in time, John," he said, as he made for the pavilion.

Challis, too, had studied the board, and taken in the situation at a glance. With a grunt he followed Basil.

As they reached the threshold of the dressing-room they heard voices speaking.

"I knew what it would be when Grainger selected him," Digby was saying. "You can't rely on a boulder like that. He would let anybody down. But I'm not sorry. Look here, Vernon, we'll play fifteen and chance it. And isn't it better than if he turned up here in his dirty rags, to make a duck and show up the side?"

"I wish he were here," growled Vernon. "Young Hood's gone to fetch him, but he's a long time. I've got him down to bat next. Confound it——" Here he frowned. "It's very unsatisfactory."

Just then they heard a distinct clicking sound from the playing-field, which was immediately followed by a yell from the boys who were looking on.

"Chalfont's out. Clean bowled middle stump. One of Grainger's beauties," shouted a player from the door. "It's a rot. The school will walk over. Never saw such a rotten start. Three of the best wickets down for 9."

The captain of the sixteen frowned.

"Get your pads on, Myers," he growled. "I'll send you in next, as Challis isn't here. Don't lash out, but stand steady to the bowling. We must try and stop the rot somehow."

Myers seized a pad, but at that moment Challis thrust his way forward and faced the captain of the sixteen, his cheeks flushing hotly, his eyes bright.

"I'm here, sir, and ready to bat if you want me to go in next," he muttered, avoiding the eyes of the others. "Sorry I forgot,

but I was puzzling out a tricky problem, and took no account of the time."

"H'm." Dead silence, and all eyes were directed at Challis, all faces lengthened in astonishment.

"Well, of all the——" Vernon looked at Challis up and down, as surprised as the rest, but too well bred to make any comment. One thing struck him forcibly, that Challis, with his fine, sturdy figure, looked every inch a cricketer in his flannels.

And even if he were bowled for a duck he would not disgrace Littleminster in this rig-out.

Slowly the expression of his face changed. His frown vanished, his lips curved into a welcoming smile, and his eyes brightened visibly.

"I'm glad you've come, Challis," he said heartily. "Thought it must be something like that that kept you. Ought to have rounded you up before. Yes, get your pads on, if you will. I think I'd like you to bat next, if you don't mind. It'll brace the side up if you can stand firm."

Challis nodded.

"I've had no practice to speak of," he said. "But I'll do my best."

So, sitting down as serene and calm as if playing cricket for Littleminster were an everyday sort of thing, instead of something entirely new for him, John Challis sat down and began to strap on a pair of pads and to ask with a blush on his cheeks—for he had forgotten to ask his father to send him down one—for somebody to lend him a bat.

"Take mine," said Vernon, whose depression had vanished with the arrival of Challis. "And, I say, I wish you luck, Challis."

## THE ACCIDENT.

OUTSIDE, among the boys who surrounded the playing-pitch, silence reigned. The trial game was always one of the most important of the season. The juniors looked forward to it with hope, and all the Houses were keen to find representatives in the picked eleven which would hold up the honour of the school during the summer campaign.

And while the eleven crack players of the school side, generally the best to be found, were regarded with awe, even with hero-worship, yet most of the sympathy was with the next sixteen. This year, on account of Challis's notorious position at Littleminster, and the eleventh-hour choice of its captain, the match was regarded with more than usual interest.

Challis would be an awful frost. That was a foregone conclusion in the minds of the majority of the boys. Yet they wanted the sixteen to make a good fight of it.

(To be continued.)