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WAR-TIME
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The three men dragged Nelson Lee away, unaware that Handforth was a silent witness of the scene.

“THE CLOSING OF THE NET!”

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 "Expelled from St. Frank's," "The Remove on Strike," "Poor Old Handforth," etc. *October 19, 1918.*



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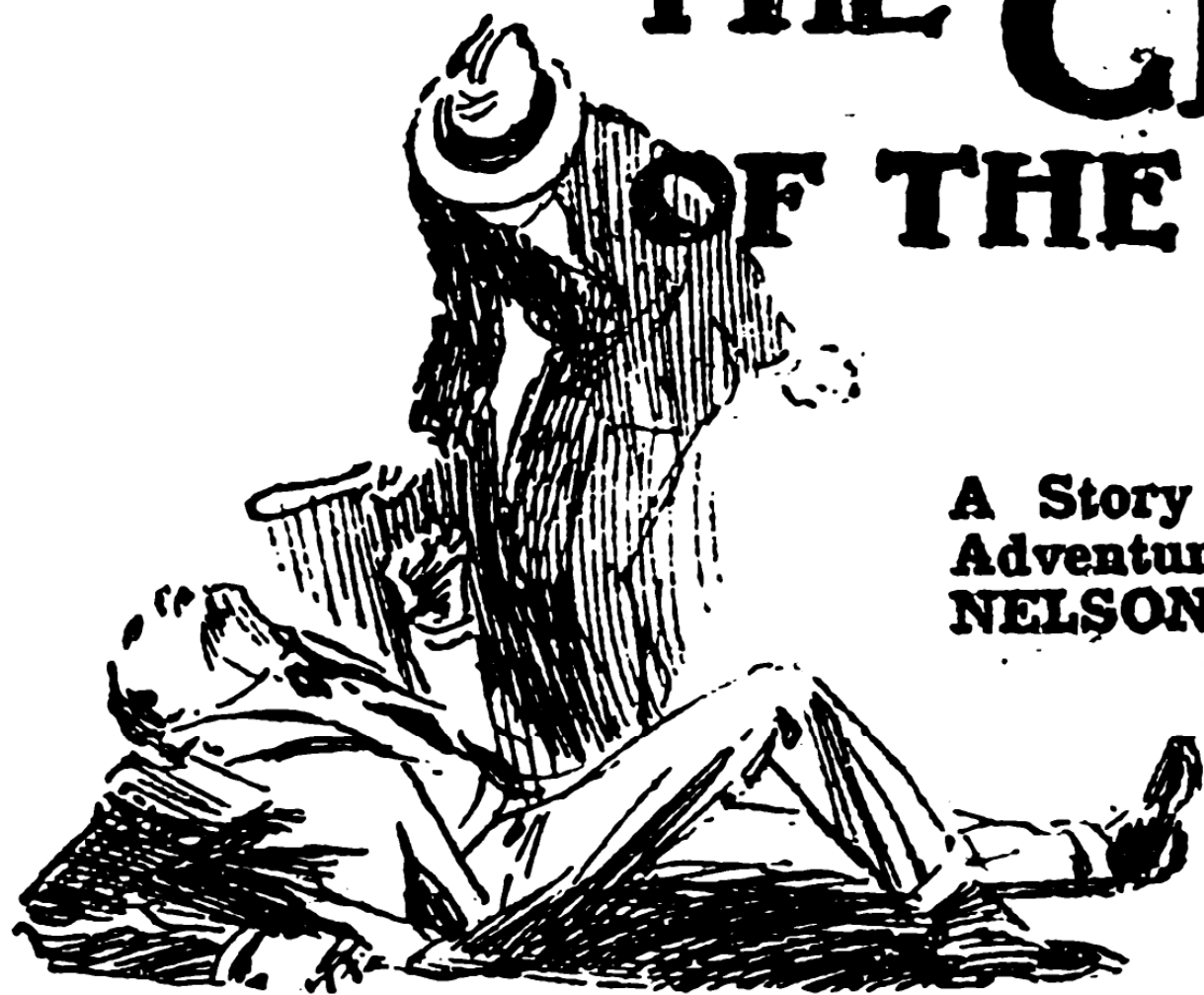
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THE CLOSING OF THE NET!



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 "Expelled from St. Frank's," "The Remove on Strike," "Poor Old Handforth," etc.

(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A VISIT TO THE EXILES.

"**P**OOOR old Handy!" said McClure gloomily.

"Sacked!" remarked Church, in miserable tones.

"Kicked out of the school!" went on McClure. "What's going to become of us, Churchy? How shall we get on without him? Oh, ain't it simply awful?"

"Awful ain't the word for it!" said Church pitifully.

It could not be said that Arnold McClure and Walter Church were the two most cheerful juniors in the St. Frank's Remove. They were probably more miserable than they had ever been in their lives before.

Edward Oswald Handforth, their famous leader, had been expelled from St. Frank's the previous evening. That was the truth of the matter, and Church and McClure were in mourning.

"All his own fault, too," said Church heavily. "I don't suppose we shall ever see him again——"

"Rats! We shall see him at the end of term," interrupted McClure. "We'll arrange to meet him, or something. By Jupiter! I'll give him a piece of my mind, too! Fancy trying to burn the gym. down! He must have been mad!"

"Recklessness, that's what it was," said Church. "He didn't realise what he was doing, the fathead. It's a good thing Pitt found it out in time. Handy might have been shoved in chokey if——"

"Eh, what's that?"

Church and McClure turned, and stared at me. I had just emerged from the Ancient House with Tommy Watson. It was tea-time, and we were off to the Mount, the

residence of Mr. Howard Ridgeway, to take tea. And Tommy and I had come to a momentous decision.

"What's that?" I repeated. "Who might have been shoved in chokey?"

"Handforth," said Church gloomily.

"What the dickens for?"

"For setting fire to the gym., of course," exclaimed Church. "Wasn't he only just stopped in time, you ass?"

I regarded the pair severely.

"But you don't believe that Handforth tried to fire the gym., do you?" I asked in a pained voice. "You don't believe that poor old Handy was guilty? Oh, Church!" I added reproachfully.

"If he wasn't guilty why was he sacked?" asked Church. "I—I don't like to believe it, Nipper, but—but—— Hang it all, he told us he typed a letter to the Head, and then it turned out that it was about burning down the gymnasium. We didn't know it at the time, or we should have jumped on his neck. The whole thing was plain, so how can we think anything else?"

"The old ass must have done it without thinking," added McClure charitably. "That's just like Handy—too jolly impulsive. Thank goodness he wasn't sacked publicly!"

Handforth, in fact, had left quietly, and Church and McClure had not even had the opportunity of bidding him good-bye. Later on, just before bedtime, Dr. Stafford made a short speech, explaining that Handforth had left St. Frank's. There was no mention of expulsion, but, of course, it amounted to the same thing.

There had been considerable dismay in the Remove, for Handforth, in spite of his somewhat aggressive habits, was one of the most popular fellows in the Ancient House. He was an ass, but he was a jolly decent ass. Somehow the place seemed bare without

Handforth knocking about. And the Remove, as a whole, was gloomy.

The only exceptions were Pullwood and Co. and Reginald Pitt, who openly gloated over the downfall of Handforth. Pitt, especially, was in high good humour. And he had excellent reason to be, since it had been owing to his rascality that Handforth had suffered.

I looked at Church and McClure in pained surprise.

"And you chaps Handy's own special chums believe him guilty?" I said severely. "I'm ashamed of you!"

Church and McClure turned red.

"Look here, who asked you to butt in?" growled McClure, looking uncomfortable. "We—we don't exactly believe him guilty, but think he must have gone dotty for a few hours. Look at all the proof—"

"Proof!" I echoed. "Where is it? Nothing but faked-up evidence, my sons. You ought to be as staunch as glue to old Handy. You know jolly well he couldn't do a really rotten action."

Church looked at McClure and McClure looked at Church.

"By George!" said Church, taking a deep breath. "We're a couple of asses, Clurey."

That's what we are! We've been making excuses for old Handy, instead of refusing to believe him guilty! Nipper's right. We ought to stick to the old as like glue!"

"And so we will!" declared McClure enthusiastically. "I—I've been thinking all along that we were on the wrong track. Good old Handy! He wouldn't do such a beastly thing as that! Not likely!"

"I should think it is not likely!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "If any of the other fellows chin you, my sons, don't take any notice. They believe the worst because the evidence looks conclusive. But you're above that sort of thing, I should hope."

"What would Handforth do himself in the same circumstances?" I asked. "Supposing you had been sacked, McClure? Why, Handy would have sworn blind that you were innocent through thick and thin. That's what he'd have done! And here we find you going against—"

McClure looked straight at me.

"I'm jiggered if we don't deserve a jawing!" he said candidly. "I felt like punching your nose just now, Nipper, but I'm pleased if you ain't right!"

I grinned.

"Good!" I said. "What about tea?"

"We'd forgotten tea!" said Church. "How can we have tea while poor old Handy is going through it at home—being tanned, perhaps?"

"Don't you worry about Handy!" I chuckled. "He 'asn't had a tanning, and won't have one, either. Just come along with us, my sons, and we'll give you a little surprise."

Church and McClure stared.

"What do you mean—a surprise?" asked the latter.

"Just leave it to your uncle!" I said genially. "Come on!"

Tommy Watson and I marched across the Triangle, and Handforth's chums followed us. They had been inclined to consider us rather heartless for appearing so unconcerned. But there was an excellent reason for our good humour, and Church and McClure would soon know it.

Tommy and I had come to the decision after much discussion. The doleful attitude of Church and McClure had really touched our hearts. They had looked so utterly miserable that we felt it impossible to go to tea at Mr. Ridgeway's without taking them with us.

We knew quite well that they could be trusted with a secret, especially a secret of the kind we were about to impart. It was not until we had covered half the distance to the Mount that I broached the subject. Church and McClure knew that we were bound for the Mount, and they had been rather startled. They didn't know Mr. and Mrs. Ridgeway, and thought they would be intruding. Besides, they hadn't got clean collars on.

"Don't you worry about that," I said cheerfully. "Just listen to me and keep your hair on. You know that Tregellis-West was sacked some time ago?"

"Know it!" repeated McClure. "Why, we've had nothing but disasters this last week or two. It was bad enough for Tregellis-West to go, without Handforth following him. Two of the best chaps in the Remove sacked practically within a week!"

"Owing to Pitt!" I said grimly.

"What?" said Church. "Sir Montie was kicked out because of Pitt, I believe, but Pitt had nothing to do with old Handy—"

"Nothing to do with Handy, eh?" I repeated. "You simple ass! Didn't Pitt give the information to the Head? Didn't Pitt take the Head and Mr. Lee to the gym? Didn't he show them the paraffin which was supposed to have been put there by Handforth?"

"Yes, but the letter—"

"Blow the letter!" I interrupted. "Pitt's a cunning beast, and you seem to forget that that letter was typewritten. Couldn't Pitt have been spying outside the door of your study? Couldn't he have typed another letter and substituted it for the real one?"

"My only aunt!" said McClure huskily.

"Pitt was the cause of Tregellis-West and Handforth being sacked," I went on. "He's got his knife into the lot of us, and would like to get me expelled, if he could. But Pitt isn't so jolly clever as he thinks he is. He'll come a frightful cropper before long."

"Who's going to expose him?" asked Church.

"My guv'nor—Mr. Nelson Lee," I replied quietly. "And it may interest you to know, my dear chaps, that Mr. Lee positively believes in the innocence of Montie and Handforth."

"Mr. Lee believes in 'em?" asked McClure, staring.

"Not only that, but he positively knows that they are innocent," I declared. "But the Head is an obstinate old boulder, and

he's ready to believe the evidence that's placed before him. Of course, he doesn't know every junior personally, and knows nothing about Pitt's evil goings-on. He'd probably refuse to believe that one junior was plotting against the others. But there's no need to go into all that," I went on. "The fact remains that Mr. Lee is working like the dickens to get Pitt shown up. And Tregellis-West is staying at the Mount until the truth comes out: then he'll come back to St. Frank's with flying colours."

"Tregellis-West's staying at the Mount!" gasped Church amazedly.

"Surprised you, eh?" I grinned.

"You're rotting!" said McClure.

"You needn't believe me unless you like," I replied. "You'll see him for yourself in a minute or two. And you'll see somebody else," I added, with a chuckle.

"You—you don't mean——" Church paused, gasping. "Oh, but that's rot! I—I thought——"

"Exactly!" I grinned. "You'll see old Handforth!"

"Handforth!" yelled McClure, with a jump.

"You needn't tell the whole neighbourhood!" said Tommy Watson. "And mind, it's got to be kept a dead secret. Mr. Lee arranged things, and before long Handy will come back."

It was some few moments before Church and McClure could quite believe the good news. But then the gloom fell from them like a cloak and their faces were eloquent of their keen pleasure.

Handforth had always caused his faithful chums to lead a strenuous life, and he had not been at all particular about delivering punches if he thought they were necessary. But Church and McClure were very fond of their somewhat overbearing leader, in spite of his faults. For, after all, Handforth's good points easily outbalanced his bad ones. He was about the most generous fellow in the Ancient House, and would willingly lend anybody his last shilling. And, although he was a bit of a fathead, his general ideas were perfectly sound, and he had often proved that he was shrewd, too."

"Mr. Lee's a splendid sort!" said McClure feelingly. "By jingo! He's absolutely a corker!"

"He'd feel highly complimented if he heard that!" I grinned. "But, you see, the guv'nor ain't like any ordinary common-or-garden Housemaster. He's one of the cleverest detectives living, and Pitt doesn't stand an earthly chance. The Serpent might be able to throw dust into the innocent old eyes of the Head, but he can't spoof Nelson Lee."

"But why didn't Mr. Lee expose Pitt at the start?" asked Church keenly. "Why didn't he prevent Tregellis-West and Handy being sacked?"

It was a natural question, and I had been expecting it.

"Because Pitt's connected with some deeper game," I replied. "I don't know exactly what it is, so you needn't ask me

anything more. But you'll learn all about it in good time; I can promise you that. There's some excitement brewing, my sons."

"It strikes me it's brewed already!" said McClure. "Fancy old Handy being at the Mount! I can't quite believe it! It's awfully good of you chaps to let us into the secret."

"We're soft-hearted, you see!" I grinned. "We couldn't bear to see you suffering, but remember—not a giddy word to a soul."

"And here we are!" said Tommy Watson.

We all turned into the big gateway of the Mount. Mr. Ridgeway was doing some light gardening in the front, and he greeted us cheerily.

"Brought some friends, eh?" he said smilingly.

We explained the situation, and introduced Church and McClure. They were nervous at first, but Mr. Ridgeway soon made them at their ease. He was a really good sort, being a novelist by profession, and quite a homely man. Nelson Lee had been friendly with him quite a while, and Mr. Ridgeway was now proving his worth.

The front door stood open, and he invited us to enter. As we mounted the steps Sir Montie Tregellis-West appeared, attired with even greater splendour than usual. His eyes gleamed behind his pince-nez.

"Begad! I'm frightfully glad to see you, old boys!" he said languidly. "Mr. an' Mrs. Ridgeway are awfully decent, but you wouldn't believe how shockin'ly slow it is here."

"We thought you were gone for good, Tregellis-West!" said McClure.

Montie beamed.

"It ain't so easy to get rid of me, dear fellow," he exclaimed. "I shall turn up at St. Frank's again before long—I shall, really. An' I'm in a frightful funk about it, too. Nipper tells me that there'll be a fuss made, an' all that sort of rot. Ain't it appallin'?"

"A fuss!" echoed Church. "I should jolly well think there will be a fuss! It'll be the sensation of the term——"

"Hallo! Here's Handy!" said McClure suddenly.

Handforth came down the hall, grinning.

"Didn't expect to see me, did you?" he asked. "And what the dickens are you doing here, anyhow? Who let you into the secret?"

"Nipper!" replied Church. "Well, this is a queer business, and no giddy mistake! I must say you're looking pretty lively, Handy!"

Handforth frowned.

"I'm not so sure that it's safe!" he said judicially. "It's ten to one you'll go and let the cat out of the bag. You chaps never could be trusted with a secret——"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" protested McClure. Handforth glared.

"I'll trouble you not to call me an ass in Mr. Ridgeway's house," he said. "Check, I call it!"

"Same old Handy!" I grinned. "Even being sacked doesn't make any difference to him."

Church and McClure were quite content.

I honestly believe that they would have allowed Handforth to punch them until further orders if he had felt so inclined. Their joy was very real, however, and Handforth could see it. He did not overlook the compliment.

"No need to make a giddy fuss, you know," he said. "Of course, I'm glad to see you, and all the rest of it. By the way, Nipper, what's the Remove going to do now?"

"Have tea, I suppose," I replied humorously.

"You ass! I meant, how's the Remove going on without its skipper—without me?" said Handforth.

I shivered.

"I tremble to think of it, Handy," I said. "How can the Remove get on without you? The thought is too appalling for words."

"Begad! Don't glare like that, Handy," grinned Sir Montie. "You mustn't blame us for smilin', old boy. The expression on your face is quite enough to make a cat laugh!"

"I don't believe in this rotting!" said Handforth tartly. "The fact remains that the Remove is without a skipper——"

"Don't you worry about that," I interrupted soothingly. "I don't suppose you would have lasted many days longer, Handy, so there's no need for you to concern yourself."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose that means that I'm going to be shoved out of the captaincy?" roared Handforth. "We'll see about that, you cackling fatheads!"

I grinned.

"I'll trouble you not to call us cackling fatheads in Mr. Ridgeway's house!" I mimicked. "Remember where you are, Handy!"

Handforth, remembering how he had rebuked McClure, had nothing whatever to say. This was somewhat surprising, and before he could summon up the necessary flow of language, Mrs. Ridgeway appeared.

"Come along, boys," she said smilingly. "Tea's all ready."

Church and McClure were introduced, and then we went in to tea. It was quite a pleasant meal, and the exiles enjoyed themselves tremendously. For that matter, so did we.

At the conclusion of the meal we were shown into a comfortable little den which had been set apart for the use of Tregellis-West and Handforth—a thoughtful little attention on Mrs. Ridgeway's part. For it was nice for the juniors to have a place of their own—which, naturally, they called their study.

We sat chatting for some little time; I was of the opinion that Handforth and Sir Montie would be back at St. Frank's within a week. They were not inclined to think this prophecy an accurate one. And then the guv'nor appeared.

Nelson Lee came in briskly, attired in his school gown. Church and McClure jumped up hastily, in great alarm.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped McClure. "Copped!"

"You asses!" I grinned. "Didn't I tell you that Mr. Lee is the chief conspirator in this business? He knows all about it, and planned all the horrid details in his own brain!"

"That is no way to refer to a Housemaster, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee severely.

"I was referring to you, guv'nor," I replied calmly. "I don't regard you as my Housemaster when we're away from St. Frank's. I told you I was going to bring Church and McClure, didn't I?"

"We—we won't breathe a word, sir!" said Church eagerly.

"I feel sure that I can trust you, boys," said Nelson Lee. "I only looked in to see how you were getting on."

"It's awfully good of you, sir," said Handforth feelingly. "Why, if it hadn't been for you, Tregellis-West and I would have been sacked properly. You're a brick, sir!"

"Begad! Rather!" agreed Sir Montie.

"Nonsense, my boys!" laughed Nelson Lee. "I happen to know that you are innocent, but I am not yet prepared to lay hands upon the real culprit. I think I can promise you, however, that your retirement will be of very short duration. On Wednesday night I intend to strike the final blow, and on Thursday you will take your usual places in the Remove."

"By George! That's ripping, sir!" declared Handforth. "And will all the other fellows know that we've been proved innocent?"

"You will not return unless you can do so with your names cleared," replied the guv'nor quietly. "Just a little more patience, boys, and then you will get your reward."

And there was something in Nelson Lee's tone which gave Tregellis-West and Handforth much comfort. His words were possibly somewhat cryptic to them, but I understood perfectly.

In short, the guv'nor meant to prepare a big police raid on the gambling-house at Bannington.

The net was already closing.

CHAPTER II.

THE TEMPTATION OF REGINALD PITT.

STUDY E, in the Remove passage, was looking very cosy. Ralph Leslie Fullwood thought so when he put his head inside the door. Reginald Pitt, whose study it was, was seated at his table, apparently writing against time.

"Nice an' comfy in here," remarked Fullwood, entering. "That fire looks cheerful. I shall have to start one in my study tomorrow. The days are gettin' chilly——"

"Shut up!" said Pitt snappily.

Fullwood grinned, and sat down in front of the fire. He extracted a cigarette-case from his pocket and lit a cigarette. Then he leaned back comfortably.

"Lines?" he suggested languidly.

Pitt grunted an assent.

"Thought so," said Fullwood. "Lines are a beastly bore, ain't they? Who gave 'em to you?"

"Old Lee, the rotter!" said Pitt, writing industriously.

"Many?"

"Two hundred," replied Serpent. "Why the deuce can't you shut up? You've made me make a mistake—and I've nearly done!"

Fullwood remained silent, smoking easily, and at the end of three minutes Pitt threw his pen down with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Thank goodness they're finished!" he said. "What's the time? Quarter past seven," he added, looking at the clock. "I've got to take 'em in by half-past or they'll be doubled!"

"Plenty of time," said Fullwood. "I was just wondering about the Remove captaincy. Handforth's gone, and the Remove is without a skipper. Couldn't we manage an election? I'd give a fiver to be made Remove captain."

Pitt shook his head.

"The time ain't ripe yet," he said. "There's Nipper to consider. He wouldn't allow it to go through, Fully. After we've got rid of him we shall be able to do as we like with the Remove. That was very neat about Handforth, eh?"

"Blessed if I know how you do it!" said Fullwood admiringly. "But ain't you goin' near the edge, Pitt? If you ain't careful, you'll come an awful cropper."

The Serpent laughed in his oily way.

"Don't you worry about me," he said smoothly. "I'm able to look after myself, and Nipper won't last much longer. But I'll take these lines along now. Going to wait?"

"Yes, I'll be here when you come back," said Fullwood.

Reginald Pitt took the lines and left the study. He walked along the passages until he arrived outside Nelson Lee's door. Pitt had received the imposition for impertinence, and it had been well deserved.

"Come in!" called a quiet voice.

Pitt entered, and found Nelson Lee sitting at his bureau. The Housemaster always used this for his own private matters, and he turned, pen in hand, as Pitt entered.

"I've brought those lines, sir," said Pitt calmly.

"Let me see them, Pitt."

The Serpent took them across, and stood by Nelson Lee's side while the detective examined them. Pitt's sharp eyes were not idle, and he took great interest in the contents of the various pigeon holes of the bureau.

Quite suddenly he started. There, in full view, lay a fat bundle of one-pound Treasury notes. Pitt's eyes gleamed, but he made no other sign. Nelson Lee looked up at the junior and nodded.

"You may go, Pitt," he said. "The lines are slovenly in places, but I will overlook the matter. And you must refrain from im-

pertinence in future. Will you bear that in mind?"

"Yes, sir," said Pitt respectfully.

He left the study, and put his tongue out at the door as he closed it.

"Beastly old rotter!" he murmured politely. "I'll get my own back on you one of these days!"

Pitt walked back to Study E, thinking of the currency notes he had seen in Nelson Lee's bureau. All that money reminded him of the painful fact that he was practically stony.

He found Fullwood still lolling in the arm-chair, and lost no time in broaching the subject which was uppermost in his mind.

"You might lend me a quid, Fully," he said easily.

"I might," replied Fullwood, "but I'm not going to."

"But I'm hard up —"

"So am I," snapped Fullwood. "I've got exactly seven bob, an' I'm not going to part with any of that. I sha'n't get another remittance until the end of the week. An' it's no good askin' Gulliver an' Bell, because they're as stony as I am."

"Marriott's run short, too," remarked the Serpent. "Rather queer, ain't it? I've never known you to all run out at the same time."

"It's astonishin'," said Fullwood calmly.

Pitt understood perfectly. The Nuts were by no means short of money; they merely professed to be. In fact they had no intention of advancing any further sums to Pitt. He had drawn upon them rather heavily of late, and they had become fed-up.

Before starting his campaign Pitt had made a bargain with Fullwood and Co. to the effect that they should supply him with pocket-money—Pitt having no large supply of cash. It had been all very well to start with, but it had grown tiresome.

Fullwood strolled out of Pitt's study, considering that the conversation had taken a turn which was not pleasing. And the Serpent watched him go with a somewhat sardonic expression on his face.

"All right, my beauty!" he murmured. "I won't say anything for the present, but you'll dub up before long. And so will your delightful pals, too!"

Pitt had no wish to quarrel with Fullwood and Co. But if they forced him to it he would show them that he was determined. This rascally junior was even not averse to a little blackmail.

"But that'll do later on," he told himself as he sat in the easy-chair. "I might be able to get hold of money by other means—quite a pile of it, too! It all depends."

He sat thinking for a long while, and when he finally arose there was a keen glitter in his dark eyes, and it was quite evident that he had come to some decision.

Fullwood and Co. had been expecting Pitt to show some signs of the rebuff he had received, but when he met them just before supper he was as pleasant as ever. Tommy Watson and I noticed Pitt's manner, and we

had an idea that trouble was brewing for somebody. Pitt was always more snaky and smooth-tongued when he had some particularly rascally game on the go.

"We'll let him go his own way," I remarked. "He's nearly at the end of his string, anyhow. If we ignore him, the shock will come all the greater—and Pitt deserves about a dozen shocks!"

If I had had any notion of the Serpent's intentions, I should certainly have kept awake that night. But I knew nothing of the workings of his cunning brain, and went to sleep at once.

But Pitt lay in bed wide awake, and he was still awake when the old clock boomed out the hour of eleven. Then he quietly slipped out of bed and got dressed.

By careful inquiry, before going up to bed, Pitt had ascertained that Nelson Lee would be over in the College House until late. Tubbs, the page-boy, had supplied Pitt with that information. It might not be true, but Pitt worked upon the assumption that it was.

He quietly descended to the lower passages, and halted before the door of Nelson Lee's study. He half expected it to be locked, but it wasn't. And Pitt, with his heart beating faster than usual, stole across the apartment, using a small electric-torch—one that he had borrowed from Fulwood's study for the occasion.

The bureau was locked, but Pitt was no ordinary junior. He took a short length of stout wire from his pocket and neatly turned the end with a pair of small pliers. In short, he picked the lock, and conquered it within five minutes. It was, of course, only an ordinary affair, and made no pretence of being burglar-proof.

This doesn't mean to imply that Pitt was a burglar—although he came precious near to it. His eyes gleamed as the light from his torch played upon the pigeon-hole containing the bundle of currency notes. He took them in his hand, and judged that there were about a hundred. They were in good condition, having been used only a little, and Pitt made no attempt to count them.

He simply selected twenty. Then he took from his pocket twenty sheets of blank paper which corresponded exactly to the size of the notes. These he placed in the centre of the bundle, thus making it up to its full size again. Unless carefully examined, thewad appeared to be whole. It was a little precaution which proved that Pitt was thorough in his methods.

He pocketed the twenty pounds, relocked the bureau, and slipped away. It was not his intention to steal the money. He merely regarded it as a loan, which would be repaid before the morning.

At the same time, his action was a rascally one, and he knew it perfectly. The only excuse he made to himself was that he was hard up, and that here was a chance of making several pounds for himself.

For the Serpent's plan was to gamble with that twenty pounds and increase it, if possible, by fifty per cent—thus making a clear

"tenner" for himself. He would replace Nelson Lee's notes, and nobody would be the wiser. It was quite a simple plan—if it panned out all right.

Pitt did not consider the possibility of losing his borrowed capital. Or, if he did consider it, he did not pause on that account. It was just a gamble, and he was confident of success.

And this base action of his proved something else.

Although Pitt was "thick" with the men who ran the gambling-house in Bannington, he was evidently in total ignorance of the fact that they were engaged upon the manufacture of base currency.

And these notes which he had "borrowed" were examples of the clever forgeries! They were worth practically nothing, and they had been handed to Nelson Lee by a Scotland Yard official. The detective had deemed them to be perfectly safe in his bureau—since he did not guard against a burglary from within the house.

Pitt, unconscious of the fact that his capital was worthless, passed out into the dark Triangle and buttoned his coat tightly. The October night was chilly, and a considerable wind was blowing. But there was no rain, and the sky was comparatively clear.

Pitt took his bicycle from a place of concealment he had used on previous occasions. He rode down to the Bannington highway without lighting his lamp, but paused to do so as soon as he got on the main road.

And then he sped onwards, with the wind at his back, and arrived on the outskirts of Bannington just after half-past eleven. The house he was bound for was known as the Hermitage, and was the residence of Mr. Bernard Sales, a man well respected in the town.

The Hermitage, however, was actually a glorified gambling-den, where roulette and faro and other games were played. Pitt believed that this was the extent of Mr. Sales's villainy—and he did not see anything particularly wrong in gambling.

But it was a fact that Mr. Sales's chief business was the manufacture of forged notes. Nelson Lee was well aware of this fact, and he had been working on the case for the past two or three weeks, and had succeeded in obtaining all the evidence necessary.

Pitt gained an entry without difficulty for he knew the password. He had donned a mask, not because he was in fear of being recognised, but because Sales insisted upon all the habitués wearing masks. The majority of them preferred to do so.

Pitt did not intend to remain long. He simply wanted to increase the twenty pounds to thirty, or as near thirty as possible. And he fondly believed that he would be able to accomplish this purpose within half an hour.

He had risked a good deal of money on the roulette table on previous occasions, and he had only once lost—and that was through

carelessness. He was a cautious "punter," and took no big chances.

The croupier was masked, but Pitt knew that he wasn't Sales—who usually presided over the table. Sales himself stood near by, watching the play.

The room was quite crowded to-night, and, as usual, the chief interest was centred upon the roulette table. There was quite a large amount of money on view.

Pitt awaited his opportunity, and then placed three pound notes on different parts of the table. If two went down, he would be almost certain of the third, according to his reckoning. So, if he didn't win anything, he would still get his money back.

The croupier spun the wheel, and the little ball went clicking round the bowl. Pitt was successful, for he raked in two pounds over and above his original three.

The croupier took the third note, which had lost, and Pitt saw him examine it for a moment. Then he beckoned to Sales, and the two men spoke for a few seconds.

Sales took the note and walked away.

"Make your game, gentlemen," droned the croupier.

Everybody's attention was upon the table, and Pitt was about to play with his winnings, when he felt a touch on his shoulder. Sales was standing there.

"One moment, young 'un!" he said softly.

"What's wrong?" demanded Pitt. "I want to—"

"Come with me!"

Sales's voice was imperative, and Pitt followed him to a quiet part of the room, and they sat down on a lounge. Sales displayed the Treasury note he had received from the croupier.

"Did you place this note on the table?" he asked.

"How do I know?" asked Pitt impatiently.

"Notes are all the same, ain't they?"

"Not exactly," was the reply. "Let me see those others you have in your hand."

Pitt had five notes in his hand, and Sales examined them carefully. He handed three of them back and kept the other two.

"These two and the one I already have are the three notes you placed on the table a few moments ago," he said. "Have you any more, Pitt? No, put those three in your pocket."

Pitt was somewhat bewildered.

"I don't see what you're getting at," he said. "What have you kept that two quid for? I won it fairly—"

"Have you got any more of these notes?" demanded Sales.

"No!" replied Pitt quietly.

Sales knew very well that it was a lie, and he rose to his feet.

"Follow me!" he said curtly.

"But, look here, I want to—"

"Follow me!"

Pitt knew better than to refuse, and he went with Sales to some curtains which covered a recess. A blank wall lay behind, but it opened back after Sales had applied pressure, and revealed itself as a door. The

pair passed through, and Sales switched on a cluster of electric lights.

There was nothing remarkable about this apartment; it was a cosy little place, comfortably furnished, and was evidently a sitting-room. And it was quite private.

"Now, look here, Pitt, I want the truth from you," said Sales grimly. "When you went to St. Frank's we made a little compact—you were to introduce boys with money to my house. Well, you've done pretty well, and I'm not going to grumble at you. But where did you get these notes?"

Pitt, in spite of his confidence, was feeling somewhat unsteady. In all probability his conscience was pricking him—hardened as he was.

"How do I know where I got them?" he asked. "A fellow doesn't keep an account of where he got currency notes."

"Well, have you any more?"

"I've told you once!" growled Pitt.

"Do you mean that you came here with three pounds only?"

"Yes."

Sales regarded Pitt steadily.

"I will give you just one minute," he said, lighting a cigarette. "If you don't produce all your money by that time, I shall search you. And if you struggle I can easily call for help."

The Serpent knew that he was cornered. If he were searched the other seventeen pounds would be revealed at once, for they were stuffed just into his trousers pocket. The three notes which Sales had returned—perfectly good ones—were in Pitt's waistcoat.

The junior had no idea of what all this meant. But the croupier and Sales had immediately recognised those notes as some of their own manufacture. The fact that they were in Pitt's possession was not startling, because a good many of them were going about, but it was rather surprising that all three should be forgeries.

It was for this reason that Sales decided upon an inquiry. Pitt didn't know anything about the forgeries, and he was accordingly puzzled. But he was obstinate and stuck to his guns.

"I don't see that you've got any right to search me!" he said angrily. "What's it got to do with you how many notes I have on me? I've told you the truth, and I don't care if you do search me. Here you are—see for yourself!"

Pitt opened his coat and stood ready for the search. He fondly believed that his willingness would delude Sales into believing that he had told the truth. But if Pitt was cunning, Sales was his master.

Without a moment's hesitation he dived his hands into Pitt's trousers pockets. He grasped the notes in a moment, of course, and Pitt smiled sneeringly.

"Well, what are you going to do now?" he asked. "That money's mine—"

"Hold your tongue!" snapped the man.

He was examining the notes, and he made the surprising discovery that they were forgeries, every one of them. Now, this was

more than coincidence. It was hardly possible to believe that Pitt had obtained twenty pounds from a legitimate source and that not a single note should be a genuine one.

Sales was looking grim when he placed the odd three pounds to the bulk. He folded them all over and held them in his hand.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

"I won a prize in a competition," said Pitt glibly. "They sent me those notes by registered post."

Sales smiled at the obvious lie.

"That won't wash, Pitt," he said. "I want the truth."

"It is the truth!" shouted Pitt, who was getting rather scared.

"Look here, you young fool, I'm not in a mood to stand any more of this nonsense!" exclaimed Sales in a hard voice. "I know well enough that you didn't win this money in a competition. Twenty pounds is a big sum for a schoolboy to have. If you don't answer correctly at once, I'll force you to speak."

"Oh, will you?" said Pitt. "How?"

"I shall not trouble to go into details," replied Sales grimly. "But I daresay your Headmaster will be glad to learn some episodes of your career before you went to St. Frank's."

"And I daresay the police will be glad to know what goes on here!" retorted Pitt savagely.

"Those threats do not worry me!" exclaimed Sales. "You can tell the police what you like—they can't hurt me. Now, I'm tired of this foolery. Where did you get those notes?"

"I borrowed them!" growled Pitt sullenly.

"Borrowed them? Who from?"

"Somebody at St. Frank's."

"I expect you mean that you took this money without permission?" suggested Sales keenly. "You hoped to increase it and replace the capital before the morning. Is that it?"

"Yes!" muttered Pitt.

"Well, why couldn't you have said so at first?" exclaimed Sales. "Do you think I care what money you borrow? I have a reason for asking these questions, however. I want to know where you obtained these twenty notes."

"From one of the masters," said the Serpent reluctantly. "I mean to put them back in his desk to-night. He won't know anything about it. Anything else?"

"Yes," said Sales. "Who is this master?"

"My Housemaster, Mr. Lee."

Sales pursed his lips. For a St. Frank's master to possess twenty of the forged notes was rather remarkable, and Sales meant to obtain further information.

"How do you spell the name?" he asked.

"L-e-e-g-h?"

"No; L-e-e," replied Pitt.

"Lee!" ejaculated Sales, with a start.

"What is his other name?"

"Nelson."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the

"Nelson Lee! That is the name of a detective in London——"

"This is the same chap," said Pitt. "He's a Housemaster at St. Frank's. Got a fancy for a quiet life, I suppose—taking a rest-cure, perhaps. Nipper's at St. Frank's, too, the young rotter!"

Sales was startled. He had never taken the trouble to inquire about the names of the masters at St. Frank's—why should he?—and this piece of information was alarming. Particularly so in the light of the fact that Nelson Lee had possessed the forged notes!

"Has Mr. Lee any more notes?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, a lot of them—I only took twenty," replied Pitt. "But what's the matter? I'm going to put these back after I've used them to win a few quid for myself. I don't see why I shouldn't make a bit out of your bally table——"

"You're a young fool!" said Sales harshly. "You might have lost all this money—and then where would you have been? I didn't think you were such a mad young idiot, Pitt."

He paced up and down for a few moments, and then stood in front of Pitt, holding out the notes.

"Take these," he said grimly. "Take them, and go straight back to the school! Do you understand? Put them back exactly where you found them, and leave no trace that they have been touched."

"And what about me?" Pitt asked. "I wanted to make a bit——"

"You've got three pounds extra," said Sales. "Here, take these two notes—that makes a fiver altogether. If you're not satisfied with that you'll have to be unsatisfied. And remember—take those twenty notes back immediately."

"Oh, all right," said Pitt, taking the notes. "A fiver ain't so dusty. I'll put these others back as soon as I get into the school again. I'll get off at once."

The Serpent commenced stuffing the notes away, but Sales stopped him sharply.

"No, don't put them all together!" he exclaimed. "Keep Lee's twenty pounds separate."

"What does it matter?"

"It matters everything!" snapped Sales. "Those notes of Lee's may be all known—he has probably taken the numbers. Put the identical notes back that you took away."

"Oh, I see!" said Pitt. "All right."

Five minutes later the Serpent was riding away on his bicycle. Upon the whole, he was quite satisfied with the result of the expedition. He had gained a clear fiver, and had taken no risk.

But Pitt little guessed the reason for Mr. Bernard Sales's acute interest in the matter. That clever scoundrel, in fact, was anxious for the notes to be replaced because he did not want Nelson Lee to suspect things. And Sales was now in possession of the fact that Nelson Lee was interested in the case!

It was the time for action—and Sales meant to act!

CHAPTER III.

TROUBLE FOR THE SERPENT!

THE DUKE OF SOMERTON opened the door of Study C and looked in.

It was the following day, and afternoon lessons had been over for about ten minutes. Tommy Watson and I were in Study C, and the Duke nodded to us genially.

"Remember your promise, old chap?" he asked, addressing Watson.

"Eh? What promise?" said Tommy.

"About the tower."

"Oh, yes," said Tommy Watson. "We're not going to have tea for half an hour, so we might as well go straight away. I dare say Nipper will get tea ready."

"He might!" I said cheerfully. "You'd better bring Somerton back with you, Tommy. Don't lose yourselves."

They didn't take much notice of my warning, and went off together—leaving me to prepare tea. We couldn't go to the Mount every day, although we should have preferred to.

Tommy Watson had promised to show the schoolboy duke up into the old Ancient House tower—where Tommy and I and Sir Montie had once been imprisoned by the notorious Mr. Hunter, who had once been our Housemaster. The duke, being comparatively a new fellow, had never been up in the tower, and was quite interested.

He and Watson made their way up, and Tommy explained how we had been kept there on a bread and water diet, and how we had escaped through a hole in the roof.

"Jolly interesting," remarked Somerton. "It must have been awfully rotten, old chap. What sort of a view is there from these windows?"

He pointed up to the deep narrow slits, high in the wall, which served as windows. Watson grinned.

"Oh, they give an excellent view of the back regions," he explained. "We can have a squint out if you like, but there's nothing much to see. We couldn't get up to those windows when we were imprisoned here, because the place was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. Just shove those old boxes over."

There were several wooden boxes against the walls, and when they were placed in position it was possible to stand on them and see out of the slits.

The duke got up and looked down upon the spacious yards in the rear of the Ancient House. He could see the dog kennels and the rabbit-hutches—for quite a number of fellows kept pets of that sort.

"Hallo!" said Somerton. "What's Pitt doing?"

"Pitt?" repeated Watson. "Is he down there?"

The duke didn't answer for a moment; then he turned an angry face down towards Tommy Watson.

"Come and look here!" he said hotly.

"What's up, you ass?"

"Pitt's tormenting somebody's little dog

"The awful cad!" roared Watson.

He jumped up on to the boxes, seriously imperilling the duke, and looked out of the narrow window. And there, far below, stood Reginald Pitt. He was quite alone in the yard, and apparently believed himself to be unobserved.

He was busily beating a little spaniel, having taken the precaution to tie the animal's tail to one of the posts. The dog was yelping, although not loudly.

"The--the cowardly rotter!" shouted Watson furiously. "That's Boz—Nipper's little spaniel! By George! We'll skin Pitt for this! Let's go down and slaughter him!"

"Rather!" said the duke readily. "I can't bear to see a dog being tortured. We'll give Pitt some of his own medicine—although we can't tie his tail to the fence, can we?"

Watson didn't answer. He was too indignant for words. He simply tumbled down off the boxes, and a moment later he and the duke were pelting down the stairs.

"This way!" panted Tommy. "We'll go by the back staircase, it's a lot quicker! We'll make the cad sit up!"

They arrived outside in a very short time, rushing through the domestic passages regardless of the fact that they were out of bounds for the juniors. And they emerged into the yard while Pitt was still amusing himself by torturing Boz.

"You awful cad!" roared Watson wrathfully.

The Serpent turned, a look of alarm upon his face. But it vanished, and he grinned.

"Come to see the fun?" he asked calmly.

"I'll give you fun!" shouted Watson.

"Collar him, Somerton! What do you mean by torturing that dog, you cruel beast?"

Pitt laughed.

"Torturing be hanged!" he said. "The little mongrel snapped at me, and nearly bit me, while I was passing. I'm just giving it the hiding it deserves!"

"Do you call this a hiding, tying the poor thing to a post by its tail and beating it?" asked the Duke quietly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Listen to Good Little Georgie!" sneered Pitt. "I've finished now, so you can go and eat coke!"

He thrust his hands into his pockets and walked away. At least, he tried to walk away. The duke stepped in front and barred his path. Meanwhile, Watson released Boz, who was delighted.

"Get out of the way, you idiot!" snapped Pitt.

"Not just yet," said Somerton. "We've got something to say to you, old chap. Haven't we, Watson?"

"And something to do, too!" said Tommy Watson grimly.

Pitt laughed again. He appeared to be perfectly at ease—but he wasn't. He could see that the two juniors were in deadly earnest, and he knew, too, that he had been

tormenting the dog in the most disgraceful fashion. Pitt was well aware of his danger.

"Don't make a fuss over nothing," he said carelessly. "I didn't hurt the little beast. Get out of my way, Somerton, unless you want to get hurt."

"I think somebody else is going to get hurt," remarked the duke. "It's had enough to bully a Second-Form lad, but it's worse to torment a helpless little dog. You ought to be kicked!"

Pitt decided that discretion was the better part of valour. He had not expected to be disturbed, and he was alarmed. Watson and Somerton were looking very dangerous.

"Look here, I just want to explain," said Pitt.

"Go ahead!" invited Watson grimly.

"Well, it was like this——"

Pitt broke off, and turned on his heel like lightning. His idea was to make the two Removites think that he had no idea of flight, and to get away before they could collar him. The ruse nearly succeeded. Pitt simply flew towards the gateway.

"Hi, grab him!" yelled Watson furiously.

He and the duke pelted after the fugitive. But for the fact that the gate-fastening worked stiffly, Pitt would have escaped. As it was, he was still tugging at the gate when Watson and Somerton jumped on him from behind.

"Lemme go!" roared Pitt desperately.

"You—you treacherous rotter!" panted Watson. "Sit on him, Somerton! Squash him!"

The duke, who didn't care a jot about his clothes—he was about the most carelessly-attired junior in the Remove—gave a wrench and neatly swung Pitt over on to his face. Once on the ground, it was fairly easy to hold him there.

"Don't you touch me, you cads!" howled Pitt, in alarm.

Watson had a length of rope in his hand, and in a moment it was bound round Pitt's feet.

"Now!" gasped Watson. "We're going to hog you, you utter cad!"

"If you hit me—— Yaroooh!" bellowed Pitt.

Watson wasn't hitting him, but a stout stick was! And Tommy was wielding it with grim energy.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Yow-ow!" roared the Serpent. "Ow! You beasts—— Yaroooh!"

"Lay it on hard!" panted the duke, who had all his work cut out to hold the squirming Pitt.

"That's what I am doing," said Watson breathlessly. "Ask Pitt!"

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Oh, you rotters—— Yow-ow!" roared the Serpent. "I'll—I'll smash you—— Oh, my hat! Ow!"

"Is Watson laying it on hard enough, Pitt?" asked the duke.

"Yaroooh!" replied Pitt.

"That's not plain English old chap," grunted Somerton. "Better lay it on harder, Tommy. Pitt doesn't seem to——"

"You fools! It's hard enough now!" bellowed Pitt. "I'm half-skinned—— You! I'll report you for this——"

Watson snorted, and worked harder than ever.

Whack! Whack!

"You'll sneak, will you?" he panted. "All right, my son! We'll give you something to sneak about! And I don't fancy Mr. Lee or the Head will sympathise with you——"

"I—I won't sneak!" shrieked Pitt wildly.

"You promise?"

"Yes—yow!—yes, yes!"

"And you'll never torment a helpless animal again?"

"You—you fool—— Yow-ow-ow!" gasped Pitt. "No, I won't torment any animal again! Lemme go, hang you!"

"Say you're sorry, then!"

"I won't!" howled the Serpent. "Confound you——"

Whack! Whack!

"Yes, I'm sorry!" screamed Pitt. "Lemme go, you beasts!"

Watson threw the stick aside. He had not been wielding it very severely, but Pitt had received terrible punishment. He would probably be sore for days to come. And there was not the slightest doubt that he had thoroughly deserved the thrashing.

"Hallo, who's being murdered?" inquired McClure, suddenly appearing in the gateway with Church. "Oh, it's Pitt!"

"Then it doesn't matter," said Church. "We were coming to the rescue, but if it's only Pitt we'll cheerfully stand by and see him slaughtered!"

"Too late, old chap!" said the duke calmly. "The show's over!"

"Oh, rats!" said McClure. "Give him some more!"

Quite a crowd of other fellows appeared, and I was amongst them, having been attracted by the yell. Pitt was just scrambling to his feet, and his face was livid with fury.

"I'll make you pay for this!" he snarled, his eyes blazing at Watson and Somerton.

"By gad! I make you sorry for yourselves by the time I've done!"

"Not so sorry as you feel just now!" panted Watson wrathfully. "Clear off, you caddish brute!"

Pitt slunk away, moving rather awkwardly—which was really not at all surprising. I turned to Tommy and the duke for enlightenment, and heard what had been happening.

"It's a good thing I wasn't here!" I said hotly. "I should have smashed the cad to bits! Is Box hurt?"

"The poor little bounder is cringing in his kennel," said Watson. "His tail's raw and bleeding where the rope grazed it. Cads like Pitt ought to be smothered!"

"Box!" I called sharply. "Box—Boxzy! Come on, old man!"

The little spaniel recognised my voice at once, and came bounding out of his kennel, wagging his tail. After doing his utmost to jump up to my face, he sat down and licked his tail tenderly.

"Not very bad," I said, after a short examination. "But you didn't give Pitt any more than he deserved, I'll bet. I knew he was a cunning rascal, but this is a new side to his character."

Quite a number of fellows knew all about it within five minutes, and Pitt would be in for a hot time when he appeared in public once more. For the present he had slunk out of the way.

"It's a good thing we went up into that tower," remarked Watson, when we were all in Study C; Boz included. "Pitt would have been able to beat the little chap until he was half dead—and he looked like doing it, too."

"But what the dickens for?" asked Somerton.

"You heard what he said," replied Watson. "Something about Boz flying at him and biting him—"

"Rot!" I broke in. "Boz wouldn't bite anybody."

"Of course he wouldn't," agreed Tommy. "That was only Pitt's rotten excuse. I suppose he was only doing it for the fun of the thing. Well, he hasn't got much fun out of it, has he?"

We commenced tea, and I was rather thoughtful.

"You two fellows had better be on your guard," I said. "Pitt's a vindictive rotter, and if you're not careful he'll be up to some of his dirty games."

"I'm not afraid of him!" said Watson grimly. "He won't bother me, I can tell you. I don't care tuppence for him."

"Of course you don't," I agreed. "At the same time, you'd better look out for squalls. Poor old Montie was sacked because he gave Pitt a licking."

"Was he?" said the duke mildly. "I thought Tregellis-West was sacked for gambling?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" I protested. "It was Pitt's doing, and Pitt's capable of plotting against you, too. So be on the lookout."

Watson and the duke did not take much heed of my warning. But, somehow, I felt that it was a timely one. There had been a very evil glint in Pitt's eyes, and it was quite obvious that he meant mischief.

However, I forgot all about the matter some little time later, for the gov'nor called me into his study and gave me a piece of information which interested me exceedingly.

"The climax will soon arrive, Nipper," said Nelson Lee crisply. "I thought you would like to know that an old friend of ours will arrive at the Mount this evening. Mr. Ridgeway is extremely hospitable, and he is taking quite an interest in this affair."

"He's a brick, sir," I agreed. "But who's the old friend?"

"Detective-Inspector Lennard, of the Yard."

I whistled.

"So old Lennard's coming down, eh?" I exclaimed. "Things are looking up, gov'nor."

Does this mean that you're going to make your coup to-night?"

"No, Nipper," replied the gov'nor. "Not until to-morrow night—Wednesday. But Lennard is coming down in order to be well prepared for the raid on the Hermitage. The affair must be planned in every detail, otherwise we might fail. These crooks are clever men, and we must not leave them a single loophole of escape. The inspector and I intend to spend two or three hours to-night planning the coup in every aspect."

I nodded.

"Like a couple of giddy generals planning a battle," I said.

"The simile is an apt one, Nipper," said the schoolmaster-detective. "Unless a general plans his attack with extreme care there is a chance of the whole scheme collapsing. And we should look rather foolish if Sales and his confederates gave us the slip. I am telling you this because you might like to greet Lennard at the Mount; but you won't be able to stay long."

"I suppose I can take part in the raid, sir?"

"If I don't give my consent I shall never hear the last of it," smiled Nelson Lee. "So I shall probably give my consent. But I shall tell you more to-morrow. Oh, by the way, Nipper, have you touched my bureau?"

I looked rather surprised.

"Of course not, sir," I replied. "Why?"

"Well, I've noticed one or two scratches near the keyhole—"

"And you suspect me of burglary?" I said indignantly.

Lee chuckled.

"My dear Nipper, I am well acquainted with your little tricks," he said pleasantly. "You would not regard it as a great offence to open my bureau if you felt in the mood for it. We are great friends, are we not?"

"I hope so, gov'nor," I grinned.

"Very well; I should not think anything if you opened my bureau," said the detective. "I merely thought of you because I cannot imagine anybody else tampering with it. For you to do so would be a trifle—for somebody else to attempt the same thing would be very serious, however."

"Have you missed anything, sir?" I asked.

"No. That is the remarkable part about it," was the gov'nor's reply. "You remember that bundle of forged notes, young 'un?"

"Of course I do, sir."

"That bundle is in my bureau—intact," he explained. "The curious part about it is that I can almost swear that they have been touched without my knowledge. My eyes are rather keen, as you perhaps know, and I notice these little things."

"Oh, you must have made a bloomer, sir," I remarked. "Nobody would be as enough to open your bureau and meddle with those banknotes, and go away empty-handed."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"I am inclined to think you are right, my boy," he said. "But I'm not quite satisfied, all the same. Since you know nothing of it, I will let the matter drop. You might

as well slip off now, Nipper. I shall see you later at the Mount."

I took my departure; but as I walked down the passage I had an impression that Nelson Lee was still rather puzzled.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ORDER OF THE BOOT!

18-8-88!

HIS sound was uttered by quite a number of juniors when Reginald Pitt emerged from the Ancient House after tea. He knew that the hiss was intended for him, and he didn't like it.

"Silly fools!" he muttered savagely.

Owen major and Farman was standing near by, chatting with De Valerie and Tom Burton. They appeared to be in ignorance of the Serpent's presence, and conversed in unnecessarily loud tones.

"I guess guys of his calibre sure ought to be lynched!" remarked Farman. "Why, say, out in the West we'd make mincemeat of a doggone hobo like Pitt!"

"He didn't get all he deserved, in my opinion," said Owen major. "Torturing a dog is a rotten thing to do. Pitt ought to be ducked in the fountain."

"Souse me! And so he ought!" said the Ro'um.

"Guess we weren't talkin' about sousing you, sonny," grinned Farman. "It's Pitt who needs the sousing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And we'll do it, too!" said De Valerie grimly. "Where is Pitt? We'll find him. and—By Jove! He must have heard us!"

The juniors grinned joyfully. Pitt had certainly heard those remarks, and he was hurrying towards the gateway with far more speed than dignity. He suspected that the juniors were only "rotting," but he had no intention of putting it to the test!

Feeling very sore, he trudged disconsolately up the road. He had no particular desire to go for a walk, but he felt that it would be safer for him to do so—until the hostile feeling in the Remove died down.

Fullwood and Co. had gone off somewhere down to the village, Pitt believed—and he had nobody to talk to. He walked in the direction of the moor, his thoughts bitter and somewhat violent. Every step he took reminded him of that thrashing he had received, and he fully meant to get even with Watson and the duke in some way or another.

It was one of Pitt's boasts that no fellow ever got the better of him without paying very dearly for it afterwards. Pitt was unaware of the fact that his own downfall was very near at hand.

But, by pure chance, he was enabled to gain just an inkling of the truth. Perhaps it wasn't quite by chance, though. Handforth's recklessness had something to do with it.

The Serpent was mooching along, deep in thought, when he heard somebody moving

amongst the trees in the wood which bordered the lane. There was nothing astonishing in this, but Pitt had a sudden suspicion that some of the juniors had followed him and were intent on punishing him still further. This suspicion could only have been caused by a guilty conscience.

He crouched near the hedge and waited. Through a gap he watched, holding himself ready to run at a second's notice. And he distinctly saw the form of a junior, walking among the trees. Pitt was only allowed one full glimpse before the wood swallowed the junior up again.

And Pitt recognised him as Handforth!

The Serpent was startled—almost staggered. He had clearly seen Handforth's face just for that moment, and the expression on it had been one of serene enjoyment. This was surprising, considering that Handforth had been expelled in disgrace! And it was still more surprising that Handforth was in the vicinity at all!

As a matter of fact, it was the result of a little argument between Edward Oswald and Sir Montie Tregelms-West. Since Handforth could not argue with Church and McClure, he naturally argued with Sir Montie. He couldn't exist without argument of some sort.

They had been strolling in the grounds of the Mount, and Montie had remarked that it was a pity that they could not venture into the wood itself—which backed upon the Mount grounds.

Considering Handforth's character, it was scarcely surprising that he had at once broken through a gap, with the stated intention of passing through the wood until he came within sight of St. Frank's.

Montie had done his best to dissuade him—chiefly because Montie did not know Handforth so well as he might have done. For it was like trying to shift a mountain to turn Handforth from a purpose.

And now, by a piece of ill luck, Handforth had been spotted by the one fellow in the whole school who really mattered!

Pitt stood quite still for some little time after he had seen Handforth. His cunning brain was working hard, and he was shrewd enough to guess things—and to be alarmed.

For what did this mean?

Although Handforth had been sacked, he hadn't gone away—he was still quite near the school. Where?

Pitt remembered that Watson and I had paid two or three visits to the Mount, and he also called to mind the fact that Church and McClure had accompanied us the previous evening. For the Serpent's eyes were keen and they did not miss much.

"Handforth's at the Mount!" he told himself tensely. "Something's gone wrong, and I'll bet a fiver that Nelson Lee is at the bottom of it! By Jove! I wonder if I've been tricked?"

The alarming thought came to him, in fact, that his own movements had been watched, and that he would very shortly meet the



"Now, look here, Pitt," said Sales grimly, "I want the truth from you."

The Serpent knew that he was cornered.—(See page 7.)

late which he had planned out for Montie and Handforth.

And with this thought came another.

Did Nelson Lee know anything about the gambling-house? Did he know that Pitt had been in the habit of visiting it? The rascally junior remembered the agitation of Sales the previous night, and he became more and more convinced that he was treading on thin ice, and that not only would he soon be exposed, but that the gambling-house would suffer also. It was only suspicion, but it was remarkably near the actual truth.

Pitt was terribly anxious that nothing should happen to Sales. If the gambling-house were raided or exposed it was certain that Pitt himself would be involved in the disaster. One or more of the men would inform against him. So, above all, it was necessary to give Sales an urgent warning.

Pitt's mind was filled with startled thoughts, although nothing definite had taken shape. He decided upon action at once. He would go to Bannington and would tell Sales of what he had seen and what he suspected. Sales would be able to give him good advice.

With this object in view Reginald Pitt hurried back to St. Frank's, and managed to get his bicycle out without attracting attention. Then he started off for Bannington at full speed.

It was growing dusk now, but was still far from being dark. When he arrived outside the Hermitage the shadows were very deep.

Several lights were gleaming in the windows of the house, and Pitt placed his bicycle against the gatepost and walked along the gravel until he came to the side door. He gave his usual taps, and waited.

After a few moments the door was opened by Mr. Bernard Sales himself. He regarded Pitt angrily.

"I saw you from one of the windows," he said harshly. "Confound you, boy, go away! I won't have you coming here at this time in the evening——"

"But—but I want to tell you——"

"You can tell me nothing now!" snapped Sales. "I am sick of you, Pitt! Go, and don't dare to show your face here again for a month. Do you understand? I forbid you to come here!"

Pitt ground his teeth.

"But I've got something——"

"That's enough—go away!" rapped out Sales.

He slammed the door in Pitt's face, and the Removite was nearly bowled over by the force. He glared at the door, half-choking with anger and helplessness.

"Oh, you rotter!" he panted harshly.

In his uneasy state of mind he had not realised that it was foolish for him to visit the Hermitage at such an early hour. He was not supposed to know either the house or its owner, and in the early evening it was quite likely that he had been spotted.

Sales had been furious because he thought

the boy had come merely for something on his own account. The man foolishly concluded that Pitt could have nothing of importance to tell him.

Moreover, Sales had a very excellent reason for being on edge just at present. He had planned a certain villainy, and was very anxious as to the result. It was not a time for him to be bothered by a silly school-boy.

In calmer moments Sales would have acted differently. But, as it happened, Pitt's warning would have missed fire, since Sales had actually received it the previous night, although Pitt didn't know it. And now Sales was taking drastic action.

Pitt left the Hermitage grounds filled with hatred and bitter fury. He had come here with the main object of warning Sales—and he had been greeted with a curt rebuff.

Worse than that, he had been forbidden to enter the place again for a month! Pitt knew very well that that had been no idle threat. Sales was a man of his word.

But why? Why was he forbidden to come? Pitt felt convinced that there was something behind the affair which he was not allowed to know of. At all events, he was filled with a great bitterness as he rode home to St. Frank's.

All his little plans for the immediate future were now upset, and he was feeling rather nervous about an interview with Starke and Kenmore. For Pitt had promised to introduce those two prefects to the roulette-room the very next night. Now, of course, he couldn't do so, and the Sixth-Form rascals would want to know why. Further, they would probably make things very hot for him.

Before the Serpent reached St. Frank's he was in a calmer mood, and he had come to the conclusion that his alarm had been rather needless. After all, if the gambling-house was raided, there was no reason why Pitt himself should be involved. In these calmer moments Pitt realised that Sales and his confederates would scarcely trouble themselves to inform against a mere schoolboy.

So Pitt deluded himself into the belief that he was safe, whatever happened at the Hermitage. But the boy knew well enough that things were going badly with him, and he could not help feeling slightly nervous, in spite of his gentle delusion.

Reginald Pitt's fears were by no means unfounded!

CHAPTER V.

NELSON LEE MEETS WITH DISASTER.

NELSON LEE glanced at the clock, and nodded to himself.

"Time I was off," he murmured. It was nearly dark, and the school-master detective was seated in his study in the Ancient House. Detective-Inspector Lenward was not due to arrive at the Mount

for quite a long while—not until the expiration of another hour, at least.

But Nelson Lee was anxious to have a few words with Mr. Ridgeway before the Scotland Yard detective arrived on the scene. And the guv'nor started out just as the shadows were growing dim.

Tommy Watson and I had started out some little time before, for we were also keen upon greeting Detective-Inspector Lennard—who was quite an old friend.

"Things are going to look up, my son," I remarked, as we strolled along the shadowy lane. "It won't be long before old Montie is back at St. Frank's—and Handforth, too!"

"Good business!" said Watson heartily. "And what about this raid? I suppose it's coming off to-night?"

"To-morrow night," I replied. "But we don't want to talk about it on the public road, Tommy. There's no telling who's about."

"Oh, rot!" replied Watson. "People don't crouch behind hedges listening, I suppose? We're absolutely alone, and I don't see why we shouldn't jaw——"

"Hallo! Look there!" I ejaculated suddenly.

Quite distinctly I had seen a bush move further along the road. It was only a slight movement, but there was no wind just at the moment, and I knew that the bush could not have moved itself.

"Look where?" said Watson, staring.

"Didn't you see? There you are!" I whispered.

This time a man's face had come into view for a second. He peered towards us, but vanished at once—just before Watson could turn. When he looked there was nothing to be seen.

He glared at me.

"Is this a new game?" he demanded sarcastically.

"My dear chap, you're slow," I retorted. "There was a face in the hedge a moment ago. Somebody is crouching behind, just in the wood. Let's talk about football."

Watson was rather bewildered, and left the football talk to me. As we passed the spot I appeared to be quite unconcerned, but I had my eyes very wide open.

And, although I did not actually turn my head, I caught a glimpse of a man's figure crouching low behind the bank. What was more, I distinctly heard a faint whisper a moment or two later. This proved that the fellow was not alone. Why were they hiding behind the hedge in that mysterious fashion?

"Only a couple of tramps, perhaps," I remarked, after we had gone some little distance. "All the same, it's rather queer, Tommy. What do you make of it?"

"I'm jiggered if I know what you're talking about," snorted my chum. "I didn't see anything or hear anything. I believe you've been trying to spoof me!"

I grinned.

"No, I haven't," I said. "Perhaps my eyes are a bit keener than yours, Tommy—and my ears, too. You see, I've been trained to use 'em. And there really were two men behind the hedge. It just proves how right I was in warning you not to jaw about things that matter on the open road."

Watson was still rather suspicious, but he accepted my statement at last. We didn't worry our heads much. After all, the wood were free to anybody, and the two men might have been merely a couple of farm-labourers. There was no sense in making all sorts of wild conjectures. Nevertheless I kept the incident in mind.

When we arrived at the Mount we found Sir Montie in the front garden. He was quite hidden from the road, being concealed by a high hedge. For it would have been unwise to expose himself to general view. Comment amongst the villagers would not have been welcome.

"Frightfully pleased to see you, dear old boys," said Tregellis-West. "But I'm anxious, you know—I am, really. I'm so anxious that I'm in a shockin' state of nervousness."

"What's biting you?" asked Watson.

"Nothin' is bitin' me, dear Tommy; an' I wish you would refrain from utterin' such ridiculous expressions," said Sir Montie severely. "The fact is, Handforth has gone!"

"Gone!" I echoed, staring.

"Exactly, dear old fellow."

"What do you mean—gone?" I demanded. "Gone where?"

"I don't know—that's what I'm worryin' about," said Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "He and I had a little argument, an' the frightful duffer went off——"

"Do you mean to say you quarrelled?" I asked sharply. "Great Scott! Can't Handy keep on good terms——"

"You have mistaken me, Nipper, old boy," put in Montie. "We didn't quarrel—we didn't even have words. It was just an argument. I mentioned that it was a pity we couldn't venture out into the woods, because it wouldn't be safe."

"Oh, that was quite enough for Handy!" I broke in. "I suppose he went off at once?"

"Exactly."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Nearly an hour."

"He'll turn up all right," I said. "I expect the silly ass is doing it on purpose, just to give you a fright—that's exactly what Handforth would do. And, after all, you and he ain't exactly prisoners. Still, it was a fatheaded thing to venture out."

Tommy Watson gave a jump.

"I'll bet it was Handforth you saw looking through the hedge," he said triumphantly. "It just shows what imagination will do. You said that there were two men——"

"And there were two men," I interrupted.

"Do you think I don't know the difference between Handforth's face and the face of a man? Have you ever seen a face anything like Handforth's?"

"Well, it would be rather hard to find another quite so beautiful," admitted Watson, with a grin. "Let's go indoors. Blow Handforth! If he likes to get himself into trouble, that's his look-out."

"There's no question of him getting into trouble," I said. "He was expelled from St. Frank's, and there's nothing to prevent him living next door, if he wants to. The only danger is that he might be spotted by some of the fellows—and that would cause talk."

We went indoors, fully expecting Handforth to return within a minute or two. As a matter of fact, he did do so. But, meanwhile, other events were happening.

And they were events which proved that my suspicions regarding the men behind the hedge were not entirely unjustified.

Nelson Lee had set out from St. Frank's attired in an ordinary tweed suit and swinging a walking-stick. He strode along the darkened lane briskly, unsuspecting of danger.

And then, without warning, the disaster occurred.

Two men, of rough-looking type, sprang out from the wood and barred his way. They did not make the mistake of hesitating, but charged the detective at once.

Lee, although taken off his guard, was instantly ready. He swung his stick up, and brought it down upon the shoulder of the nearest man, sending him reeling backwards. But the fellow, with a bellow of pain, grabbed the stick.

"Hang you!" he snarled.

Lee could easily have retained his grip but for the fact that the other man had a stick of his own. The end of this crashed upon Lee's knuckles, and he was forced to relax his hold.

"Very well, my friends!" he said grimly. "My fists are quite dangerous, I can assure you. Now then, I am ready!"

He was about to charge when he heard a swish behind him. Before he could turn a heavy object descended upon his head, rendering him dizzy and helpless.

His knees sagged and he fell to the ground. A third man had come upon the scene—having been hiding until the crucial moment. Whilst Lee was engaged with the first two men, the third had done his evil work.

But Nelson Lee was not stunned. The blow had been heavy, but not very violent. After three minutes he was almost himself again, except for a throbbing headache and a certain giddiness.

It was too late, however, then. His feet and hands were bound, and he had been dragged through the hedge into the wood. The three men, he saw, were strangers—except for one. This fellow was Field, the man

who acted as doorkeeper at the gambling house.

Nelson Lee was instantly aware of the fact that he had been captured by the emissaries of Bernard Sales. A great rage welled up within the detective.

Just when his plans were about to be completed he had fallen into the hands of the enemy! This proved, also, that Sales was aware of his danger. How had he gained that information? How had he known that Nelson Lee was interested in the case?

In some vague manner Nelson Lee suspected Reginald Pitt.

"You have got the better of me, my friends," he said grimly, "but I can assure you that——"

"That's enough, Mr. Nelson Lee!" snapped Field. "Where's that gag, Jim? We'll soon make him quiet!"

The gag was applied, and then Nelson Lee's hands were secured with greater tightness.

"Now, Mr. Lee, you've got to carry out our orders," said Field. "We're going to cut your ankles loose, and you've got to walk as we direct. If you don't, you'll be forced to!"

Nelson Lee knew that the men were in earnest. It would be sheer foolishness to resist. He would merely exhaust his strength for no purpose, for he would be taken along in the end, even if he had to be carried. And Lee preferred walking.

They proceeded through the wood without a word being said. Lee was inclined to blame himself for what had occurred; he ought to have been more wary. But the detective was rather harsh with himself. There had been no reason for him to suspect that an ambush had been prepared for his benefit.

When they emerged from the wood the dusk had nearly changed into night, but it seemed quite light after the gloom of the wood. Bannington Moor stretched out into the misty distance, and everything was bleak and chill.

Comparatively near by stood the old ruined mill, and the moor road ran just past it. Nelson Lee's captors marched him to the road, and he was left with two of them whilst Field walked briskly away.

The detective saw that Field went to a little hollow behind the ruined mill. A few moments later there was the buzz of a motor-car engine, and the vehicle itself appeared shortly afterwards.

Lee was forced to enter, and then his feet were once more bound. The car was a landaulette, and closed. Field took the wheel and the other men remained on guard behind in the tonneau. Lee had no idea as to his destination, but hardly thought that it would be the Hermitage.

As a matter of fact he was taken to the Hermitage.

The car arrived and turned down a narrow side lane until it reached a meadow. This

meadow adjoined the Hermitage garden. And as the car came to a standstill Sales appeared.

"Successful?" he asked sharply.

"Yes," replied Field. "We did the trick beautifully."

"Good!"

Field jumped down just as the tonneau door opened. Nelson Lee was bundled out, and Sales regarded him with great satisfaction. There was a grim smile upon his face.

"Put a stop to your little game—eh?" he remarked pleasantly.

Lee was not in a position to answer, but he thought quite a lot. Amongst other things, he remembered that Detective-Inspector Lennard was now at the Mount, in all probability. And Lee was quite satisfied that his position was not at all desperate.

Sales had acted—but he had acted too late. Fortunately, Sales was not aware of this uncomfortable fact. Having captured Lee, he would probably assume that the danger was over. For Sales had methods of knowing exactly how active the police were; and the police, at present, were perfectly quiet.

Therefore there was no reason for alarm; Lee was rendered helpless, and no damage had been done. That, at all events, was what Sales fondly supposed.

He would make no immediate attempt at flight; and Nelson Lee was hoping that the climax would come before the criminals took fright and vanished. He had no fear that he was in any personal danger. Sales was a criminal, but he was not a murderer. His whole idea was to keep Lee helpless until he could make complete plans. There had been no evidence, so far, that Sales contemplated running away in a panic.

"Bring him inside!" he exclaimed harshly.

Nelson Lee was carried through a gateway, and then down into a little hollow at the bottom of the Hermitage garden. A small stone building stood here—a mere shed, which had been built, probably, as a garage. There was now a much larger one attached to the house, and this shed was disused. It was quite a long way from the house, beyond earshot of the road, and surrounded by trees.

There was no window, and the grating had been boarded over securely. The doors, too, had received much attention. Two great beams had been propped against them from the outside, closing them so that no amount of effort could force them open. In addition many planks had been screwed securely over the edges, rendering the whole place an absolute prison. Sales had prepared well.

And the only entrance now was a very small door which had been cut out of one of the big doors, and was secured by a Yale lock and four heavy bolts on the outside.

Nelson Lee was carried within, and the door was closed. A stable lantern was burning, hanging from a nail. Over in one corner

stood a small camp bedstead, and a deal table and a kitchen chair formed the remainder of the furniture.

"Your future home, Mr. Lee," exclaimed Sales, with a wave of his hand. "I am very sorry to treat you in this manner, but I have learned that you are taking too much interest in my affairs."

Sales removed the gag, enabling Lee to speak.

"At all events, whatever suspicions I had are now fully justified," said the detective calmly. "You have certainly got the better of me, Mr. Sales. It is most unfortunate, because you have upset my plans very completely."

"You will come to no harm so long as you remain passive," said Sales. "As you can see, I have made every preparation for your comfort."

"Quite so," said Lee drily. "I have already observed that."

"And I must warn you that any attempt to escape would be most foolish," went on Lee's captor. "You may shout to your heart's content, but nobody will ever hear you. Furthermore, a man will be placed on guard every night."

"You are most considerate," said Nelson Lee, still keeping up the pretence of politeness. "But may I inquire how long you intend to keep me here?"

"Until it suits me to release you."

"That is rather indefinite——"

"I can say nothing further," broke in Sales. "You have only yourself to thank for what has occurred. If you had not interfered with my business I should not have interfered with you."

Nelson Lee made no reply. What was the use? The less he said the better. And Sales motioned to Field and one of the other men.

"Cut these ropes," he said sharply. "There is no reason why Mr. Lee should be kept bound——"

"I don't agree with you, Sales," objected Field. "Unless Lee is constantly guarded he had better be left with his hands and feet bound. There will be somebody to watch him during meals, and then it won't matter. But we shall be shorthanded this next day or two, and we'd better be cautious."

Sales rubbed his chin.

"I daresay you're right," he said, after a moment. "I shall be in London until Thursday, and Butler will be with me. You'll have to be responsible for Lee's safety, and I shall expect him to be still here when I return——"

"You don't think I'm going to let him go, do you?" asked Field impatiently. "But I shall certainly take precautions."

And so Nelson Lee was left in the old garage, bound and helpless. After Sales and the others had gone he pondered over the whole affair, and his feelings were somewhat bitter.

But Nelson Lee needn't have worried!

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE TRACK!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was evidently excited.

He dashed across the beautifully-kept lawn of the Mount and ascended the steps to the front-door three at a time. The door was not latched, and he burst in like a whirlwind.

"I say, Tregellis-West!" he shouted.

Just at that moment Sir Montie and Tommy and I were in the little room which had been set apart for the schoolboy visitors. We hurried to the door at once, just in time to be nearly knocked over by the impetuous Handforth.

"What the dickens is the matter?" I demanded. "And where have you been to all this time?"

"I've—I've seen something!" gasped Handforth hoarsely.

"Go hon!" sneered Watson. "What have you seen—the trees in the meadows? Do you know that you're kicking up a terrific row?"

"Come inside!" I said briskly.

We hauled Handforth into the room and closed the door.

"Dear boy, I told you not to go," said Sir Montie reproachfully. "An' now you've been gettin' into trouble. You've been seein' things——"

"You—you asses!" roared Handforth excitedly. "Can't you listen to me? I've just seen somebody killed!"

"Killed!" I gasped.

"Well, it looked like it——"

"Begad! Calm down, dear old boy!"

"How can I calm down?" bellowed Handforth. "He was killed, I tell you—and then dragged into the wood!"

"Look here, Handy, you'd better put the brake on," I said sharply. "You're getting a bit wild. Calm down and tell us exactly what happened. Don't begin at the wrong end—begin at the beginning."

Handforth gulped, and then began again.

"I went out for a walk," he explained. "I went through the wood until I could see St. Frank's, and it was nearly dark by the time I turned back. Montie said it was risky, but that was all rot. Nobody saw me—I took jolly good care of that! But I saw plenty of the other fellows——"

"Why don't you get to the point?" said Watson impatiently.

Handforth glared.

"Some people are never satisfied!" he shouted. "I was getting to the point just now, and I was told to begin at the beginning."

"That's all right, Handy!" I said. "Don't take any notice of Tommy. Go ahead in your own way."

"Well, about ten minutes ago, just as I was making for this garden, I heard voices on the road, and they seemed to be angry voices, too," went on Handforth. "I was a good distance off, so I shinned up one of

the trees and was able to look right down into the road itself."

"Splendid!" I said approvingly.

"And I saw two men going for another one," went on Edward Oswald. "He seemed to be getting the best of it, but just then another rotter came up behind and gave the poor chap a frightful bash on the head with a stick."

"Oh, begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie.

"And what happened then?" I asked quickly.

"Why, the chap fell down, and they dragged him into the wood," replied Handforth. "I didn't wait any longer, but rushed straight back here. I'm not a funk, but I didn't quite like the idea of facing three murderers of that sort! I thought I'd better rush for help!"

"Handy, you're smarter than I thought you were," I said. "You did the best thing possible. Now, you boulder," I added, turning to Watson, "what about that man I saw, and what about those voices I heard?"

Tommy Watson looked scared.

"Dash it all, you were right!" he admitted. "But—but what does it mean, Nipper? Do you think they were footpads?"

"I'm blessed if I know what to think," I replied. "And Mr. Ridgeway isn't here just now, either. We shall have to act on our own hook, my sons."

"Murder's a serious thing!" said Handforth huskily.

"Don't be an ass!" I exclaimed. "The man wasn't murdered—only stunned, I expect. And do you know who he was? By Jupiter!" I added, with a start. "It couldn't have been Mr. Lennard, could it? Try to think, Handy. Was the man a short, thick-set sort of——"

"Wrong!" interrupted Handforth. "This chap was tall, and rather lean, so far as I could see. As a matter of fact," he added, "he reminded me of Mr. Lee."

"Mr. Lee!" I echoed aghast.

"Of course, it couldn't have been him——"

"You madman!" I shouted. "Of course it was him! Why didn't you tell me so at first? It's the gov'nor who's been knocked on the head and carried off!"

"Oh, my only aunt!" gasped Handforth. "How—how do you know?"

"I don't know for certain," I replied. "But the gov'nor was coming here this evening—he ought to have arrived ten minutes ago. And you say that the man looked like Mr. Lee. Isn't that good enough?"

"Knocked on the head!" muttered Watson. "Oh, my hat! What's to be done? Has anybody got a bicycle? I'll rush down for the policeman!"

"That won't do!" I cut in sharply. "What the dickens could old Sparrow do in a case like this? He's only a village bobby, and an absolute ass. We've got to think of something."

"I wish that Scotland Yard chap was here!" interrupted Handforth.

"Well, he isn't here, and he might not

come for hours," I ejaculated. "It's no good waiting for him, either. I'll tell you what!" I added eagerly. "What an ass I was not to think of it before!"

"Think of what?"

"Boz!"

"Boz!" roared Handforth. "Have you gone off your rocker?"

"You seem to forget that Boz has got a nose like a bloodhound," I said quickly. "Look here, I'll rush back to the school and fetch Boz. While I'm away, Handy, you take these chaps to the spot where the affair occurred. We'll get on the track straight away," I added grimly.

"But what about——"

"Can't stop for any more jaw, Tommy!" I interrupted. "Every second is of value. Don't say anything to Mrs. Ridgeway, she'd only be worried. And make Handy and Montie dive into the hedge if anybody comes along; it wouldn't do for them to be spotted."

I hurried off without another word, and simply ran to St. Frank's with every ounce of speed possible. Of course, I was tremendously alarmed. I felt positive that it was the guv'nor who had met with disaster—and I was pretty certain, too, that the Bannington crooks were responsible. In some way or another they had discovered that Nelson Lee was on their track—and they had acted. I didn't trouble to ask myself how they had got on to the guv'nor's game.

When I arrived in the Triangle I thought it as well to make sure, and rushed to Nelson Lee's study. He wasn't there, and Warren, the porter, informed me that the guv'nor had gone out twenty minutes earlier. This was quite good enough, for it practically proved that my suspicions were correct.

While in the guv'nor's study I had grabbed one of his caps—though this wasn't really necessary. But Boz would be given a better chance if he had something to give him a start.

I pelted round to the kennels at full speed, and in another minute Boz was trotting along in front of me, wagging his tail with keen delight. And then I received a very pleasant surprise.

Just outside the gates I ran bang into somebody who was walking briskly past in the direction of the Mount. Although it was nearly dark I instantly recognised Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

"Thank goodness!" I exclaimed joyfully.

"Why, hallo, Nipper!" exclaimed the Inspector. "It's you, isn't it?"

"You've just come at the right time, Mr. Lennard!" I panted, grabbing his arm.

He stared at me.

"Hold on! What's the matter, youngster?" he asked curiously.

"The guv'nor's been collared!" I explained quickly. "Walk along with me, Mr. Lennard, and I'll tell you all about it. By the way, did you come by car?"

"Yes; it's in the village," replied the Inspector. "I didn't want to bring it up

to the Mount, because Lee thought it would be wiser——"

"That's all right, then," I said. "We may want that car later on. The fact is, Mr. Lennard, the guv'nor has got it in the neck!"

"You said something like that just now," commented the Inspector. "You may not know it, Nipper, but I'm in a large-sized fog. What's the trouble? Why can't you be coherent? I'm a patient man, but——"

"Keep your hair on!" I interrupted, with the familiarity of an old friend. "Just listen to me and say nothing!"

"Any more orders?" asked Lennard drily. "You master always said you were cheeky, but I never heard of such infernal saucy——"

I cut him short, and related exactly what had occurred. By the time I had finished the inspector was no longer in a mood for jocularly. He realised, as I did, that the matter was grimly serious.

"As you say, Nipper, I seem to have blown into the scene at the right moment," said Lennard. "But what's this dog doing here?"

"I've brought him along to track the guv'nor," I explained.

"Oh, yes!" said the Scotland Yard man. "I'd forgotten for the moment. He's quite a marvel in the canine line, isn't he? Named Charles Dickens, or something?"

"Boz!" I replied. "That's short for Charles Dickens, anyhow. But you needn't blame me for naming him that; it was Lord Dorrimore who perpetrated it. But here are the other fellows."

We had arrived at the spot arranged, and Sir Montie and Tommy were quite glad to see the inspector. Handforth was not certain; he had an idea that we were going to get on the guv'nor's track off our own bat, so to speak, and Handforth was inclined to regard the inspector as an intruder.

"Yes, there's been a struggle here," said the inspector, flashing a powerful electric torch upon the slightly muddy road. "Where's that dog of yours, Nipper? We'll see if he's worth his salt."

While I was making Boz sniff the guv'nor's cap the inspector searched the ground more thoroughly.

"No sign of blood," he remarked, with the callousness of the official detective. "I don't suppose Lee has come to much harm. He might not be far off, either—probably just inside the wood."

"Begad! I hope so, sir!" said Montie feelingly. "It would be frightfully rotten if anythin' serious happened to Mr. Lee. An' I'm inclined to pat Handforth on the back for bein' so shockin'ly wilful. If he hadn't gone for a walk we shouldn't have known anythin' about it."

Montie was addressing everybody in general, but we didn't take much notice of him—except Handforth, who was considerably pleased. Handforth considered—and not without reason—that he had done well.

Boz did prove himself worthy of his salt. For, after one sniff at the cap, he seemed to know exactly what was expected of him.

He sniffed over the ground eagerly and thoroughly. And a minute later he gave a little yelp of delight and dashed through the gap in the hedge. Once on the other side, he turned and waited for us. This was quite a characteristic of Boz. Although hot on the trail, he required no leash, but waited for his master to follow.

I did so gladly, and we proceeded through the wood without a pause, the little dog making no false moves. He led us straight through the Belton Wood until we arrived at the other side, where Bannington Moor stretched out blankly ahead. There wasn't a light to be seen, and the whole landscape was dull and dreary.

"Well, your theory was wrong, inspector," I remarked. "The guv'nor isn't in the wood, and doesn't seem to be anywhere near."

"We're on the track, though," said Lennard grimly.

"Begad! Rather!"

We pressed on, Boz leading the way. And at last we arrived upon the deserted moorland road. And here we received a check. Boz, after running up and down for a few moments, looked up at me and whined apologetically.

"He's lost the trail," I said, breathing huskily. "What does it mean, Mr. Lennard? The guv'nor must have been put in a motor-car or a trap. What do you think?"

"We'll soon find out for certain," replied the inspector.

He again used his torch, and we instantly saw the marks of a heavy motor-car upon the road. The fact that it had been run on to the moor itself, and had then come back, proved beyond question that it was the car which had carried Nelson Lee away. We looked at one another rather blankly.

"We've come to a dead stop, sir," I exclaimed, clenching my fists. "We can't hope to follow these motor-car tracks; the road's as hard as rock further on. What the dickens shall we do?"

The inspector rubbed his chin.

"H'm! It's rather more difficult than we supposed," he said. "We've certainly drawn blank, Nipper. Now we shall have to use our wits. Your master was collared, I've no doubt, by these Bannington crooks. There's nobody else likely to have molested him, is there? I mean, he's got no other enemies in this district?"

"Of course it was those Bannington rotters," I agreed. "But we're no nearer, even if we do know that. They wouldn't have taken him to the Hermitage, would they?"

"The chances are that they haven't done anything of the sort," replied the inspector grimly. "But the Hermitage seems to be the only point for us to start on. We'd better go there and prowl around a bit."

"Then somebody had better fetch your car—" I began.

"How far is it to Bannington from here?" asked the inspector.

"Just over two miles."

"Then we don't want any car," said Lennard crisply. "We should lose more time by fetching it, and make ourselves noticeable, too. We can easily get there within half an hour if we step out."

"Right-ho!" I replied. "Let's get going, then."

We started the walk briskly, and my thoughts were busy. So far our quest had been very unsatisfactory. But we now knew for certain that Nelson Lee had been the victim. There was no doubt about that whatever, since Boz had followed his trail. And we also knew that he had been taken away in a motor-car.

But I was despondent. Boz was of no further use to us, for he couldn't track a motor-car. And, for all we knew, the guv'nor was miles away—perhaps right in another county. In any event it was almost ridiculous to suppose that he had been taken to the Hermitage.

Still, we had no other course. The inspector, no doubt, would set the telegraph to work if we drew a blank at the gambling-house. But it was far wiser to go there to begin with, even though we didn't know exactly how to get to work when we arrived. As Lennard remarked, we should have to direct our movements according to circumstances.

Now and again the inspector flashed his light upon the ground. And although we saw traces of the motor-car to begin with, they soon vanished, for the road became hard and smooth. Our visit to Bannington was just an off-chance, because we had no other move to make.

Boz was with us, and he was very quiet. I believe the little beggar was sharing our gloom, for he had failed—through no fault of his own. We walked on without much conversation. We did not feel inclined for talking, although, perhaps Handforth did more than the rest of us.

He was as keen as mustard, and delighted to be included in this adventure. And the fact that he had been the cause of our getting on the track pleased him enormously. As he confided to Montie, he wouldn't have missed it for worlds. From his tone it could almost be supposed that he was glad that Nelson Lee had met with disaster! Handforth fancied himself in the detective line, and was glad of an opportunity to display his powers.

We arrived in Bannington at last. I knew the district as well as I knew the Triangle at St. Frank's, and I led the way through the outskirts of the town until we arrived at the road in which the Hermitage was situated. We did not actually pass through Bannington itself, but came upon the Hermitage straight out of the country lanes. Incidentally, we didn't pass a soul.

"Now, boys, we must be cautious," said the inspector in a low voice. "It's dark, fortunately, and there's not much fear of our being recognised. I've an idea that I ought to leave you behind—"

"Then the sooner you get rid of that idea the better!" I said grimly. "None of those

tricks, inspector. We're in this affair, and don't you forget it!"

"I'm not likely to!" remarked Lennard drily. "But, seriously, boys, we must be very careful indeed. We'll walk quietly on—"

"Begad!" interrupted Montie suddenly. "Listen!"

We all stood still, and, quite clearly, we heard the sound of a motor-car. It wasn't on the road, but appeared to be right amongst the trees on our left. We couldn't help realising the significance of the thing—although probably this motor-car had nothing to do with the one we were interested in.

"Listen!" said the inspector tensely. "And get ready to back into the hedge!"

We waited, and presently a landaulette appeared from between some trees, bumped over a grassy piece of ground, and turned in the opposite direction to us. We heard the driver slip in the second gear, and the car's red light vanished into the distance. All became silent again.

"We'll have a look into this!" said the inspector grimly. "This can't be mere chance, boys."

"By George!" said Handforth. "Let's buck up!"

"Don't be in such a hurry!" said Lennard. "We'll stay exactly where we are for another five minutes. There might be somebody else down that alley, and we should look fine specimens if we ran into the enemy, shouldn't we? I'm a man of action, but I believe in being cautious."

We soon found out how wise the inspector's decision was, for within three minutes we heard low voices, and then two men appeared at the spot where the motor-car had turned into the road. We heard a grating noise, and judged that a gate was being closed. After that the men walked off and vanished into the gloom.

By this time we were positively convinced that we were on the right track, and we were intensely eager to make further investigations.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CLOSING OF THE NET!

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD gave the word at last.

"We'll chance it now," he exclaimed grimly. "I don't suppose we shall run into anybody else, but I don't feel inclined to hang about any longer. Come on, boys—and remember what I said about being careful."

It was something novel for this astute Scotland Yard official to be engaged upon a case in the company of a number of schoolboys. But he knew that I was quite different from the average schoolboy, and Tommy and Montie and Handforth were my chums. Moreover, we were on the track of Nelson Lee.

I was rather puzzled as to why the car should have been here now, and concluded

that it must have remained for some time after the guv'nor had been removed—unless, of course, he was still inside. And that thought gave me a turn, for we should have been able to stop the car if we had acted promptly.

However, it was no good thinking of that now. And, really, it was hardly feasible to suppose that Nelson Lee had been brought here only to be taken away again. We should probably learn the truth very shortly.

We found ourselves in a kind of rutty lane, leading, apparently, to nowhere, for dense trees lay ahead, and I knew there was no road down there. After proceeding some way we discovered that there was a thick hedge right in front, the lane being, indeed, a cul-de-sac. But right near the end there was a gateway to the left, and here we paused.

"Hailo!" muttered Watson. "Look at old Boz!"

The little dog was running about excitedly, and he forced his way through the bars of the gate and stood there, waiting.

"By jingo!" I exclaimed. "He's picked up the guv'nor's trail again!"

"Good!" said the inspector.

We vaulted over the gate and followed Boz down into the little hollow. Here we saw a low stone building against the background of trees. It was in total darkness, and everything was as silent as the grave except for the faint rustling of the wind in the trees.

"He's in that shed, I'll bet a quid!" I muttered.

Detective-Inspector Lennard came to a halt.

"We mustn't be rash!" he muttered. "There's a chance that somebody is on guard, and we don't want any alarm to be given. It strikes me that we're now standing in the lower part of the Hermitage grounds, and, strictly speaking, we're trespassing. I've got no warrant or authority for searching this place, and we've got to be deucedly careful. You boys had better remain behind," he added, turning to the other three. "Nipper and I will creep up."

"Oh, I say—" began Handforth protestingly.

"Sorry, youngster, but you've got to obey my orders!" cut in the inspector.

There was no mistaking his tone, and Sir Montie and Tommy Watson and Handforth remained behind. Lennard and I crept forward, crouching low, and making no sound whatever. We arrived at the stone building, and walked round it twice, making certain that nobody was on guard outside, at all events.

Then we gave our attention to the door. Although the gloom was thick, we could see that the place had originally been a coach-house or a garage. The doors had been fixed up solidly and a tiny door freshly cut. This latter was bolted on the outside.

"See that, young 'un?" said the inspector happily.

"Rather!" I replied. "It means that the guv'nor's locked in stone. Those bolts would

never have been shot if one of the crooks was with him. It strikes me that we're having everything our own way. What shall we do—call out?"

"Yes, just a low hail," said the Yard detective. "You'd better do it, Nipper. Lee will recognise your sweet tones in a moment."

I tapped lightly on the door.

"Anybody here?" I called softly—and then I gave a low whistle of a special variety, which was an old signal arranged between the guv'nor and myself. On the instant the reply came, and I gasped with relief.

"Well done, Nipper!" came Nelson Lee's voice.

"Are you all right, sir?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes, except for a somewhat troublesome bump on the back on my head," he replied, with a short laugh. "Don't worry, Nipper. Is there anybody else with you?"

"Watson and Montie and Handforth," I replied.

"Don't I count?" asked the inspector.

"Hallo, Lennard, so you've arrived, too?" came Lee's voice. "Splendid! But you needn't trouble to rescue me——"

"Needn't trouble!" I gasped.

"No; I am quite content," was Lee's amazing reply.

The inspector looked at me and I looked at the inspector. Just then Montie and the others came up, considering that they were justified in doing so. I was simply astounded. The guv'nor didn't want to be rescued!

Lennard evidently took no notice of him, for he shot the bolts back and tried the door. It wouldn't budge, and the inspector produced a bunch of curious-looking keys. As he explained, it was sometimes necessary for a respectable detective to turn into a burglar.

The lock was a very excellent one, but it was not made to resist those keys of the inspector. Within five minutes the door swung open, and the lock was in no way damaged. The place was in total darkness within.

Lennard led the way in, flashing his torch. We followed, and gave little cries of alarm when he saw that Nelson Lee was lying on a camp bedstead, bound hand and foot. He was smiling cheerfully.

"You haven't been long in locating me," he said. "How did you manage it?"

"Well, sir, it was really because Handforth is an ass——" I began.

"What's that?" snorted Handforth.

"It's true enough," I grinned. "Handy went out roaming in the wood, and he happened to spot those awful rotters piling on to you, guv'nor. Handforth acted like a sensible chap, I must admit, because he came rushing back to the Mount and gave us the alarm. Then we met the inspector, and Boz tracked you to the moor, and we guessed that you were here. That's all."

"In a nutshell, so to speak—eh?" smiled Lee. "Well, I'm very pleased that you have found me, boys, and I'm glad to see you, Lennard. But I should advise you to

make yourselves scarce as soon as possible. Sales or Field might come back——"

"What about you?" I asked quickly.

"I intend to remain here."

"Re-remain here!" I stuttered. "Bound up like that?"

"Exactly."

"You're mad, guv'nor!" I gasped.

"Not quite so mad as he sounds, I'll warrant," put in the inspector. "You've got a card up your sleeve, Lee. I can see it. What's the idea?"

Nelson Lee's expression hardened.

"The net is closing, Lennard, and I do not wish to leave a loophole through which these men can escape—and a loophole would certainly be provided if I took advantage of this opportunity and escaped," he exclaimed. "Don't you understand?"

"No, I'm blessed if I do!" I replied.

"Begad! An' I don't either, sir," said Sir Montie. "It would be shockin' to go away an' leave you here. We couldn't do it, sir—we couldn't really!"

"I can quite understand your anxiety, boys, and I appreciate it," remarked Nelson Lee gently. "But think what would happen if I went away with you. These men would take to flight without a moment's delay, and they would probably escape completely. A successful raid could not be arranged for to-night, and the end of the affair would be a complete fiasco—a failure."

"And what if you remain, sir?"

"Then I have every reason to believe that we shall scoop in the whole bunch," was the guv'nor's reply. "They have no idea that a raid is being prepared, and are completely off their guard. Having secured me, they believe that the immediate danger is passed. If I escaped they would flee instantly."

The inspector nodded.

"I can quite understand that," he agreed. "But why shouldn't I rush things and raid the place to-night?"

"Mainly because the two principal crooks are away," said Nelson Lee. "Sales and Butler are the actual 'heads' of this conspiracy, and they have both gone to London this evening. A raid would probably be successful—but the result would even then be unsatisfactory, because Sales and Butler would escape."

"We want the evidence—and we should get it," objected Lennard. "The pair would be in our hands within three days at the outside. You'd better let me make plans for a raid this evening, Lee. In fact, I shall take matters into my own hands and hurry away——"

"No, don't do that, Lennard," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You are thinking solely of my safety. I know. But, my dear man, there is no need for you to be anxious. I shall be perfectly safe here. Sales won't harm me so long as I remain submissive; and I shall be extremely meek. Field will be in charge, and he will find me a very subdued prisoner."

"What do you suggest, then?"

"That you all go at once, without letting yourselves be seen," replied Lee promptly. "You, Lennard, will make full arrangements for a big police-raid on Thursday night at twelve o'clock—or, perhaps eleven-thirty—"

"Thursday night?" I broke in. "Why not to-morrow night?"

"Because Sales and Butler will not be back until Thursday, and I want to rope them all in together," replied Nelson Lee. "It's all very well for you to say that the fellows will be caught later on, Lennard, but I believe in making sure of them. They are slippery customers, and would disappear completely—only to resume their villainies in another part of the country."

"If you feel justified in remaining here, Lee, I agree that it would be far better to nab the whole crowd in a bunch," said the inspector, nodding. "You can rely upon me to get everything ready for Thursday night."

"Good. Come for me just before the raid—I should like to be in it," said the gov'nor. "Until then, remain easy in mind about me. I shall come to no harm whatever. Don't look so alarmed, Nipper."

I grunted.

"I don't like it, gov'nor," I grumbled. "We've found you, and now you want to stay in captivity! Some people have queer tastes!"

"I have already explained——"

"I know you have, sir, but I don't like it, all the same," I declared. "Still, you know best, I suppose. What will the Head think? How is the Ancient House going on without you?"

The gov'nor chuckled.

"I fancy the Ancient House will manage to pull through the ordeal," he said drily. "And the Headmaster will be informed of the facts by Mr. Lennard. The raid will

take place on Thursday night, and not before."

"And shall we be able to come back to St. Frank's after that, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly. "Will Tregellis-West and I be cleared?"

"Whatever the result of the raid is, I can promise you that you will be cleared, Handforth," replied Nelson Lee. "It will be unwise for me to say anything at present; just be patient, and leave everything to the inspector and me."

"Begad! That's what we will do, sir," said Sir Montie willingly. "An' I hope everythin' will be all right—I do, really. But we shall be all anxious about you, sir."

Five minutes later we had taken our departure, leaving Nelson Lee locked in the old garage. It seemed a queer state of affairs—and it was a queer state of affairs—but I realised that the gov'nor was right.

While he was about it, it would be far more satisfactory to make a clean sweep.

We returned to the Mount by the way we had come—walking—and it was late by the time I entered the Ancient House. Supper, in fact, was over, and it was just upon time for bed. I noticed that Reginald Pitt was not looking so calmly confident as usual.

But the Serpent did not know that his career of rascality was nearly at an end, or he would have looked less confident. And, if it comes to that, I didn't know of the surprising events which were to occur on the Thursday night—events which were to mean a tremendous lot for Reginald Pitt.

The end of the game was within sight—and it promised to be exciting!

Exactly what happened is quite another yarn, and I shall set down the facts as they occurred; and I think they will prove astonishing.

THE END.

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GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIAL**The Chums of Littleminster School.****A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.****By ARTHUR S. HARDY.*****The First Chapters.***

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

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGGIN** are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. 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. The next day the match between the eleven and the sixteen takes place. The sixteen takes first innings.

*(Now read on.)***A MAN HURT.**

AND here were three of the best wickets down for nine. Awful!

Challis hadn't turned up, either. He had funked it. The game would end in a dire fiasco, and the glum-looking school-boys who stared vacantly at the pitch were quick to mark Challis down as the Jonah.

But, hallo! What's that? A number up? Six? Why that was Challis's number on the card. Cad Challis! So he had had the cheek to turn up after all, and was going in to make an ass of himself.

Kotter! As if he could hope to do any good! And going to play in his tweeds, too! What an outrage!

All eyes studied that number on the board in amazement, and were then turned upon the pavilion.

The eleven waited serenely, patiently, for the coming of the new man in, some sitting on the close-cut turf. Myers and Ponsonby were openly jeering at the idea of Challis batting for any team at all.

Even Grainger looked a trifle nervous as he watched that door of the pavilion, too.

Suddenly Basil rushed forward, waving his cap in the air, and tore round the pitch to where Raymond and Fawcett sat.

"Hurrah!" he bellowed. "Hurrah! He's going in. Challis will make 'em sit up."

And then a tall, striking figure emerged from the pavilion door, a figure clad in immaculate flannels, pulling on a pair of batting gloves as he came, with bat tucked under arm, treading firmly and confidently.

But surely that couldn't be cad Challis?

"It isn't—it can't be," ran in a chorus round the field. "Yes, by Jove, it is! It's Challis. My word!"

The murmur deepened, swelled into a roar of loud comment, and then—Myers could hardly believed his chagrined ears—into applause, applause led by Mr. Evans, the umpire, himself.

Myers was too astonished to speak. Challis made his way to the empty wicket, took his middle, and began to pound the ground with his bat, while his eyes roamed the field to see exactly how the field was placed; and it was not play-acting, either.

"Showing off!" growled Ponsonby.

And now Grainger prepared to send the ball down.

Back he went, taking a short, swift run, and the ball came hard, fast and true along the pitch.

"Got him!" yelled a nervous fag. But no, Challis blocked the ball neatly.

So with the next, and the one after that. The fourth he hit easily along the wicket, after the manner of W. G. Grace, of famous memory, leaving his crease almost with the ball, his confident "yes" echoing loudly over the field. The run was easily made, and Challis had the bowling again from the other end, Ponsonby taking up the bowling there.

Ponsonby was vicious. The boy was now wavering between dislike of Challis, and admiration, which he grudgingly conceded.

At all events, he meant to bowl him out quickly if he could.

A deft and able bowler was Ponsonby, with an easy, careless style and a seemingly loose ball, which no batsman dare take any liberties with, for it broke in trickily.

Challis must have heard about Ponsonby's craft, for he made no attempt to get runs until the last ball of the over, and then, as it was a trifle off the wicket on the leg side, he swept it low, hard, and clean, to the boundary, and four runs were ticked to his credit on the board.

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"Bravo! Bravo! Hurrah, Challis! Hurrah!"

The silence gave place to loud applause, and Challis set his lips grimly.

Now another misfortune befell the sixteen, for Challis's partner, Griggs, was clean bowled by Grainger's third ball.

The next man skied a lob high into the air, and Andrews, dashing in, held it.

Two more wickets down. My word!

Things now looked serious for the sixteen.

Myers came in now, looking highly strung and nervous.

He kept Grainger out, and then Challis was tried again by Ponsonby, who could make no impression on him.

Three successive overs were now played, and only one bye was recorded. The onlookers began to harrack. But with Challis warming to his work and getting his eye in, there was soon a change.

Ponsonby began to lose his temper. He sent the ball down viciously, carelessly, and his hand in consequence lost its cunning.

Challis then made the boys sit up and gasp, for three successive balls were sent to the boundary, and with the last one of the over Challis ran a safe and gentle one, and faced Grainger once more.

Vernon, seated on the veranda in front of the pavilion, began to laugh happily.

"By George, what a chap Grainger is!" he exclaimed. "I've always regarded him as the best judge of a cricketer the school ever had, and he's made no mistake about Challis. The chap's a bat. He's no fluke. Bravo, Challis!"

This as the "cad" opened his shoulders to a fierce full pitch and, getting fairly hold of it, hit it clean out of the field, over the ropes and boys as well, for as grand a drive as had ever been seen at Littleminster.

Grainger himself laughed and nodded appreciation of Challis's effort.

Before that over ended three more runs went to John's bat.

Twenty-seven the cad had scored, and looked to be well set as he loosened himself out to deal with Ponsonby.

Myers, as the field crossed over, clutched the bowler by the arm.

"Don't let the cad beat you, Ponsonby," he sneered. "It'll be too much of a joke."

"I'll rattle him," growled Ponsonby.

But instead he sent down easy, loose balls, and, as before, was hit all over the field, while the score began to rise by leaps and bounds.

Before sending down the last ball of the over Ponsonby took a pull at himself. He tried to remember the tricks by which he so often beat better men than Challis, and prepared to run, with a grim smile on his face and a snap in his eyes.

The ball was bowled with a tremendous spin on it. It went straight at the wicket. Challis prepared to play it. Good.

In anticipation of the stroke, even as the ball left his hand, Ponsonby raced down the wicket, ready and eager for the catch.

Challis played it firm, hard and true. Ball left bat like a cannon shot.

Ah! The warning cry came too late. Ponsonby, spreading his fingers for the catch, was beaten by the pace of the ball, which he never saw.

A thud. A cry of horror from the assembled boys, and Ponsonby, having received the blow, in its full force, fair upon the forehead, pitched forward and lay like a log on the grass.

Mr. Evans was the first to move.

"Good Heavens, he's killed him!" he cried as he rushed to where Ponsonby lay.

Challis stood petrified at his wicket, his eyes widening in horror.

Round him the players surged, Myers first and foremost among them.

"You hound!" snarled John's enemy. "You did that on purpose. You've killed him. You'll be sent down for this, if you're lucky to escape being handed over to the police. You—you blackguardly cur——"

Then, as the group gathered closer round the still and silent figure of the injured boy, with one accord the onlookers broke bounds and surged all over the field.

THE STORM CLOUD GATHERS.

JOHN CHALLIS stood dismayed, silent, white-faced before the torrent of abuse that was hurled at his devoted head.

He gazed vacantly round at the surging crowd of boys who burst over the boundaries of the playing-field and came swarming towards the wicket.

A feeling of horror gripped at his heart and choked the words he would have uttered.

He strove to look past the distorted faces of his accusers, at the spot where Ponsonby lay, but the kneeling masters blotted out the still and silent figure.

"Have you lost your tongue, you cur?" snarled Myers, his evil eyes blazing with triumph. "By George, I wish I had the dealing with you! I'd make you sorry you're alive!"

Challis looked dully at him.

"I didn't—mean it," he faltered lamely.

Poor Challis, he felt like a murderer at that awful moment, it never occurring to him that it had been no fault of his.

Now, Chalfont, Digby, and more of his enemies clustered round him, adding their blame to Myers.

Chalfont, his face flaming, raised his fist and struck at John's face.

Vernon, the captain of the sixteen, brushed the blow aside.

"Steady, I can't allow that!" he said.

Now a hissing crowd of Evans's boys gathered round Challis, hustling him, hooting him, until the air echoed with the din.

Challis shrank back before the storm, glancing pitifully round for the sight of a kindly face, aching for a moment's sympathy, feeling helpless and forlorn.

And as he looked three juniors pushed a way through the press and a hand touched his. Basil was looking up at him with an

(Continued overleaf.)

encouraging smile Raymond and Fawcett were backing him up and looking wistfully at the big boy.

"Poor old John," murmured Basil. "It wasn't your fault. Ponsonby asked for it."

"The way he ran up the wicket was mad," pronounced Raymond. "Especially after such a ball. He must have known you'd drive it straight. The duffer! He ought to have known better."

"But—I—I need not have hit the ball so hard," faltered Challis, helplessly. "I don't know why I did." The ball came, and I opened my shoulders to it, keeping it low. I—I half-saw Ponsonby running in, and—and nothing I could do could prevent my driving the ball low and straight at him. I—I—don't know—"

"Don't worry, Challis," said Raymond. "Nobody with an idea of fair play could possibly blame you."

Whereat a heavy hand gripped Raymond by the arm and swung him round, and another heavy hand struck him on the side of the head, nearly felling him to the ground.

"You clear out, you young muff!" snarled Byfleet, for whom Raymond lagged. "You'd sympathise with the common enemy, would you! Wait till I get you in my room! I'll skin you alive!"

"Beast!" retorted Raymond indignantly, as he backed away.

Challis was now driven away by the surging crowd of hooters.

"He's confessed he did it on purpose!" shouted Myers. "He ought to be lynched! Come on, boys, let's set about him! He deserves it!"

The cowardly boy saw a chance of maltreating the unpopular cad, a chance such as might never occur again. He sprang in and struck at John, who merely raised an arm to ward off the blow.

"Don't!" pleaded Challis pitifully. "Please, I didn't—"

"Hark at the funk! Come on!" shrieked Myers, who was brave enough as long as he had a crowd to back him up.

But suddenly Grainger, the captain of the school, strode through the press. He got in front of Challis and looked sternly around.

"Stand back! Stand back, the lot of you!" he cried. "Leave Challis alone!"

"Look what he's done to Ponsonby, Grainger!" snapped Challis.

"Stand back!" repeated Grainger, still more emphatically; and the boys recoiled.

"Things are coming to a pretty pass," the captain went on, "when you fellows want to take the law into your own hands!"

He swung round on Challis.

"It was an awful thing to happen," he

said, looking full into John's eyes. "Especially when you were shaping so well, too. What made you do it?"

John passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"I don't know. I saw the ball coming. I knew I could drive it to the boundary, in spite of the spin on it. There was only one way to strike it—I—I didn't see Ponsonby rushing up the wicket until I lifted my eyes a fraction of a second after the ball was struck, and it went straight at him. Grainger, I wouldn't have injured him for worlds."

The note of pleading appeal in the cad's voice sent a thrill through the school captain.

"I see," he nodded, taking John by the arm and drawing him to the place where Ponsonby lay.

As they reached it the group of seniors who were looking on made way for them.

Challis bounded forward and stood staring helplessly down on the stricken boy, over whose still and lifeless form Evans the master was bending, having cast aside his umpire's coat.

On the forehead just above the temple was a large raised lump, discoloured and terrifying. Ponsonby's face was deathly white, and his head hung limply on the master's arm.

Challis stooped down.

"Can—can I help, sir?" he faltered; and Mr. Evans, casting a swift upward glance at him, scowled in irritation.

"No, no! You have done quite enough for one day," he said; and Challis, reeling back on his heels, uttered a low cry.

His lips set, hard lines marred the smoothness of his forehead, and into his eyes a hard gleam came.

"Will they never bring the stretcher?" cried Mr. Evans irritably.

"It's here now, sir," said Grainger, as the group parted and the school-porter and a Fifth-Form boy advanced, bearing the stretcher with them.

On this the unconscious boy was gently laid, and Mr. Gray, Mr. Evans, the porter, and Vernon, captain of the next sixteen, lifting the stretcher up, marched away with their burden, the schoolboys making a lane through which they passed.

Grainger watched them go, then turned to Challis.

John stood as if turned to stone, white-faced and silent, seeing nothing, hearing none of the taunts that were still hurled at him.

"Come along, Challis," said the school captain, not ungently. "You'd better come back to the school with me. No good staying here, you know. The sooner you are out of this the better."

Challis, turning mechanically, obeyed.

(To be continued.)