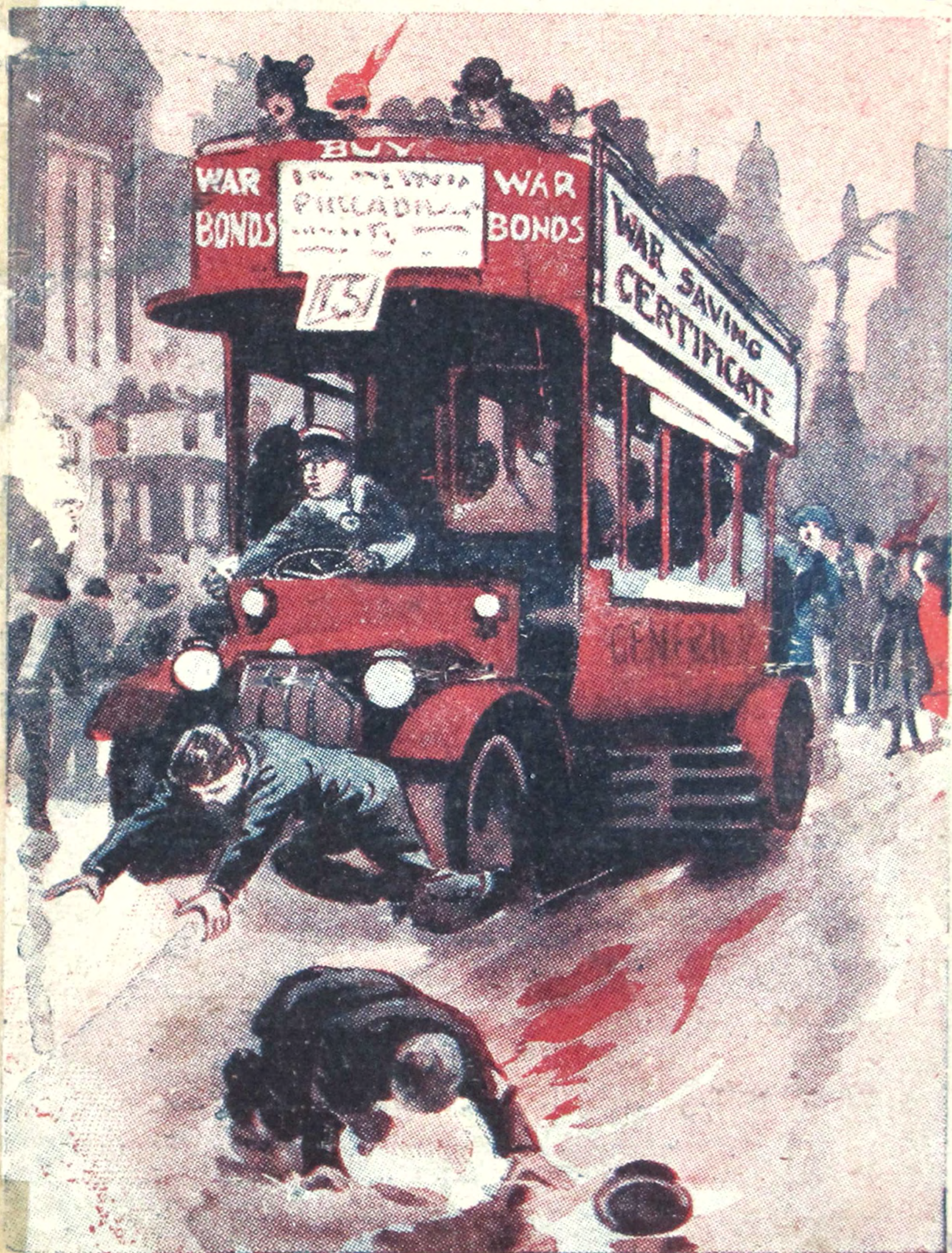


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(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

TEDDY LONG KNOWS SOMETHING.

TOMMY WATSON shook his head doubtfully.

"It's too much to expect that it'll last. The chap's a rotter, and he'll always be a rotter. That's my opinion, anyhow."

"I'm frightfully sorry, dear fellow, but I must be allowed to remark that your opinion ain't sportin'," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West, regarding Watson severely through his pince-nez. "It ain't playin' the game, Tommy boy—it ain't, really. It's been agreed by everybody that Pitt was a hero——"

"Oh, I'm saying nothing about that," interrupted Watson. "Pitt acted jolly decently—in fact he can't be praised too much. It'll be a long while before you'll hear me say a word against him. He saved my life, and I shall always regard him as a chap with mountains of pluck."

I grinned.

"That doesn't quite tally with what you said just now," I remarked.

"Oh, my hat! I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful!" said Watson quickly. "When I said that Pitt would always be a rotter, I didn't mean that literally. What I was trying to get at was this: No matter how much Pitt changes for the better, he'll be a cunning, snaky sort of bounder. He can't help it—it's his giddy nature. And a chap can't change his nature, any more than a leopard can change his spots."

"Don't you be so sure of that," I said slowly. "The guv'nor and I have met with all sorts of queer people in our detective cases, and I could tell you of a good few instances of criminals turning as honest as the day. But I'm ready to grant that Pitt will probably go back into his snaky, gambling ways. That doesn't mean to say he's not full of grit. He is—he's proved it."

Tommy Watson nodded.

"And I'm the first to acknowledge it," he

agreed. "Why, if I heard any fellow running down Pitt I'd punch his nose. But I still believe—strictly between ourselves—that he'll chum up with Fullwood and Co. again. That's all I meant. It'll be a beastly pity if he does, because I should like to see him chuck up those cads for good."

Sir Montie and Tommy and I were chatting in the common-room of the Ancient House at St. Frank's, standing in front of a glowing, cheerful fire. We had the room to ourselves at the moment, and the subject of our discussion was Reginald Pitt, of the Remove.

Pitt had returned to the ranks of the Remove two days previously, after spending almost three weeks in the school sanatorium. He wasn't quite well even now, but he had begged to be allowed to get about again.

The Serpent—as he was called in the Remove—had sustained severe burns during a serious fire on the outskirts of Bannington. On that occasion Pitt had undoubtedly saved Tommy Watson's life—and Watson was grateful. But this did not prevent him speaking in a rather critical fashion on Pitt's shortcomings. I don't think I should have respected Watson so much if he had blindly sworn by Pitt and couldn't see anything wrong in what he did. Watson was a blunt person, and because he spoke bluntly it didn't imply that he was ungrateful.

At the same time, Tommy couldn't quite forget that Pitt's heroic action was really the outcome of a mean, dastardly trick. It was Pitt who had got Watson into the terrible fix, and Pitt's conscience had smitten him. At the crucial moment he had redeemed his sins.

So, although Watson was rescued by Pitt, it was Pitt who had got him into the trouble originally. In short, the fire had occurred at a gambling-house where a raid was proceeding, and Pitt's genial plan had been to get Watson mixed up in the disgrace. Tommy, although very grateful, couldn't quite forget that.

And he held the opinion, as he had plainly stated, that the Serpent would break out again in the old way. Personally, I was very much afraid that Watson was right. Pitt, of course, had been booked for expulsion, but his brave action in plunging into the fire had earned him a free pardon. And now he was provided with a fresh chance.

The Remove generally, instead of disliking Pitt as before, was generously inclined to give him a new start. He came back into the Ancient House with the past behind him, so to speak, and it was now up to him to make good.

"It will be really interestin' to watch Pitt's progress," remarked Sir Montie thoughtfully. "I am wonderin' if he will have anythin' to do with Fullwood and Co.—"

"He was speaking to Fullwood just before tea," put in Watson. "That's why I'm pretty certain that he'll slip back into his old ways. It's too much to expect that his decency will last."

"Well, look here, we needn't talk about Pitt," I said. "I want to have a chat about the football—"

"Football!" exclaimed Handforth, charging into the common-room at that moment. "That's queer. I was just looking for you, Nipper, to jaw about the football—"

"Don't!" I interrupted. "Talking about football with you, Handy, is too much of a fag."

Handforth strode across the room, followed by his two chums, Church and McClure. Several other juniors came in, too.

"A fag, is it?" roared Handforth. "If you think you're going to choke me off, Nipper, you're jolly well mistaken! I want to know about the football arrangements for this season."

"But why should you want to know?" I asked innocently. "You don't take an interest in football, do you?"

"You—you silly ass!" roared Handforth. "Just because you're junior skipper you seem to think you know everything. But I'm not going to stand any nonsense, my son. I want to learn—"

"Oh, you want to learn football, eh?" I interrupted.

"Learn!" bellowed Handforth. "Why, you—you—"

"First of all, Handy, you've got to bear in mind that football is a game," I said blandly. "Twenty-two fellows play it—eleven a side—and the idea is to kick the ball about—"

"You dotty idiot!" roared Handforth.

"And there are two goals, one at either end of the field," I went on. "The chap who stands between the goal-posts is called the goalkeeper—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And his job is to keep the ball out of the net," I proceeded, with the air of a lecturer. "Sometimes, of course, he lets the ball slip by him, and that's called a goal. Got that? All that's necessary is to bear these points in mind, Handy."

"You blithering fathead!" shouted Hand-

forth wrathfully. "I suppose you think this is funny?"

"Not at all," I replied. "Football is a serious game. After you've had a few lessons, Handy, you may be able to pick up the rudiments of the game. I don't suppose you will—but you may!"

"Ha, ha ha!"

Everybody in the common-room was cackling, and Handforth's own chums were no exception to the rule. He turned on them wrathfully, punched McClure's nose with great precision, and treated Church to a beautiful thick ear. They didn't laugh so much after that.

"And if you ain't careful, I'll punch your nose, too!" said Handforth, glaring at me. "It all comes out of sheer jealousy. I happen to be the best junior forward in the school, and you don't like it. That's why you've given me a rotten place in the team as half-back. I don't see why I should stand it!"

I sighed.

"Nobody wants you to stand it that I know of," I said patiently. "There are plenty of fellows who would be only too glad of your place, my son. In fact it's quite likely that I shall be compelled, by public opinion, to chuck you out of the eleven."

"You'd have your hands full!" shouted Handforth warmly. "We've had these arguments again and again, and I'm fed-up with them. If you can't give me a place in the forward line, I shall probably refuse to play for the side at all."

"Begad! What a relief that would be!" said Sir Montie languidly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It wouldn't be a relief to the side!" declared Handforth. "What would you do without me? Just answer me that question, if you can! Without me to back you up, you'd lose every game on the fixture-list. I don't like boasting, but I must say that I'm the chief mainstay of the eleven—"

"Heard the latest?" shouted Teddy Long excitedly, bursting into the common-room at that moment.

Handforth turned round, glaring.

"I was talking!" he roared aggressively.

"That's nothing new," said Teddy Long. "When ain't you talking, Handy? Unless somebody interrupted you, you'd go on for ever! Here, I say— Hold him back, you chaps! Ow! Oh, you beastly bully! Leggo my ear—"

"Don't you dare to interrupt me again, then!" said Handforth magisterially. "I was talking about football—"

"Oh, dry up, Handy!" said Long, dodging behind two other fellows. "I've got some news—some jolly interesting news, too. There's a new Remove kid coming this week."

"Let him come!" snorted Handforth.

"But this chap's a novelty," yelled Long, still keeping in cover. "He lives in Bermondsey—"

"Where?" inquired half-a-dozen fellows in one voice.

"Bermondsey!" repeated Long, gaining confidence. "That's given you a surprise,

eh? I call it jolly rotten, and I think we ought to get up a protest."

I strode across the room and grabbed Long by the coat-collar. He was a fat, grubby little beggar, and had the reputation of being the sneak of the Remove.

"What's this yarn?" I demanded grimly. "I expect you've been listening at some key-hole, and you've mistaken the word. It's more likely to be Birmingham——"

"It ain't!" shouted Long, wriggling away. "Do you think I haven't got ears? The kid's coming from Bermondsey, I tell you. I reckon the Remove ought to get up a petition——"

"But what for?" asked McClure. "What's wrong with Bermondsey? It's a suburb of London, ain't it?"

"Of course it is," said Long. "A beastly rotten slum place, where everybody goes about in rags——"

"You young fathead!" I grinned. "Some parts of Bermondsey are more select than a good many streets in the West End. And if there's a new kid coming from Bermondsey, it doesn't prove anything. You shouldn't jump at conclusions——"

"But I tell you he's a slum beast!" declared Long defiantly. "I heard the Head telling Mr. Crowell—— I—I mean Mr. Crowell told me all about it just now," he added hastily. "Old Crowell was quite pally, and gave me all the information I wanted. Of course, I always get on well with the masters—they like me."

I grinned.

"You little fathead," I said. "Do you think we believe that yarn? Mr. Crowell knows better than to confide in a sneaking young bounder like you. Clear out while you're safe——"

"I don't see why I should clear out!" said Long indignantly. "While I was listening I heard—— I mean Mr. Crowell told me that this new kid has been going to a beastly London County Council school. What do you think of that? A low-down bounder from a Council school coming to St. Frank's!"

"I don't believe it!" said Handforth bluntly.

"All right, you needn't, but you'll see on Wednesday," retorted Long. "I'm only telling you what I know. This beastly chap is a regular slum-cad, and he's only been to a Council school——"

"I don't believe him, either," I interrupted. "But, supposing a kid does come from a Council school, what of it? Council schools ain't contaminated, are they?"

Teddy Long stared at me.

"Why, they're awful places!" he said. "Ragged kids go to 'em, and dustmen's sons, and all sorts of low-down beasts——"

"You'd better buzz-off," I interrupted sharply. "And don't air your views about Council schools again. St. Frank's may be a select place, but some of the best chaps breathing were educated at Council schools. And you've got nothing to boast about, Long."

The fat junior sniffed.

"Perhaps you've been to a Council school yourself?" he sneered.

"No, I haven't, but I shouldn't be ashamed of it if I had," I replied. "Every fellow can't afford St. Frank's fees, and I daresay a chap learns just as much in a L.C.C. school as he learns here. It all depends upon whether the fellow wants to learn. You'll never learn anything, Long, if you stay at St. Frank's for ten years!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Long, who felt that he had missed fire with his startling information. "I know my pater won't keep me at St. Frank's if he finds out that a common cad is coming here. This new kid talks like a bargee and he's a perfect horror."

Sir Montie beamed.

"That's a piece of rippin' news, old boy," he said languidly.

"What is?" demanded Long.

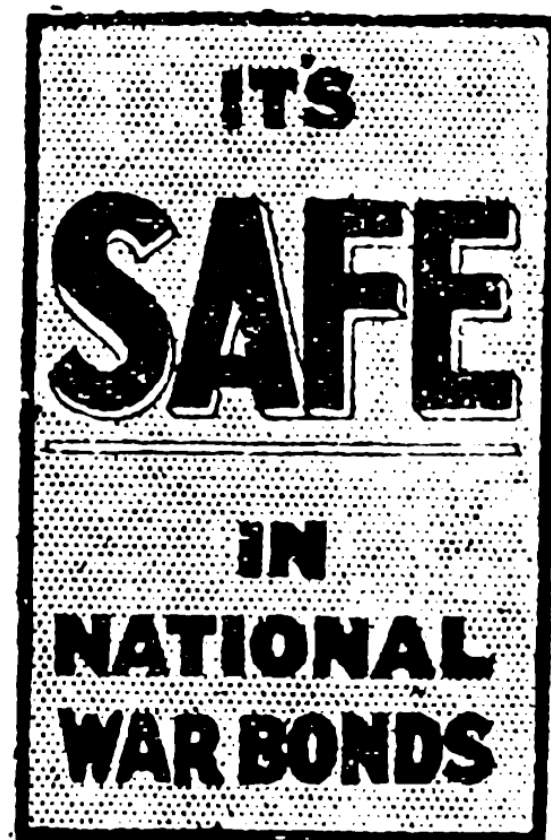
"About this new fellow comin'," explained Tregellis-West. "If he comes, you're going away, I understand? There couldn't be anything more rippin' than that, begad!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you're sure to be funny!" said Long sheepishly. "Of course, I—I don't suppose I shall go really——"

"I do!" said Handforth grimly. "You'll go out of this common-room really—assisted by the toe of my boot! Clear off, you beastly little spy! And you'd better get another yarn next time; we don't believe this one."

"Rather not!" exclaimed Gulliver. "St. Frank's must have come to a pretty pass if



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they're admitting Council school rotters. But I don't believe it. The governors wouldn't allow it. As you seem to know so much, what's this new kid's name?"

"Mason!" replied Long promptly.

"And he's coming into the Remove?"

"Yes."

"Ancient House?" I asked.

"That's what the Head said."

"Oh, the Head said it, did he?" exclaimed Handforth, frowning. "I thought you told us that Mr. Crowell——"

"I—I meant Mr. Crowell!" stammered Long. "They were talking—— I mean, I——"

"You mean that you were listening outside the door of Mr. Crowell's study," I broke in. "Own up, you little rotter! Did you listen at the keyhole, or not?"

"No, I didn't!" said Long indignantly. "I wouldn't do such a thing! I should think I'm above listening at keyholes! I happened to be passing, and I dropped a—a piece of toffee just outside Crowell's door. And while I was looking for it I couldn't help hearing——"

"You awful young fibber!" roared Handforth. "Look here, you chaps, help me to give the young spy a good bumping! I'm down on eavesdropping, and we'll teach him a lesson."

Long backed away hastily.

"Don't you touch me!" he yelled in alarm. "I've given you some news, and you ought to be jolly pleased. Keep your beastly paws off me, Handforth—— Yaroooooh!"

Handforth and I, ably assisted by Watson, Church, and two or three other fellows, grasped Teddy Long firmly and grimly. He was raised from the floor, wriggling and yelling.

Bump!

Long descended with a crash, howling as though he was being subjected to terrible torture. But we persisted with the punishment until he had been bumped six times. Then, sore and outraged, he scuttled to the door and passed out.

"I'll never tell you anything again, you beasts!" he bellowed, as he closed the door with a slam.

"Bugad! I wish we could believe it, old boys," remarked Sir Montie. "But I wonder how much of that tale is true? Personally, I don't think it matters a rap where a fellow comes from, providin' he is true blue. An' Council schools ain't such awful places, are they?"

"Yes, they are!" said Pullwood, who had come in during the last few minutes. "And I can tell you jolly plainly that if a Council school chap comes here, he'll meet with a hot reception. We'll make his life a misery, an' show him that he ain't wanted."

I didn't think it necessary to make any comment. After all, Long's story was probably all wrong, and I had no intention of saying a word about the matter.

The other fellows, however, said quite a good many words. And I'm afraid that the majority of them were rather snobbish in

their views. Even some of the decent fellows considered that it would be a bit too thick for a Bermondsey kid to come to St. Frank's.

But a Bermondsey kid was coming, nevertheless.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY FROM BERMONDSEY.

WEDNESDAY was a cold, clear day—and a half-holiday. It was ideal weather for football, and a junior House match was the programme for the afternoon.

Christine and Co., of the College House, were in good form, and I was anxious to give them a whacking—for my team was in good form, too. Christine had been saying that his eleven couldn't be touched this season, and it was necessary to point out his little mistake.

Nelson Lee, who was the Housemaster of the Ancient House, had already told me that Jack Mason, of Bermondsey, was due to arrive that afternoon. I had attempted to get further information out of the gov'nor, but he hadn't satisfied me. He just told me to wait until the new fellow arrived, and then draw my own conclusions.

I did know, however, that Teddy Long's yarn, in the main, was true.

As to the why and wherefore of the thing, I couldn't get the hang of it. It was really extraordinary that such a boy should be allowed to enter an ultra-select college like St. Frank's. Pressure of some kind had evidently been brought to bear upon the governors. For as a rule there was no opening for a new fellow unless his name had been on the books for years. And even then the sons of old boys always have preference.

So it was really hard to believe that a fellow of Mason's type should gain admittance. I hadn't seen him, and I passed no comment—it wouldn't have been fair. I believed in judging a fellow on his merits—and that's the only proper way.

But the majority of the other Removites were inclined to judge the prospective new boy by other things. It really didn't matter what he was himself; but it did matter that he had previously been educated at a common or garden Council school.

Taking them all round, the Ancient House fellows were by no means snobbish, but there was a certain limit to their tolerance. And it was universally decided that a Bermondsey kid couldn't be stuck at any price. It was simply a matter of quality—and St. Frank's had always prided itself upon the quality of its pupils. I could name a few who were worse than the roughest urchins in any free school, in spite of their swell families.

Mason was due to arrive by the afternoon train, and so there was no prospect of seeing him until after he had been at St. Frank's for an hour or two—unless he elected to come over to Little Side in order to watch the game.

And so I dismissed him from my thoughts as soon as the coin was tossed at the commencement of the match. But Fullwood and Co. had not forgotten the new boy, and they stood in a group round the Ancient House steps, deep in consultation.

"The new kid's coming this afternoon—there's no doubt about that," Fullwood was saying. "We've only got Long's word for it that he's a low beast. I think we ought to make sure of it as soon as he arrives."

"How?" asked Gulliver.

"By cornerin' the cad an' putting questions to him," replied Fullwood. "If he refuses to answer we shall know what to think—an' if he turns out to be a slum rotter we'll rag him until he can't stand. That's my idea. I want you chaps to back me up."

"We're with you," said Marriott, nodding. "And if we find out that the new chap is all serene, we'll give Long a ragging. So we shall have a bit of excitement in any case."

Fullwood grinned.

"That's settled, then," he said. "Let's go down to the gates."

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were accompanied by two of the fellows from Study G—Merrell and Marriott. These precious youths were all members of the noble order of Nuts, and they considered themselves to be the elite of the Remove. This was just as well, for nobody else shared that opinion.

It was not necessary for them to wait long. For presently a figure was observed striding up the road from the village. It was a boy in Etons, and he was carrying two glaringly new bags in his hands, both of them being fully bulged and evidently heavy.

The newcomer came along through the slight mud of the road, and was conscious of the group of very elegant juniors gathered round the gateway. He knew that they were eyeing him in the most critical manner possible.

He was a well-set-up youngster of about fifteen, with fair hair and frank blue eyes. His Eton suit sat ill upon him—probably because it was of rather bad fit and obviously brand new.

"This is St. Frank's, isn't it?" he asked, in a quiet, hesitating voice. "I was told —"

"St. Frank's?" echoed Fullwood, winking at his chums. "Never heard of such a place. This is a convalescent home for young gentlemen—so you can't have any business here, can you?"

The new boy smiled.

"I don't mind a joke," he said in an even voice. "I know this is St. Frank's, and I only asked you because I just wanted to say something pleasant. You'll let me pass, won't you?"

This request was quite necessary, for Fullwood and Co. blocked the entrance completely—and did so deliberately. Fullwood grinned and shook his head.

"There's no hurry, kid," he remarked. "You're Mason, I suppose?"

"Yes, that's my name—Jack Mason."

"And you're booked for the Ancient House—Remove Form?"

"I think so."

"Well, that's satisfactory so far," said Fullwood, in a fatherly way. "No, don't put those bags down—I like to see you holdin' 'em. By the way, you might give me the address of your tailor."

"But what for?" asked Mason in surprise.

"Oh, I shall have to get him to make a suit for me," replied Fullwood gravely. "You don't often see a fit like that. It isn't a fit at all, really—it's a giddy convulsion!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Nuts laughed uproariously at this cheap, second-hand humour, and Jack Mason flushed scarlet. He knew very well that his clothes were being made fun of, and he was rather sensitive about them himself—knowing well enough that they didn't fit him properly.

"I think you are very rude," he said, with simple directness. "I was told that St. Frank's was a very select place, and that I should have to be careful of my manners. But it doesn't seem that the standard of manners is very high here."

The smiles of Fullwood and Co. vanished.

"Why, you cheeky beast——" began Gulliver.

"Leave him to me!" snapped Fullwood. "Look here, Bricklayer, or Mason, or whatever your name is, we don't allow new kids to talk like that. And unless you want a choice selection of thick ears, you'd better apologise."

Mason smiled again—it was a very calm, easy smile, and it somehow irritated the Nuts enormously.

"But I'm not going to apologise," he said calmly. "I said that your manners are poor, and I meant it. And I shall be very sorry if all the other boys here are just like you. Will you please get out of my way?"

Fullwood and Co. had an idea that they were getting the worst of it. Mason was nervous—they could see it clearly—but he managed to remain perfectly calm all the same.

"Look here," said Fullwood roughly. "We want to ask you a few questions, you ill-dressed bounder—an' you're not goin' through this gateway till you've answered 'em. Do you understand?"

"I heard quite distinctly," said Mason.

"Well, first of all, where do you live?"

"At St. Frank's," replied the new boy sweetly.

"Why, you—you beastly rotter!" roared Fullwood, irritated by the involuntary smiles of his chums. "I'll punch your head if you ain't careful! Where did you live before you came here?"

"In London."

"What part of London, you blockhead?"

"Bermondsey," replied the new boy, sensibly realising that direct answers would be the best.

"By gad!" said Fullwood, taking a deep

breath. "So it was true, then! Bermondsey! Well, by gad!"

"Is there anything the matter with Bermondsey?" asked Mason.

"You silly young fathead!" snorted Gulliver. "Ain't Bermondsey a beastly, low-down suburb in the East End?"

"No, it's south-east," replied Mason. "And it's not beastly, and I don't think it's low-down. Some parts of it are populated by poor people, but that doesn't mean to say it's low-down, that I'm aware of. And I don't think it's very polite of you to insult me—"

"Bosh!" roared Fullwood. "How the deuce can we insult a slum urchin? What is your father, for goodness sake?"

The new boy flushed.

"My father was a carpenter," he replied quietly.

Fullwood and Co. staggered.

"A—a what?" gasped Fullwood faintly.

"I think you heard me quite plainly."

"A carpenter!" muttered Gulliver dazedly.

"Oh, my only Sunday tile! What's St. Frank's coming to? It's too terrible to be believed! This kid's beastly father is a beastly carpenter! We shall be having sweeps and rag-merchants next!"

Jack Mason's eyes flashed.

"I think you are cads—absolute cads!" he exclaimed hotly. "You have no right to talk about my father in that way—"

"Why isn't he talking like a bargee?" demanded Bell. "There must be something wrong. A carpenter's son couldn't talk decent English like this chap's talking. He's kiddin' us."

"If you don't let me get past I shall force my way through," said Mason, with deadly calmness. "I'm a new boy, and I don't want to quarrel. I was particularly warned against quarrelling on my first day. Oh, you are brutal!"

"Collar him!" snapped Fullwood harshly. "We're not going to stand this—from a rotten carpenter's urchin—"

"Perhaps I ought to have told you something else," interrupted the new boy. "My father is dead, and when you know that you won't be so cowardly as to insult him."

"I don't care if your father's in prison!" roared Fullwood. "He's a confounded—"

"I say, hold on!" muttered Gulliver. "You can't talk like that about a chap who's dead, Fully. Go easy, for goodness sake. We've touched the kid on the raw!"

Gulliver was not quite such a cad as the others, and he was possessed of humane feelings.

"Well, we'll let that pass," growled Fullwood. "But we're not going to let Mason pass!" he added, trying to be funny. "I want to know what school you came from."

"I left school nearly a year ago," said the new boy. "Fellows don't keep at school after they're fourteen in London—at least, not the kind of school I attended."

"And where was that?" asked Marriott.

"Milton Road School—one of the London County Council schools," replied Mason

quietly. "Have you finished asking me questions yet? I want to take my bags indoors and report myself to the Housemaster."

Fullwood and Co. stared wonderingly.

"It's amazin'!" said Fullwood. "He talks as though there wasn't any shame in it. By gad! What a nerve! A chap comes here from a low, rotten school, and refers to it as though it was a place like this! Grab him!"

This time Mason was grabbed by the Nuts. For some reason best known to themselves Fullwood and his pals considered it necessary to give this outsider a lesson. Why he should have a lesson was a mystery—but he had come from Bermondsey, and that was enough.

His bags were wrenched away from him and thrown into the mud. Gulliver and Merrell playfully kicked them across the road, and Mason's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Oh, you beastly cads!" he exclaimed tensely. "I didn't think that I should find such hooligans at a gentleman's school like St. Frank's. The roughest fellows at Milton Road wouldn't have treated me in this fashion!"

"Roll him in the mud!" suggested Bell cheerfully.

"If you do I shall make you suffer for it," said the new boy, breathing hard. "I can't do anything now—I can't fight five or six of you. But let me warn you—"

Smack!

Fullwood's fist was aimed straight at Mason's nose, but somehow the blow didn't go home. Mason's head was jerked up, and he received the punch on the side of his neck, when nearly all its force was exhausted. To retaliate was impossible, for his arms were tightly held.

"Over with him!" snarled Fullwood savagely.

Willing hands jerked Mason nearly over, but just before he actually fell a fresh voice sounded.

"What's the excitement out here?" it exclaimed. "Oh, it's a new kid, I suppose?"

"You clear off, Pitt!" snapped Fullwood, glaring.

Reginald Pitt, somewhat pale but otherwise his old self, stood regarding the group with his usual sardonic smile. His eyes, dark and intense, were now somewhat amused.

"Don't be such a confounded set of cads," he said. "Let that new kid alone, Fullwood. It's just like you to play a dirty trick of this sort."

"Mind your own business!" roared Fullwood.

"I think that's what you want to do," retorted Pitt. "Don't take any notice of these fellows, old man," he added, smiling at Mason. "You mustn't think they represent the Remove. They're the Nuts—the elite of the Form. By George! Ain't they elite?"

"I'm glad to learn that all the fellows are not such absolute cads," said Mason calmly. Pitt grinned.

"You're found out, Fully!" he exclaimed. "Bowled over, by Jove! This new kid knows that you're an absolute cad—"

"Why can't you shut up?" snarled Fullwood, scowling.

"Clear off, you snaky beast!" said Gulliver savagely.

"I sha'n't clear off until you've let this new fellow alone," retorted Pitt. "He's no pal of mine—I've never been introduced to him—but I am not going to stand by and see him chucked over in the mud!"

Fullwood laughed unpleasantly.

"The champion of the oppressed!" he sneered. "How many new leaves have you turned over, Pitt? If you ain't careful, we'll roll you in the mud, too!"

"You'd better not try—" Pitt paused, and glanced round into the Triangle. "Oh, good!" he went on, grinning. "Fenton and Morrow, of the Sixth, are coming along. They'll soon make you—"

"Hang them!" snapped Fullwood. "Let the new cad go, you chaps. We'll deal with him later. Buck up!"

Fullwood and Co., having no wish to fall foul of the two prefects, released Jack Mason, and strolled down the lane with more haste than dignity. Mason looked after them contemptuously.

"I hope there aren't many more like them at St. Frank's," he said, turning to Pitt.

"Oh, there may be a few," replied the Serpent calmly. "I used to be worse than Fullwood, but I've changed for the better. I expect you'll hear about it soon enough, so I might as well warn you in advance. I was nearly sacked, you know, but the Head had mercy on me—because I rushed into a burning house when I was too excited to know what I was doing."

Pitt spoke in an easy, sardonic kind of way, and Mason did not know whether to take him seriously. But the very fact that he seemed to be on bad terms with Fullwood and Co. stamped him as a decent fellow in Mason's eyes.

"It's very good of you to help me," said the new boy. "Could you tell me which is the Ancient House, and where I can find the Housemaster? Oh, but I dare say one of those Sixth-Formers will tell me—"

"There's nobody coming," grinned Pitt. "That was only a little dodge of mine to give Fullwood a fright. You see, he couldn't look into the Triangle, and I could from where I was standing. Worked nicely, didn't it?"

Mason regarded Pitt somewhat unfavourably.

"But it was a lie," he protested.

"Was it?" said the Serpent calmly. "How shocking!"

He turned and walked into the Triangle, followed by Jack Mason, who had recovered his muddy bags from the other side of the road. The Triangle was practically deserted, but Mason caught glimpses of footballers on Little Side, and his eyes gleamed with interest.

But he followed Pitt right into the Ancient House, and along to Study E. For the time being Pitt was the sole occupant of that

study. Marriott had shared it with him until he went into the sanatorium; but, not wishing to be alone, Marriott had transferred to his old study—G. And he had remained there.

"Here we are," said Pitt. "Comfortable quarters, ain't they? Furniture's a bit shabby, but you mustn't take any notice of that. Juniors ain't supposed to have luxuries."

Mason looked round the study with interest. A cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and the carpet wasn't such a bad one, after all. Two easy-chairs and a table and two ordinary chairs completed the furniture, except for a bookcase on a small side-table.

"Is this going to be my study?" asked Mason.

Pitt was rather taken aback.

"Not that I know of," he replied. "This is my study, and I just brought you here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," interrupted Mason.

"That's all right," said Pitt carelessly. "Junior studies are generally shared by two or three fellows, and I've no objection to you being my study-mate. But, of course, it all depends upon whether you're agreeable to sharing my quarters."

"I shall be glad to—very glad," said the new boy quickly.

"Good!" said Pitt. "We'll consider that settled."

And, in this unceremonious fashion, Reginald Pitt and Jack Mason became study-mates—truly, a curiously assorted pair. It would be most interesting to see how they got on together.

It had been confidently expected that the boy from Bermondsey would have some difficulty in finding a study, and the whole Remove was considerably amazed when it discovered that Pitt, of all fellows, had taken the stranger in!

What was this intimacy to lead to?

CHAPTER III.

NOT WHAT FULLWOOD WANTED.

WHEN I heard the news I wasn't exactly pleased. Sir Montie Tregellis West and Tommy Watson and I discussed the matter in Study C at tea-time. We had already seen Jack Mason, and our impression was good.

"He seems to be a thundering decent chap," remarked Watson. "Nobody can take any objection to him, anyhow. He talks with perfect grammar, and looks a good 'un, too."

"An' yet quite a number of fellows are makin' a fuss, dear boys," said Sir Montie. "Personally, I think Mason is a top holer—an' I'm usually rather particular."

"I don't think!" grinned Watson. "You're about the least particular chap in the Remove, you ass!"

"Well, we won't discuss the question," said Tregellis-West languidly. "Nipper, old boy, you might pass the bloater paste. Thanks."

classy, ain't it—havin' bloater-paste for tea. I should think they lived just as well at Bermondsey!"

"I shouldn't be surprised!" I grinned. "But look here, my sons, I don't quite care for the idea of Mason being in Pitt's study. You can't get over the fact that Pitt has a bad record, and I've already noticed one or two signs which seem to indicate that his reformation won't last. He's been ill, and hasn't had a chance to get up to any tricks."

"You think he'll make Mason into a rotter?" asked Watson.

"Well, I don't say that," I replied. "But I shouldn't think that the influence of a chap like Pitt will do Mason any good—Great Scott! What's all that noise?"

"Sounds like Handforth," remarked Watson, pouring out some tea.

"And it is Handforth," I said. "There's nobody else at St. Frank's with a voice like that. Just oblige me, Tommy, by stepping outside and telling the ass to shut up!"

"Oh, rats!" growled Watson.

But he got up and passed out into the passage. Handforth was within view, and he was having a heated argument with Church and McClure. Jack Mason was standing near by, looking very nervous, but calm.

"What's the trouble out there?" I bawled.

"You mind your own business!" roared Handforth. "Can't I talk to this new kid without being interrupted? If you don't dry up, McClure, I'll punch your silly nose!"

"Well, don't be such an ass!" snapped McClure. "What's it got to do with you who's paying the new kid's fees? If he'd got any pluck he'd jolly well bowl you over!"

"Oh, would he?" snorted Handforth. "Goodness knows, I ain't a curious chap, and I only asked a civil question. Why can't he tell us about his giddy people?"

"I don't mind you knowing," put in Mason quietly. "But I can't tell you who's paying my fees here, because I don't exactly know myself. My uncle left me a legacy, I think—"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "I've got no grudge against you, personally, but I'm blessed if I'm going to be cheeked! You're a new kid, and you've got to understand that new kids can't answer back. See? If you say another word to me you'll feel my fist!"

"I'm sure I don't want to——"

Smack!

Handforth, who was always excitable, delivered a light punch—just to prove that he hadn't been gassing. It would perhaps be correct to say that Handforth considered that punch a light one; but Handforth's judgment was questionable. By the manner in which Mason staggered back I reckoned that there was plenty of force behind that punch.

"Leave the new chap alone, Handy!" I shouted sharply.

"Well, he shouldn't make me wild!" roared Handforth. "I didn't want to punch

him—in fact, I rather like the look of him, and he can rely on me to back him up if any cads chip him. I'll punch anybody's nose who bothers him!"

"You'd better start with your own, then," I suggested.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth loftily ignored the proposal.

"It's all right, Mason," he said kindly. "No need to back away—I sha'n't hurt you. But you've got to understand that a new kid at St. Frank's has got to do just what he's told."

"I'll remember!" said Mason quietly.

He was looking very flushed, and his nose was somewhat red. Quite a crowd of juniors collected, and they did not regard him very favourably. Being juniors, however, they were thoughtless, and did not even consider the true reason for the new fellow's meekness. It was only natural that he should do his utmost to avoid anything in the nature of a fight on his very first afternoon at St. Frank's. It would have been a rotten start if he had entered into a fight.

"Funk!" jeered Fullwood, who had sauntered up in time to see the punch. "What else can we expect? Ain't he a rotten slum kid? I suppose he sold papers at street corners before he came here!"

"You dry up, you rotter!" shouted Handforth aggressively.

"It's very kind of you to take my part," said Mason, his eyes blazing, "but there's no need for you to go to the trouble, thank you. And I don't think there's any need for me to answer this coward's beastly suggestion——"

"Are you calling me a coward?" roared Fullwood.

"You heard what I said," replied Mason, clenching his fists.

"Why, you—you impudent little beast!" bellowed Fullwood, striding forward. "Take that for your sauce!"

He lunged out heavily before Mason could realize his intention. The new boy received the blow on the chest, and he went over with a thump. There was a buzz of excitement as Mason jumped to his feet, quivering with anger and looking dangerous.

But the new boy suddenly turned sharply on his heel and walked away. He was followed by a series of deep groans.

"Yah! Funk!"

"Rotter!"

"An' the little blighter dared to call me a coward!" exclaimed Fullwood contemptuously. "My hat! If I have any more cheek from him I'll knock him into the middle of next week!"

"That's just what you would do!" snapped Handforth. "Any chap who can stand up to you would be left severely alone. I've a jolly good mind to wipe you up myself, Fullwood! That was a rotten suggestion of yours, anyhow!"

Fullwood stared at Handforth, and then walked away, whistling. When Tommy Wat-

son came back into Study C he closed the door, and the commotion died away.

"The chap's a funk," said Watson disgustedly.

"Think so?" I remarked.

"Don't you?"

"No."

"But he took those punches as meekly as you like——"

"That's nothing," I interrupted. "Didn't you notice his fists? Didn't you notice his eyes? There's plenty of fight in Mason, if he only lets himself go."

"Then why didn't he stand up to Fullwood——"

"Because he's feeling all anyhow, I suppose," I replied. "How did you get on when you first came to St. Frank's, Tommy? A new kid is the butt of everybody, and if Mason had hit back there would have been a proper row in the passage. Wait until he gets settled down. He won't take punches so meekly then, I'll bet!"

"Begad! There's somethin' in what you say, dear old boy—there is, really," remarked Sir Montie, with a wise shake of his head.

But, although Montie and Tommy were inclined to agree with me, the rest of the Form had set Mason down as an arrant funk. They didn't take the trouble to reason things out as I did.

And Fullwood, seizing his opportunity, decided to get up a movement against the new fellow. He called a great many fellows together in the common-room, and suggested that Mason should be sent to Coventry.

"He ain't our class!" declared Fullwood warmly. "He's a confounded gutter brat—a low-down bounder."

"He doesn't look like one," objected Owen major.

"An' I guess he don't talk like one," remarked Farman.

"That's nothing!" snorted Fullwood. "He's admitted that he came from Bermondsey—an' that's a beastly place——"

"Have you ever been there?" asked De Valerie.

"No, an' I don't want to go, either."

"Then why not talk about things you are capable of understandin'—what?" asked De Valerie calmly. "There's nothin' wrong with the new kid, an' this meetin' is declared null and void."

"Rot!" roared Fullwood hotly. "Mason's an outsider, an' I don't see why we should stand him. Why, he admitted to us that his beastly pater was a carpenter. A carpenter! An' this kid dares to come to St. Frank's! What's the world comin' to?"

"It's a bit too thick, I must say!" admitted Hubbard.

"An' if sendin' him to Coventry's no good, we'll all sign a round robin to the Head!" went on Fullwood grimly. "We'll kick the beast out of St. Frank's. In fact, I don't see why we shouldn't march to the Head's window an' create a demonstration!"

"Nobody's stoppin' you," said De Valerie. "Get on with it—an' there'll be a different demonstration afterwards! The Head's best cane will play quite a big part in it!"

"You can keep your rotten sarcasm to yourself!" said Fullwood, glaring. "I maintain that Mason is a chap who oughtn't to have been admitted to St. Frank's—he's a rotten working-class kid, and this school is only for young gentlemen!"

"By gad!" said De Valerie. "That's news, anyhow!"

"What do you mean?"

"If it's only for young gentlemen, Fullwood, what the dickens are you doin' here?" asked De Valerie smoothly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Kick that rotter out!" roared Fullwood, turning red.

The laugh had only been uttered by one or two fellows; for Fullwood's audience mainly consisted of his own chums, who were in strong force. But De Valerie was quite calm.

"If anybody touches me——" he began.

And just then the door opened and I marched in, followed by Watson, Tregellis-West, Handforth and Co., and quite a number of other fellows.

"What's the meaning of this, Fullwood?" I demanded sharply. "I've heard that you're getting up an agitation against Mason——"

"Go away an' hear somethin' else!" snapped Fullwood. "This meetin' is goin' to pass a resolution that Mason shall be shunned by the whole Remove an' kicked out of the school!"

"I shall be surprised if this meeting does anything of the sort," I retorted. "I propose that the meeting be squashed straight away, and the common-room cleared."

"Hear, hear!"

"Carried unanimously!" roared Handforth.

He didn't wait for anything further, but rushed forward. I followed, backed up by other fellows, and in less than a minute the Nuts were receiving something they certainly hadn't bargained for.

The meeting, in short, was smashed up, and Fullwood and Co. had a very strong idea that they were smashed up, too. They certainly suffered severely at the hands of the Removites.

Sore and furious, they fled, leaving us in undisputed possession of the common-room.

"Rotten!" panted Handforth. "I didn't even get a decent punch in!"

"Begad! Don't tell such frightful whoppers, Handy, old boy," protested Sir Montie, nursing his nose. "You punched me in the most shocking manner, although I've done nothin' to deserve it——"

"That was your fault," declared Handforth. "You shouldn't get your silly face in the way of my fist. Well, the meeting's cleared, ain't it?"

It was—and there were no more meetings of a similar nature.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE DOWNWARD GRADE.

JACK MASON was not the kind of fellow to obtrude himself where he wasn't wanted, and his very quietness made it almost impossible for the caddish element of the Remove to rag him.

The Ancient House was surprised. The juniors, at least, had expected to find Mason an absolute bounder, totally unfit for taking his place amongst the sons of gentlemen at St. Frank's.

But the unexpected had happened. Mason, although a poor boy—although he had never been to anything better than a Council school—was just as gentlemanly and refined as any junior in the Remove. In fact he was far more refined than many.

Most of the fellows decided that no action should be taken. At the same time there was a rather widespread feeling that Mason ought to be treated distantly. This was most unjust—but justice is not to be expected from junior schoolboys. The advent of Mason had brought out a touch of snobbishness in many fellows who had hitherto shown no signs of such a complaint.

The real surprise was that Reginald Pitt had allowed the new boy to share Study E. It only proved that Pitt was an unknown quantity, so to speak, capable of doing things which nobody would have dreamed of.

Strange as it may seem, Pitt rather liked the new fellow. He wouldn't have admitted it for worlds, but it was a fact. I honestly believe that Pitt meant to do his best to run in the straight path, as he had promised while in the sanatorium.

But Pitt was a human being, and he had his weaknesses. Upon recovering his full health, his feelings naturally underwent a change. Smoking did not seem so absurd to him now, and his active brain was constantly devising schemes which would enable him to get out of his promise.

But Pitt was certainly changed. Instead of allowing those schemes to develop, he cast them aside and kept himself in check. The will to remain decent was there—but would he prove strong enough?

He knew well enough that Fullwood and Co. were young rascals, and that it was his plain duty, in the light of his promise, to cut them completely. But he saw no harm in having a chat now and again; he did not realise that a series of chats would probably lead to complete intimacy.

Pitt went along to Study A soon after the fiasco in the common-room. It was not his intention to be pally—after what had happened at the gateway that afternoon, it wasn't likely that Fullwood would greet him cordially.

"What the dickens do you want?" demanded Fullwood, scowling at Pitt as he entered the study. "Clear off—"

"Don't get excited!" interrupted Pitt, as he closed the door and looked at Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell in turn. "I must say that you're looking rather the worse for wear—"

"Clear out!" roared Fullwood and Co., who were sore.

"I will when it pleases me," replied Pitt. "I just want to point out that it's a potty idea to persecute Mason. He's my study-mate, and I'm not going to allow him to be sat upon—"

"He can't look after himself, can he?" sneered Fullwood. "The chap's a funk. I knocked him down, an' he didn't even punch me back. I'm surprised at you, Pitt, for bein' associated with such an outsider."

"You mustn't be surprised at anything I do," said Pitt calmly. "If it comes to that, it's rather surprising that I came to this study. I don't want to be offensive, but—"

"We shall be offensive in a minute!" growled Gulliver. "What's the matter with you, Pitt? You used not to be like this. Why can't you come in an' have a smoke now and again?"

"Smoking's a silly game—I've chucked it up," replied Pitt. "You needn't stare—I mean what I say. Only silly fools smoke—that is—until they get old enough."

"What a transformation!" jeered Fullwood. "Just listen to our good Little Georgie! He makes me sick—"

"He's only rottin'!" put in Bell. "Ain't you, Pitt?"

"No."

"You're really serious?"

"Of course I am," said Pitt. "I'm not in the habit of saying things I don't mean. If you take my advice, you'll—"

"I don't want any of your potty advice!" snapped Fullwood. "I never thought you'd turn out to be such a rotten weakling, Pitt. Why can't you have a fag, like the rest of us? It's all piffle to say what you said just now. I'll bet you're dying for a smoke."

"I might be," replied Pitt coolly. "But I can keep myself in check."

"Look here, Serpent, don't be such a fat-head!" said Gulliver. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be pals again. Here you are—smoke this. You'll enjoy it hugely!"

Pitt pushed the cigarette back across the table.

"I'd rather not," he said shortly.

"Afraid to?" sneered Fullwood.

"No, you rotter, I'm not afraid to!"

"Rot!" grinned Fullwood savagely. "I'll dare you to light that fag and smoke it! You beastly funk! The sooner you get out of this study, the better. I'm sick of the sight of you!"

Pitt's eyes blazed. To be spoken to in this contemptuous manner by such cads as Fullwood and Co. was past all bearing. He snatched up the cigarette, stuck it between his lips, and then hesitated.

"Never spoil a good mind!" jeered Gulliver.

"Hang you!" muttered Pitt. "I won't smoke the thing!"

"Yah! You're afraid!" said Bell disgustedly.

"Am I?" roared Pitt.

He savagely struck a match, and lit the cigarette. But for the taunts of the three

young rascals he would probably have kept to his resolve. But he was not strong enough to withstand those sneers. Had he been manly, he would have laughed them to scorn.

"That's better," said Fullwood. "Why can't you be sensible, Pitt, and squat down comfortably? Great Scott! There's no harm in havin' a cigarette, I suppose?"

Pitt made no reply, but sat down. And just at that very moment, by all that was unfortunate, I looked into the study. I merely intended asking Fullwood a question about a book he had borrowed from Watson. And I was rather startled to find Pitt lounging in the study, smoking.

"What's the idea of this?" I asked coldly. "I thought you promised not to act the fool——"

"Oh, rats!" muttered the Serpent.

He was very red in the face, and he flung the cigarette into the fireplace and pushed past me out of the study. I needed no telling that Fullwood had been responsible for Pitt's backsliding, but I was rather surprised, all the same.

"You beastly cads!" I exclaimed angrily. "Why can't you let the chap alone? He's been trying to keep straight——"

"Get out of this study!" interrupted Fullwood roughly. "Pitt came here and asked for a cigarette, if you want to know. We advised him not to smoke it, but he insisted."

I withdrew from the study without a word, but did not fail to notice that both Gulliver and Bell were grinning. I knew how much reliance to place upon Fullwood's words.

"Silly ass!" I muttered absently, as I entered Study C.

"Are you referrin' to me, or to Tommy?" inquired Sir Montie languidly.

"I'm referring to Pitt," I replied. "I just found him in Fullwood's study, smoking!"

"Begad!" said Montie seriously. "That's shockingly disappointin', old boy."

"I'll give the ass a good talking-to later on," I said grimly. "But I don't know whether it will be any good. Perhaps I'd better not interfere—it's not my place to give lectures."

Tommy Watson nodded wisely.

"I thought what it would be," he remarked. "Didn't I warn you? It's a beastly pity, but Pitt's a queer chap, and I suppose he'll always be a queer chap. Jawings don't do him any good—they probably make him worse. But I wish he'd kept straight!"

"It may be only a brief outbreak," I said. "He looked awfully uncomfortable when I spotted him, and chucked the cigarette away without a word. I can't help feeling that Pitt's got some decency in him."

"Dear fellow, I wouldn't dare to deny it," said Tregellis-West. "But Pitt's decency requires such a frightful amount of findin', begad! It's so deep down that it'll take a long time to bring it to the surface. But it'll come up all right."

"And what's going to happen to Mason meanwhile?" I asked.

"To Mason, dear boy?"

"Yes, to Mason," I repeated grimly.

"Pitt's influence won't do the new fellow any good, and I've half a mind to find Mason a different study. I would do, but I hate the idea of interfering."

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear boy, there's one thing you've overlooked," he remarked sagely. "Mason is a member of the downtrodden working classes, an' his standard of honour is therefore far higher than ours——"

"You silly ass!" snorted Watson.

"Pray let me finish, dear fellow," said Montie beaming. "Mason's honour is somethin' to admire. Don't ask me how I know, because I can't tell you. But Mason is true blue—a splendid example of an upright British boy."

"The lecture will conclude at nine-thirty," remarked Watson gravely.

"It's shockin'ly rude of you to make such facetious remarks, Tommy," protested Tregellis-West. "I'm not deliverin' a lecture, an' wouldn't dream of doin' such a thing. You won't allow me to get to the point——"

"Oh, is there a point?" I inquired politely.

"Of course there is—an' it's this," replied Montie. "You're afraid that Pitt will influence Mason, ain't you? Hasn't it struck you, dear boy, that Mason is just as likely to influence Pitt? Why, I can see Pitt comin' out of his shell an' turnin' decent right through. An' if that does happen, it'll be because of Mason's influence. I think it's a splendid thing for those two to share the study. Pitt won't do the new fellow any harm, but it's quite likely that the new fellow will do Pitt good."

I nodded slowly.

"Well, that's a good way of reasoning," I admitted. "We shall have to wait and see what the result will be, Montie. And now we'd better get on with our prep."

"What about my French grammar?" asked Watson.

"It's rotten!" I replied promptly.

"I mean the book, you ass!" roared Watson.

"Oh, I forgot to ask for it," I grinned. "You'd better pop into Handforth's study, next door, and borrow his."

And while we were getting on with our prep. Reginald Pitt was having an argument with himself in the dark Triangle. He mooched up and down, his hands deep in his pockets, brooding over the incident which had just occurred.

"What the dickens did Nipper want to come in for?" demanded Pitt savagely. "And why did I take any notice of him? Rats to him!"

He paced up and down for another few minutes.

"There's no harm in a smoke," he told himself. "Dash it all, some of the kids in the Third smoke! I don't see why I should deny myself just because a fathead like Nipper is against smoking."

Pitt knew all the time that he was weakly giving in. He knew that he would respect himself far more if he stuck to his resolve. But he was obstinate; and considered that it

would be a loss of dignity if he forced himself to give up a habit which he wished to continue.

Just at present the Serpent was in a queer mood. And he suddenly came to a resolve. Striding indoors, he marched up to one of the box-rooms, and produced a packet of cigarettes from his trunk. Then he went downstairs, smiling sardonically, and entered Study E.

Jack Mason was there, sorting out various books and papers. He looked up with a smile of welcome, and nodded.

"I wanted you, Pitt," he said. "Can I have some space in that bookcase? I want to put these books somewhere——"

"You can have the middle shelf, if you like," said Pitt, dropping into a chair. "I don't mind. This is our study, Mason, and you've got a right to half the available space."

The Serpent took out his cigarettes carelessly, placed one in his mouth, and lit it. Mason was not aware of the fact until a whiff of smoke went in his direction. Then he turned sharply.

He said nothing, but there was an expression of pained surprise in his eyes which Pitt did not miss. Rather to the Serpent's disappointment, Mason turned away without making any comment.

"Anything wrong?" asked Pitt.

"You ought to know," replied Jack shortly.

He went on sorting his books, and gave a little start as a cigarette was tossed on to the table in front of him.

"Here's a light," said Pitt generously.

Mason looked round, picked up the cigarette, and tossed it contemptuously into the fire.

"Thanks all the same," he said coldly.

"I don't act the fool like that!"

Reginald Pitt laughed.

"By Jove! You're rather blunt," he remarked. "But I'm hanged if I didn't deserve that rebuff, Mason. Thanks for the tip."

He tossed his own cigarette into the fire, and followed this up by the whole packet. He watched them burning with a queer smile on his lips, but did not refer to the matter again.

Was Mason's influence beginning to work already? It certainly looked like it. Pitt was doing his utmost to be decent, but the old habits had not yet been entirely eradicated, and the Serpent would need to be very strong if he was to keep to the straight path.

Had he sufficient strength?

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SHABBY STRANGER.

NELSON LEE was in Bannington, the town about three miles from St. Frank's. I should probably have gone with him, but it was a half-holiday, and the St. Frank's Junior Eleven was playing the first really important match of the season. Our opponents were Bannington

Grammar School, and their eleven was hot stuff.

Jack Mason had rather pleased Nelson Lee, for he had proved to be a very capable pupil, and a quiet, gentlemanly fellow in every way. Mr. Crowell, the Remove master, had given Nelson Lee a very favourable report.

Mason had been at St. Frank's for a week now, and he had shaken down with very little trouble. The rest of the Remove, unjustly enough, regarded him as a necessary evil, and allowed him to go his own sweet way. Mason, for his part, was quite content with this plan, for he did not seem to care for the noisy amusements of the other fellows. He was studious, and spent nearly all his spare time with his books.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I allowed him to see quite plainly that we were extremely friendly, and did not regard him as a freak—which was certainly the attitude of some juniors.

Fullwood and Co. deemed it wise to let the new fellow alone. So, instead of trying to get him kicked out, they contented themselves with loftily ignoring him. Mason was undoubtedly glad of this. It was an honour to be ignored by Fullwood.

Pitt seemed rather more friendly with Mason after that first few days. I had not had much time to notice how Pitt was shaping, but he certainly gave no trouble, and was not much in evidence.

Mason, to my satisfaction, evinced a very strong interest in football, and I resolved to give him a chance before long. Some of the other Removites had the idea that it was a piece of cheek on Mason's part to take any notice of football at all. What right had he, a Council school bounder, to be interested in football? I made no reply to these remarks, but was quite ready to point out that he had as much right as any other fellow in the Remove.

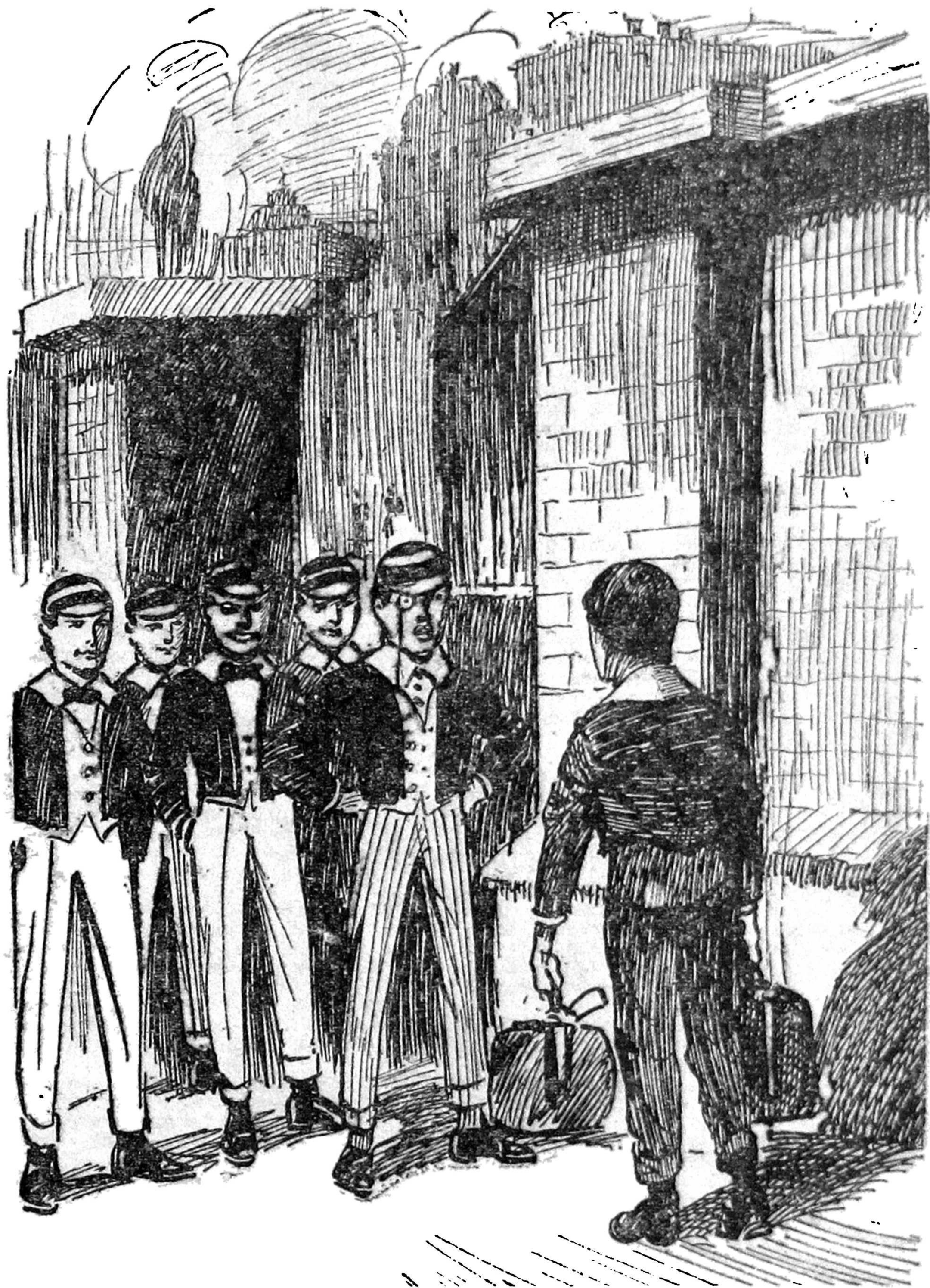
My object in recording Nelson Lee's curious little adventure on this half-holiday will become apparent in due course. I don't know why the gov'nor went to Bannington—probably to make some purchases—but that's really nothing to do with it.

There had been a lot of rain the previous day, and the roads were inches thick in mud. This didn't affect the footer match, for the St. Frank's playing-fields were always splendidly kept.

But the gov'nor decided to travel by train instead of bicycle—and his little car was disabled owing to tyre trouble. A brace of new tyres was on order, but they hadn't arrived yet.

It was really no concern of Nelson Lee's at all, but he was undoubtedly interested. He noticed a well-dressed stranger step out of the London express on to the Bannington platform—Lee himself having come to the station in order to catch the afternoon train back.

The schoolmaster-detective was attracted towards the man because he was obviously ill at ease. Upon leaving the express he walked quickly over to the local train, got



Fullwood and Co. blocked the entrance completely and deliberately.
"There's no hurry, is there, kid?" the bully began smoothly.—(See p. 5.)

in, and then gazed out with some anxiety. Lee could see no cause for this.

But what Nelson Lee did see was the spectacle of two flashily-dressed individuals—obviously racing men—hovering at the rear of the local train. Lee, who was casually interested, noted the fact that these two men dodged into the local train when the well-dressed stranger was looking in the opposite direction.

Lee pondered over this little piece of by-play. But, of course, he had no intention of interfering. It was none of his business, but the incident created a diversion while he waited.

The local train started at last. The afternoon was gloomy, heavy clouds obscuring the sky. Lee was at the window as the train was drawing into Bellton, and he was somewhat astonished to see the two flashily-dressed individuals jump from their compartment before the train came to a stop. They dodged behind a pile of packing-cases before the aged ticket-collector knew that they had left the train.

And then something else occurred which really needed an explanation. A man stepped out of the train as soon as it stopped. He was elderly, and attired in somewhat shabby clothing. And to Nelson Lee's astonishment, he recognised this down-at-heel person as the extremely smart-gentleman who had boarded the train at Bannington.

What mystery was this? Why had the stranger changed his clothing during the short ride from Bannington? And who were the other men? Lee felt that he would not be making a mistake in giving the matter some attention.

He was all the more convinced of this when he left the station. For the shabby stranger had only just passed out of the station-yard when the horsey-looking men followed him. Nelson Lee decided that it would do no harm for him to follow in turn.

He did so, and thus they all walked through the village. The shabby man was quite unconscious of his shadowers, for they took care to remain concealed from their quarry constantly. And Nelson Lee, who was an expert shadower, had not the slightest trouble in keeping his men under observation.

This went on until the lonely stretch of lane from the village to the school was entered upon. Rain was now falling slightly, and the lane, bordered on one side by Bellton Wood, lay in dense gloom.

At this point Nelson Lee lightly slipped over the gate, and continued his way within the meadow, hugging the hedge, and walking with such speed that he rapidly overhauled the strangers without their being aware of his movements.

It was really just as well that the detective had taken this precaution. For quite abruptly an angry exclamation came to his ears from a point only twenty or so yards ahead.

"How dare you, sir!" came the voice. "If you attempt to molest me——"

"That's allright, old gent," said one of

the men cheerfully. "Just step over this stile, will yer? Grab 'im, Bert. The lane's quiet just now, an'—— Hold 'is mouth!"

"Help! You scoun——"

The cry ended quite abruptly, then came the sounds of a struggle. Nelson Lee smiled grimly to himself—probably because his suspicions had turned out correct—and pushed quickly through a gap in the hedge.

A dozen running strides brought him to the stile. He leapt over cleanly. And there, amongst the trees, the two flashy men were doing their utmost to force their victim upon his back.

"Look out, Bert!" gasped one of the men suddenly.

But the warning was too late. Nelson Lee was already on the spot, and his fist swung round with deadly purpose.

Crash!

Lee's knuckles went home squarely upon the jaw of one man. His companion was foolish enough to believe that he could get in a blow at this interrupter. He nearly did so, certainly, but Nelson Lee twisted round with astonishing speed, and his fist thudded heavily against the side of his opponent's head. The blow was so unexpected that the man rolled over, jumped up dazedly, and then rushed off blindly through the wood.

The other fellow had already fled, taking advantage of the distraction.

"Is there anything missing, my dear sir?" asked Lee sharply.

"No—no, I think not!" gasped the stranger, who was sitting down in the damp grass. "Good gracious! What an alarming adventure! Thank you for coming to my rescue, sir—thank you exceedingly!"

Nelson Lee helped the shabby man to his feet. The two rascals had been put to flight, and there was really no object to be gained by giving chase, for in the tangle of Bellton Wood there was little prospect of capturing them.

"You must really honour me by letting me know your name, sir!" exclaimed the stranger. "I am Mr. David Strong, of London, and I have come down to visit St. Frank's College."

"Then it is rather fortunate we met," smiled Lee. "I am one of the Housemasters from the school you mention, and my name is Lee."

"Dear me—dear me! How very fortunate!" exclaimed Mr. Strong, grasping Lee's hand warmly. "I can now understand the better—for you are, of course, Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective. My dear sir, I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

He seized Lee's hand once again.

"Of course, I have heard that you are staying at St. Frank's for the present," he rattled on. "And I have no doubt that you are somewhat anxious to hear why those scoundrels were after me, and what it is they were anxious to obtain?"

"I am not at all inquisitive, Mr. Strong."

smiled Lee. "At the same time, I must acknowledge that I am interested."

Possibly Nelson Lee was looking rather hard at his companion's clothing. At all events, Mr. Strong went red in the face and was plainly embarrassed. His age was possibly fifty, but scarcely any more, and his face was lined and greatly wrinkled. And these wrinkles screwed themselves up about his eyes when he smiled, giving him the most genial expression.

"Of course you are interested, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed heartily. "It is only natural that you should be. It is a most fortunate thing that you were close at hand to answer my call."

The detective smiled.

"I don't think I should have been at hand in the ordinary course of events, Mr. Strong," he replied. "As it happened, I was on the Bannington platform when you left the London express, and I observed the movements of the two men who recently attacked you. I took the liberty of keeping them under observation."

"Then, my dear sir, I owe you far greater thanks than I originally supposed!" exclaimed Mr. Strong. "How splendid of you! How truly remarkable that——" He paused abruptly. "But, good gracious me! You must surely have observed a—a difference in my attire——"

"Quite a striking difference," smiled Lee. "But it is really none of my business——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Mr. Strong. "Why, bless my soul and body! You don't suppose I should allow you to remain in ignorance of the truth, do you? It is quite simple, Mr. Lee, and I think you will grant that my precautions were in no wise unnecessary. The only fault was that I did not keep my eyes sufficiently open. But come, my dear sir, we will be walking on. Oh, thank you—thank you."

Lee had seized Mr. Strong's bag, and they both crossed the stile and walked up the road.

"As to the identity of the two ruffians, I have not the slightest idea," said Mr. Strong, offering Lee his cigar-case. "I should judge that the men are race-course scoundrels, and they were probably returning from a meeting—sadly out of pocket—when the incident occurred. Otherwise I should hardly imagine that they would indulge in highway robbery. You see, Mr. Lee, I was travelling in the same compartment of the express, and I was unfortunate enough to drop my note-case. Quite a considerable amount of money—mainly in Treasury notes—slipped out. The two men easily observed that I was carrying a large sum—which is nothing unusual. The manner in which they regarded me almost made me nervous. But there were other people in the compartment, and I was safe."

"But you entered an empty compartment of the local train," Nelson Lee suggested.

"Ah, with an object!" chuckled Mr. Strong. "I should have alighted at once if the rascals had attempted to join me. But I could not very well change my attire in a

crowded compartment, could I?" He chuckled again. "Dear me, no! For that was my object, Mr. Lee. I became shabby, as you now see me—foolishly imagining that I should throw the villains off the scent. Let me thank you once again, my dear sir, for assisting me so ably."

"Pray don't mention it, Mr. Strong," said Lee quietly.

The visitor offered no further remark, and he failed to observe that Nelson Lee was far from being satisfied with the explanation. The most important point had been completely ignored.

How was it that Mr. David Strong had this shabby suit of clothing in his bag—all ready for donning in the local train? Obviously Mr. Strong could not have prepared for the attempt at robbery before commencing his journey.

So Nelson Lee was perfectly convinced that he had been told only a portion of the truth—and Lee, accordingly, was not very gratified. He would have preferred Mr. Strong's complete confidence—more especially as the visitor had intimated that he would tell him the whole story.

"By the way," said Lee, as the school gates hove in sight. "I know of no boy at St. Frank's of your name, Mr. Strong. Possibly you are a relative——"

"Oh, no!" interrupted the other. "I am merely a friend of one of the boys—just a good friend, Mr. Lee. He has only recently arrived, and I am curious to see how he is shaping. The boy's name is Mason—Master Jack Mason."

"I will direct you to Mason's study at once, Mr. Strong," said Lee.

But the schoolmaster-detective could not help wondering how it was that the boy from Bermondsey could have such a friend as this aristocratic gentleman, whose pocket-book was stuffed with notes, and who had a weakness for changing his clothes in railway trains.

There was something behind it all—but what?

CHAPTER VI.

MR. STRONG IS CONFIDENTIAL.

"WHO'S the rag-and-bone merchant?" Handforth asked that question, and the object of his insulting remark was Mr. David Strong. That gentleman had just entered the gateway with Nelson Lee, and the fellows were greatly interested.

The Junior Eleven was in high spirits. We had whacked the Grammar School hollow, gaining three goals to their nil. And the Grammarians had gone off home feeling rather used-up, for they had had a gruelling time on the St. Frank's junior field.

There was really some excuse for Handforth's reference to a rag-and-bone merchant, for Mr. Strong looked highly disreputable—from a St. Frank's point of view. Visitors

were generally "swell," and not attired in worn, shabby clothing.

"Oh, he's the rate-collector, I expect," said McClure.

"Rats!" snapped Handforth. "More likely a chap selling laces— Now then, Owen major, look where you're going!"

Owen major had hurried up, and he was grinning hugely.

"See that moth-eaten old chap with Mr. Lee?" he asked. "Guess who he is, my sons."

"What's all the mystery?" I demanded, strolling up with Tregellis-West and Watson in time to hear Owen major's remark. "Guess who who is?"

"That old buffer over there," grinned Owen. "He's a visitor—come to have tea with Mason!"

"Mason!" yelled Handforth.

"Come from Bermondsey, I suppose?" chuckled Owen major.

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Might have expected it," sneered Gulliver. "When we've got a rotten street urchin in the school, it's only natural that pub. loafers should come to visit him. I call it disgustin'."

"There's nothing wrong with the gentleman," I remarked. "A bit shabby, perhaps, but he looks a ripping sort." Dukes and earls ain't the best dressed people sometimes—so don't judge by appearances."

"I'd expect you to stick up for him!" jeered Gulliver. "You were a beastly street urchin— Yow-ow! Oo, you beast!"

"And I'll give you another in a minute!" roared Handforth, who had punched Gulliver's nose with all his usual impetuosity and force. "I'll teach you to sneer at the best chap in the Remove—"

"Thanks for taking my part, Handy," I grinned. "But if Gulliver's nose wants punching, you might allow me the pleasure."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I was nearer than you!"

Gulliver backed away scowling.

"There's going to be a row over this!" he shouted savagely. "We ain't going to stand this sort of thing. It's a bit too thick when Mason's Bermondsey relatives come down here, disgracin' the school!"

And there were quite a number of fellows who shared Gulliver's view—fellows like Hubbard and Owen major, who were really decent. They felt that it was too thick altogether.

"It's frightfully unfair, you know," protested Sir Montic. "There's all this talk goin' on, an' the fellows really don't know who the visitor is or anythin' about him. It ain't playin' the game, an' I'm feelin' quite disgusted. Begad! I'm ashamed of you!"

And Tregellis-West, having delivered himself thus, marched into the lobby with his nose in the air. Watson and I followed, grinning, but just then Mr. Strong came into sight down the passage. He had evidently entered by the masters' doorway. As a matter of fact the guv'nor had taken

him to Study E, but Mason wasn't there. So the visitor had elected to find the Remove unaided.

"Ah, my dear lads," he exclaimed benevolently. "Will you have the goodness to tell me where I can find Master Mason? My name is Mr. Strong, and I take a great interest in Jack's welfare."

"I don't know where he is, sir," I replied, greatly liking the visitor's attitude and smile. "But I daresay some of the other fellows will soon put us on the track. Mason can't be far off."

"And do you come from Bermondsey, sir?" asked Watson bluntly.

Tommy was always blunt, and he sometimes asked questions which really sounded rude, but which were only thoughtless. Mr. Strong smiled and shook his head.

"No, my boy, I don't come from Bermondsey," he replied.

"Tell that to the Marines!" came a jeer from the doorway.

"Yah! Rag-and-bone man!"

"Clear out, you shabby old rotter!"

The next moment Fullwood and Co., strongly supported by their pals and some other misguided Removeites, surged down the passage and surrounded us.

"Now then, you chaps!" I shouted sharply. "We don't want any rot. Remember that Mr. Strong is a visitor, and that he expects to be treated in a decent fashion by—by young gentlemen!"

This was a dig at Fullwood, but Ralph Leslie only sneered.

"Mr. Strong shouldn't come to St. Frank's if he doesn't want to be hooted!" yelled Fullwood. "We don't want low-down old buffers like him here. He's going to be ragged—"

"I think not, Fullwood!" came Nelson Lee's sharp, cold tones.

Fullwood started back with a gasp, and there was a general rush of feet down the passage. But Nelson Lee took care to detain Fullwood and one or two others.

"I am sorry that you so completely forgot yourself as to be grossly insolent to a visitor, Fullwood," said the guv'nor. "You will write me five hundred lines, and I shall expect you to attend my study at half-past seven—when you will receive a severe caning."

"My dear sir!" protested Mr. Strong. "The boy did not mean—"

"I really cannot allow Fullwood to go unpunished, Mr. Strong," interrupted the guv'nor quietly. "Fullwood, you will at once offer a complete apology to Mr. Strong for your insults."

Fullwood mumbled out an apology with an ill grace.

"And if I hear that Mr. Strong has been subjected to any further insolence, I shall punish the culprits even more severely," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I am absolutely astounded that my boys could be guilty of such vicious conduct."

"Jolly good!" I murmured to my chums.

"I am grieved that I should be the cause

of this distressing upset," said Mr. Strong painfully. "Thank you, Mr. Lee—thank you. I shall be glad to—. Ah, here is Jack!"

Mason came up breathlessly.

"Why, fancy you coming down, Mr. Strong!" he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with welcome. "It's jolly decent of you, and I'm tremendously glad to see you. Will you stay long, sir?"

"Only this evening, Jack, my boy," smiled the visitor.

"You'll have to come to tea in Study E, sir," said Mason eagerly. "My study-mate is named Pitt, and he's a good sort of chap. Just fancy you coming down!"

Nelson Lee smiled, and walked down the passage, leaving Mason with his visitor. Fullwood and Co., at the other end, scowled savagely. Their little plan hadn't been at all successful.

"Yah! Detective-Buaybody!" hissed Gulliver in a safe voice.

I glared at him, and mentally resolved that Gulliver should receive a punch in reply to that insult. But it wasn't quite so safe as Gulliver had fondly supposed. For Nelson Lee turned sharply.

"Come here, Gulliver," he said, his voice very icy.

"Mum-me, sir?" gasped Gulliver fearfully.

He came forward, and Nelson Lee regarded him sternly.

"You apparently overlooked the fact, Gulliver, that this passage has somewhat remarkable acoustic properties," he said evenly.

"Moreover, I happen to possess quite respectable hearing. You referred to me a moment ago as 'Detective-Buaybody.'"

"I—I didn't breathe a word, sir!" stammered Gulliver.

"Silence!" snapped the gov'nor. "If you dare to lie to me again, Gulliver, I shall cane you severely. You may, of course, refer to me in any terms you please when in private—that is none of my business. But I shall certainly not allow you to use insulting terms whilst I am within earshot. You will be confined to the school bounds for the remainder of this week. You may go!"

Gulliver went, shivering visibly. And after that there were no more whisperings. Nelson Lee was simply a terror in the eyes of Fullwood and Co., but the majority of the fellows chortled gleefully over that little incident. Lines for Fullwood and a gating for Gulliver were distinctly satisfactory.

It must be admitted, however, that quite a number of Removites were inclined to treat Mr. Strong contemptuously. They would not go to such lengths of insult as Fullwood—even if there had been no fear of punishment—but they felt that this shabby visitor was lowering the tone of the school, and St. Frank's prided itself on its tone.

In Study E all was harmony. Pitt was quite genial, and he surprised Mason by treating Mr. Strong with great courtesy. Jack had grown to realise that Pitt was an uncertain fellow; you could never tell how he was going to act. And just at present he was acting in the most exemplary fashion.

"Well, my boy, and how are you getting

on here?" asked Mr. Strong genially, when tea was served.

"Oh, quite decently, sir," replied Mason.

"Ah, what's this?" asked the visitor. "I think I detect a certain hesitancy in your voice, boy. I suspect that your schoolfellows have been making things hard for you—eh? This is a high-class college, and we do not quite fit in with things." He chuckled. "Well, well, I daresay that matter will work itself right in time. I should be most sorry to think that you were unhappy—"

"But I'm not, sir!" put in Mason quickly. "Some of the fellows have been rather hasty, but all the rest are as right as rain. I'm awfully glad that you've come down, Mr. Strong. I didn't think you took enough interest in me for that."

Mr. Strong laughed softly.

"I take a great deal of interest in you, my boy," he replied. "I shall probably come down again before long. You see, I have—er—certain business which brings me into Sussex, and it is quite an easy matter for me to slip over here."

"That's splendid, sir."

"Some more tea, Mr. Strong?" asked Pitt affably. "Let me pass you some of these cakes."

"Thank you, my boy, but I have finished —"

"Finished, sir!" broke in Mason. "But you've only had one cup of tea and a single slice of bread-and-butter!"

Mr. Strong beamed.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Jack—and I feel bound to confess—I had already accepted Mr. Lee's invitation to tea in his study," he explained. "I didn't like to refuse, so I came along here first, just to join you in a cup. You will forgive, I am sure."

"Oh, of course," said Jack readily.

A few minutes later Mr. Strong rose from the table and patted Mason upon the back.

"I intend coming back shortly, and then I shall have something to show you," he smiled. "I shall be able to spend an hour with you, my boy, and I want you to show me over the school before I leave. I am quite delighted with everything I have seen so far, and I am—very anxious to see more. Good-bye for the present, Jack."

He passed out of the study, and Pitt grinned.

"Rather an affectionate old bird," he remarked. "He seems a bit taken with you, Mason."

"Mr. Strong is about the only real friend I've had in my life," replied Mason quietly. "I met him by accident in a London street a month or two ago, and he's been jolly good to me."

Mason said no more, although he could have done. Meanwhile Mr. Strong made his way to Nelson Lee's study, and found his host all ready. The schoolmaster-detective smiled a welcome.

"I am afraid I don't deserve this consideration, Mr. Lee," said Mr. Strong deprecatingly. "Yet I am extremely glad of the opportunity to have another quiet chat with you. For I have a confession to make—and I more than

suspect that you regard me with disfavour."

"Not at all, my dear sir," smiled Lee. "At the same time I must acknowledge that your story this afternoon did not quite convince me—"

"Of course it didn't—of course it didn't!" said Mr. Strong, his eyes twinkling. "And now I wish to tell you the absolute truth. Yes, one lump of sugar, please. Thank you, my dear sir. With regard to those thieving rascals, I have nothing to add. My story was quite truthful. I now wish to speak you upon quite a different matter."

"Pray proceed, Mr. Strong."

"No doubt you have thought it peculiar that I should come to this school fully prepared to don my present shabby attire. But there is a reason, Mr. Lee. It is quite possible that you will set me down as an eccentric old crank. If so, I must accept the situation. But I am not. I assure you, I am not a crank."

"You are making me very curious," said Nelson Lee.

"Splendid!" chuckled the other. "I make no claim to being keen-witted, but I am well aware of the fact that you did not accept the whole of my story. I should not have changed my clothing in the train had it not been for those infernal pickpockets who were worrying me. My original intention was to book a room in one of the village hotels and to perform the transformation there—quietly and unobtrusively. For, I can safely assure you, I detest wearing shabby attire. Otherwise, I should have travelled from London as you now see me."

Nelson Lee laughed.

"You are certainly achieving your purpose, if that purpose is to bewilder me, Mr. Strong," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea what you are driving at, and I can think of no earthly reason why you should prefer to present yourself at St. Frank's as I now behold you."

Mr. Strong's eyes twinkled gleefully.

"It is a plot, my dear sir—a plot!" he whispered, bending forward. "What do you think of that? What do you think of a respectable person like myself descending to the depths of conspiracy? Is it not truly appalling?"

"It depends on the nature of the conspiracy," replied Lee.

"Well, that is perfectly innocent," said Mr. Strong. "Were it not, I should hardly be consulting upon it with you, Mr. Lee, eh? But to get to this point—and I admit I am a shocking person for wasting words—my little conspiracy concerns Master Jack Mason. I presume you know very little of the lad?"

"I am aware that he was recommended to the governors by Sir Crawford Grey, and that considerable pressure was brought to bear by that gentleman," replied Lee.

"Quite so—quite so," chuckled Mr. Strong. "I believe that Sir Crawford Grey was interested. But let me begin at the beginning, and tell you how it all came about."

"Jack Mason is a most quiet boy, and I met him under curious circumstances. In point of fact, Mr. Lee, the lad saved my life

at the risk of his own. Egad, sir, it was a noble action! I was unfortunate enough to slip over whilst crossing Piccadilly Circus on a showery day. The road was disgustingly greasy, and I really thought that my last moment had come. You see, a motor-omnibus was bearing down upon me, and all the driver's efforts to stop it were in vain, the wheels being locked."

"Motor-buses are awkward things, once they start skidding," commented Lee.

"Bless my soul and body! They are appalling," agreed Mr. Strong. "I am not so young as I was at one time of day, Mr. Lee, and my fall robbed me of breath. To move was impossible, and I fully expected to die at that minute. And then I met Master Jack Mason. Do you know, sir, what that boy did? He pushed past a crowd of gaping, shouting idiots, placed himself in the most dire peril imaginable, and pulled me out of danger. It was the nearest shave one could possibly conceive. Indeed, the boy was knocked over and badly bruised, and I regard it as a miracle that he was not killed on the spot."

"It was indeed a courageous action."

"And yet the lad thought nothing of it," said Mr. Strong, becoming serious. "He was so severely bruised that he could scarcely walk, so I took him home in a taxi. I discovered that he lived with his aunt, a Mrs. Grell, in quite a respectable street in Bermondsey. Now, I was rather struck by one fact. Mrs. Grell is not a select woman—and yet Jack himself is a gentleman to his fingertips. I asked no questions, but I easily gathered that the boy's home life was very miserable. He did not get on well with his aunt, and the fault, as you may imagine, was entirely on the woman's side."

"Pray proceed, Mr. Strong," said Nelson Lee, as the visitor paused.

"In some vague manner the boy attracted me—quite apart from the great debt of gratitude I owed him," said Mr. Strong. "Yet I could plainly perceive that Jack would be most unwilling to accept any monetary token of recognition. It pleased me, therefore, to pose before him as a man of limited means, whereas, as you may have gathered, I am quite the opposite. Do you follow me, Mr. Lee?"

"Perfectly."

"In due course I learned that Jack held a situation in London—in a publishing office," proceeded Mr. Strong. "By this time, you must understand, he and I had become great friends, he believing that I was an impetuous old chap. I learned that he was attending night schools, for he was most anxious to improve his education. And then, Mr. Lee—then I resolved to concoct a little plot." Mr. Strong chuckled. "I am happy to say that my scheme has been an unqualified success. I wanted Jack to come to St. Frank's, but to suggest such a thing to him—to suggest that I should pay his fees—would have squashed the matter at once. He would have regarded it as an act of charity. And Jack—bless the boy!—is quite an independent young rascal."

"I consulted my solicitors, and the result was just this. The legal gentlemen communicated with Master Mason, and they deliberately made their epistle somewhat vague, in the true legal phraseology. The gist of their information was to the effect that a legacy had been placed in their care for the especial purpose of providing the lad with a thorough education at St. Frank's, and, later on, at Oxford. I had discovered that Jack's uncle went over to Canada some years ago—about five, I believe—and he recently died there. Without making any definite statement, but by vague references, Jack was given to understand that this legacy had been left by his uncle. At all events, Mr. Lee, the trick worked successfully."

"It was most generous of you——"

"Tut-tut! Nonsense, my dear sir!" interrupted Mr. Strong. "Good gracious me! Generous, when he has saved my life? I intended visiting Jack after about a week, and to hear the news. But, bless your life, the boy could not wait until then. He came to a little flat I had taken in London—a paltry furnished place—bubbling over with the great news. I was duly interested, and congratulated him heartily. The boy suspected nothing—he suspects nothing now. He has not the slightest notion that I am paying his fees and that the legacy is a mere myth. He simply regards me as a friend, and not as his benefactor. Do you quite understand, Mr. Lee? I naturally wished to come and see him down here, and that is why I took such precautions. I rely upon you to keep this little secret of mine."

"And you will not rely in vain, Mr. Strong," said Nelson Lee heartily. "Your whole idea is most generous and thoughtful, and you must allow me to express my very great admiration. I am very glad that you have told me, for it is far better that I should know."

Mr. Strong nodded.

"Quite so," he agreed. "And I also think it is far better that you should know something else, Mr. Lee."

He bent forward and made several whispered remarks.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "Why, this is better than ever. Now I grasp every point without the slightest difficulty. Splendid, Mr. Strong—splendid!"

Mr. David Strong lay back in his chair and beamed.

"Your approval is all that I desire, Mr. Lee," he said, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "I feel quite comfortable, and a great load is now off my mind."

CHAPTER VII.

PITT IS VERY CURIOUS—AND VERY PUZZLED.

STUDY E, in the Remove passage, was looking neat and tidy when Mr. Strong again presented himself. Tea had been cleared away, and Jack Mason and Pitt were chatting together.

"Here again, boy!" exclaimed the visitor, bustling in. "Bless my soul and body! You have comfortable quarters here—most comfortable. Egad! I shouldn't mind a room of this sort myself!"

He chuckled as he sat down, and beamed good nature around him.

"What time are you going back, sir?" asked Mason.

"Gracious me, boy, do you want to get rid of me——"

"Rather not, sir!" protested Jack. "But I want to take you round the school-grounds before it's dark. And then you'll have to have a look through the school, too."

"Of course I shall—most decidedly I shall," replied Mr. Strong genially. "But there is just one little matter which I must attend to first. I have something to show you, Jack. I don't suppose you will be interested, but there is no telling—eh?"

The visitor took from his pocket a small paper package tied up with string. The knot was sealed with red wax, and there was nothing upon the package to show what it contained.

"Well, I'll be going," said Pitt, making for the door.

"Not at all, my boy; there is nothing private to be discussed between Jack and myself," said Mr. Strong. "Please stay—Upon my soul! What on earth——"

The door had burst open in a manner which could scarcely be described as gentle. And Edward Oswald Handforth strode in, closely followed by Church and McClure. A crowd of grinning juniors hovered about in the passage.

"Oh, I say, Handy, don't start any of your rot now!" protested Pitt. "Mr. Strong is a visitor——"

"When I want your advice, Pitt, I'll ask for it," said Handforth, glaring. "I've been thinking, and I've come to the conclusion that something must be done——"

"Hear, hear!" said Church and McClure.

"Really, boys, I trust you are not thinking of renewing that somewhat unfortunate scene which occurred before tea?" asked Mr. Strong quietly.

Handforth stared.

"Me?" he exclaimed. "Renewing that awful rot? 'Tain't likely, sir! I've come here to apologise."

"Oh, I see—I see."

"What the dickens for, Handforth?" asked Mason. "You didn't insult Mr. Strong; so what's the idea of apologising?"

Handforth smiled pityingly.

"Of course, I don't expect you to understand," he exclaimed, waving his hand. "Half the Remove doesn't understand, and the fellows only grinned at me when I suggested this visit. I was born to be misunderstood—but that's my misfortune."

"Get on with it, you ass!" muttered McClure.

"Ain't I getting on with it?" roared Handforth. "The fellows, I repeat, jeered at me. Why? Perhaps you don't know—but I do. What did Carlyle say? Answer me that question."

"How the dickens do we know what Carlyle said?" demanded Pitt. "He's only a silly kid in the Second——"

"You—you thumping ass!" bellowed Handforth. "I mean the great Carlyle. Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist. What did he say?"

"Have you come here to crib the information for your prep?" asked Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's no good talking," snorted Handforth. "I'll tell you why the fellows jeered at me. Carlyle said that the British nation consisted of five hundred millions, and that the majority of them were silly asses! That's what nearly all the Remove chaps are!"

"You've got it wrong, haven't you?" asked Mason, smiling. "There aren't five hundred millions——"

"Do you think you know better than I do?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Pray, don't quarrel, my dear boys," said Mr. Strong gently. "You must allow me—ahem—to point out just a slight discrepancy, my lad. Carlyle, I believe, said that the British nation consisted of forty millions, that they were composed of wise men and fools—mostly fools."

Handforth nodded.

"Well, that's what I said—or near enough, anyhow," he replied. "And how can a fellow expect to be understood when the nation mainly consists of fools? Wise men always have that trouble!"

"Dear me! Your modesty is most charming," smiled Mr. Strong.

A roar of laughter sounded out in the passage, but Handforth took no notice. He probably set it down as unavoidable—since the fellows were mostly fools!

"Well, that's one point settled," he said grimly. "As for my modesty, Mr. Strong, there's not another chap in the Remove who can beat me at it. And now I'll get to the point."

"Thank goodness!" muttered Church.

"The other chaps can't understand why I'm going to apologise, but it's really simple," went on Handforth. "You were insulted, sir—grossly insulted by Fullwood and several other rotters. The honour of the Remove was cast into the dust, and it's my duty to fling it out and clean it. That's what I'm doing now."

"Egad!" murmured Mr. Strong. "How remarkable!"

"And I apologise, sir," said Handforth firmly. "I apologise in the most humble manner on behalf of those cads who ragged you. They haven't got the decency to treat a visitor with respect, and so it falls upon me to do their dirty work!"

"You—you silly ass!" muttered McClure. "You've spoilt everything by saying that!"

"I am most gratified," said Mr. Strong graciously. "Please allow me to thank you for your kind consideration——"

"Don't mention it, sir," interrupted Handforth. "It's my duty. Thank goodness, I ain't a rotten snob like some of the other

chaps. They haven't heard me insulting you, and they won't. I don't suppose it's your fault that you come here in those shabby clothes, looking like a giddy tramp, and I I wouldn't dream of throwing such a thing in your face. Poverty ain't a sin—— What the dickens are you kicking my shin for, McClure? Keep your beastly hoofs to yourself!"

McClure, who had been growing redder and redder as Handforth's "apology" proceeded, now turned the colour of beetroot, and backed away in confusion. His efforts to stay his leader's flow of eloquence had fallen flat.

"You—you silly fathead!" he gasped. "Don't—don't take any notice of him, Mr. Strong. He means well, and it's only his way. But everybody knows that he's the biggest ass in St. Frank's!"

"Quite so!" smiled Mr. Strong.

"Eh?" said Handforth, starting.

"I certainly do not misunderstand you, my boy," said Mr. Strong hastily. "I realise that your motives are splendid—although, perhaps, you express yourself in a manner which is somewhat calculated to confuse. But I appreciate your thoughtfulness, my boy."

Handforth looked gratified.

"I thought you would, sir," he said. "Of course, when you came I mistook you for a rag-and-bone merchant——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But that wasn't my fault," went on Handforth. "We're used to seeing people well-dressed at St. Frank's, you know. But I don't suppose people trouble to dress very well in Bermondsey. Gulliver told me that you kept an oil-shop, but I don't believe that!"

Mr. Strong looked rather startled.

"Dear me! There is a mistake somewhere," he said. "I can assure you, my lad, that I have never knowingly entered an oil-shop in my life—much less one in Bermondsey."

"I thought it was a yarn, sir," said Handforth. "Bell's suggestion about a second-hand clothes shop was much more likely—but that's nothing to do with me. You're a visitor at St. Frank's, and I wouldn't dream of saying a word that might offend you. In fact, I'm going to suggest that you should come and have a look round the place under my escort. I'll see that nobody interferes with you, sir!"

"Is there danger, then?" asked Mr. Strong mildly.

"Danger!" repeated Handforth, staring. "You don't suppose you could walk about safely, do you? Why, you'd be ragged by everybody—especially the fags. And I mean to protect you until you are off the premises. It won't take us more than five minutes to look all round——"

"It's jolly good of you, Handforth, but I'm going to show Mr. Strong over the school," put in Mason. "Thanks, all the same——"

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, all right!" he said. "I've done my best—that's all. Don't say I didn't show the right spirit!"

He marched out of the study, and both Pitt and Mason grinned. Handforth had certainly been sincere, but he really had an unfortunate way of putting things.

The door closed, and then the most alarming uproar commenced in the passage. Mason afterwards discovered that a whole crowd of fellows had been only waiting for the moment until Handforth had finished. When he emerged from Study E, thoroughly pleased with himself, he was seized, bumped, frog-marched down the passage, and literally hurled out into the Triangle. In his efforts to sustain the honour of the Remove he had only succeeded in making everybody look silly. But as this was not Handforth's fault, but his misfortune, it was rather hard lines on the famous leader of Study D.

Meanwhile, Mr. Strong chuckled greatly over the incident, and immediately left the study on a tour of inspection. But this is the main point. Mr. Strong completely forgot the little sealed package which was lying upon the study table, beneath a paper. It was Handforth who had caused Mr. Strong to forget that package—and the most startling results were to follow—although they did not follow immediately.

Mr. Strong spent a full hour round and within St. Frank's, and, needless to say, he was not molested—as Handforth had feared. And the visitor discovered that he had barely sufficient time to get to the station for the evening train.

So he hustled off, after bidding Nelson Lee good-bye, and Jack Mason went with him to the station.

Pitt remained alone in Study E. He sat in a chair, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. The Serpent was smiling queerly as he did so. In fact he was wondering why on earth he should consider Jack Mason in this matter of smoking. Yet Pitt did consider Mason. He refrained from smoking during the time that Jack was in the study.

"They can't diddle me," murmured Pitt. "Strong ain't quite such an old buffer as he pretends to me—and he hasn't worn those shabby clothes for long, either. I'm going to keep my eye on this affair."

The Serpent was one of the keenest fellows in the Remove, and it was a difficult job to "diddle" him. There was no reason why he should concern himself about Mr. Strong; but Pitt was naturally curious, although he always took care to investigate a thing on the quiet.

After a few minutes he decided to get on with his prep. He disliked it intensely—in common with most other juniors—but it was an evil which could not be avoided without uncomfortable results.

He sat down at the table, pulled some papers aside, and looked for his favourite pen. Then his eyes fell on a small, brown-paper package, tied with string, and sealed.

"The old chap forgot all about this," muttered Pitt, picking it up. "That was Hand-

forth's doing. Now, I wonder what it is? Mason won't open it, I'll bet."

He turned the package over in his hands, wondering curiously what it contained. It was sealed, or he would have opened it without compunction—Pitt saw nothing wrong in that. After all, Mr. Strong had told him to stop within the study, so it couldn't be anything private.

"Oh, rats!" muttered Pitt. "I'm going to have a look."

There was plenty of string in the cupboard, and some red sealing-wax, too. He could fasten up the package again without anybody being the wiser—for the seal was quite plain, showing no impression.

He cut through the string with a table-knife, grinning coolly. Then he carefully unwrapped the paper and spread it out. A small box was revealed—one of those little cardboard boxes which jewellers send out brooches and such-like trinkets in.

"A giddy present, I expect," Pitt told himself.

He rather enjoyed examining something which he ought not to examine. And he received a little surprise. Removing the lid of the box, he saw a plain gold locket, carelessly laid among some tissue paper. It wasn't new, by any means, for the gold was scratched and tarnished, as though it had been carelessly carried in a trousers-pocket for years.

Pitt took it out, and then gave a start. It was only half a locket, he found; but this was not surprising in itself. He rose from the table and went to the bookcase.

Here he took down a half-locket exactly identical with the one on the table. Both were plain, and were obviously fellows. Fitting them together, Pitt easily established this fact.

The second half was Mason's. Jack had been showing it to Pitt the previous day, and had forgotten to put it back in his pocket; so Pitt had placed it in a position of safety.

"I suppose the chap lost this other half, and Mr. Strong found it and brought it along," thought Pitt. "Well, it's a giddy disappointment. I thought I was going to see something interesting. Punishment for interfering with what doesn't concern me," he added, grinning.

The door opened, and Tommy Watson looked in.

"Mason here?" he asked.

"Gone to the station with his beautiful visitor," replied Pitt.

"Oh, I'd forgotten that," said Watson. "Thanks. Nipper wants to have a word with him in Study C. You might give him the tip when he comes in."

Watson went away, and Pitt fished out the two halves of the locket from the table-drawer, into which he had slipped them, and he suddenly whistled and stared into his hand.

"Now they're mixed up!" he muttered. "Just like somebody to interrupt! Oh, well,

they're both about the same, so it doesn't matter."

To Pitt's eye they were undoubtedly the same. There were no miniature portraits inside, or anything of that sort—not even glass. The plain gold was roughly engraved with some curious signs which meant nothing to Pitt, and which he certainly did not recognise as Arabic writing.

Actually, the signs were totally different on each half, but to Pitt they looked the same. He didn't really care, for the matter was of no importance. So he just dropped one half in the box and put the other back on the bookshelf. Within five minutes the little package was again sealed up and there was no sign that he had opened it.

"I can't tell Mason anything about it, of course," decided Pitt. "He'd know, then, that I'd been nosing. And yet he'll go and send the giddy thing back, I suppose."

Pitt went on with his prep., and he little realised that Handforth's interruption, seemingly so trivial, was to lead to much mystery and excitement. For, if Mr. Strong had known that Jack possessed the other half of the locket, much trouble would have been avoided. But it was a fact that Mr. Strong was in ignorance of this circumstance, and Jack, in his turn, knew nothing of Mr. Strong's half.

Mason returned, cheerful and smiling, and Pitt immediately indicated the package on the table.

"What about that?" he asked, looking up from his work.

CHAPTER VIII.

PROVING HIS METTLE.

JACK MASON whistled.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Strong forgot all about that—and he was going to show it to me, too. I shall have to keep it until he comes next time, or send it on by post—"

"Why not open it?" suggested Pitt.

"No, I sha'n't do that," replied Mason coldly. "It wouldn't be the right thing, Pitt. It's not mine."

Pitt grinned.

"Your standard of honour is too high—what," he remarked. "I ain't quite such a goody-goody bounder as you are, Mason. I should open it if I were you—Mr. Strong said it was for you, anyhow."

"That doesn't make any difference," replied Jack, putting the package into the drawer. "You might shift up a bit, Pitt."

"Oh, I say, I was going to remind you," said the Serpent. "That locket thing of yours is on the bookshelf."

"Oh, thanks," said Mason, fetching it.

"Where's the other half?" asked Pitt.

"I don't know—I've never seen it."

"Never seen it?"

"No."

"How long have you had this half, then?"

"Ever since I was a baby, I think," re-

plied Mason. "I don't know much about it, really. Pass that exercise book along."

They went on with their prep. Pitt was certainly interested and puzzled now. He knew well enough that Mr. Strong had not met Mason until quite recently—and yet Mason had had the half-locket since he was a baby. Pitt felt almost tempted to explain that the other half was in the packet, but decided that he had better not. It would only make Mason distrust him afterwards.

"Oh, Nipper wants you," remarked Pitt, after a bit. "I forgot to mention it when you came in."

"I'll go along when I've done my prep.," replied Jack.

And so, for the next half-hour, the two juniors continued their prep. in silence. Pitt had dismissed the locket affair from his mind. It wasn't his business, and it wasn't very interesting. But that locket was to lead to some stirring adventures before very long.

Mason presented himself at Study C when Sir Montie and Tommy and I were discussing football.

"You wanted me?" asked Jack.

"Oh, I was wondering if you're interested in football, Mason," I replied, looking round.

"Yes, rather," said Jack eagerly.

"Oh, rats!" said Watson. "You can't play, can you?"

"A little," replied the new boy. "I was captain of a team we had in my district—"

"Oh, were you?" I said with interest. "That looks pretty promising. The fact is, Mason, I intend to give you a chance at footer, and it's up to you to make good. I'm out to make the Ancient House team the hottest stuff going, and if you can play a good game you'll be given a look in. But all duds are ruthlessly cast aside—even if they're my own pals."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "I hope you ain't referrin' to me, old boy? I ain't exactly brilliant, but it's a shockin' thing to call me a dud."

"You haven't been ruthlessly cast aside, Montie," I grinned. "Well, Mason, what do you say?"

Jack's eyes were gleaming with pleasure.

"I think it's awfully good of you," he replied. "I—I thought that I shouldn't be given a chance here, and I appreciate your kindness tremendously—"

"Kindness he jiggered!" I interrupted. "You won't find me very kind if you're N.G., Mason. The Ancient House Junior Eleven is selected on its merits, so you'll have to show pretty good form if you want to pass. You'd better come down to the ground with me to-morrow."

"Thanks awfully!" said Mason eagerly.

The very sight of his pleasure was sufficient reward, and I sincerely hoped that he would come out of the test successfully. It would make a great difference to him in the Remove.

Jack went down the passage, walking springily. The very fact that he was to be

treated just as the other juniors and given a chance at football gave him a confidence which had hitherto been lacking. He felt that he was not an outsider, and his heart was thumping rather hard. But just as he was about to enter Study E he heard certain sounds which caused a frown to take the place of the smile.

"Leggo, you beast!" came a shrill hiss.

"If you yell, I'll twist it harder!" exclaimed Fullwood's voice. "Hold him, Gully. Now then, Owen minor, you've got to pop down to the village straight away and do what I tell you——"

"I won't!" shouted Owen minor. "It's after locking-up—— Oh! Ow-yow! You—you—— Oh, you beasts!"

Mason set his teeth and walked down to the lobby. Fullwood and Gulliver were vigorously twisting the arms of Owen minor, of the Third. And Jack Mason forgot everything in his anger and contempt. He strode forward.

"Leave that youngster alone!" he said curtly.

"Eh, what——" Fullwood simply stared. "Why, you cheeky gutter-brat! Clear off before I knock you down!"

"Leave that kid alone," repeated Mason grimly.

Fullwood deliberately twisted Owen minor's arm again, and this time with a vicious force which caused the fag to shriek with agony.

"You confounded cad!" shouted Mason.

Smack!

His fist caught Fullwood upon the nose, and Ralph Leslie went over like a ninepin. But he was on his feet in a second, his nose bleeding, his eyes glittering with hatred.

"I'll smash you for that!" he snarled.

Fullwood remembered how easily he had knocked Mason down once before. Everybody, in fact, regarded the new fellow as a funk. But Fullwood was destined to receive a big surprise.

He hurled himself at Mason—and went down again with such shattering force that he wondered if the roof had fallen in. Mason's fist was like a sledge-hammer.

"I didn't want to fight," Mason said quietly, his voice quivering. "But if I see a bully at work I forget things. Don't let me catch you playing those games again, Fullwood!"

Those words revived Fullwood more than anything else. He sat up dazedly. He—Ralph Leslie Fullwood—was being warned by a beastly outsider like Mason! It was past all belief.

"Grab him, Gully!" muttered Fullwood savagely.

But by this time quite a number of fellows had appeared on the scene. Within two minutes the lobby was packed, and I was amongst the crowd with Montie and Tommy.

"A fight!" shouted somebody. "A fight!"

"Rot!" I roared. "You can't scrap here, you asses! What's the matter, anyhow?"

"Oh, nothing much," replied Mason. "I found Fullwood doing something that I didn't approve of—so I knocked him down."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Who said the age of miracles had passed?"

"I expect it served Fullwood right," I said grimly. "I'll bet he was bullying some fag or other. I heard a screech a minute or two ago, I remember. You'd better go and wash your face, Fullwood——"

Fullwood panted with rage.

"I'm going to half kill this slum beast!" he snarled.

And, before anybody could prevent him, he threw himself at Mason. The pair were going at it hammer and tongs within three seconds. And the crowd surged round excitedly.

Fullwood, for all his faults, was no mean fighter. He knew quite a lot about boxing, and he possessed a heavy fist. It was his mistaken idea that Mason was a hopeless duffer.

But the new fellow just stood his ground, without giving an inch. He received Fullwood's onrush squarely, and the next moment things happened. Fullwood's great charge came to a stop and his guard simply fell to pieces. About two dozen fists—so it seemed to him—hammered his face and neck and chest ceaselessly.

"Oh, my hat! Go it!"

"Good for you, Mason!"

"Oh, good man!"

Nearly everybody was on Mason's side. Fullwood was a rotter, detested by all the decent fellows in the Remove. And to see him thrashed—and thrashed by Mason—was just glorious.

Mason dispelled for ever the idea that he was a funk. He took blows without flinching, and displayed a knowledge of boxing which took everybody by surprise. His guard was splendid, and he remained serenely calm throughout that short, breathless scrap.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Three times his fists went home. Fullwood staggered back, dazed and agonised. He fell to the floor, and remained there.

"Cave!" hissed a dozen voices.

The unmistakable cough of Nelson Lee sounded from the top of the stairs. The result was remarkable. The juniors simply vanished. Tommy Watson, De Valerie, Tregellis-West, and I yanked Mason out into the dark Triangle, and Fullwood's pals hustled their beaten leader out also.

When Nelson Lee arrived in the lobby he found it empty and deserted and wonderfully peaceful. The Housemaster-detective smiled—and did not make any further investigation.

As for Jack Mason, he went up in the estimation of the whole Remove, and Fullwood was obliged to crawl away and hide his diminished head. The boy from Bermondsey was not doing so badly, after all!

And he was to have many further adventures at St. Frank's in the near future.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

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. Challis plays a splendid innings, but Ponsonby foolishly gets in the way of a hard drive, and is laid out. He is taken to bed, and a lot of the boys turn against Challis. Challis goes to his study that night and sees the figure of Ponsonby coming in through the open door. (Now read on.)

A GHOSTLY VISITOR.

CHALLIS had left the light burning, and, blinking into it, glanced at the open door, through which a figure came.

Then, with a hoarse cry, he started up, holding his hands in horror as if to ward off a blow.

"No, no! Stand back! I didn't mean it, Ponsonby! I didn't mean it!" he moaned distractedly, only half awake, his brain numbed with an unspeakable terror; for there stood Ponsonby in his night-shirt, with the hideous, bruised lump showing above the temple, his eyes staring, a ghostly figure that might have startled a lad who had not John's conscience or cause for fear.

Ponsonby stood staring a moment, then smiled feebly and walked slowly forward.

Challis, who had never believed in ghostly manifestations, believed that he had to deal with a visitor from another world now, and his hair almost stood on end, his heart leapt to his throat and choked him.

Had not the strange visitor spoken it might have gone ill with the distracted boy.

But the soft, deep voice of Ponsonby echoed through the room.

"It's all right, Challis. Don't be scared."

I awoke just now, and I couldn't help thinking of you. I came to ask you to—to forgive me—"

Challis had reeled back to the table. He stood there supporting himself upon one hand, and looking big-eyed at the spectre.

Had he gone mad, or was it really Ponsonby speaking?

"Aren't you a ghost?" he muttered vaguely.

"Hope not, old thing," smiled Ponsonby wearily. "And I say, Challis, I oughtn't to have run in as I did. Of course you couldn't help playing that ball straight. Nobody could. I tried to protect my head, but it came too swiftly. Still, I deserved what I got."

Then Challis laughed. It was Ponsonby speaking. He had to deal with living, pulsating flesh and blood, and no spectre.

With a hoarse cry he staggered forward, touched him, and then held him in his arms.

"You oughtn't to have come here," he said gently. "Wasn't there anybody in your room to look after you?"

"Yes, the old doctor. Saw him the moment I woke up. He'd fallen asleep. The duffer's sitting at the bedside with a night-light on the table at his side. Knew he wouldn't let me come here, and so I didn't ask him. You see, I wanted to ask you to forgive me, Challis, for what I did. I was savage because you were doing so well, and I'm jolly ashamed of myself. You batted like a brick."

Challis, holding him, gazed wonderingly into the white face, marred by that awful bruise. And as he held Ponsonby, murmuring his regret and sympathy in broken sentences, he saw the expression of Ponsonby's face change, felt him go limp in his clutch.

"Say you forgive me, old sport!" murmured the injured boy.

"There's nothing for me to forgive, Ponsonby. It's I who ought to ask your pardon."

The other smiled feebly.

"That's all right," he said, and fell limply in John's arms.

With a low cry the big boy gathered him up, and, striding from the room, bore him along the moonlit passages back to his own room.

As he went he felt his concern for Ponsonby deepen, but his heart was swelling with a great gladness, for Ponsonby, at any rate, bore him no malice. He was glad the boy had

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

come to him, glad, but he wanted to get him back to bed and place him in the doctor's hands without delay.

He found the door of Ponsonby's room standing ajar. Gently pushing it open, he walked softly with his burden towards the bed, and laid the sick lad down there as tenderly as if he were a child.

Drawing the clothes over him, he made him snug and comfortable, then, after a hesitating glance at the doctor, who lay asleep in his chair, in the attitude of a man who was thoroughly tired out, wondering whether he should awaken him or not, he turned and tip-toed towards the door.

But even as he did so the doctor stirred restlessly, then, opening his eyes, sat bolt upright.

A low cry burst from his lips, and Challis turned.

The boy's face was very pale, his eyes glowing feverishly. Excitement gripped at John's heartstrings, and the doctor believed that he had just come into the room.

"Challis, what are you doing here?" said the medical man, his voice trembling with anger. "Have you not done enough harm, that you long to do more? Go to your room, I say!"

"But, doctor, I——"

"Don't argue with me—go!" said the doctor, pointing sternly at the yawning door. "Go to your room, I say! I shall report you to Dr. Mason in the morning, and leave him to deal with you. The slightest shock will have the most disastrous effect upon the sick boy; may even kill him. Is that what you wish? Go, I say!"

Challis, instead of leaving the room, stepped forward, and, speaking in an eager whisper, said:

"But, doctor, Ponsonby has——"

The doctor swung him abruptly about and, pushing him, drove him from the room.

"It is a pity you ever came to Littleminster!" he said sternly. "I regard you as a most undesirable character, and if I can have my way, you'll be expelled!"

Challis gave it up at that. With a red spot burning on each cheek he went back to his room. But his mind was easier now in spite of his unfortunate clash with the doctor, and his heart at rest.

After all the doctor would attend to Ponsonby. Nothing he could say or do would improve matters there. And for the rest Ponsonby had come to him, had forgiven him, had spoken like a man, and John felt that he could sleep in peace.

With a prayer that Ponsonby might be better in the morning, he crept back into bed, and a few minutes later was fast in the land of dreams.

A TURN FOR THE BETTER.

JOHN did not waken until the school bell clanged him out of bed. Then he bathed and dressed hastily, brushed his hair, and hurried past the room in which Ponsonby lay, pausing there for a moment, and so to breakfast.

Here the boys treated him with their usual sneering disdain and contempt, save the school captain and Mr. Evans, who now and then cast him a reassuring glance that was worth a lot to John.

As for Basil, his eyes shone with the light of hero-worship; and he made John feel that he could bear the ordeal with equanimity now.

Before school he received another summons from Dr. Mason.

When he entered the Headmaster's study, as he expected, he found the school doctor there.

The Head glowered at him in the old unfriendly way.

"Challis, I hear there is another complaint against you," said he. "In spite of all that has happened you entered Ponsonby's room last night, and were insolent to the doctor. What have you to say?"

Challis, standing calmly before the Master, with his eyes set on the doctor's face, answered quietly:

"If only I had been allowed to explain, I would have told the doctor that the reason why I entered Ponsonby's room was because I carried him back there. I could not sleep last night for worrying about him, and he came to me in my room, to ask pardon for running in to that drive, and when we'd shaken hands he collapsed, I took him back, put him to bed, and found the doctor asleep. He awakened just as I was about to leave the room."

The doctor laughed ironically.

"The explanation is absurd," he said testily. "I do not believe a word of it. I was dozing, it's true, but if Ponsonby had got out of bed I should have awakened immediately."

Challis, flushing hotly, advanced a step.

"I am not in the habit of lying, whatever other faults I may possess," said he. "I have told the truth."

"But, sir," said the doctor, appealing to the Head, "Ponsonby is still unconscious. It's not possible——"

The Headmaster looked intently at John for a moment, then turned his eyes full on the doctor's.

"But if it were, would it be a bad sign, or a good one?" he asked.

"Oh, good, of course. Such a lapse into sensibility and consciousness without delirium would mean that the brain was not affected, and that Ponsonby will soon be well."

At that moment open swung the door, and Basil came running wildly in.

"Beg your pardon, sir," he said, flushing hotly as he caught the Head's stern eyes directed at him, "but Ponsonby is awake, and he's asking for John Challis!"

Up rose Dr. Mason.

"Ah!" said he. "We shall learn the truth now, I think. Doctor, let us go up. Challis, attend us, please."

So they passed through passages and up stairs until they reached the door of the sick room. At the end of the passage here

(Continued overleaf.)

a number of heads were peeping round the angle of a wall.

The news had spread like wildfire. Though the school bell was loudly clanging, the juniors delayed, anxious for news.

The Head ignored them.

By the bedside sat Grainger, holding Ponsonby's hands in his, while the boy, with his head propped up on the pillows, glanced feverishly round him.

"Where's Challis? I want John Challis!" he moaned.

The three hastened forward. Bending over the sufferer, the doctor, feeling his pulse, begged him to lie quiet.

"You must not attempt to talk," said he. "Excitement is bad for you. Your pulse is low. Wait a moment."

He mixed a draught and gave it to the boy, who drank it eagerly.

Then, glancing from Dr. Mason to Challis, and from him to Grainger, Ponsonby smiled.

"I'm glad you're all here," he murmured, in a low voice. "So glad, John, old man, you haven't forgotten what you said last night?"

Headmaster and doctor exchanged meaning glances.

"Sir," the sick boy went on, "when I woke last night I couldn't help thinking about Challis, and how unfair it was of me to have run in to that ball. I never ought to have done it. I deserved to get knocked out. I found Challis awfully cut up. But he forgave me. And I don't know what happened after. I think I must have fainted."

He paused, and stretching out his hand, clasped John's.

"But I'm all right now. My head feels bad, but I'll soon get better, won't I, doctor?"

"Yes, if you lie quiet and don't distress yourself," replied the doctor, somewhat grudgingly.

"And now, sir"—and Ponsonby looked appealingly at the Head—"I don't want you to be hard on John. He's had a jolly bad time. I've come to the conclusion it's not been his fault. We behaved like a lot of cads. Myers and that lot were beastly angry because he made a good show in the trial match. So was I for a moment, but that's all past and done with."

His eyes closed wearily.

"Challis, leave the room as soon as you can," said the doctor, without looking at "the cad."

Challis bent over Ponsonby.

"Thanks, old fellow. I sha'n't forget this," said he. "I'm going now. I'll come again if you want me."

He pressed the boy's hand, while Ponsonby wondered at his smile. Then he turned and strode towards the door.

The doctor, following him, placed a hand upon his shoulder.

Swiftly the boy turned, eyeing the medical officer doubtfully. He need not have doubted him, for the doctor, stretching out his hand, said:

"Challis, I am sorry. I did you a great wrong. I am glad to find that I was mistaken in you. Will you shake hands?"

Shake hands! How Challis beamed. How the colour flushed his pale cheeks, and the light of gladness shined in his eyes!

"Thank you, sir," he said, and so was gone.

(To be continued.)

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