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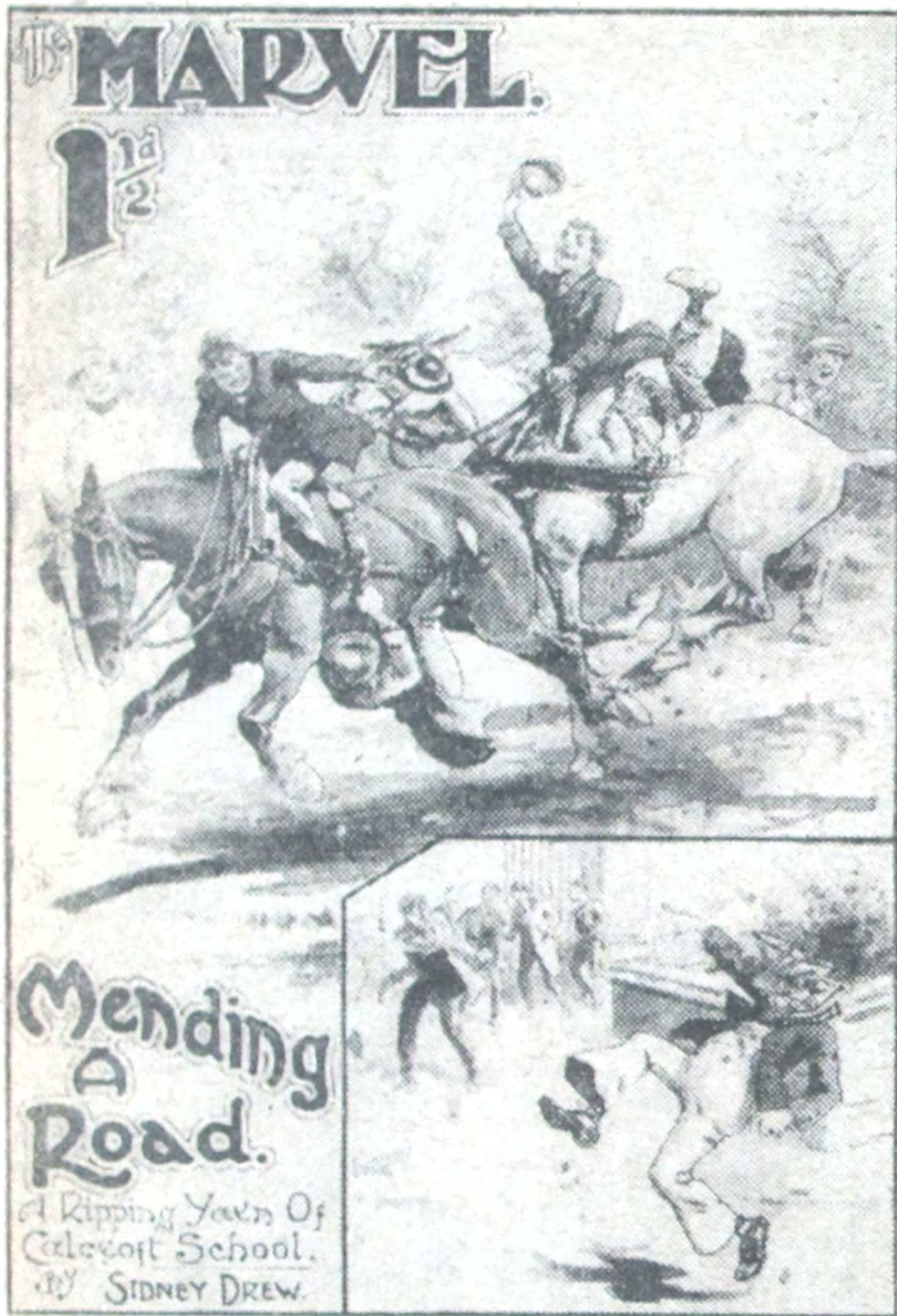


MR. GRELL WAS THE CENTRE OF A STRUGGLING PILE OF HUMANITY!

THE GOLDEN LOCKET;

Or, THE MYSTERY OF THE ARABIC SIGNS!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S. By the Author of "The Boy from Bermondsey," "The Remove Against Him," and other stirring Stories. Nov. 16, 1918.



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THE GOLDEN LOCKET !

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(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

REGINALD PITT IS HARD UP !

TEA was in progress in most junior studies in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. Some were frugal, some were plentiful, and others were sumptuous. It really all depended upon the state of finances at the moment.

The evening meal amongst the juniors was never uniform. It fluctuated according to the amount of pocket-money which each individual study could rake up. Occasionally times were so lean that it was necessary to partake of tea in the Hall, and this was considered almost a disaster. Tea in Hall was somewhat plain, though wholesome, and the fellows much preferred the free-and-easy liberty of their own quarters.

Jack Mason, of the Remove, was partaking of tea in Study C, being the guest of Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. We had become very friendly with Mason of late, and did not regret it, for the boy from Bermondsey was one of the best.

As it happened, it was very fortunate that he had been invited out to tea on this particular day, for the immediate financial resources of Mason and his study chum, Reginald Pitt, were very low. Pitt, indeed, was shockingly hard-up, possessing nothing more valuable than a bent shilling.

The Serpent—as he was called in the Remove—was not a wealthy youth. He never possessed sums like those which were mere matters of no consequence to such juniors as Tregellis-West, or De Valerie, or the Duke of Somerton.

But Pitt had been ably helped in the past by his friendship with Fullwood and Co., of Study A. The Nuts were nearly always "flush," and Pitt was a first-rate card-player. If he couldn't borrow money from them, he would win it at nap, and that was really much better, because it hadn't to be paid back.

But, somehow, Pitt wasn't quite so fond of gambling as he had been. Possibly the influence of Jack Mason had something to do with this. Until Jack's arrival Pitt had done things without a thought. But Mason was such a straight fellow that the Serpent could not fail to be impressed. He had laughed at first—he had scoffed—but, to his own surprise, he found himself changing his views. He didn't like changing them, and he assured himself that he was no different, but his views were changed, all the same.

Mason being out to tea, Pitt invited himself to study A. He found a plentiful supply of good things upon Fullwood's table. And Ralph Leslie Fullwood, although a cad of the first water, could never be accused of stinginess.

"Come in!" he said, when Pitt appeared. "Lookin' for some tea?"

"Well, I was thinking of inviting myself to your spread," replied Pitt calmly. "You'll never eat all that lot unless you're helped out."

He entered the study, and sat down. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were indulging themselves with a tinned tongue, sardines, and other delicacies. Pitt helped himself to some tongue, landed a couple of slices of bread-and-butter upon his plate, and accepted a cup of tea from Gulliver, who was pouring out.

"Lucky beggars!" remarked Pitt. "It must be ripping to be in funds always."

"Hard up?" inquired Fullwood.

"Stony," said Pitt.

"You'll get some tin before long. I expect," remarked Gulliver. "I daresay you'll win a few bobs to-night, if you join us in a game—or else you'll hand us a few I.O.U.'s. It all depends on your luck."

"I don't think I shall play," said Pitt, sipping his tea.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's not much fun in playing when you've got no money."

replied the Serpent. "As a matter of fact, I really came here to borrow a couple of quid. Do you think you could manage it?"

"I'm rather tight just at present," said Gulliver carelessly.

"You fibber!" grinned Fullwood. "What about that fiver you were flashing about half an hour ago?"

Gulliver turned red.

"That's—that's to buy some new togs with," he said lamely. "Besides, I can't change it just now."

"I'll give you change," said Fullwood.

Gulliver was trapped, and he knew it.

"If you want the truth, I don't believe in lending you money, Pitt," he said bluntly.

Pitt looked indignant.

"That's rather rotten," he exclaimed. "I've never failed to pay you back yet, Gulliver—"

"I don't mean that," said Gulliver. "I don't like to lend a fellow money who's associated with a beastly bounder from Bermondsey!"

"Sounds like a comic paper character," grinned Bell. "Beastly bounder from Bermondsey! That's rather good, you know!"

"It's not far from the mark, anyhow," observed Fullwood. "I was goin' to jaw about that, Pitt. What about Mason? Are you still pally with him?"

"He's my study-mate," said Pitt shortly.

"An' he's changin' you, too," put in Gulliver. "You ain't the same chap, Pitt. You're getting wishy-washy—an' I'm rather sick of it. Every time we ask you to play nap or banker, you hesitate."

Pitt grinned.

"That's nothing to do with Mason," he replied. "You don't think I'd allow him to make any difference to me, do you?"

"I don't think anything about it; I know he does!" said Fullwood grimly. "You're as squeamish as a beastly kitten, an' it's about time we had a talk. I reckon you ought to chuck that cad out of your study."

Pitt helped himself to some more tongue.

"That's rot," he said. "How can I chuck the chap out? He's settled there now, and I rather like him—"

"What?" ejaculated Fullwood, staring.

"I said I rather like him."

"Well I'm hanged!" said Gulliver. "Do you mean to tell us, Pitt, that you like that rotten street-urchin?"

"It may give you some pleasure to call him a street-urchin, but it's sheer piffle," said Pitt. "He's as well educated as I am and a gentleman to his finger-tips. So what's the good of keeping up that fiction?"

"Look here, you'd better clear out!" snapped Gulliver hotly. "We don't want pals of Mason's in here—"

"Don't get excited," interrupted Fullwood. "You never know how to take Pitt, Gully. He doesn't mean half he says. If he had the chance he'd be the first to join in a japo against Mason. And, anyhow, I'm goin' to settle the point straight away."

"How?" asked Pitt calmly.

"Well, you can't be our pal if you're goin' to be Mason's pal," replied Ralph Les-

lie grimly. "That's certain. It ain't in the nature of things for you to be friendly with both parties at the same time. You'll have to choose between us, Pitt."

"I don't see that it matters to you," replied the Serpent warmly. "I don't like rows all day, and I have to keep on good terms with Mason. I'm certainly not going to shift him out of the study."

"That means that you choose Mason?" asked Fullwood.

"It doesn't mean anything of the sort," retorted Pitt. "You know as well as I do that I hate the chap sometimes. But he's such a quiet fellow. It's jolly difficult to have a quarrel with him, and as long as he leaves me alone I don't trouble. I smoke in the study, and he doesn't say a word. Some fellows would kick up a frightful fuss. You'd better leave Mason out of it, Fullwood."

"I loathe the chap," said Fullwood. "If you persist in sticking to him, Pitt, you won't be so welcome in this study. Why the dooce don't you take good advice when it's given to you? There's no reason why we shouldn't get on jolly well together. Finish up with Mason, and you'll find us easier to get on with."

The Serpent went on with his tea without speaking. He did not like the idea of this lecture. The Nuts were doing their utmost to estrange him from his study-mate, because they had their knife into Mason.

And Pitt hated being dictated to. He was a fellow with a will of his own, and he could be extremely obstinate when he chose. He certainly didn't see why he should break with Mason just because he was told to.

He even began to feel uncomfortable as he was eating this food. He didn't want to be beholden to Fullwood and Co. unless they were prepared to take him as they found him. And he suddenly set his cup down and looked up.

"We've been getting away from the point," he said. "Are you fellows going to grant that little favour for me?"

"Which favour?"

"I want you to lend me a quid or two—"

"I'll tell you what," interrupted Fullwood. "I've got a suggestion to make. This will be a test for you, Pitt."

He took out a silver-bound pocket-book and selected three one-pound currency notes. These he placed on the table.

"You're quite welcome to that three quid for as long as you like," he said smoothly. "You can pay me back any old time. I'm rather well off this week, an' I don't mind doing you a favour."

"Thanks," said Pitt, reaching for the money.

"Silly ass!" said Gulliver, glaring.

"Hold on!" smiled Fullwood. "There's just one little condition, Pitt."

"A condition?"

"Exactly," replied Fullwood. "You can have that money if you'll agree to do what I want. I rather like you, and—"

"What are you driving at?" demanded Pitt shortly.

"Just this," was Fullwood's grim reply. "You can have the loan of that three quid if you'll kick Mason out of your study. I don't care how you do it, but you've got to get it over this week."

"Oh, rippin'!" grinned Gulliver.

"Splendid idea," remarked Bell.

"That's all I want," went on Fullwood. "Chuck Mason out of your study, and finish with him. Providing you do that, you're perfectly welcome to come here whenever you like an' to borrow money from me when you're short."

Pitt smiled.

"It's not at all a bad idea," he said thoughtfully.

"You agree, then?" asked Fullwood, bending forward.

"I didn't say that——"

"Do you accept the condition?"

"No."

Pitt rose to his feet as he spoke. He picked up the three pounds, calmly screwed them into a ball, and tossed them into Fullwood's lap.

"Why, you rotter——"

"I always thought you were a beastly cad, Fullwood, but I didn't think you were quite such a cad as this," said Pitt. "Why, you must be mad to think I'd accept money from you on those putrid conditions. Mason is my study-mate, and I'm not going to kick him out for anybody."

Fullwood and Co. were on their feet, angry and hot.

"Hoof him out into the passage!" roared Gulliver.

Pitt turned like lightning.

"Try it on!" he snapped. "The first chap who lays a finger on me will be sorry for it. I'm fed up with you. I was a fool to come here at all!"

And the Serpent opened the door and walked out. In doing so he knew that he had closed the only doorway through which he could reasonably hope to obtain funds. But he walked down the passage in a state of sheer delight. He had made Fullwood and Co. sit up, and that was most gratifying.

Under comparatively slight provocation he would have had no compunction in making Mason's life in Study E unbearable. But to be told to do it by other fellows was quite beyond the limit. Unconsciously, Fullwood had attached Pitt to the boy from Bermondsey more strongly than ever. It had been a blunder on Fullwood's part, but he hadn't realised it at the time.

And Pitt was quite content with his empty pockets.

CHAPTER II.

NOT THE RIGHT NIPPER.

MR. SIMON GRELL knocked out his pipe in the fender and proceeded to refill it from a well-packed pouch.

He was seated in the small back parlour of the White Harp Inn, situated in the

village of Bellton, a mile from St. Frank's. Mr. Grell was alone, and he had been busy with his thoughts for some little time.

"Yes, there's only one way for it," he told himself, gazing into the fire. "I've got to see the kid this evenin', an' I've got to see him on the quiet. It wouldn't be any good goin' up to the school. In fact I should be a blamed fool to do anythin' of the sort."

He glanced at the clock, and then at the window. It would be getting dusk before long, and the November day was somewhat dull and overcast. It was quite cosy and warm in the parlour, but Mr. Grell knew that he would have to be making a move shortly.

He was a stranger in the neighbourhood—a short, thick-set man with a bronzed, ruddy complexion. To gaze upon him, it would be hard to realise that he was the uncle of Jack Mason. Yet this was the unfortunate truth.

Mr. Grell had come down for the purpose of seeing his nephew. But he had seen, instead, the Housemaster of the Ancient House, who happened to be Mr. Nelson Lee. And Nelson Lee was one of the last persons that Grell was anxious to meet.

The man believed that he had not been recognised by the famous detective; but he was wrong. Lee knew at once that Mr. Simon Grell was a criminal, known as Captain Jim, who had been rather badly wanted by the police five years before. It was most annoying, from Mr. Grell's point of view, to find Nelson Lee at the school.

Captain Jim's reason for coming to the neighbourhood of St. Frank's was a simple one. He wanted money, and he had an idea that Jack Mason could supply it. Or, at all events, that Mason could be forced to tell the truth regarding his presence at such a select school as St. Frank's.

Mr. Grell had returned home after an absence of five years, and he had found that Jack was missing, and that he had been sent to St. Frank's by a firm of lawyers. His fees were being paid, it appeared, out of a legacy which had been left for the especial purpose of providing Jack with a first-class education.

Now, there was something queer about all this. Mr. Grell could think of nobody who would be so kind as to bequeath an amount for the benefit of the boy. The fees at St. Frank's were high, and the sum of money must necessarily be large—large, that is, in Mr. Grell's eyes.

And he saw no reason why he should not "touch" that sum himself. If he could only discover the full facts he might be able to turn the information to account. For Captain Jim had an idea that the money was Jack's and the boy had deliberately chosen to come to St. Frank's. If this proved to be the case Grell could force his nephew to leave the school, and then it would be a comparatively easy matter to get control of the money.

If it had been possible for Captain Jim to know the full details at this moment he

would certainly not have pursued his plan, for there was absolutely no chance of his attaining his object.

I knew the facts, because Nelson Lee had told me, but nobody else did. I had not even mentioned the matter to Tregellis-West and Watson, although I kept very few secrets from them. The truth was, I couldn't very well do so, because the gov'nor had told me in confidence.

The legacy story was—well, it was just a story. There was no actual foundation for it, and it had only been concocted for the benefit of Jack Mason himself.

A month or two before Mason came to St. Frank's he had performed an act of great bravery in Piccadilly Circus. He had saved the life of a Mr. David Strong, a genial old gentleman of a most benevolent nature.

Curiously enough, Mr. Strong had been greatly attracted to the boy. And yet, after all, it wasn't so very curious, seeing that he saved Jack his life. But there was something more than this. A policeman could have rescued Mr. Strong, but the latter would have recognised the service by some financial reward. It was quite different with Jack Mason.

The boy was poor, but he would not have accepted a farthing. Mr. Strong knew that. It was Jack's ambition—a hopeless one, it seemed—to be educated at a great public school. And Mr. Strong had hit upon the neat idea of instructing his solicitors to make Jack Mason believe that a legacy had been left by some unspecified gentleman for the purpose of providing the lad with a complete education. At all events, the object had been achieved, and Jack had no idea that he was really accepting the favour of old Mr. David Strong. If he had known that he wouldn't have been at all comfortable, for he considered that he had no right to any reward.

The kind-hearted Mr. Strong had already visited Jack Mason at St. Frank's. But he had come shabbily attired, for the express purpose of keeping up the pretence that he was impecunious. He took a keen delight in playing this trick upon the boy—whom he loved. For it was an absolute fact that Mr. Strong was strangely attached to the lad he had met under such dramatic circumstances.

Jack, of course, was in ignorance of the fact that his benefactor was alive, and that he was none other than Mr. Strong.

It will thus be seen that Simon Grell's plan was doomed to failure from the very start. There was no legacy, so he couldn't get hold of it. Jack, indeed, knew practically nothing himself. His fees and his pocket-money were supplied by the lawyers, and these gentlemen had been singularly reticent in all their dealings. Considering the true state of affairs, this was not surprising.

But Captain Jim was hopeful, not knowing how the position stood. And the first step was to have a quiet talk with his nephew. He was at liberty to go up to the school, and he would be courteously received—as a relative of one of the pupils. But Mr. Grell was opposed to this move.

He knew that he was not a gentleman in manner or appearance, and his presence at the school would do him no good. Moreover, there was Nelson Lee to be considered; and Mr. Grell was quite anxious to steer clear of Nelson Lee.

So he had decided upon a little plan to get his nephew out into a quiet place. He sat down at the table of the inn parlour, drew paper and pencil towards him, and scrawled a short note. When he had finished it he screwed it up and threw it into the fire.

"Don't want to mention no names," he muttered. "Somethin' simple will do—just enough to bring him out."

He made another attempt, and this time the result pleased him. He enclosed the half-sheet of notepaper in an envelope, sealed it, and stowed it in his pocket. Then he passed into the bar and partook of a drink.

Feeling refreshed, Captain Jim rolled out of the public-house and looked up and down the village street; or, rather, up it only, for the White Harp was situated on the outskirts of Bellton.

"Just the very young shaver I want!" murmured Mr. Grell.

A diminutive member of the village population was coming along the road, whistling cheerfully and shrilly. His age was about eight, and he was evidently the hopeful son of a farm labourer, or somebody of that class.

"Come here, young feller-me-lad," said Captain Jim pleasantly, as the urchin was about to pass.

"Wot cher want?" inquired the lad bluntly.

"You needn't be afraid—I sha'n't hurt ye," said Mr. Grell. "Look, here's a penny! It's all for you, my sonny boy. Don't snatch it, mind!"

In spite of the injunction the child snatched it rather hurriedly, apparently fearing that Mr. Grell might change his mind. He gazed at the penny lovingly, and then looked up at Mr. Grell with perfect confidence. A man who could give him a penny for nothing at all was obviously to be trusted.

"What's your name, little man?" inquired Captain Jim.

"Bobby, sir."

"Bobby what?"

"Jenkins, sir," replied the urchin.

"Well, look here, Bobby Jenkins, I want you to run a little errand for me—an' I'll give you sixpence all for yourself," said Mr. Grell kindly.

"Oo, lummy!" exclaimed Master Jenkins, appalled.

"Do you know St. Frank's, my lad?"

"'Course I do. It's the big skool that all them young gents go to," replied Bobby scornfully. "Don't yer know that?"

"I was askin' if you knew it," smiled the man. "You do, so it's good enough. I want you to take this note up to the school an' hand it to a nipper named Mason. Understand? Go straight up an' find that nipper, an' give him this note. Will you do this for me?"

"Where's the tanner?" asked Master Jenkins suspiciously.

"Blamed if you ain't smart on your

money," grinned Mr. Grell. "Here's the sixpence, young shaver. Now be off as fast as you can go. Mason is one of the junior boys, an' you've got to give it into his own hands. Understand? Take it straight to the nipper, an' don't make no mistake. I'll wait here until you come back."

The village boy nodded brightly, and set off as fast as his legs would carry him towards St. Frank's, the note clutched tightly in his grubby hand. Mr. Grell watched him go up the road, and was quite sure that the note would be delivered safely. So that there could be no mistake, Mr. Grell had pencilled "Jack Mason" upon the outside of the envelope.

But he did not bargain for the grubby condition of Master Jenkins's hands. Long before the gates of St. Frank's were reached the pencilling was entirely rubbed off; or, at least, a considerable amount of dirt had been rubbed on, which amounted to the same thing. The name, at all events, was obliterated.

Master Jenkins, having received his sixpence, faithfully intended carrying out his instructions. But he was—unfortunately for Mr. Grell—labouring under a mistake.

It was really Captain Jim's fault, for having used the term "nipper" several times whilst giving his instructions to the youngster. In consequence, there was confusion in Bobby's simple mind.

"I've got ter give it to Master Nipper, the gent told me," said the village lad, as he neared the gates. "I like Master Nipper—he give me a penny once."

Bobby had quite a good memory. That little incident had occurred a month or two back, when my cap had blown off in a high wind. Bobby had recovered it for me, and I had duly rewarded him.

His present mistake was quite pardonable.

Mason was a new-comer, and the name was not familiar. Mine was, for there wasn't a living soul in the village who hadn't heard of me by this time. My doings at St. Frank's, particularly in connection with the great harring-out, had made me something of a famous character in the neighbourhood. Amongst the junior population, particularly, I was well known.

So Bobby promptly seized upon "nipper" when Mr. Grell uttered the word. Bobby assumed that the note was to be given to Nipper—to myself. Under the circumstances it was only natural that he should make this mistake. Mr. Grell had not been explicit enough.

There was the pencilling on the envelope, of course, but Mr. Grell would have been far wiser if he had used ink. However, the exact facts were as I have stated, and the whole course of after-events really pivoted upon Bobby Jenkins's error.

Tea was just over in most junior studies at about the time of Bobby's arrival in the Triangle. He entered the gateway tentatively, realising, with considerable awe, the imposing nature of his surroundings.

Handforth and Co. were emerging from the Ancient House, and Handforth frowned as he

saw the shabby little figure approaching through the dusk.

"What the dickens does that urchin want here?" he demanded gruffly.

"No good asking me," said McClure. "And you needn't look so jolly fierce. No harm in the kid coming, is there?"

"Unless he's got some business here I'll jolly well kick him out!" said Handforth majestically. "Can't allow this sort of thing, you know. There'll be no dealing with the village kids if dozens of them come running in here every minute of the day!"

Church grinned.

"Marvellous chap!" he remarked thoughtfully.

"Who's marvellous?"

"You are."

"Well, I know that, but I didn't expect you to be generous enough to say so," replied Handforth genially. "But where's the point?"

"Why, it's easy," said Church. "I can only see one village kid, but you said there were dozens. Of course, I wouldn't doubt your word for anything, Handy. I expect your eyesight's better than mine —"

"You—you silly ass!" roared Handforth, glaring.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth tried hard to think of some reply which would be suitable for the occasion. Failing, he visited his wrath upon the innocent Master Bobby.

"Hi! Clear off, you little sweep!" bel-lowed Handforth.

Bobby Jenkins came to a halt, rather uncertain as to the safety of advancing.

"I gotter note," he explained shrilly.

"You've got which?"

"A note, master. I brought it from a gent—"

"I'm not your master, you young donkey!" growled Handforth, noticing that Church and McClure were grinning. "Who's the note for—the boot-boy?"

Bobby shook his head.

"No, sir, that be for Master Nipper," he replied, holding out the soiled letter.

"Oh, is it?" said Handforth. "For Master Nipper? What the dickens do you want to bring notes for, Master Nipper—"

"Who's talking about me?"

Handforth turned as he heard my voice. He indicated the village lad with a wave of his hand.

"Some correspondence for you, Nipper," he replied. "It ain't my business, but I should say that the blacksmith has taken to writing letters for a



change. Of it might be the sweep. Got your gloves with you?"

"No; it's not cold this evening——"

"Because I should advise you to have 'em ready," said Handforth, as he moved off. "That letter doesn't look exactly sweet!"

"Begad! What's the frightful ass talkin' about?" inquired Sir Montie Tregellis-West, who had come out with me. "I have a faint idea, dear boy, that Handy was attemptin' to be witty, but I may be wrong."

"That kid's got a note," said Watson bluntly.

"Yes, so I see," I replied. "Hallo, my lad, what are you doing here? I seem to remember your smiling chivvy, somehow. Come to pay an afternoon call?"

Bobby grinned all over his face.

"A gent give me sixpence to bring this note to you, Master Nipper," he said, holding it out. "I promised I'd give it into your hands."

I took the letter wonderingly.

"Sure you're not making a mistake?" I asked. "What sort of a gentleman was he, kid?"

"Oh, a nice gent—'e give me sixpence."

I grinned.

"You mentioned that before," I said. "But I'm not expecting a note, and perhaps this isn't for me at all."

"The gent told me to give it to Nipper—'e told me that two or three times," said Master Bobby. "I know it's for you, sir."

"All right, kid, you'd better cut along," I said. "Just tell me one other thing—was the gentleman a young one or an old one?"

"I dunno," replied Bobby slowly. "'E 'adn't got no whiskers, Master Nipper, an' 'is 'air was a bit reddish, like my brother Ted's!"

"Well, never mind your brother Ted," I said cheerfully. "Here's another sixpence for you, just for luck—and if you take my advice you'll clump the whole lot together and put it into the War Loan."

Master Jenkins grinned hugely at this sound advice, and took himself off, feeling that his luck was too good to be true. Down the lane he duly reported that he had delivered the note, and Mr. Grell was satisfied. At all events, there was no indication that the note had fallen into the wrong hands.

And Captain Jim went back to the White Harp feeling that something had been done.

It had!

CHAPTER III.

KEEPING THE APPOINTMENT.

"WHAT is it?" asked Watson.

"Blessed if I know," I replied, handling the letter dubiously.

"At any rate, it can't be a mistake. We'll soon know the awful truth."

I pulled out the half-sheet of notepaper, glanced at it, and grinned. There was no address, and nothing to indicate who it was intended for—neither was there any signature. The note itself was short:

"I want to see you urgent. Be at the old stile, down the lane, at half-past seven. And don't bring nobody else with you. This is most important. Be there at seven-thirty, sharp. You'll be sorry if you fail."

"Mystery!" I grinned. "Just have a look at this, my sons!"

Sir Montie and Tommy read it, and they frowned perplexedly. The writing was rather poor in quality, but that might have been deliberate.

"Begad! Who wants to see you down the lane, Nipper, old boy?" asked Sir Montie. "This is really frightfully interestin', you know. An' you haven't got to take nobody with you—so Tommy an' I can go."

"How do you make that out?" asked Watson.

"Dear fellow, it's obvious," smiled Tregellis-West. "If Nipper isn't to take nobody, it stands to reason that he must take somebody. But I suspect that it is really a case of bad grammar."

"Well, blow the grammar," I said. "I know for certain that no man wants to have a private talk with me. This must be a decoy, my bucks!"

"A which?"

"A decoy. I shouldn't be surprised if those River House cads are responsible for it," I replied. "They want to get me down there alone—and then wipe up the road with me. They expect me to walk into the trap like a little innocent. Yes, I'll bet a quid it's an ambush."

"I shouldn't be surprised—I shouldn't, really," said Montie. "Wellborne an' those other Hogs have been fairly quiet of late, but there's no tellin' when they'll break out again. Perhaps they're tryin' to break out now."

"Well, we'll break out as well," I said grimly. "This trick doesn't deceive me; and I don't see why we shouldn't prepare a nice little surprise for them."

I had good reason for suspecting that the note was the work of the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne, the leader of the Honourables at Dr. Hogge's Academy, down the road—the River House School. Certainly it never entered my head that the note was intended for somebody else, and that it was written by Mr. Simon Grell.

I had never seen Mason's uncle, but Nelson Lee had; and the gov'nor had informed me of Grell's record. It wasn't Mason's fault, of course, and I don't think the boy from Bermondsey knew that his uncle was in the neighbourhood. Pitt had informed Mason of the fact, but Jack believed it to be a yarn—for he was under the impression that Grell was dead.

I naturally thought that this note was a jape. Somebody expected that I should go down to the stile out of sheer curiosity. It might even be Fullwood who was the culprit, but I didn't fancy so. The word of Master Bobby was hardly reliable, and although he had declared that a "gent" gave him the note, it might have been Wellborne or one of his chums.

"Anyhow, we'll have a look into the matter," I remarked, pulling out my watch. "Nearly six o'clock. We've got heaps of time, and we'll prepare a nice little surprise for the would-be japers. This is an occasion for a meeting."

"A meeting?" repeated Watson.

"Exactly," I said briskly. "We shall want about eight or nine chaps—ten would be better. Just run round and call seven of the fellows into Study C. It's quite likely that Wellborne and Co. will be there in force—at the stile, I mean—and I want to have plenty of men ready."

"Forgive me for asking, old fellow, but what's the idea?" inquired Montie. "I'm a shockin'ly dull chap, an' I can't quite get the hang—"

"I'll tell you my wheeze when we're all together," I interrupted. "Come on!"

Within five minutes the gathering was complete. In addition to ourselves there were Handforth, Church, and McClure; De Valerie and the Duke of Somerton; Tom Burton, Yakama, and Farman. This was one more than we had arranged for, but it was really all the better.

"What is the honourable stunt, my worthy Nipper?" inquired the Japanese junior. "The glint of the eye is significant, and I perceive that great events are in the process of being evolved. It is with extreme pleasure that I attend the splendid gathering—"

"Very likely, Jappy," interrupted Handforth. "But we didn't come here to hear you gassing, old man. Once you start, there's no telling when you'll stop. As I've often had occasion to remark, meetings of this sort should be conducted in a business-like way. There's no sense in one chap monopolising the whole conversation, and I consider that everybody ought to contribute to the jaw. Before we start I'd like to say—"

"I've been waiting for you to finish for quite a long time, Handy," I said politely. "But as you seem to be going on for ever, I'd better cut it short. It's just like your cheek to jaw at Yakama for gassing—and then gas at full steam yourself!"

"Look here—" began Handforth.

"Oh, great Scott!" I interrupted. "Don't start any of your rot now, for goodness' sake! I've called this meeting, and I'm going to do the jawing."

"Go ahead, old chap," said Somerton. "What's the trouble?"

"Well, there's no trouble at all yet," I replied. "What do you make of this letter?"

I handed it round, and all the fellows read it with interest. But they confessed that they were puzzled, and looked to me for enlightenment. I explained how it had come into my hands, and Handforth shook his head.

"Looks bad!" he said grimly.

"How does it look bad, you ass?"

"I suppose you haven't been getting into trouble?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"You don't happen to owe money to anybody?" asked Handforth. "This looks like a

note from a chap who means to dun you for some tin."

"Begad! Handy's got a frightful good opinion of you, Nipper!" remarked Montie.

"Handy's an ass!" I replied. "I don't owe anybody a farthing, and I'm jolly certain that this note wasn't written by any man who wants a secret meeting with me. It must be a trick—and I suspect Wellborne and Co."

"Souze my scuppers!" remarked the Bosun.

"And, what's more, the Hogs mean to gain a victory if they can," I went on.

"See the idea? Once they've got me down there alone they'll simply proceed to slaughter me. It's just the style of jape they delight in—to get a fellow by himself and wreak their evil will upon him. Why, I should be rolled in the mud and made into a guy, or something equally pleasant."

"So you're not going?" asked De Valerie.

"I think so."

"Eh? You are going?" asked Handforth.

"Yes."

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, if you're anxious to be rolled in the mud, I've done with it," he said.

"Personally, I shouldn't much care for the experience—"

"You silly ass!" I interrupted. "Do you think I should be such a blockhead as all that? My idea is to meet the Unknown at the stile—but certain preparations will be made beforehand."

"I guess you'd best explain some," remarked Farman.

"Well, my notion is this," I went on.

"If I keep this appointment I shall probably meet somebody at the stile—Wellborne, dressed up, perhaps. There'll be a whole crowd of others behind the hedge, ready to pounce on me unawares."

"That's quite likely, dear fellow," said Sir Montie.

"The time of the appointment is half-past seven," I continued. "Now, when do you reckon the Hogs will get into the ambush?"

"At about a quarter-past, or perhaps before that," said De Valerie.

"Not before seven?" I asked.

"I shouldn't think so."

"Well, if all you chaps take up your positions behind the hedge at about ten to seven, I reckon you'll be there first," I said.

"See the idea? They mean to lay an ambush for us, so we'll forestall them by laying an ambush of our own. You won't let yourselves be seen, and when they come they'll know nothing. Let 'em collar me before you act—just to give the bounders the idea that they are having everything their own way. Then you'll spring out and—well, the fun will start!"

"A top-hole wheeze," declared the Duke heartily.

"I'm with you, Nipper," said De Valerie.

"Of course, it's simply a stunnin' jape, dear old boy!" Sir Montie remarked. "You won't hear me grumblin' in the slightest—not even if I find it necessary to lie in a

muddy ditch, gettin' my feet wet. It doesn't matter a hang about my trousers. I'm perfectly willin' to sacrifice them for the good cause!"

I grinned.

"I don't think you'll find it necessary to lie in a muddy ditch, Montie," I replied. "There hasn't been any rain for a few days, and you'll only need to get into the wood, behind the trees."

"I'm frightfully glad to hear that," said Tregellis-West, with relief.

All the others were in agreement.

"Of course, it's not certain that we're on the right track at all," said Handforth. "It might be something quite different. You ain't like the other chaps, Nipper, and this affair may be something serious."

"Such as which?" I inquired.

"Ain't Mr. Lee your guv'nor?" asked Handforth. "Haven't you had all sorts of fights with murderers and burglars and forgers and convicts and pickpockets and anarchists and assassins—and—and——"

"Go on!" I said, as Handforth paused. "You haven't exhausted 'em all yet, have you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" I grinned. "Do you think the guv'nor and I did nothing else but fight criminals all the time we were at work? At the same time, there might be something in that idea of yours, although I don't think it's probable. They wouldn't think I'm worth all the trouble."

"Well, supposing it's an escaped criminal?" asked Watson.

"Then our plan couldn't be better than it is," I answered. "If anybody tries to play a trick on me, you chaps will be on hand. So we're on the right side, in any case. All you fellows will start half-an-hour before me, because I sha'n't turn up until about twenty-five past seven."

We were all pretty certain that the affair was a joke, and didn't look upon it as anything else. It would be rather neat to turn the tables upon the tricksters. And at a quarter to seven the ambush-party started out under De Valerie's leadership. Handforth considered himself leader, but that was only his little delusion.

I remained in the common-room until a quarter-past seven. Then I donned my overcoat and emerged into the Triangle. It was dark, although a half-moon was doing its best to penetrate a bank of clouds.

I chuckled as I strolled across the Triangle and passed out through the gateway. There was a prospect of some fun, and I was ready for it. As I neared the stile I made out a dim figure leaning against it. And I started slightly as I saw the glow of a pipe.

So it was a man, after all! Wellborne was somewhat addicted to cigarette-smoking, but he certainly would never take to smoking a pipe. So my theory was knocked on the head at the start, and I was puzzled.

"That you, Jack?" came a low voice.

I didn't reply as I walked up. Jack! The only fellow of that name in the Remove

who would be likely to receive a note was Jack Mason. There were one or two other Jacks, but they were not prominent juniors.

"I've come down in answer to that note," I said, without committing myself. "What's the trouble?"

The man peered at me in the gloom.

"I'm glad you've come, young shaver," he said, in a satisfied tone. "I thought mebbe you'd be disrespectful enough to take no notice. But I reckon you've got more sense in that head of yours. Let's have a look at ye, boy."

"I don't understand what you're getting at," I said shortly.

"None o' your innocence——"

"Well, I am innocent," I interrupted. "I want to know why you sent me that note and who you are. You forgot to sign your name."

The fact of the matter was I didn't like the look of the man—or, to be more exact, the sound of him. He was obviously of a low type, although he could have been better had he chosen. His breath smelt strongly of spirits. I couldn't make out who the man was, and I was greatly mystified.

"Don't you talk to me in that way, Jack, my boy," said the other. "What's come over ye? You was allus a meek kind o' kid, but I suppose five years makes a difference."

"I think you're making a mistake," I said, having no wish to pry into other people's affairs. "My name isn't Jack, and that village kid must have given me the note in mistake for somebody else."

The man laughed unpleasantly.

"So you want to deny your own uncle, do you?" he said. "Why, you little swab, I'll knock your head off if you give me any o' your lip! Don't you dare to say that you don't know your Uncle Simon!"

"Is your name Mr. Grell?" I asked.

"Don't be a young fool——"

"Is it?" I persisted.

"You know it is, you cheeky imp!" growled Mr. Grell. "Now, look here——"

"I'd better tell you that I'm not Jack Mason," I interrupted. "The note was given to me, and I didn't know who it was from. It was intended for Mason, of course, so it wouldn't be right for me to let this conversation go on. If it had been daylight you wouldn't have made the mistake."

Simon Grell swore.

"You're lyin' to me, durn you!" he shouted. "Do you think I don't know my own nephew? It's five years since I saw you, an' a man's liable to make mistakes, but nobody else but you would have come down——"

"My name isn't Mason at all," I broke in warmly. "I'm Nipper, of the Remove. So I'll bid you good-night, Mr. Grell."

A hand grasped my shoulder.

"There's no hurry!" snapped Captain Jim. "I'm beginnin' to think you ain't Jack, arter all."

"That's a good thing," I remarked. "You'll oblige me, Mr. Grell, by taking your hand off my shoulder. If you wish to see

Mason, I'll tell him that you're waiting down here——"

"What name was that you said just now?" demanded Grell harshly.

"Nipper."

"Then you're the young cub who's allus been along of Nelson Lee!" snarled Mr. Grell, tightening his grip. "It's a plant—you've come down here on purpose to trick me, hang you——"

"Don't be silly!" I cut in sharply. "Didn't I tell you I wasn't Mason within the first minute? The note was given to me by mistake—and I shall certainly warn Mason not to come down. And if you don't release me at once, I'll not be answerable for the consequences——"

"You young whelp!" shouted Mr. Grell furiously.

As he spoke he released my shoulder and both his hands went up to my throat. His strength was enormous, and the next moment he had me on my back across the stile, half-choking the life out of me.

"Rescue—help!" I gurgled desperately.

As a matter of fact I was becoming really alarmed. The man was in a blind rage, and hardly responsible for his actions. To fight him alone was utterly impossible, and I simply struggled with all my strength in vain.

"You can call for help all you like!" muttered the man savagely, his face close to my own. "You've come down here, and—— By thunder!"

The sound of quick footsteps came to my buzzing ears, and the next moment Mr. Simon Grell found himself surrounded by numerous dark forms. I dropped limply as he released me.

And I felt thankful that adequate preparations had been made!

CHAPTER IV.

NELSON LEE TAKES A HAND.

"**B**EGAD! We're here, dear fellow!" Sir Montie Tregellis-West spoke breathlessly as he rushed up. De Valerie, the Bo'sun, Watson, and all the others were there, too. They had been concealed amongst the trees, and had come forward upon hearing my cry.

"Grab him!" shouted De Valerie.

"I knew I was right!" roared Handforth. "The chap's a giddy criminal!"

"You young hounds!" snapped Simon Grell, glaring round him with some alarm—for the sudden appearance of the juniors had startled him. "Clear out o' my way, or I'll half kill some of——"

He wasn't allowed to get any further. The juniors were in force, and they threw themselves at the man and bore him to the ground. It wasn't necessary for them all to engage in this tussle; eight were quite sufficient. Sir Montie and Watson bent over me and helped me up.

"Begad! Are you hurt, old boy?" asked Sir Montie anxiously.

"You ass!" gasped Watson. "He's nearly dead!"

"Not just yet, Tommy," I replied dazedly, holding on to him. "My only hat! The rotter would have finished me off, I believe, if you hadn't come up in time. He went dotty for the minute."

"I believe he's dotty now," said Watson, turning his head.

Mr. Grell was certainly making enough noise to warrant that statement. He was as strong as a horse, as the heaving mass of humanity near by proved. It was about as much as the eight Removites could manage to hold him down. He was struggling with extraordinary fury.

"Let him fag himself," I advised. "It won't last long."

I was right. Grell's struggles were so exhausting that he subsided after another minute, being quite breathless for the time. He lay still, gasping out oaths—until Handforth jabbed a cap—somebody else's—over his face and held it there by the simple expedient of placing his knee on the top of it.

"The blackguard!" gasped Handforth. "What awful language, by George!"

"How's Nipper?" came De Valerie's inquiry.

"Oh, I'm all right now," I replied. "Just a bit shivery, and I suppose my neck'll be sore for a week. But he didn't do any real harm—although he tried to, the scoundrel!"

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Handforth. "We can't sit on him here all the evening. I suggest lugging him off to the police-station and giving him in charge. He's committed an assault with violence."

"Go hon!" I grinned. "Have you ever heard of an assault that wasn't violent? But we won't take him to the police-station——"

"Why not?" asked Watson.

"I think it would be better to let Nelson Lee know all about it first," I replied. "We'll take the rotter to the school, and the guv'nor will know the best thing to do. Anyhow, we're not going to let him go!"

"Rather not!"

"Mr. Lee's the man to deal with the beast!"

Mr. Grell had commenced struggling again—in consequence, probably, of my decision, which he had undoubtedly heard.

"You brought it on yourself, you scoundrel!" I exclaimed sharply. "You attacked me without provocation, and I don't know what would have happened if these chaps hadn't been near by. You can't do things like that without paying for them."

"Yank him up!" said Handforth. "And look here, my beauty, if you start swearing again I'll tie McClure's coat round your beastly mouth!"

"Oh, will you?" demanded McClure warmly. "What's wrong with your coat?"

"Do you think I want to catch cold?" roared Handforth.

"You—you——"

"Always grumbling!" snapped Handforth. "Can't make a little sacrifice like that, even, without growling about it!"

"If you think I'm going to have my coat tied round that rotter's mouth you're jolly well mistaken!" howled McClure. "You're dotty!"

"Don't start rowing now," I broke in. "Don't take any notice of Handy, McClure—he's a wonderful chap for taking other people's property for unpleasant uses. That cap won't be much good by the time the prisoner's done with it!"

"Cap!" exclaimed Church, who had been looking round. "I wondered where the dickens my cap had got to! Of all the beastly cheek!"

And Church snatched Handforth's cap off and planted it upon his own head. Under ordinary conditions this action would have led to frightful consequences. But Handforth couldn't very well move now without causing trouble generally, and he was too excited to realise the full enormity of Church's crime.

"You wait, you rotter!" he gasped. "Now then, you rotter, up you get!"

This was hardly a nice compliment to Church, for Handforth had used the same disparaging term twice in one breath, thus placing Church in the same category as Mr. Grell. However, Church was thick-skinned.

Our prisoner was a truculent rascal. He gave us great trouble, struggling and kicking continuously. Although there were plenty of us, we only got in one another's way, and Mr. Grell was only pushed a dozen feet in two minutes.

"This won't do," I panted, at last. "Drop him down in the mud, and we'll tie our handkerchiefs round his wrists and ankles. He can't do much harm then—and it'll be easy enough to carry him bodily, five a side."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed De Valerie.

But Mr. Simon Grell didn't think so.

"No need to do that," he muttered. "I'll go quiet, young gents."

"All right, I'll take your word," I said grimly. "I wouldn't take it, only we're strong enough to prevent you escaping. But if you show any sign of violence again, we'll soon have you trussed up. Remember that!"

But Mr. Grell knew that he was beaten, and marched along sullenly, held on both sides by many hands. And in this way we progressed towards the school. It was quite impossible for us all to hold him, so six performed that duty, and the others hovered near, in case of emergency.

I had made out that I wasn't hurt much. But Grell had nearly choked me, and I still felt dizzy and faint from the effect of it. And my throat was extremely sore.

"I vote we take the chap straight to the Head," said Handforth.

"Rot! Nelson Lee's the man——"

"Did you say 'rot' to me, Watson?" roared Handforth.

"Yea, I did——"

"Then I'll trouble you to apologise, or

take a punch on the nose—whichever you like," said Handforth, dropping behind. "And I've got to punch Church's nose, too, Gimme my cap, Church."

"Rata!" retorted Church. "You can wear mine!"

"After that beast's been chewing it?" bel-lowed Handforth. "I'll show you whether you can play those tricks with me, Walter Church!"

He made a grab at his faithful chum, and Church dodged. In doing so he blundered against Farman and the Bo'sun. They lurched—unavoidably, and Mr. Grell recoiled from the concussion.

He let out a savage exclamation, wrenched his arms free, and knocked the unfortunate Church flying, with Farman on top of him. The next second Mr. Grell was tearing up the road at full speed.

"After him!" I roared, in alarm. "Oh, you asses—— Whooop!"

I made that last startled remark as I fell headlong over the Bo'sun's sprawling form. The utmost confusion reigned, and when we had sorted ourselves out our late prisoner was no longer in sight.

"It's no good now!" I snorted. "He's in the wood by this time. Oh, you blithering idiot!"

"I should think he is!" roared Handforth.

"I meant you!" I declared fiercely.

"Me?"

"Didn't you start having a row?" I snapped. "It was all your fault, Handy, and you'll be jolly lucky if you ain't rolled in the mud! Ten or eleven of us, and we couldn't hold one man!"

"It's disgustin'—it is, really!" protested Sir Montie.

"Well, it's no good growling," I said. "We'd better get back to the Ancient House and say nothing about it. There's no sense in making a song. I'll tell the guv'nor all about it, and he'll take the right steps. The less we say about it to the other fellows the better."

"Why?" demanded Watson warmly.

"Well, I was considering Handforth—although he doesn't deserve it," I replied. "He caused this disaster, and he'd be the laughing-stock of the school if it came out—we should all be chipped to death, in fact. Eleven chaps, and we couldn't hold— Oh, what's the good of talking?"

For once in a way Handforth had nothing to say. He knew well enough that the fault was his, and he—and all the others—agreed that it would be better to keep the affair to ourselves.

But Mr. Simon Grell was not escaping so easily.

While we were sorting ourselves out he was very busily engaged. Rushing up the road, he ran clean into the arms of somebody who was walking down. And that somebody was Nelson Lee himself.

The guv'nor was nearly bowled over, but he was instantly on the alert. The fugitive was obviously no ordinary pedestrian in a hurry. He was fleeing, and Nelson Lee's

acute ears detected unmistakable shouts from down the lane. He instinctively grasped the stranger as he was about to tear on.

"Just a minute, please," said the school-master-detective grimly. "I am afraid your undue haste is somewhat suspicious, Mr. Grell."

Captain Jim lashed out furiously with his fists. The fact that he had been recognised drove him into a fresh frenzy. He knew also that this man was Nelson Lee.

"Hang you!" he snarled. "Let me go!"

But if Mr. Grell was strong, Nelson Lee was his match. Furthermore, Captain Jim was partially exhausted from his previous struggles. He knew that he could not hope to escape in a fair tussle.

So he kicked out viciously with his heavy boot.

But Nelson Lee had been expecting that move, and Grell's foot beat the air idly. The effort, indeed, threw him off his balance, and the next moment he was down, with Lee on top of him.

After that attack the detective had excellent cause to detain the man, although he was unaware of the events which had already occurred. Those shouts had certainly warned him that some mystery was afoot, and it would be far better to hold Mr. Grell and ask questions afterwards.

But Captain Jim needed some holding.

He was like a madman, and Lee had all his work cut out to prevent his face being torn and his eyes injured, for Grell did not hesitate to use his formidable finger-nails. Ordinarily, perhaps, he would not have descended to this bestial style of fighting, but he was now half insane with alarm.

But Lee easily guarded himself.

"Calm yourself, you madman!" he shouted angrily. "I'm not going to hurt you——"

"By thunder!" snarled Grell. "I'm goin' to hurt you!"

They had rolled by this time to the side of the lane. And as they struggled amongst the rough grass Grell's hand fell upon a heavy chunk of wood. He swung it up viciously, and it descended upon Lee's head with considerable force, although the blow was not at all a serious one.

In simple language, it made the guv'nor see stars for a few seconds. And it enabled Grell to haul himself free and stagger to his feet. Before the detective could rise Grell dashed across the road, broke through the hedge, and disappeared.

Nelson Lee was on his feet, fuming.

Although his head was aching, he attempted to follow. But just then he spotted the guv'nor, and ran forward. He was in advance of the other chaps, and he managed to have a few words in private.

"Yes, Nipper, it was Grell," said Lee quickly. "I don't know what the man's game is, but he's up to no good. No, I shall take no action—mainly for Mason's sake. Moreover, I am curious to see how the matter develops."

"But the man's dangerous——"

"I don't think so, young 'un—at least,

not at ordinary times," replied Lee. "We must not judge him by this affair. He has probably been drinking, and was in a blind passion. I fancy he will give St. Frank's a wide berth, in any case. By the way, do the other boys know who he is?"

"No, sir; I haven't told them."

"Well, don't," advised the guv'nor. "If we can keep the thing quiet, all the better. Mason is an excellent boy, and I am afraid a great many juniors would make things difficult for him if the truth of this affair went abroad."

The rest of the fellows came up, and Nelson Lee said nothing about his own adventure with Mr. Grell. And they, for their part, readily agreed to keep the thing quiet—more particularly now that their Housemaster had made the request.

Meanwhile, Captain Jim was making for the village across the meadows. As a matter of fact the rascal had crouched behind the hedge, intending to trick Lee if he should follow. And Grell had overheard part of our conversation. He knew, at all events, that no action was to be taken. And he regained the road, lower down, in a much calmer frame of mind.

"A blamed fool—that's wot you are," he told himself savagely. "This business ain't done you no good. By thunder! It's a good thing it wasn't worse—an' all my own fault for losin' my temper!"

He walked on until he reached the White Harp. It was his intention to get in quietly, wash himself, and then take a long drink of spirits. He needed that drink to steady his nerves.

But just as he was about to turn into the gateway he saw a figure emerge from the post-office down the High Street. It was a boy, and Mr. Grell vaguely recognised something familiar about the lad's form.

He was Jack Mason.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF THE ARABIC SIGNS.

CAPTAIN JIM caught his breath in sharply.

"If that ain't the boy, I'll never believe my eyes agin!" he muttered. "It'll be durned queer if I run across him by accident, arter all my efforts to get hold of him. I'll make sure, anyway."

He walked quickly down the dark street. It was only comparatively light just outside one or two shops, and Mason had already left these behind. Mr. Grell meant to make no further mistakes.

"Oblige me with a match, young gent?" he asked, as the junior was passing.

"Sorry!" said Mason. "I haven't got one."

"That's all right, young 'un," said Mr. Grell, recognising the voice. "I didn't really expect—— Why, I've got a match all the time!"

He struck it, and allowed the light to fall

full upon the boy. One glance was sufficient. He recognised his nephew in a moment, for five years had not made much alteration—except, of course, that Mason was now bigger, and that he was no longer a child.

"Why, blame me, if you ain't Jack—Jack Mason!" exclaimed Captain Jim, in a tone of surprise. "My little nevvvy! Well, boy, how are you? I'm real glad to see ye agin, that I am!"

Jack Mason gave a little cry.

"Uncle!" he ejaculated, utterly startled.

"No need to shout, boy!"

"But I thought you were dead! Aunt and I always thought that you had died in Canada!" exclaimed Mason amazedly. "Then Pitt was right—Pitt told me that you were here, and I wouldn't believe him. I thought it was a joke!"

Mr. Grell laughed.

"So that's why you didn't come down to me?" he asked, feeling that this meeting was some little compensation for what had already passed. "Never mind, Jack—never mind! We've met now, ain't we? An' we'll have a nice little chat."

Mason's feelings were somewhat mixed. As a child he had detested his uncle, for the latter had been harsh and cruel. So the news of his death had not been a very great blow. Indeed, the blow of finding that Mr. Grell was alive was even more serious. Jack Mason was not foolish enough to make himself believe that he was pleased to see his uncle. He wasn't; and a vague uneasiness filled him.

"Why have you come down here, uncle?" he asked quietly.

"Wot a question to ask!" protested Mr. Grell. "Ain't I come to see you? Wot did ye think I come down for? Ye don't seem over pleased to greet me, Jack—me as you thought dead, too!"

"If you had written first it would have been better," said Jack. "You've taken me by surprise, uncle, and I hardly know what to say. If you'll come up to the school with me I'll show you round. I suppose you mean to take the last train home?"

Mr. Grell laughed nastily.

"Want to get rid of me—hey?" he suggested. "Well, you won't—not until it pleases me to clear off. See? An' we won't go up to the school, neither. I want a quiet talk with ye, so we'll stroll along this here lane."

They had reached a point on the outskirts of the village where a small lane led across to an outlying farm. It was a lane which was generally deserted after nightfall, and the pair would be certain of privacy there.

Jack Mason was filled with uneasiness and alarm. Having recovered from the first shock of finding that his uncle was alive, he realised that this visit could mean no good. For his uncle was a rascal, and it was past all belief that he had come down to St. Frank's for the mere pleasure of seeing his nephew.

"What do you want to talk about?"

asked Jack. "Have you been home to aunt?"

Mr. Grell snorted.

"Don't talk about your aunt to me!" he snapped. "Yes, I've bin home, an' you won't find me there agin. But look here, Jack, I want to ask you a few questions. I was a bit surprised when I heard that you'd come to this swell school."

"I don't wonder at it," said Jack. "It was a big surprise for me, too."

"I dessay," agreed the other. "But how did ye manage it, boy? I want to know the whole truth, mind. How comes it that an orphan—a nevvvy of a hard-working sailorman—is bein' eddicated at a first-class school of this sort?"

"My fees are being paid——"

"Who by?"

"I don't know exactly," replied Jack. "The lawyers do all the business, uncle. They told me not to worry——"

"That yarn won't wash," put in Mr. Grell grimly. "Lawyers ain't generous folk, that I know of; it ain't their way to pay money for other people. They're simply actin' for somebody else. Who is it? Why are your fees bein' paid——"

"I don't know," interrupted Jack steadily. "I was told that some money had been left for the purpose of sending me to St. Frank's. I always thought that you had died, and that the legacy had been left by you."

"Bah!" jeered Mr. Grell. "D'ye suppose that I'd leave any money o' mine to be wasted on such blamed foolery as this?"

"It was rather extraordinary," said Jack simply.

"That's a sneer at me," retorted Mr. Grell. "Don't you dare to sneer at your own uncle, my boy. I won't stand no sauce, so you'd best understand that straight away. You know perfectly well all about this money, so don't fake up any yarns to me. Understand?"

"I've already told you the truth——"

"You ain't! Who's paying this money?" demanded Captain Jim roughly. "An' how is it bein' supplied? Can you lay your hands on it if you want to?"

"I don't know who is paying it at all, now that you deny all knowledge of it," said Jack, in a puzzled tone. "It's a legacy, and the lawyers told me that everything was perfectly in order. It might have been left by one of my father's relations—somebody I've never seen."

"That's quite likely," agreed Mr. Grell. "What's the exact sum?"

"I don't know, uncle. I never have done!"

"Can't you lay your hands on it?" demanded the other. "Understand, Jack, that I'm your uncle, and your legal guardian. You can't do nothin' without my consent—that's law. An' I don't hold with a kid of your class bein' eddicated at this place. That there money can be put to better use."

Mason was beginning to understand.



"You young Shylock!" grumbled Captain Jim. But he paid over the notes all the same.—(See page 18.)

"I don't see why you should try to spoil everything like this, uncle," he said angrily. "The money was left for me, and I can't touch it. It was only left on condition that it was spent upon my education. The lawyers pay my fees and supply me with pocket-money. That's all I know."

"How much pocket-money do you get?"

"Ten shillings a week, and an extra pound on the first of each month."

"By thunder!" ejaculated Mr. Grell. "That's enough for a man to keep a wife and family! What do you do with all that money?"

"I spend a lot of it on books, and there are all sorts of expenses at a school like St. Frank's. It isn't any too much. Tea in the study every day takes some of it, and there are other things, too."

"Durned foolishness, I call it," said Mr. Grell. "Fifteen bob a week for a kid like you—that's what it amounts to. It's too much, Jack, an' you'll have to send ten bob of it every week to me—understand? I don't hold with a boy having too much money."

"That's not fair——" began Jack hotly.

"I don't want no lip!" snapped Grell. "You're under my control, an' I'm goin' to have my way. What's more, you'll go an' see them lawyers, an' ask if you can't have the money in a lump. I'll take charge of it, an' see that it ain't wasted. When a boy has money left him he don't want to waste it on useless eddication. I'll shove it in the bank and put you to a job. That money will be a nice little nest-egg for ye when ye come of age."

Jack Mason was boiling within him, but he remained calmly outwardly.

"I won't leave St. Frank's!" he exclaimed grimly. "The legacy was especially provided for me, and it wouldn't be right to touch it. Besides, I don't think the lawyers would agree, in any case. They expressly told me that it was for no other purposes."

"Lawyers are the biggest liars on earth," snapped Mr. Grell. "Anyhow, we'll talk about this some other time and make all arrangements. For the present, you'd best hand me all the money you've got."

Mason was rebellious. His uncle had absolutely no right to demand a penny. With regard to the legacy, Jack was not at all alarmed. He knew well enough that Mr. Grell's plan could never be accomplished. The solicitors would never consent to the money being placed in the uncle's care.

Jack wanted to get away—so that he could think over this development alone. So he pulled out all the money he had on him.

"I've only got a few shillings," he said shortly.

"None of your lies!" snapped Mr. Grell. "Bah! What d'ye call this? Five bob an' some coppers—— Hallo, what's this thing?"

He picked up the half of a gold locket which lay in Mason's hand.

"That's nothing much," said Jack. "You've seen it before, uncle—don't you remember? It's got some Arabic writing on it——"

"Fancy you keeping that thing all these years," interrupted Mr. Grell, picking it up. "Why, you had this thing when you was just a little nipper. It's pretty heavy, an' it's solid gold, too. I reckon that would fetch a quid in a pawn-shop!"

Jack pulled his hand away.

"You're not going to take that, uncle!" he protested. "It's a keepsake——"

"I can have a look at it, I suppose?" growled Captain Jim. "Bein' an eddicated man myself, I can read this here lingo. An' I never went to no swell school, neither. Experience is what you want, boy—not learnin'."

It was quite true that Mr. Grell could read Arabic. But this was mainly on account of the fact that he had voyaged frequently to Algiers, Alexandria, and other North African ports. He had spent years there in his earlier life, and had picked up a smattering of all sorts of languages. Arabic was one of those which he could read.

He struck a match, and looked at the half locket interestedly. He did not expect to discover anything of a startling nature; he was merely curious, wishing to look at the Arabic signs again, having vague memories that they were of a curious nature. Indeed, he even remembered a portion of the message.

For this Arabic writing was roughly scratched upon the inner side of the gold casing, several lines of signs being visible. Neither Jack nor his uncle knew how they had come there.

But Mr. Grell was startled with a vengeance!

"What's this?—what's this?" he exclaimed suddenly. "Why, blame me—Curse the match! Here, strike another, boy!"

The match had burnt Captain Jim's fingers, and Jack took the box and struck another. He could not understand why his uncle was so excited. How could this half-locket have affected him so? He had seen it often enough before.

"Well, I'm durned!" ejaculated Mr. Grell. "What's the meanin' of this? How did ye get this, Jack? Where's the other half?"

"What do you mean—how did I get it?"

"Don't fool with me, boy," snapped Grell. "This ain't the half I've allus seen afore—it's the other half—the one what was missin'. How did ye get it, Jack? An' what have ye done with the other——"

"I don't know what you're talking about," interrupted Jack. "You're making a mistake, uncle. That's the half I've always had, and I don't know where the rest of the locket is. Why, what gave you the idea?"

Mr. Grell made no answer for a time. He made Jack strike match after match while

he closely examined the interior of the locket.

And, curiously enough, Grell was right. This actually was the other half! But Jack Mason himself was quite unaware of the fact. The change had come about in a queer manner—and Reginald Pitt had been responsible.

During the previous week Mason had received a visitor in the person of Mr. David Strong, the man who was actually paying his fees at St. Frank's, but who was regarded by Jack as a kindly, impetuous old gentleman.

Well, Mr. Strong had left a small sealed package behind him, quite by accident. And while Mason was seeing his visitor to the station Pitt had seized the opportunity to examine the package—Pitt being a curious youth.

To his astonishment, he had found that the package contained nothing more remarkable than the other half of a locket, which corresponded exactly with the half in Jack's possession. Pitt had seen this, and it happened to be lying in the study at the time. He had compared the two, finding them apparently identical. Even the Arabic writing to his uneducated eye had seemed the same.

In brief, Pitt had replaced the wrong half! He didn't know it at the time, and he didn't know it now. Both he and Mason were certainly uneducated in Arabic, and they were not aware of the change. Pitt had fastened up the package again, and, naturally, he had said nothing. In consequence, Mason was in total ignorance of the fact that the package contained the missing half of his locket.

Pitt was interested—and with reason. For he found out that Mason had possessed his half since a baby. And yet he had only met Mr. Strong a few months before. It was rather remarkable that the old gentleman should possess the half-locket—more particularly as he was unaware that Jack had the other half. To Pitt's mind it was rather a mix-up, and yet he could not straighten it out without admitting that he had opened the package. So Reginald Pitt remained silent.

It was quite bewildering, therefore, to Jack Mason. He positively believed that his uncle had made a mistake. The very idea that this was not the half-locket he had always possessed was preposterous. How could it be anything else? Jack believed that it had been in his possession all the time.

"I don't understand you, uncle," he said, after Mr. Grell had spent fully three minutes in examining the locket. "You must be wrong—"

"Don't be a 'young fool!' snapped Mr. Grell, his eyes blazing excitedly. "Do you think I ain't got eyes? This writ'n' is quite different—I've never seen this half afore. Where's the other? Out with it, boy!"

"I tell you I haven't seen it," protested

Jack angrily. "There is no other half. This is the piece I've always had—"

"Don't tell them lies to me!" rapped out the man. "You can say that till you're blue in the face, but I shan't believe ye! I want the whole locket—complete. I shan't take it away from ye, so don't be a young fool. I only wan to have a look at the writin'."

"But I don't know—"

"There you go agin!" roared Mr. Grell. "I'll be at the stile to-morrow evening at half-past seven, just the same as I was to-night. An' you've got to come round an' bring me the other half. Now don't make no objections. You've got it, an' you needn't tell me that you ain't!"

Jack sighed.

"I don't understand what all the fuss is about," he said quietly. "If you won't believe me, uncle, you won't. But I tell you that you have made a blunder. How could I have the other half when I've never seen it? You must have forgotten, or you're mixing this locket up with another one. Give it back to me, please."

"There's no hurry," said Mr. Grell. "Don't forget to be at the stile at half-past seven, and bring down the other half. I'll give ye the whole locket arter I've looked at the two of 'em. An' I'm givin' to keep this—"

"You're not!" shouted Jack angrily. "Give it to me!"

The lad knew his uncle well, and he was quite convinced that Mr. Grell would make for the nearest pawnshop in the morning. And then Jack would never see his keepsake again. The talk of the missing half was bewildering, but Mason was not thinking of that now. He only knew that his sentimental little prize was being stolen from him.

"I'll not give it to ye!" snapped Mr. Grell. "An' you needn't look so alarmed over a silly locket. Arter you've shown me the other half I'll let you have it back, and not afore. To-morrow evening—"

But Jack Mason was taking no chances. The locket was still in his uncle's palm, and Jack suddenly thrust out his hand and snatched the locket away. Mr. Grell gave a roar, but it was too late.

"You young whelp!" he bellowed. "Gimme that—"

But Jack was fleeing down the road like a deer. Perhaps it hadn't been the right thing to do, but if he had neglected the opportunity he wouldn't have seen the locket again. Captain Jim tore after him.

"Come back, durn you!" he shouted furiously. "I'll skin ye alive for this! Bring the locket complete to-morrow night—"

But Mr. Grell's orders fell on deaf ears. He was a fleet runner for a somewhat heavy man, but Mason was like a greyhound by comparison. He shot away in the darkness, and only slowed down after he had reached the main lane to St. Frank's.

He felt excited and worried. But there was one cause for satisfaction. His precious locket was safe, and he had no intention of handing it to his uncle again.

CHAPTER VI.

PITT MAKES A BARGAIN.

REGINALD PITT looked at his study-mate curiously, although Mason was unaware of the Serpent's examination. The two of them were at prep. in Study E, and there was silence in the little apartment.

Pitt knew well enough that something had upset Jack. He was quiet enough, and he went on with his work in his usual methodical manner. But, at the same time, his face was flushed, and he could not conceal the anxiety in his eyes.

"Uncle Simon!" Pitt told himself. "That's the trouble."

Pitt had met Mr. Grell, and he was not surprised that Mason was worried. But Pitt asked no questions, instinctively realising that he would get no satisfaction. And, after all, it was not his business. He had no reason to love Captain Jim, for the latter had turned upon him on one occasion and had hurled him into a ditch. This was in a fit of fury, when Pitt had failed to bring Mason to his uncle.

Neither was Pitt on very good terms with his study-mate. The pair had had numerous quarrels, and it did not make Pitt any the happier when he realised that he was the cause of them all. Mason was certainly not to blame, being one of the mildest juniors in the Remove. At the same time, Mason had a temper, and he knew how to use his fists. Fullwood knew that—to his sorrow.

Pitt was inclined to be pleasant—especially after the affair in Fullwood's study. But when prep. was over Mason walked out of the room without a word. This was rather unfortunate, for Pitt took it as a slight, and he frowned unpleasantly.

As a matter of fact Mason was too busy with his thoughts to realise that his action seemed rather queer. He quite forgot that Pitt was in the study, and walked out absent-mindedly. He wanted to think—to come to a decision.

And, pacing in the dark Triangle, he came to one.

Grell was not likely to come to the school, and Mason decided that it would be wiser to say nothing for the present. If his uncle actually did pay a visit, Jack would have no hesitation in appealing to Nelson Lee or the Head.

Jack felt quite justified in his action. Grell had no right to the locket, and he would certainly have stuck to it if Mason had not acted promptly. What the consequences would be remained to be seen, but Jack was not nervous.

Handforth and De Valente and all the rest didn't even know that the man they had struggled with in the lane was Mason's uncle, and the affair was allowed to blow over without any reference being made to it.

I did not fail to notice a difference in Mason that evening, and I guessed that he had seen his precious uncle and was far from pleased. However, it was no concern of mine, and I asked no questions.

Mason seemed rather absent-minded when I had a chat with him about football—which was most remarkable. For Jack was as keen as mustard on footer, and there was a distinct prospect that he would play for St. Frank's in the next big match. In fact it was as good as settled, for Mason had proved himself to be a player of quite unusual ability.

His preoccupation, therefore, was an excellent measure of the worry in his mind. Only a very serious affair would have caused him to treat football as a kind of side-interest; and that was certainly his attitude just then. Seeing this, I dropped the subject and left him alone.

I had half a mind to ask what the trouble was and to offer my help. But I have a horror of prying into other people's affairs, and I didn't want Mason to think that I was inquisitive. It would be better to wait a little longer and see how events turned.

On the following morning the boy from Bermondsey was more cheerful. A good sleep had driven the worry away, and he told himself there was nothing to concern himself about. Grell was down there for just what he could get, and Mason did not consider it his duty to obey his uncle.

With regard to the appointment for that evening, he didn't intend to keep it. Considering what had happened, he couldn't. And Captain Jim would certainly not expect the boy to be there.

Whether he expected Mason or not, however, Mr. Grell turned up. He thought, perhaps, that Jack would be afraid to keep away, and it would be just as well to be on the spot.

Naturally, Mason would not bring the locket. Grell was quite sure of that, but if he could get hold of the boy again he would adopt different tactics. Force was evidently useless, for Jack resisted it. So persuasion must be tried—persuasion and an assumed kindness.

But Jack wasn't there.

The long road between the village and the school was dark and deserted. The night was quite clear, the moon shining somewhere in the sky, although completely hidden by the high trees of Belton Wood. The lane was in deep gloom, and there was a touch of frost in the air.

Mr. Grell swore savagely as he glanced at his watch and found that the time was a quarter to eight. Jack wasn't coming, and Grell felt as though he could shake the boy like a rat. At that very moment Jack Mason was seated in his study, busy with his books.

Pitt was disgusted. If Mason hadn't been such a "swot," life would have been easier in Study E. But whenever Pitt wanted to talk, Mason was deeply immersed in work. It was most annoying. Even if Pitt interrupted, he only received short replies, and this sort of thing irritated him.

Pitt was a fellow who liked companionship, and it was only natural, perhaps, that he should seek the society of Fullwood and Co., for he was not made welcome in any

other study. Juniors were polite, but Pitt knew that his presence was not desired. From one point of view, therefore, Mason was rather to blame for the feeling which existed between the two juniors.

Pitt lounged out into the Triangle at about eight o'clock, having finished his prep. He always "skipped" over it as hurriedly as possible. From the Triangle he strolled into the road, half deciding to walk down to the village in order to obtain some cigarettes. But he hesitated, wondering if the game was worth the candle. Pitt's desire for smoking was not nearly so great as it had been.

A form loomed up out of the gloom.

"That you, Jack?" came a soft voice.

"No, it isn't Jack," retorted Pitt. "You're Grell, ain't you? What the deuce did you mean by chucking me into the ditch the other day—"

"Why, it's Master Pitt," said Captain Jim, coming forward. "I'm glad you've come out, young shaver. I want a word with ye."

"I'm not particularly anxious," said Pitt shortly.

"Don't bear no malice, young 'un," said Grell pleasantly. "I was wild when I handled you rough. It's up to me to apologise, an' I don't want you to think I'm a bad sort o' chap. That's square enough, ain't it?"

Pitt laughed.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked calmly.

"Why, I'm only bein' friendly-like—"

"Is that all?" asked Pitt. "I thought you were just resorting to flattery—or, at least, that you wanted to make things genial again. You're not the kind of man to waste words over a junior unless you want something out of it, Mr. Grell. And I haven't forgiven you for that ducking, so don't think I have."

"Well, that's unkind of ye," said Mr. Grell. "I didn't mean no harm, an' I've apologised. Wot more can I do? I come here to meet my nevvie, but the young rascal hasn't turned up."

"Did he know that you were coming?"

"Yes."

The Serpent laughed again.

"He didn't say anything about it," he remarked. "I left him in the study five minutes ago, busy at his work. That's how much he cared for your appointment, Mr. Grell. I don't think he likes you, somehow."

Captain Jim scowled.

"I'll make him smart!" he exclaimed savagely. "But, look here, Pitt, if you're willin' to lend me a hand I'll make it worth your while. If you can do somethin' for me you won't have no cause to grumble."

Pitt became interested.

"It all depends upon what you want," he replied. "If you're asking me to do anything dirty I shan't listen to you. I don't mind anything reasonable, but there's a limit. And what would it be worth?"

Pitt remembered that he was stony, and with no prospect of "raising the wind." Pitt hated being stony, and he was willing to seize any chance to improve his finances.

"I'll tell you wot it's worth when I know a bit more," said Captain Jim. "I'm Mason's uncle, an' the young varmint has deliberately disobeyed me. I s'pose you'll agree that I'm the right chap to control him?"

"I won't pass an opinion," said Pitt calmly.

"Well, you've got a fair nerve, but I reckon you're just the kid for my job," said Mr. Grell. "I'll git to the point. Do you know anythin' about a gold locket which Jack's got?"

"I know quite a lot about it," replied Pitt.

"By thunder!" murmured Mr. Grell. "We'd best stroll down the road, Pitt. You an' me can have a friendly little chat. Now, about this here locket. Do you know where you can lay your hand on it?"

"It's in Mason's pocket," replied Pitt. "I can't very well get at it, even if I wanted to. I don't happen to be a thief."

Captain Jim laughed heartily.

"You will have your joke!" he exclaimed, as they walked down the road. "Thief? That's all rot, young shaver. Ain't I the kid's uncle? That locket ain't his no more than it's yours. It's mine, an' he won't give it up to me. If you'll git hold of it you'll be doin' me a service, an' there'll be no question of thievin' about it. A man can't steal his own property!"

"That's one way of looking at it," remarked Pitt. "But why the deuce are you so eager to get hold of that half-locket? It's not worth much, is it?"

"Just a bit of sentiment," explained Mr. Grell. "That belonged to my pore mother, an' I've allus wanted it with me. But wot's that you said about half a locket? Ain't it all there?"

"Mason's only got half," replied the Serpent.

He did not mean to mention anything about the other half. He wasn't supposed to know of its existence, for it was in Mr. Strong's sealed package. And Pitt saw no reason why he should reveal that fact to Grell.

"Only half!" repeated Captain Jim. "That's queer. I allus thought he had the complete locket. If you'll git me that half, Pitt, I'll give you a quid. Good enough? A quid, all for yourself."

Pitt considered.

"I wouldn't do it at all, but I'm hard-up just now," he said at last. "And, as you say, it's not a question of stealing. You're his uncle, and it's only a family affair."

"That's all," agreed Mr. Grell promptly. "Well, wot d'ye say?"

"I want the quid—now," replied Pitt. "I shall feel safer if you pay in advance, Mr. Grell. I'll bring you the half-locket to-morrow evening."

"I don't pay on them terms," said the man curtly. "I don't mind lettin' you have five bob on account—"

"All right," said Pitt. "The deal's off."

"You aint no ordinary kid, durned if you are!" declared Mr. Grell. "Let's talk this

over a bit more. Jack's got the whole locket—I'll swear to that. An' for why? Because the piece I saw last night wasn't the half he allus had. See? He must have the two, or it couldn't have been changed."

Pitt nearly whistled. So he had mixed up the two halves after opening Mr. Strong's package! That action, evidently, was leading to unexpected consequences. And Pitt was very short of money.

"How much would you give to get the whole locket?" he asked slowly.

"Five quid—down!" replied Mr. Grell at once.

"It's not worth two—intrinsically," said the junior. "Look here, Mr. Grell. if you're willing to give a fiver for the locket, it stands to reason that it must be worth more. I bet those Arabic signs——"

"Bosh!" interrupted Captain Jim hastily. "I dossay it ain't worth more than two quid, rightly speakin'; but it's worth five to me because I'm a sentimental chap."

"You look it!" remarked Pitt calmly. "Still, it's no business of mine, and I could certainly do with a fiver. I didn't mean to say anything about it, but I can't see that it'll do any harm, and five pounds is five pounds."

"You never spoke a truer word!" said the man eagerly. "I knew young Jack was lyin' to me, the young varmint!"

"He wasn't lying at all," Pitt exclaimed. "He doesn't know anything about the other half. It's in a little sealed package, and it was left here by mistake by a Mr. Strong, a friend of Mason's."

"An' how do you know the locket's inside?"

"Well, I haven't got eyes like X-rays," replied Pitt. "How do you think I know? I opened it, of course, and did it up again, while Mason wasn't there. I suppose I'm a fool to tell you anything about it. But if the thing's worth a fiver to you, I don't see why I shouldn't make a bit for myself. You're Mason's uncle, and you must have a right to the things."

Pitt tried to make himself believe that he was justified; that Mr. Grell had every right to the gold locket. But Pitt was unsuccessful. He didn't convince himself at all. He knew he was doing wrong; but he didn't draw back.

"How are you goin' to get the things, anyhow?" asked Grell.

"Well I don't want to take any risks, if that's what you mean," replied Pitt. "The game wouldn't be worth it. But if you'll make it six quid I'll outline a little scheme which will be as safe as houses. Is it a go?"

"Let's hear the scheme first."

"If you adopt it, will you pay me six quid?"

"Yes, you young Shylock!" growled Captain Jim. "You seem to think I'm a bloated millionaire! You'll skin me out, hang you!"

Pitt grinned, taking no notice of this statement. It wasn't quite true, for Mr. Grell had over ten pounds in his pocket at that moment, and he knew where he could lay hands on a further supply if necessary.

The scheme was outlined, and Mason's uncle was enthusiastic. It was close upon nine o'clock before the pair parted, and then the gates were closed. This didn't worry Reginald Pitt, for he slipped over the wall and stole into the Ancient House without being seen.

He felt extremely satisfied with the evening's events. Exactly one hour later, after getting into bed, his feelings had altered. The satisfaction was lacking, and he felt that he was several kinds of a rotter.

But the Serpent had committed himself now, and the scheme had to go through. Moreover, he had three pounds in his pocket, and three more were to come.

And that, at all events, was some consolation for his conscience. The very fact that he had a conscience was surprising. It even surprised Pitt himself.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCHEME—AND A HITCH!

"TELEGRAM, Master Mason."

Tubbs, the Ancient House page, came into Study E on the following afternoon, which happened to be a half-holiday. Mason was in the apartment alone, attired in footer rig-out, for he was to play in the House match.

"For Pitt?" he asked. "All right, Tubby. Put it on the table."

"It's for you, Master Mason," said the page-boy.

Jack took it wonderingly, for he couldn't imagine why a telegram should come for him. Tubbs was about to leave, when Pitt strolled in, smiling.

"I'm going to watch the match this afternoon, Mason," he said affably. "Hallo! Who's the telegram for?"

"Master Mason, sir," said Tubbs.

The page-boy passed out, and Pitt closed the door.

"No gadding about this afternoon," he said, grinning. "I'm going to be quite a good boy and watch you playing football. The fact is, I'm getting rather interested in footer. Nipper's never given me a trial, but that only because I didn't want one. But I'm not so dusty——"

Pitt paused as he realised he was addressing the empty air. Mason had opened his telegram, and was reading it with great eagerness.

"Oh, how ripping!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining.

"Somebody left you a fortune?" asked Pitt politely.

"Mr. Strong will be in Bannington this afternoon," said Jack. "I shall have to go over to see him, of course. He's asked me to. It's about that package he left behind."

"How's the team going to fare without you?" asked Pitt.

"Oh!" Mason's face clouded. "I shall have to miss the match," he went on regretfully. "Look at the telegram."

Pitt took it, and read the message:

"Will be at Bull Hotel, Bannington, this afternoon. Will you bring that package over to me—the one I left behind? Shall be very pleased to see you, Jack. Don't fail."

DAVID STRONG."

"I suppose you'll have to go," said Pitt. "But there's no need for you to miss the match, that I can see. 'This afternoon' covers two or three hours, and the match'll be over by four. You can easily run over to Bannington on your bike after that. Mr. Strong will be waiting till five, I'll bet."

"Yes, I suppose he will," said Jack. "That's a good idea, Pitt. I should have gone right off if you hadn't given me that tip. The wire was dispatched at Helmford. I see. Where's that?"

"Oh, a good way beyond Bannington," replied Pitt. "I suppose your venerable friend went to Helmford on business, so thought he might as well collect that package of his at the same time. Rather queer he didn't come to St. Frank's, though."

"Oh, I expect the trains were awkward," said Jack. "If he had come here, he might have missed a good connection—and he knows I don't mind going over. Coming out?"

They left the study, Pitt in the rear. There was a smile upon the Serpent's face, but it was scarcely a contented one. He was telling himself how easily the new boy had fallen into the trap. Mason never suspected that the wire was not from Mr. Strong at all—he had no earthly reason to suspect such a thing.

The House match was nearly due to start, and Pitt kept his word and was an interested spectator. It was the first time he had stood by the ropes on Little Side since his arrival at St. Frank's.

He thought he would be bored. He wasn't. He found himself yelling with enthusiasm, and crested quite a lot of attention. It was unusual to see Reginald Pitt cheering his side in a football match. But the fact remained—and it was an excellent sign.

I noticed Pitt's attitude on several occasions: I noticed his flushed face and his sparkling eyes. This all told of a change, and I began to feel that the day would soon come when the Serpent would cast aside his old habits altogether.

It is not my intention to go into any lengthy description of this match. It was quite an ordinary affair, the only outstanding feature being Mason's wonderful work in the forward line. He surpassed all expectations, and converted an easy victory for us into a positive triumph. He scored six goals in that match, and three of them were Mason's. The College House Eleven just managed to score a single goal within two minutes of the finish—when we had grown careless. I even suspect that Handforth, in the fullness of his heart, allowed the ball to slip past him into the net—Handforth being goalie. Edward Oswald was a kind-hearted fellow, and he knew that we could afford to give the Monks one goal.

Jack Mason's fate was sealed from that

hour—a fate he delighted in. He was positively booked for his colours in the Junior Eleven, and there wasn't a single fellow in the Remove who raised a protest. It would have been madness to play a match without including Mason.

He was a modest youth, however, and when everybody looked for him to congratulate him, he had bunched off the field. This wouldn't have been the case, perhaps, if Jack had had plenty of time. But he was anxious to get off to Bannington, in order to keep his appointment with the supposed Mr. Strong. Pitt went up into the dormitory with him, and offered to cycle over to Bannington at the same time.

"Thanks," said Mason. "I shall be awfully glad, Pitt. I say, can't we get on a bit better together?"

"That's what we are doing," said Pitt calmly. "I've been a bit of a beast sometimes, Mason, but you mustn't take any notice of me."

As Pitt was uttering the words he felt how hollow his first remark was, and how truthful the latter. He had certainly been "a beast"; and to say that they were getting on better together was a mere farce. For Pitt was even now, at that very moment, planning a contemptible trick upon his study-mate.

He was half-minded to give it up, then, and there—to warn Mason of the whole scheme. Unfortunately the thought of the three pounds to come prompted him otherwise. And Pitt, for all his faults, was a fellow of his word. When he made an arrangement, he stuck to it.

He and Mason started off soon after four and cycled briskly along the road to Bannington. Reginald Pitt's plan was a cunning one. Mr. Grell had wanted him to obtain the locket, but that would have involved a certain amount of risk for Pitt.

The present scheme left him out of it completely, and as Grell was satisfied, everything was all right. It had been Pitt's idea to send the wire. Mason would go over, taking the package—and, naturally, the half-locket of his own. Once within the private parlour of the Bull Hotel he would find himself face to face with his uncle. And Mr. Grell knew that he would have no difficulty in obtaining what he wanted.

Pitt himself did nothing—except think out the scheme. Also, he had been on hand when the telegram arrived in case Mason should suspect treachery. Pitt would have scoffed at the idea under those circumstances, and would have persuaded Mason to go. But that had not been necessary.

He had no intention of going all the way with Mason. His idea was to stay behind in Bannington on the pretext of doing some shopping. The Bull Hotel was on the further outskirts. Then Pitt would cycle on and arrive just in time to "rescue" Mason from his uncle—after Grell had obtained what he wanted. In this way Mason would not suspect him of being implicated; and would, indeed, believe the opposite.

But while the pair were cycling on, some-

thing was happening at St. Frank's which was destined to make a very big alteration in the scheme. I was chatting with Nelson Lee in the latter's study.

The subject of our conversation was football, and I had just changed into ordinary clothes. Sir Montie and Tommy were preparing tea in Study C.

"A remarkable victory, Nipper," the giv'nor was saying. "If you go on at that rate the College House will have no look-in at all. And you say that Mason is quite good?"

"I didn't," I replied. "Good isn't the word, sir. It's no exaggeration to say that he's one of the finest men in the Junior Eleven; in fact, there are only about two chaps who can touch his form."

"One of them, of course, being yourself?" smiled Lee.

I grinned.

"I'm a modest chap, giv'nor," I replied. "There are certain things which I leave you to imagine for yourself. But, really, Mason — Oh, rats!"

The telephone-bell was ringing, and Lee pulled the instrument towards him.

"Yes," he said. "St. Frank's—that's quite right. You are speaking to Mr. Lee, of the Ancient House— Oh, yes—I didn't quite catch the name? Mr. David Strong? Oh, quite so! How are you, Mr. Strong? Your voice sounds remarkably robust!"

I looked on and listened interestedly.

"Yes, of course you may speak to Mason," said the giv'nor. "If you will hold the line, my dear sir, I will send for the lad at once. I have no doubt that he will be most delighted to speak to you."

"Another job for me!" I growled.

Nelson Lee turned his head.

"It is certainly another job for you, Nipper. Just run round and fetch Mason, will you? Mr. Strong is waiting."

"Where's he speaking from?" I asked.

"Brighton, you young rascal," said the giv'nor. "What on earth do you want to know that for? Tell Mason to come here."

I left the study. Brighton wasn't so very far off, and the 'phone call was quite a normal one. Mr. Strong possibly had an idea of getting Mason to join him for the week-end at the seaside, although the weather wasn't very pleasant.

"Seen Mason?" I asked, as Church and McClure passed me.

"Not since the match," replied McClure. "Ain't he having tea?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I replied.

We walked up the passage together, and I turned into Study E. One look was sufficient—the room was empty, and there was certainly no sign of tea. If I found it necessary to chase Mason all over the House, Mr. Strong would be cut off by the time I found him.

"Gone out, by the look of it," I murmured. "Well, it's no good—"

And then I paused. I had caught sight of a familiar-looking envelope in the fireplace—a telegram-envelope. This immediately sug-

gested things, and I looked round the room with a searching eye.

My quest was a short one. Upon the bookshelf, neatly folded, was a telegram. I felt justified in reading it—especially after seeing that Jack Mason's name was upon the crumpled envelope.

"What's this?" I muttered, as I read the message. "Bull Hotel, Bannington? How the dickens can Mr. Strong be in Bannington if he's in Brighton?"

The thing was impossible, and I frowned with perplexity. At all events, there was a discrepancy somewhere. Mr. Strong would hardly tell the giv'nor that he was at Brighton if he wasn't; and, in just the same way, Mr. Strong would hardly ask Jack to go to him in Bannington if he wasn't there.

This led to a startling idea.

Something was wrong—either the 'phone call or the telegram. It suggested that the man at the other end of the wire was not Mr. Strong at all; or, it was just as probable that the telegram was a faked one.

In any case, it was quite evident that Jack Mason had gone off to Bannington, so he couldn't go to the 'phone. I hastened back to Nelson Lee's study and found him chatting amiably with Mr. Strong about things in general.

"Why, Nipper—" began the giv'nor.

"Mason's out, sir," I said, in a low voice. "And look at this. I found it in his study."

Nelson Lee continued talking into the transmitter while he glanced at the telegram. His eyes grew a little grim, but he showed no other emotion.

"You are in Brighton, I understand, Mr. Strong?" he asked.

"Yes—yes, quite so," came the reply.

"Would it be inquisitive for me to ask if you have been there all day?"

"My dear sir, I have no secrets to keep," chuckled Mr. Strong. "I came down by the morning express from London. As I explained a few moments ago, I have an idle half-hour just now, and the whim seized me to ring up St. Frank's. You really must forgive me for being such a nuisance."

"My dear Mr. Strong, I am quite delighted to have this little chat," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, I urge you to ring me up whenever you have an opportunity—and to pay me a personal visit, too."

"I'm afraid I can't get to St. Frank's just yet," replied Mr. Strong. "I am off to France to-morrow, and shall stay there a week or two on business connected with my estate. That is one reason why I wished to have a few words with Jack. I want to bring him a little souvenir back, and he shall have a choice—"

"I am very sorry, Mr. Strong, but I have just learned that Mason is not in the school at the moment," said Nelson Lee. "It appears that he has gone to Bannington, and will probably not be back for an hour."

"There!" ejaculated Mr. Strong. "I knew it! Even while I was ringing up I had an idea that something like this would turn up. How annoying, Mr. Lee. But no matter—"

the affair is of no importance. Please forgive me for bothering you so needlessly."

Two minutes later Nelson Lee hung up the receiver, and then he turned in his swivel chair with the telegram in his hand.

"Now, Nipper, what is this?" he said intently.

"Well, I'm hanged if I know, sir," I replied. "Why didn't you ask Mr. Strong about it? Why didn't you ask him if he'd sent a wire?"

"Because it is perfectly obvious, young 'un, that Mr. Strong did not send a wire."

"Do you think you were really speaking to Mr. Strong?" I asked.

Nelson Lee smiled at me.

"I think you'll give me credit, Nipper, for being sufficiently wide awake to detect a deception of that sort," he said. "It was Mr. Strong right enough—and it is the telegram which is at fault."

"But why didn't you mention it to him, guv'nor?" I persisted. "He ought to be told, you know."

"No doubt, Nipper—and he will be told. Indeed, I intended informing him of the fact at once, but then I learned that he is off for France in the morning. Now, a man who is just about to leave the country would not want a worrying matter of that sort put before him. I think we are quite capable of dealing with it ourselves, Nipper. Mr. Strong can hear about it when he returns, in a week or two."

"Oh, that alters it!" I said. "But what does this wire mean?"

Nelson Lee rose from his chair.

"That is what we are now about to find out, young 'un," he replied grimly.

CHAPTER VIII.

NOT ACCORDING TO PROGRAMME.

SOMETHING was decidedly amiss.

"It is most fortunate that Mr. Strong happened to ring up this afternoon," remarked Nelson Lee, as he lit a cigarette. "But for that fact, Nipper, we should have had no warning. And, let me tell you, there is not a moment to be lost. How long ago did Mason start out for Bannington?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Then find out, Nipper—find out!" rapped out the guv'nor. "I will get the car ready, and we'll start within five minutes."

"Can Montie and Tommy come, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"No, certainly not! Still, I don't know that it matters," added Lee. "There's no reason why they shouldn't have the benefit of the ride. Since Mr. Strong is in Brighton it is obviously impossible for him to be in Bannington. A telegram is a most handy method of deception, Nipper, since there is no handwriting to recognise, and it carries with it an urgency which is liable to disarm any possible suspicion. Such a trick could not deceive us—but Mason is inexperienced."

"Who's the culprit, then?" I asked.

"Why, Grell, of course—Mason's uncle," replied Lee. "Who else? You know as well as I do that Grell has been trying to see his nephew for the past two or three days, and it now appears that he is after a certain sealed package. Suggestive, Nipper. There is something behind all this."

"That's what I've been thinking, sir——"

"Well, don't think now," interrupted the guv'nor. "Be at the gates within five minutes, and not a moment later. We don't know the exact nature of this plot, but we do know that every minute is of value."

I hurried off, and soon learned that Mason had taken his departure with Pitt about twenty minutes before, so I had only missed him by a narrow margin. And with Pitt, too! Why was Pitt with him? Knowing the Serpent's record, I was a bit suspicious.

Grell was undoubtedly responsible for the trick. Instead of finding Mr. Strong at Bannington, Mason would find his own uncle. Nelson Lee could not have interfered if Captain Jim acted openly. But he had used another man's name and had descended to deliberate forgery—for that is what it amounted to. Therefore the guv'nor was justified in taking a hand.

I burst into Study C like a whirlwind.

"About time you came!" said Watson.

"Tea's been ready——"

"Bust the tea!" I interrupted. "Chuck it all aside, and come with me!"

"Begad! You're frightfully disturbin', Nipper," complained Montie. "What's the meanin' of all this whirlwind? Don't glare at me, old boy——"

"We're just going off to Bannington," I explained. "Mason's been tricked by some rotter, and the guv'nor's going to rescue him. If you don't like to come with us, you can stay behind. We're going by car."

"Begad! How beastly interestin'!" said Tregellis-West, rising to his feet. "I'm always there when there's somethin' on the go. Excitement suits me wonderfully, an' I thrive—— Begad! Where are you goin', dear boys?"

We hadn't time to wait for Montie to finish. Tommy Watson was full of enthusiasm in a moment, and we hurried down the passage. Sir Montie, with a sigh, followed us. We only paused for a moment at the cloak-room to obtain our caps and overcoats. And when we got outside we found Nelson Lee's car shooting round from the garage, with the guv'nor at the wheel.

"Jump in, boys!" he exclaimed briskly.

"Well, Nipper?"

"About twenty-five minutes ago, guv'nor," I said, knowing what he meant. "Pitt's with him, and they must be nearly there by this time."

"All the more reason for us to hurry," said Nelson Lee.

We scrambled on board, and shot out into the roadway, to the enormous indignation of Handforth, who was rushing up behind with the object of asking us where we were off to. Handforth hated being left out of anything; he considered it a slight. But he was certainly left behind on this occasion.

We simply whizzed down to the village, the cold November air cutting against our faces as we sped along. But this was nothing compared with our rate of progress once we started along the straight road to Bannington.

"Ripping, ain't it?" I exclaimed.

"I think it's quite possible that things will be rippin' if we meet anybody comin' round that corner," gasped Sir Montie. "We shall never do it, dear old boy. I do hope the fall won't spoil my trousers!"

"You silly ass!" panted Watson. "We're all right."

Nelson Lee was certainly driving furiously—in official language—but the corner was negotiated with perfect safety. That ride to Bannington, in fact, was nearly a record. Reckoning the time Mason must have taken on his bicycle, we couldn't be very far behind.

In the High Street I caught sight of Reginald Pitt. He saw us, too, and he waved his hand and smiled as we shot past. This made me think. It looked as though Pitt had nothing to do with the affair, otherwise he would have been with Mason now. The probable explanation was that Mason and Pitt had simply ridden to the town together, each on his own business.

There were ten-mile-an-hour limits within the town, but Nelson Lee ignored them completely. We went through Bannington at fully thirty, and two stout policemen gazed after us with strong disapproval.

The Bull Hotel wasn't well known to me, but I had heard of it. The place was only small, and had a somewhat questionable reputation. As we swung round a bend we came within sight of it, and saw a bicycle standing outside.

Jack Mason was already there, but he hadn't been there for long.

He had arrived about ten minutes before us, full of eagerness to see Mr. Strong, whom I really believe he regarded as a father. Although thinking that Mr. Strong was poor and shabby, Mason actually loved him. He had saved the old chap's life, and the pair had spent many happy hours together.

Jack had not had a father that he could remember, so it wasn't surprising that he should be so attached to Mr. David Strong. The boy's home-life had been a constant misery ever since he could remember. He hadn't known what it was to have kindly words spoken to him until he met Mr. Strong.

So he dismounted from his bicycle, eager and expectant. There was a small "hotel" entrance, and he went in that way, encountering an untidily clad woman in the passage. She looked at him curiously.

"Is Mr. Strong here?" asked Jack.

"Mr. Strong? Yes, he's in the parlour," said the woman, jerking her hand. "In that doo', there."

Mason walked down the passage to the door of the little parlour. He certainly wondered why Mr. Strong should have come

to such a disreputable place as this; but it was probably cheap.

Grell had taken the precaution to give himself the name of Mr. Strong at this inn. It disarmed Mason at once, even if he had been suspicious. He walked straight into the parlour, never dreaming of treachery.

"Hallo, Mr. Strong!" he exclaimed cheerily. "I got your wire——"

"An' I've got you, Master Jack!" said a harsh, jeering voice. "Now then, my lad, I'm goin' to have a straight talk with you!"

Mason turned, gasping with dismay. Simon Grell was behind him, having been just near the door. And he turned the key in the lock and removed it. The lock wasn't much good, certainly, because the woodwork was old, and the lock looked as though it had come out of the Ark.

"Uncle!" muttered Jack, staring.

"Yes—uncle!" sneered Captain Jim. "Surprised, ain't you? Didn't expect to see me here, hey? Well, you——"

"Where's Mr. Strong?" demanded Jack hotly. "That woman out there told me that Mr. Strong was in here. What have you done with him?"

"Raten him for my tea," said Mr. Grell calmly. "You silly young fool; did ye think that the old dolt was here? I allus thought you was——"

"But he sent me a wire!" shouted Mason.

"Did he? You recognised the hand-writin', I suppose?" sneered Grell. "It was me who sent that telegram, Jack, my lad. I used somebody else's name just becoss I knew it would fetch ye. You wouldn't come for your uncle, you young hound."

Mason started back, with clenched fists.

"You've tricked me!" he exclaimed fiercely.

"You don't say so," smiled Mr. Grell. "Why, it was all arranged—— Now, then! None o' your foolery! Get away from that window, d'ye hear?? An, if you shout out for help, it'll be the worse for ye!"

Mason regarded his uncle steadily.

"I'm going to shout for help," he declared. "You've no right to keep me here——"

"No right!" roared Mr. Grell. "No right, an' I'm your own uncle! You impudent young whelp! I'll show you whether I've the right!"

Jack looked round him helplessly.

"An' don't make no noise, neither!" went on Captain Jim. "You've got your own safety to think of, remember. You wouldn't like to be kicked out of that big school, would you?"

"I don't know what you mean!" said Jack angrily.

"Then I'll tell ye," said Mr. Grell, taking hold of the boy's arm. "If you make any fuss, it'll get to the ears of your Headmaster. I'll see to that, mind. How would it look, hey? A junior boy from St. Frank's visitin' a low pub in Bannington—a low hovel like this here Bull Hotel. How would it look, Master Jack? Why, you'd get sacked within an hour!"

Mason could have cried aloud with rage. Grell was right. If it reached the ears of

the Head that he had visited this place he would certainly get into dire disgrace—it might even mean expulsion.

"Well," he muttered. "What do you want?"

"Ah, that's better," said Captain Jim, lighting a cigar. "That's a heap better, my young shaver. Don't make no noise, an' you'll be all right. You've brought a sealed package with you—hey?"

Mason started.

"That package is Mr. Strong's!" he protested hotly.

"I'm Mr. Strong for the time bein'," grinned his uncle. "See? Give me that package, and give me that half-locket o' yours. Hand 'em over——"

"I won't!" shouted Jack. "I won't do anything of the sort! They're not yours, and you've no right to demand them. Open that door, so that I can get out. If you don't I'll shout for help."

"An' get kicked out of St. Frank's?" jeered Grell.

"I don't care!" retorted Mason. "I'd rather be kicked out of St. Frank's than give you something which belongs to Mr. Strong! And I don't believe the Headmaster would kick me out, either. I shall tell him everything——"

"You little puppy!" snarled Mr. Grell savagely.

He grabbed Jack's arm and held him tightly. In vain the boy struggled. Mr. Grell's muffler was thrust over his face and drawn tight—a wise precaution, for Jack would have yelled lustily a moment later.

"We'll see who's master!" panted the man.

He shoved his hand into Jack's coat pocket, and cursed as he withdrew it, empty. He tried another pocket——

And then came a sharp rap at the door.

"Go away!" roared Grell furiously. "I don't want to be disturbed now!"

"Open this door, please!" came a woman's voice, shaking the handle.

"I'll call out when I want something!" snapped Grell.

He held Mason tightly, so that he couldn't make an outcry. Captain Jim meant to get that locket; afterwards Jack could do what he liked. It wouldn't make any difference then, anyhow.

But Mr. Simon Grell couldn't see through the door. If so, he would have discovered that the landlady wasn't alone. Nelson Lee was there, and I hovered behind with Sir Montie and Tommy. The guv'nor had quickly explained that "Mr. Strong" was there for an evil purpose, and the woman had been eager to assist us.

"Open the door!" she repeated shrilly.

"Curse you, go away!" came Grell's coarse voice.

"Let me come, please!" murmured Nelson Lee.

He could see that one shove would send the door flying inwards—and he shoved. As he had expected, the lock gave way in a moment. And the guv'nor strode into the room, with the rest of us piling behind.

Grell turned with a bellow of fury, which somehow faded away when he saw who the intruders were. Jack Mason was released like a hot brick, and he staggered over to the table.

"Wot's the meanin' of this?" snarled Grell.

"You need not ask that question!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "You tricked this boy to come to you, and you were ill-using him, Mr. Grell. Mason, have you anything to say?"

"No, sir!" panted Jack.

"Has this man persecuted you at all?"

"He—he was going to take something of mine, sir," replied Jack hesitatingly. "You just came in time to prevent him. Thank you, sir. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come."

Grell swore horribly.

"He's my nephew!" he shouted with great violence. "I'll do what I like——"

"No, Mr. Grell, you will not!" snapped Lee curtly. "Mason has told me that you were in the act of stealing some property of his. I give you just ten seconds to get out of this place."

"Why, you—you——"

"Begad! Shall we kick him out, sir?" asked Montie eagerly.

"I'll have the law on ye——" began Grell, swearing again.

Nelson Lee made no bones about it this time. He seized the rascal by the coat-collar, ran him along the passage, and literally hurled him into the roadway. Simon Grell feared more, for he scrambled up, and tore away into the dusk for all he was worth. He disappeared round a bend in the road.

"Why didn't you give him in charge, sir?" asked Watson.

"Because he is Mason's uncle, and we must consider the lad," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "I fancy he will think twice before resorting to any further tricks of this sort. Come, boys."

We entered the passage again, and found Jack Mason still in the parlour. He had recovered his composure by this time, and thanked Nelson Lee quietly for coming to his rescue.

Nelson Lee gave the landlady five shillings for damages to the door—which really amounted to about tuppence. After that we all got into the motor-car and went sedately home.

There is one other little point. Mason, upon being asked about the sealed package, told Nelson Lee that it had been left behind by Mr. Strong. And the guv'nor suggested that it should be left in his charge—a suggestion which Jack eagerly consented to. He felt that it would be safer with Nelson Lee.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

OUR POPULAR 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. When Ponsonby recovers he asks Challis to be his friend.

(Now read on.)

CHALLIS PLAYS THE HOST.

THAT afternoon it suddenly occurred to the school captain that he would like to have a word or two with Challis.

Really, the fellow improved immensely on closer acquaintance, he thought.

At the beginning of the term nobody would have anything to do with the cad. He had been scorned, derided, sneered at, openly insulted, and as for his being able to make a show at cricket, why the mere idea had been considered absurd. Yet, after that unfortunate slip with regard to the house match, he had come to the scratch like a hero.

He had scored over his enemies, who had intended to heap ridicule upon him, and was now chosen, and with justice, for the school eleven.

Decidedly, Challis was an interesting study. His was a character full of latent possibilities. Mr. Evans had only the evening before told Grainger that John was far and away the cleverest boy in his Form. He would be going up into the Sixth next term, most likely.

There was that incident of the fishing expedition with young Hood, too, to further incline the captain in Challis's favour. Not only did he seem to know a great deal about the art piscatorial, but he was a good swimmer, and a cool hand in a tight pinch into the bargain; whilst young Hood, a topping little fellow, liked him.

"And he's won Ponsonby over, too," muttered Grainger, as he opened the door of Challis's study. "And that's a miracle!"

For Ponsonby was one of those boys who did nothing by halves, and hated or loved with equal fervour and unswerving determination.

As Grainger crossed the threshold a cry of astonishment burst from his lips, and he smiled.

Certainly he had not been prepared for this.

There, seated at table, handing round a dish of cakes, was John Challis; whilst Ponsonby, propped up in John's favourite arm-chair, had a stool beside him on which rested a plate of buttered toast and jam, and a cup of tea was by his side. On Challis's left at the table, pouring out the tea, sat Vernon, captain of the sixteen. And there over at the gas-fire, specially lighted for the purpose, knelt young Basil Hood, toasting away for dear life.

As he heard the exclamation John looked up, and his cheeks flushed warmly.

"Come in, Grainger," he said. "Make yourself at home. I can soon get a chair for you. You'll have a cup of tea, won't you? No? Yes, do! Please change your mind. That's right!"

"Oh, don't bother, thanks," said Grainger, fetching the chair himself, placing it at the table, and turning to shut the door. "You seem to be giving a decent sort of tea-flight, Challis!"

John looked uncomfortable.

"It's the first I've ever given," he explained. "Not that I haven't often longed to do so. But—well, I haven't been very popular, you know, and until lately my dad hasn't been able to send me along much pocket-money." His cheeks burned as he spoke, and he looked uneasily from one to another of his guests, for he was afraid what effect his frank and open confession would make upon them.

He need not have been alarmed. Since he had turned up at the cricket match, wearing flannels to equal the best of them, and had

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

showed that he was no muff at the game, he had been much better understood.

So Grainger sat there and ate a hearty tea, whilst Basil bustled about, the prince of fags, attending to everyone's wants with a nimbleness and eagerness that did him infinite credit.

"Glad to see you two are getting on well together, Ponsonby," said Grainger presently.

"Rather!" answered Ponsonby eagerly. "I hated Challis, you know, but he's a good sort. I treated him rather badly. But that's all done with now. I'm going to read with Challis, and we're going to share his study--aren't we, John?"

Challis nodded grimly.

"Yes. I think I shall be able to get Ponsonby to stick more closely to his studies," explained Challis.

"By the way, what I came to see you about, Challis, is this: We're going to have our sports soon. Regular big thing it is, you know. We always get a crowd down for 'em. I want you to enter for some of the events. What do you say?"

"I—er—don't know that I'd be any good at sports," said Challis diffidently.

"H'm! Nobody thought you'd be any good at cricket, and yet we know how that turned out. Can you jump, or run? Are you any good at the field events? Or the steeple-chase?"

"I can't jump, too heavy and clumsy," said the boy. "I might be able to run a bit, but I'm not class enough to do any good. I'd rather stand down, if you don't mind, Grainger. Thanks so much for your letter, though: It was good of you fellows to give me my Blue. But I don't deserve it, and I'd rather—"

"Rot!" said Grainger, rising. "I shall be disappointed if you don't prove to be one of the best bats we've had at Littleminster for years. And I'm going to get you to practise regularly. By the way, we'll have a turn on the track one of these afternoons. Got any running shorts or shoes?"

Challis shook his head.

"No," said he.

"Oh, well, I can lend you some. Or perhaps you'll get some."

Challis looked uncomfortably round, but saw none but encouraging faces.

"Do what Grainger says, John," cried Ponsonby.

"Yes, do try and see what you can do on the track, Challis," advised Vernon.

"Yes, do, Challis. And I'll bet you'll beat the best of 'em," chirruped Basil.

"Very well," said Challis reluctantly. "I'll send for some running pumps and knickers. My dad will send them down in day or two."

Grainger made for the door.

"That's right," said he. "We intend to draw you right out of your shell, Challis, and see exactly what you're made of."

And as the school captain hurried along the passage outside, he smiled to himself.

"By George, Challis can play the host with the best of us, it seems! How one can be mistaken about a fellow."

A MEAN REVENGE.

FOR the purpose of the tea-party that afternoon John Challis had been obliged to borrow some china and other necessary articles from Ponsonby, whose study was situate some distance away.

Basil, acting the part of fag to perfection, had fetched them, cleaned them, and after they had been used, washed them, and set them on a tray to take back.

Ponsonby, whose disposition seemed to have changed since his unlucky accident, told Basil he need not bother.

"You've done your share, young 'un!" he cried. "You've been fagging like a hero, and are entitled to a moment's rest, at any rate. Put the tray down and I'll carry the things upstairs when I go."

"That's all right," answered Basil. "It's no trouble. I'll do it. I know exactly where the things ought to go, and I'll put 'em back again in their proper places."

So off he bustled, carrying the tray, his boyish face flushed with excitement, wriggling through the door with the tray in a manner that called forth admiration.

"That's clever, kid!" remarked Ponsonby. "Only be careful or you'll smash the lot!"

Basil laughed, and hurried, whistling, along the passage.

Little did he dream that a trap had been laid for him, and that he was likely to fall into it.

Now, it happened that when Basil and Ponsonby were busy in the latter's room, selecting the china and spoons, etc., Myers happened to pass, and paused and listened.

Myers's body was sore, and covered with weals, his mind was sore, too, and his heart was longing for revenge.

He had been trying to get on with some of those lines, but to sit down was a painful operation. He had left his room and gone for a stroll along the corridors, when the ring of voices brought him to a standstill, and he listened, as he always did in similar circumstances, for he liked to hear what everybody had got to say.

So, listening, he learnt all about the tea-party to be given in John Challis's rooms, and his frowning face grew blacker.

Not wishing to be seen, he hurried back to his own room, and through the half-open doorway presently saw Basil pass with the tray.

So Ponsonby was making up to the cad Challis, was he? And the cad was getting into the way of giving tea-parties? Bah! What rot!

He was making a bid for popularity now, the beast!

And Basil Hood, and Ponsonby, Grainger, and the rest were going to make things easy for him. Who could say that he wouldn't be elevated into the position of a hero before long?

Myers sat and brooded. If only he could pay them out. If only—

(Continued overleaf.)

Suddenly he uttered a low cry, and a smile curved his surly lips.

By George, there was a way! The passages were dark, and Basil would have to pass with that tray after the tea-fight to take the things back to Ponsonby's room. Of course he might not bring them back so soon, but then it was odds on he would. Very well, then—

Myers kept his door open, and crept cautiously to the door of Challis's study once to listen.

As the time for the return of the tea-things drew near, he tied a thick piece of cord to the knob of a study door opposite his own, and then crept to the stair-head to listen.

He waited until a shrill and happy whistle told him of Basil's approach, and when he saw the fag hurrying upward, carrying the laden tray, the enemy rushed back to his study, tied the cord to the knob of his own door, and waited.

It was some distance through the school house from Challis's room to Ponsonby's, and Myers's door had to be passed on the way.

All unsuspecting, Basil hurried upward, onward.

Suddenly there came a wild "Oh!" Myers heard a tug at his door-knob, and the next moment there was a resounding crash.

Basil had run into the cord without seeing it.

It had caught him, tray and all, and the lot had been tumbled on to the floor in a flash.

And there lay the fag amid the bits of broken china and the litter of forks and spoons, cruet, and jam-jar, half-stunned and literally aghast at the awful catastrophe.

Myers, with his ear at the keyhole, chuckled.

"That's done it!" he murmured to himself. "Serve the beast right!"

(To be continued.)

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