

No. 183.—GRAND COMPLETE SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE TALE!

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"BY ALLAH!" HISSED THE PRIEST, "THOU SHALT SUFFER FOR THY IMPERTINENCE."

THE ARABS OF EL SAFRA!

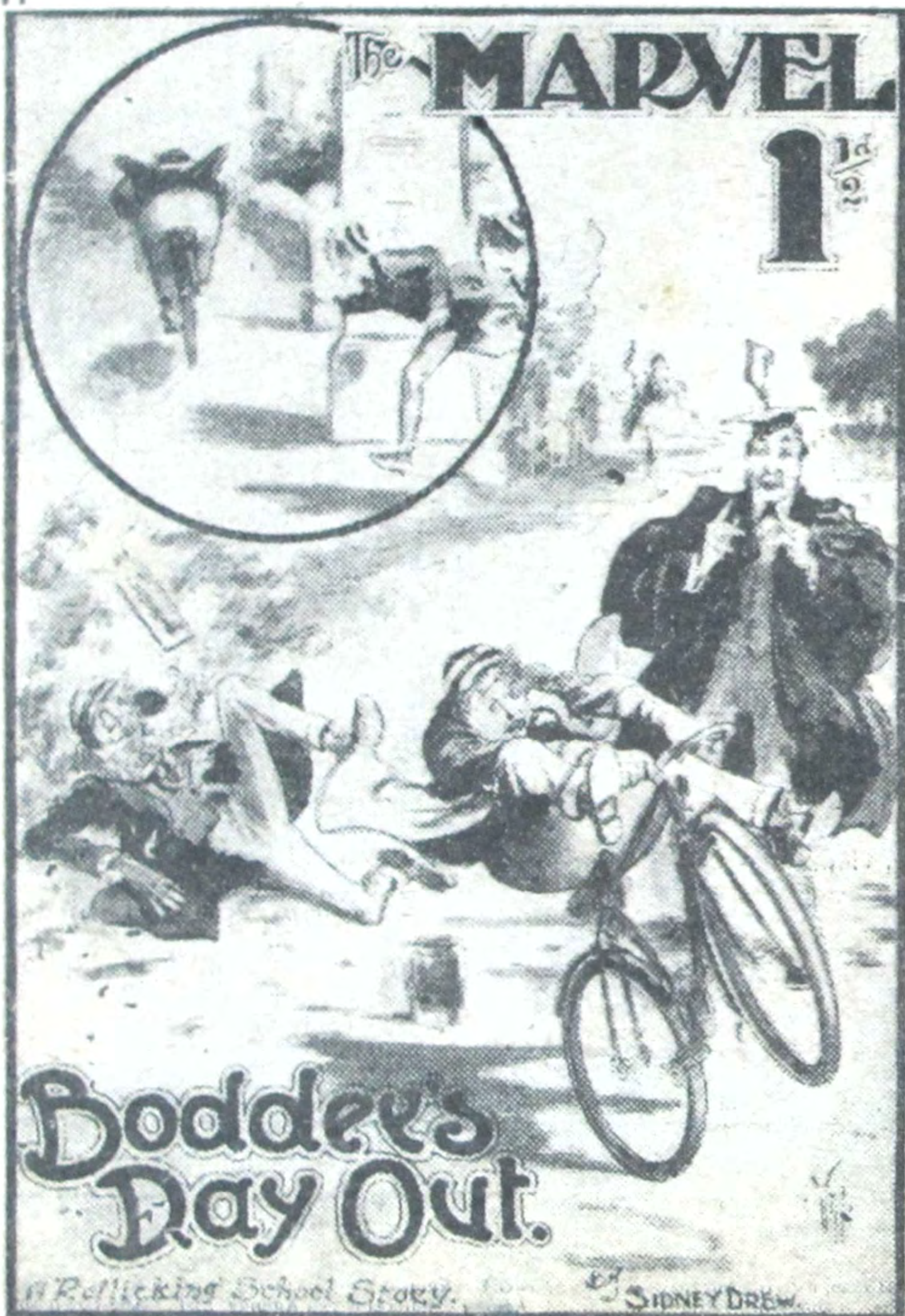
Or, THE SACRED LOCKET.

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 Golden Locket," "Going to the Bad," "The Ancient House Burglary," etc., etc. . December 7, 1918.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

HANDFORTH FINDS TROUBLE.

MCCLURE, of the Remove, glanced at the clock.

"We shall have to buck up," he remarked briskly. "It's twenty past six, Churchy, and we promised to meet Handforth in the village at half-past. You know what an ass he is for kicking up a fuss."

"Rats!" said Church. "That clock's over five minutes fast. Still, we'd better start now—we don't want to go in a tearing hurry. I wish Handy wouldn't get such dotty ideas!"

Church and McClure were quite loyal to Handforth, however, and they didn't really mind going to the village to help their leader to carry a hamper home from the station. Besides, the matter was of some urgency. That hamper was full of tuck, from one of Handforth's loving aunts, and it would never do for Church and McClure to fail Handforth at such a time.

The two Ancient House juniors left their study just as the door of the next apartment was opened. Jack Mason, of the Remove, emerged.

"Anything you want from the village, Mason?" asked McClure generously. "We're just running down——"

"Oh, good!" said Mason promptly. "I'm going down to Bellton myself, so I'll go with you, if you don't mind."

"Come on, then," said Church.

There had been an expression of semi-worry and annoyance on Mason's face, but it cleared away completely now. The truth was, the boy from Bermondsey had met Church and McClure at an exceedingly opportune moment.

He wanted to go to the village, and Pitt, his study-mate, was being entertained by other juniors. As a matter of fact, Tregellis-West and Watson and I had invited Pitt to tea in Study C, and he was still with us. Mason had been with De Valerie and Somerton. It was because of this, really, that we had invited Pitt to our own study. Moreover, Reginald Pitt was a very different fellow of late; he had changed in a marked degree.

Astonishing as it seemed, there was more than a chance that Pitt would turn out to be a decent fellow.

Why should Jack Mason be worried because he couldn't find anybody to go to the village with him? Well, the truth was simple, if not exactly palatable. Mason's uncle, Mr. Simon Grell, was in the neighbourhood, and he was a pretty complete rascal. Acting upon Nelson Lee's advice, Mason did not go beyond the school grounds unless he had two or three other fellows with him. This was decidedly irksome and annoying, but it was a wise precaution.

Mr. Grell had been particularly anxious to get hold of his nephew, and Mason had had two or three unpleasant adventures. If he ventured out alone he would probably run right into Mr. Grell's arms—and that's why it was really necessary for him to be cautious. This was particularly urgent in the dark.

Mason couldn't very well ask any of the juniors to go down with him to the village; they would have thought that he was afraid of the dark, or something of that sort. So it came in particularly handy to find that Church and McClure were just on the point of starting.

"Going to the tuck-shop?" asked Church, as they donned their overcoats in the cloakroom. "We're going to meet Handforth there."

"That's all right," said Mason. "I'm bound for the tuck-shop myself. What's Handy doing down there all alone?"

"Oh, he's having his watch mended—a new glass in—so he went down half-an-hour ago," replied McClure. "Church and I didn't see the fun of hurrying over our tea just for that. So we arranged to meet him down there. It really serves Handy right for chucking rulers across the room."

"How could that smash his watch-glass?" asked Mason.

"Well, Church chucked it back!" grinned McClure. "You ought to have seen Handy's face. But he was reasonable for once, after consideration, and I'll bet he won't chuck things about so freely again."

They sallied out into the Triangle and

found the early December evening dark and slightly frosty. The sky was clear, but there was no moon. The stars were quite bright, so the trees and buildings stood out fairly distinctly against the bespangled background of sky.

Mason was not a nervous boy, and he would have been perfectly willing to venture out unaccompanied. Indeed, he would have preferred to do so, because he hated the thought of requiring an escort. But his Housemaster—Nelson Lee—had given him advice, and Jack Mason was not the fellow to scorn it.

Simon Grell had a companion with him, named Jake Starkey, and the precious pair were bent upon obtaining from Mason a half-locket which the boy possessed. In addition, they wanted a sealed package which was really the property of Mr. David Strong—a genial old gentleman who had befriended Jack.

Only a few days since Grell had actually had the audacity to break into St. Frank's on a foggy night. What was more, he had stolen the locket and the package from Nelson Lee's study, and had managed to get away.

Reginald Pitt was responsible for the restoration of the stolen property. Secretly he had outwitted Grell and Starkey, and had replaced the things on the quiet. I knew all about it, although the rest of the school didn't. And this action of Pitt's told me that he was decent at heart. Not only had he taken great risks to perform the service, but he wanted no glory. He believed, even now, that his action had been undetected by a soul.

Nelson Lee had decided to say nothing to the police; but this was mainly for Mason's sake. Grell had certainly been conspicuous by his absence of late, and it was just possible that he had given up the whole thing. But Jack Mason did not intend to take any chance.

"We shall soon begin to think of Christmas," remarked McClure, as the three juniors walked down the gloomy lane. "You made any arrangements, Mason? I suppose you'll go home to your people?"

"I don't think so," said Mason grimly.

He did not add that his "people" were Mr. Simon Grell and Mrs. Grell—both of them detestable individuals. Jack Mason was far more likely, in his own opinion, to remain at St. Frank's over the coming holidays.

"Handforth has asked us to go down to his place," said Church. "It's quite probable that we shall——"

"Great Scott!" gasped McClure, halting abruptly.

"What's the matter with you, ass?"

"Didn't—didn't you see it?"

"See what?"

"That face!" muttered McClure. "Oh, my hat!"

He was staring at the hedge, with the background of Bellton Wood beyond. But, although Church and Mason stared as well, they saw nothing but the hedge swaying to and fro in the high wind which was blowing.

"A face?" repeated Mason slowly. "You must have fancied it."

"Of course!" said Church, looking behind him uneasily.

"I didn't! It was a horrible-looking face!" said McClure shakily. "Not English, I'll swear, and there was a kind of white thing over the top of it. Let's walk on quickly."

"I didn't know you were a nervous chap before," said Church. "You must have been reading some beastly ghost stories. Ghost stories ain't good for a fellow—they make him imagine things——"

"You silly ass!" snapped McClure. "I haven't been reading any stories, and I'll bet there's no chap in the Remove less nervous than I am. I saw a face—an' if you don't like to believe me, you needn't. I don't care tuppence!"

McClure was annoyed. He didn't like his companions to think that he had been imagining things, like a kid of the Second.

"Keep your giddy hair on," said Church. "I'll admit I've never known you to have fancies before——"

"I haven't had fancies now!" roared McClure fiercely.

"All right—don't bite me," grinned Church. "I'm willing to accept your word. I dare say the face was the property of a tramp, or somebody of that sort. Tramps generally camp out in this weather, or sleep in ditches—I don't think!"

"I'm inclined to believe that McClure did see a face," said Mason quietly. "At any rate, there's no need to scoff at him."

"There you are!" growled McClure.

"Still, I shouldn't worry about it——"

"Who's worrying?" demanded McClure. "I don't care for a dozen rotten faces! Don't talk about it any more, for goodness' sake!"

They were nearing the bridge now, and soon passed along the old High Street, with the dimly illuminated little shops on either hand. Half-past six had already struck before the trio entered the tuck-shop—which was, in reality, a kind of miniature Whiteley's as well. The juniors were in the habit of making all manner of purchases in that establishment.

Edward Oswald Handforth, who was sitting at a table, rose to his feet with a rustling of his mackintosh, and glared at the newcomers.

"About time, too!" he said tartly.

"We're only a minute late——" began Church.

"I've been waiting here for a quarter of an hour," said Handforth. "That's the worst of making arrangements with chaps I can't rely on. Hallo, Mason! What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to buy some things," smiled Mason.

"Buy the shop, if you like," said Handforth generously. "I can recommend the hot drinks; I've just had a peppermint. Ripping stuff for a cold night like this. We shall see you, probably, as we come back. We're just going to the station."

"I dare say you'll have finished by the time we get back here," remarked Church. "We might as well all walk up together—McClure will like plenty of company, anyhow."

Mason nodded. Nothing would suit him better, for he would have the benefit of Handforth and Co's companionship on the way home. And Mason had his own ideas about that face in the hedge.

"What do you mean—I shall like company?" demanded McClure warmly.

"Well, you're full of fancies——"

"Do you want your nose punched?" roared McClure.

"Young gentlemen—young gentlemen!" protested the proprietor, from behind the counter. "There is no need to quarrel, surely?"

"I'll see after the asses, Mr. Binks," said Handforth confidently. "Now, my sons, what's the trouble? What fancies have you been having, McClure?"

They passed out of the shop and walked along towards the station. McClure maintained a stony silence. He didn't intend to say anything more about the affair. He was fed up with it.

"McClure thought he saw a face in the hedge as we were coming down," explained Church, grinning. "Of course, he may have been right, but I should say that he was wrong. Just as if anybody would be looking over the hedge——"

"And why not?" demanded Handforth.

"Eh?"

"Why not?"

"Well, who'd be looking——"

"I don't know," said Handforth. "If that's what's the matter, I think you need a punch on the nose. Church! I believe McClure. It's quite likely he saw a face over the hedge. Tramps often come in this district."

Church stared in dismay. He had not expected Handforth to champion McClure in this fashion. But, then, there was never any telling what Handforth would do next. McClure grinned with genuine pleasure.

"Of course, it doesn't matter," he said. "What made me wild was being scoffed at. My eyesight ain't bad, and just because Church and Mason didn't see the face, they say I'm fanciful—at least, Church did, Mason believed me."

Handforth snorted.

"A lot of fuss over nothing," he said. "I don't suppose there was a face——"

"What?" gasped McClure.

"It's dark to-night, and a chap sees——"

"But you said that you believed me?" exclaimed McClure blankly.

"Did I?" asked Handforth. "Well, I'm blessed if I know what to believe. I suggest dropping the subject altogether. I don't want to argue—I always hate having arguments, as you chaps know."

"Oh, yes!" gasped Church. "Exactly!"

Considering that arguments arose in Study D about twenty times a day—all of

them brought on by Handforth—it was not surprising that Church and McClure were rather at a loss for words.

They wisely considered that it would be better to say nothing further. Handforth's hamper was packed with good things, and Church and McClure wanted to share them. If they ruffled their great leader now, he was quite capable of sharing his tuck with other juniors. Under no circumstances would Handforth keep it all for himself; he was the most generous fellow in the Remove.

"Train came in five minutes ago," said Church carelessly.

"Then the hamper will be waiting for us," remarked Handforth. "I know it's coming by this train, because it was sent off yesterday."

"It might have been held up," suggested McClure.

"Rats! If it isn't here, I shall write to the general manager," said Handforth. "I don't believe in being humbugged about—Oh, corks!"

Handforth made a wild movement, and came to a halt.

"What's the matter?" asked Church.

"My cap!" snapped Handforth. "That rotten gust of wind lifted it off, and it's blown away. Where did it go to?"

"How should I know——"

"Fat lot of good having chaps like you with me," snorted Handforth. "That was a nearly new cap, and now it's smothered in mud, I expect. You'd better go and get that hamper while I search round."

"Right-ho!" said Church and McClure promptly.

They hurried off, in case Handforth should call them back; they knew that Handforth was quite capable of blaming them for the catastrophe. It was rather surprising that he hadn't insisted upon them searching for the cap while he went for the hamper. But Handforth was always an uncertain quantity.

He searched about for some few minutes before he located the missing headgear. This section of the road was very still and quiet, except for the high wind. The station was at the end of the village, and the road was blank just here, no cottages being nearer than two hundred yards.

Handforth found his cap just against the hedge. He donned it, and was about to move into the road when he heard a sound behind him.

Before he could turn a startling thing happened.

Three mysterious-looking forms seemed to materialise out of the very hedge, and they seized him before he could move a finger.

"What the dickens——" gasped Handforth, startled.

"Silence, boy!" muttered a harsh voice.

"You—you beastly rotters—— Oooooop!"

Handforth ceased speaking abruptly, for a heavy pad had been thrust over his mouth. And the next second he was forced through the hedge, thrown down, and bulky forms overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER II.

MOST EXTRAORDINARY!

HANDFORTH was utterly bewildered—and scared.

At least, he was scared for the first minute. This was because of the startling suddenness of the attack. But then he became indignant, and finally his fury came to the surface.

He struggled with all his strength, but it was useless. The mysterious forms held him tightly, and his efforts were wasted. He couldn't speak, but his eyes were free. And he saw, with considerable amazement, that the three figures were clothed in strange, flowing robes—and they wore turbans!

Handforth was thunderstruck for a moment, and then he arrived at the truth. At all events, he thought that he had arrived at the truth—and became more indignantly furious than before.

His feelings were not improved when he felt his ankles being tightly and roughly bound. This task completed, his wrists were forced forward, and he knew that they were to suffer the fate of his ankles.

Then another dim form loomed up from the background of shadows.

A dazzling light was thrown upon the prisoner's face—and a harsh, angry exclamation sounded. The light snapped out, and Handforth heard muttered voices, raised in anger. The language seemed to be foreign.

The surprises of the adventure were not over yet, however.

Handforth was roughly yanked to his feet. Again the electric torch blazed in his face, but it was only for a second.

He received a violent shove, and, his feet being bound, it was impossible for him to retain his balance. He went over with a thud, rolled down the muddy bank near the hedge, and—

Squelch!

Edward Oswald Handford sprawled into the ditch with a yell which might have been heard half a mile away—for the muffler had been removed now. And, certainly, there was an excellent reason for Handforth's roar. That ditch served its purpose well, for it was half filled with water—ditches are generally made for the purpose of draining fields, and this one was most efficient. And it contained not only water, but a considerable quantity of sticky mud.

Handforth descended into this and was submerged for a few horrible seconds. There was no danger of his coming to any actual harm, for the muddy water was only sufficient to cover him while lying at full length. He sat up, gasping, spluttering, and spitting out muddy water.

He didn't exactly know how he crawled out of the ditch, but he did it somehow. And then, more furious than he had ever been in his life, he attempted to regain his breath.

"Oh, the cads!" he panted. "The fright-

ful, unutterable cads! If I don't pay 'em out for this, I'll let 'em duck me again!"

He tore at his bonds, but found that the knots were too much for him, and the soaking condition of the ropes did not make his task any easier. So with some difficulty he thrust a hand into his muddy pocket and brought out a clasp knife.

A minute later he was on his feet, gazing round into the gloom.

He was alone—not a sign of a living soul was to be seen. His attackers had faded away as mysteriously as they had appeared. Shivering with cold, Handforth blundered through the hedge and found the road once more. Two dim figures were approaching.

"Haven't you found it yet?" came a hail in McClure's voice. "Was that you yelling just now, Handy?"

"Come here!" chattered Handforth, his teeth clashing together with cold.

"What the dickens are you mumbling about, you ass?" asked Church, as he and the other Removite came up. "Your giddy hamper hasn't come, Handy. It'll arrive by the morning train, I suppose, and the carrier will bring it up—"

"Great Scott!" gasped McClure suddenly. "Look at him!"

Church stared with round eyes—as well he might. Handforth presented a startling spectacle now that the two juniors were close at hand. He was muddy from head to foot; his face was streaked and nearly as black as a nigger's. And water was dripping from him as he stood there.

"Have you been indulging in a mud-bath?" asked McClure.

"For your health?" added Church.

Handforth nearly choked.

"You — you blithering fatheads!" he roared. "I've nearly been killed! Can't you see it without making fatheaded remarks?"

"You don't sound killed, anyhow," said Church. "Don't make that noise, Handy, you'll have half the village round us soon. I suppose you fell in the ditch? Just like you to go blundering—"

"You silly chump!" shrieked Handforth. "Three awful cads sprang at me, bound my ankles, and then pitched me into the ditch! What do you think of it? There's going to be a terrific row over this!"

Church and McClure were serious now.

"I should think so, too!" declared Church. "It's a bit thick when a chap is hurled into a ditch in this weather. Who did it, Handy?"

"Christine and Co.!" exclaimed Handforth, his teeth chattering with cold and rage. "Christine and Yorke and Talmadge. I didn't think they were such horrible cads! By George! We'll make 'em pay for it!"

Handforth's statement was a positive one. He did not think it necessary to add that he only suspected Christine and Co., and that he had no actual evidence of his attackers' identity. Handforth's line of reasoning was not exactly an ideal one. He knew that the College House juniors were rehearsing a new

play, and that flowing robes were included in the "props." And he took it for granted that the Monks had used these robes for the purpose of disguising themselves. Handforth was quite convinced that Christine and Co. were the culprits.

"I say, I didn't think Christine was a chap of that sort!" objected Church. "It's more like one of Fullwood's rotten tricks. But you mustn't stand here, Handy, you'll catch cold, or Spanish flu, or something!"

"I—I'm in a frightful state!" shivered Handforth.

"We shall have to run," said McClure. "Never mind about getting fagged, Handy. Running's the only thing that'll save you from a chill."

Handforth realised the soundness of his chum's words. And he commenced running without delay, Church and McClure accompanying him. They raced through the village as though on a cinder path, and completely forgot that Jack Mason was waiting for them in Mr. Binks's shop. Under the exceptional circumstances this oversight was not at all surprising. It was really urgent that Handforth should not wait about in the cold.

By the time the gates of St. Frank's were reached Handforth was glowing from head to foot. The run had done him a world of good, and, without doubt, it prevented the chill which would certainly have set in had he merely walked. To stand about now would be even more serious than before.

"Come on!" panted Church.

They dashed across the Triangle, and as luck would have it, several juniors were in the lobby when they entered the Ancient House. There was a general yell when the muddy apparition appeared.

"By gad!" said De Valerie. "What's this thing? What have you brought into the House, you fellows? Is it human?"

"It's Handforth!" exclaimed McClure.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can yell!" gasped Handforth wildly. "You unfeeling rotters! I'm booked for pneumonia, or I might even die——"

"Never!" said Owen major promptly. "Chaps like you don't die, Handforth. It's only good people who die!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's all the commotion?" I asked, entering the lobby from the Remove passage, accompanied by Tregellis-West, Watson, and Pitt. "Great goodness! Is—is that awful-looking object Handforth?"

"He's been trying a mud-bath, by the look of it!" grinned Hubbard.

"Dear fellows, it's no laughin' matter!" exclaimed Sir Montie Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez and gazing at Handforth with enormous interest. "Begad! What a shockin' state you're in, dear old boy. I'm afraid your trousers will be utterly useless, on' that jacket——"

"What do I care about clothes?" stammered Handforth. "I'm going to kick up the dust over this affair——"

"Kick up the mud, you mean what?" grinned De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, it's hardly fair to laugh," I protested. "Poor old Handy has had an accident or something. Let him get past, you chaps, he ought to rip those wet things off at once and have a bath."

"Yes, I should certainly advise a bath," said Sir Montie, shaking his head.

Handforth fled upstairs, and I yelled after him that he had better report himself to the House, damn. But I don't think he took any notice of that excellent advice. We turned to Church and McClure for enlightenment.

"I suppose the silly ass fell into a ditch?" I asked.

"He says he was chucked in?"

"What?"

"Chucked in," repeated McClure. "Of course, it may be a yarn of his; we haven't had time to ask him any questions; we rushed him up here so that he shouldn't catch cold. What's more, he told us that Christine and Co. did it."

"Christine and Co.?" I repeated blankly.

"Rot!" declared Watson.

"The Monks wouldn't do anything like that!" protested Pitt.

"Well, that's what Handforth said," remarked Church. "According to him, Christine and Co. sprang out on him, bound his ankles, and pitched him into the ditch. If it's true, those Monks ought to be ragged until they can't stand!"

I shook my head.

"Well, we're not going to believe it yet," I said. "We'll wait till Handforth comes down, and then question him. You two chaps had better go up and help him to clean that mud off."

"My hat!" said McClure suddenly.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, Handforth told us that the chaps who collared him were dressed in flowing robes like—like Arabs, or something."

"Arabs!" exclaimed Pitt sharply.

"Yes. And what's more, I saw a face looking through the hedge as Church and I went down to the village with Mason——"

"Mason!" exclaimed Pitt.

"Do you think you're a parrot?" asked McClure irritably. "I tell you I saw a face looking over the hedge—a foreign-looking face it was, with a white kind of hat on. It might have been a turban, like Arabs wear. Church says I fancied it, but I know jolly well I didn't!"

"Where's Mason now?" I asked.

"Oh, my hat!" said Church. "We promised to go back to the tack-shop for him—we were all going to walk up together—but we were too busy with Handy to think any more about Mason. I suppose he'll be in soon."

"I'm blessed if I can understand it," remarked Watson. "Just as if Christine and those chaps would dress up like Arabs! Besides, Christine wouldn't be such a cad as to pitch Handforth into a ditch. The Monks

haven't got any grudge against Hardy. It's all tommy-rot!"

Church and McClure went off to assist their unfortunate leader in getting himself clean. Meanwhile, the fellows dribbled down into the common-room, for the lobby was not exactly a cosy place for a discussion.

"I guess them guys have got kind o' rattled," remarked Justin B. Farman.

"They've got which?" asked Owen major.

"Rattled—locoed."

"You ass! What does that mean?"

"Gee! I guess you can understand plain language, can't you?" asked the American boy. "Rattled—confused—muddled-up some. They don't know what's happened, an' they're sort o' skeered. I'll allow we've had a few strange things gettin' busy around this ranch, but Arabs don't seem to fit in."

"Somebody dressed up, of course," I remarked thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," said Reginald Pitt.

Nobody took any notice of his remark—at least, there was no comment made. But I certainly noted the rather curious tone with which he uttered the word. Pitt seemed to be even more thoughtful than myself, and he looked just a little worried, too.

Handforth was remarkably swift in changing his attire. This was accounted for by his desire for instant revenge. He came down into the common-room, his face red from much towelling, and partly because he was angry and excited.

His toilet was most careless, indicating the haste with which he had dressed. And he came into the common-room with a firm step and a grim face.

"Seen the matron?" I asked.

"No!" said Handforth tartly. "What do you think I am, a giddy kid? I can stand a ducking, I suppose? I ran all the way up to the school, and there's nothing wrong with me now."

"Church says that Christine chucked you into the ditch——"

"And so he did, Nipper," interrupted Handforth. "Christine and Yorke and Talmadge."

"It wants a bit of believin', old boy——"

"Do you think I'm a liar?" roared Handforth.

"Begad! Pray keep your temper, dear old fellow," said Sir Montie. "You're lookin' frightfully fierce, Handy. I shouldn't like to fight you just now, I shouldn't, really! You might knock me down!"

Handforth looked round the room steadily.

"Are you chaps going to back me up?" he demanded. "What do you think of fellows who spring on me in the dark, bind my feet up, and chuck me into a ditch where I might have drowned? Do you call that a jape?"

"It was an outrage," I replied. "It was an utterly rotten piece of work."

"That's what I say," declared Handforth. "I'm sorry to make the statement, but Christine and his pals are responsible. You know jolly well that the Monks have been

rehearsing some silly new play of theirs, and that they've hired some costumes for Hindoos, or Bedouins, or something."

"By Jingo! So they have!" said Watson, starting.

"Well, they thought they'd work off a trick on the Ancient House, and that's why they dropped on me," said Handforth grimly. "Do you think I don't know? I call upon every fellow here to back me up."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give Christine the hiding of his life," replied Handforth firmly.

And he stalked out of the common-room with a fierce expression on his heated face. I looked round at the other fellows, and, as though by general consent, we all crowded out.

It was up to us to see this thing through.

CHAPTER III.

NOT GUILTY!

EXCITEMENT was running high by this time, and practically every fellow in the Ancient House Remove followed Edward Oswald Handforth out into the Triangle. It was dark, and the cold wind came whistling round the buildings in gusts.

Handforth's expedition of vengeance was not to be stopped by icy winds, however, and the crowd of juniors marched across to the College House grimly. Personally I wasn't at all satisfied that Christine and Co. were responsible for the cowardly trick upon Handforth. But they would soon give an account of themselves.

By a piece of luck, Christine and Yorke and Talmadge were just leaving the College House when the avengers arrived. They stared rather curiously at the noisy crowd and came to a halt.

"What's this, a new game?" asked Christine.

He and his chums were surrounded. And we noticed that the three Monks were carrying some curious articles of apparel over their arms—white garments of some kind.

"Pax!" exclaimed Yorke hastily. "No larks, you chaps!"

"We're on our way to the gym," said Talmadge. "Our new play is going to knock spots off any mouldy old——"

"You cads!" roared Handforth hotly.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"You beastly rotters!" bellowed Handforth.

"Are you trying to start a House-row?" inquired Christine politely. "It's rather off-side, considering that we're outnumbered——"

"I don't know anything about a House-row!" said Handforth. "But I'm going to punch your nose, Robert Christine! And I'm going to punch Yorke's nose—and I'm going to punch Talmadge's nose!"

"Quite an entertainment, in fact?" asked Christine. "Why don't you fellows take this poor idiot away and lock him up? It isn't safe to let him run loose about the premises—Yaroooph!"

Christine concluded with a terrific howl. Handforth, without troubling to ask questions, punched Christine's nose with all the force he could command at the moment, and this was quite considerable.

Christine tumbled over backwards in the mud, completely taken by surprise. Handforth lunged out at Talmadge, but that wary youth had already dodged, and it was Yorke who received the blow.

"Rescue!" howled Talmadge. "Monks—Monks! Rescue!"

He dashed forward vallantly, courage being lent him by the sight of several College House juniors charging out into the open. Christine was already upon his feet, and he was rushing at Handforth in the most determined manner.

The result was inevitable.

Within ten seconds a free fight was in progress. The feeling of hostility between the two factions at St. Frank's was generally asleep, but House-rows broke out at periodic intervals. And then things happened.

There was no actual ill-feeling—certainly nothing vindictive on either side. The rivalry between the Ancient House and the College House was more of a friendly character. But when Christine's nose was punched with great violence, Christine considered that it was a time for drastic action.

His chums rallied round him nobly. The commotion which was caused was probably heard throughout the school. The majority of the fellows had no idea why they were fighting. It was simply a scrap, and it was their business to join in.

Upon the whole, we got the better of it. But before any decisive victory could be claimed by either side, prefects arrived upon the scene. Morrow and Wilson, of the Ancient House, and Jesson, Carlisle and Mills, of the College House, sallied out with canes.

"Now then!" roared Morrow. "Stop this, you young sweeps!"

"Rats!"

"Go it, the Fossils!"

"Give 'em socks!"

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Canes descended with clockwork-like regularity, and the juniors began to realise that scrapping with one another was one thing, but accepting cuts from a hefty cane was another. And the excited warriors scattered like chaff before the wind.

"And if there's any more of it, you'll be gated!" declared Jesson angrily.

"Get into your Houses——" began Morrow.

"You've stopped the row, so don't go any further, Morrow," I put in. "We won't begin again, and I want to ask Christine some questions. Just toddle indoors and forget all about it."

The battle was certainly over, and the

wounds were being attended to. Bleeding noses, black eyes, and thick ears had been distributed broadcast. I had come out of the scrap scatheless, but I had delivered a good number of blows—I don't know who received them, but they had gone home all right.

"I ain't satisfied!" panted Handforth. "A House-row is all rot, anyhow. I challenge Christine to a fight behind the gym, and Yorke and Talmadge, too!"

Bob Christine breathed hard.

"If I didn't know you were such a natty idiot, I'd accept that challenge!" he exclaimed warmly. "But I don't want to knock you into next week, Handforth. You punched my nose and started the whole thing; but I think I've punched yours just as hard, so we're quits. Your nose looks pretty swollen!"

"Fathead!" said Owen major. "That's its natural size!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go on! Jeer all you like!" bellowed Handforth. "My nose is swollen, and it's been bleeding, too! But that's nothing. I'm going to fight Christine for chucking me into that ditch——"

"Eh?" said Christine, staring.

"Handforth says that you and two other fellows sprang on him near the station, bound him up, and pitched him into the mud," I explained. "It was a beastly thing to do, Christine, and I can't quite believe——"

"I don't know what you're talking about," interrupted Christine tartly.

"By George!" exclaimed Handforth. "By George!"

He stared at Christine, and took a deep breath.

"By George!" he repeated.

"Is that all you can say?" demanded Christine sourly.

"No! I'm just trying to think of something which'll fit the case!" retorted Handforth. "But there ain't words; the English language isn't any good for this job! Of all the confounded fibbers——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted.

"You mind your own business——"

"This is my business," I said. "I'm your skipper, Handforth, and it seems to me that you've been acting the giddy goat—as usual. I never believed that Christine and Co. handled you as you described, but I didn't have a chance to say anything before the scrap started. You're off your rocker!"

"What?" said Handforth faintly.

"What do you mean by accusing Christine and Co.?" I went on. "Haven't you any more sense than to suspect decent chaps——"

"If you're bluffed, I'm not," bellowed Handforth. "I don't expect you to sympathise with me, anyhow. I'm not the chap to take things lying down, and Christine is going to fight me, or I'll know the reason why!"

Bob Christine sighed.

"My dear ass," he said, "if you're particularly anxious to fight me, I'll oblige. I don't mind in the least. You might grumble,

of course, but after I've knocked you flat I shan't expect you to grumble. A fellow who asks for trouble hasn't any right to growl when he finds it!"

Handforth laughed bitterly.

"So you think you could whack me, do you?" he demanded. "Well, I daresay you could if you used the same methods as you employed down at the station. Three of you piling on to one chap! It's—it's disgusting."

"Hit him in the eye, Christy!" yelled Yorke excitedly.

"Too much fat," said Christine. "I'm a patient chap, and I should be tremendously pleased to know what all this fuss is about. Does Handforth have these fits very often? Is it a habit of his to suffer from delusions?"

"You—you——"

"Hold on, Handy," went on Christine. "You've had your say, and now I'm going to have mine. I don't know what the dickens you mean about somebody chucking you into the ditch, and I think it would be as well if we straightened things out. I won't say anything about the rottenness of believing that I could be capable of such a caddish trick; you're excited, and don't know what you're up to. But Talmadge and Yorke and I were in our study every minute since tea-time, until you all butted into us ten minutes ago. We haven't been out for a minute!"

Handforth simply gasped.

"It beats me!" he said blankly. "You, generally a decent fellow, can stand there telling the most frightful whoppers——"

"They're not whoppers!" roared Yorke.

"Didn't you duck Handforth, then?" asked De Valerie.

"No!"

"Of course we didn't!"

There was a quick buzz of excitement.

"I don't say that he doesn't deserve ducking," said Christine. "In fact it's quite likely that he will be ducked if he doesn't change his tone. I'm patient, as I said before, but there's a limit."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "Handforth positively said that you chaps had done the trick; he was so certain that we believed him. My only hat! I'm sorry I gave you a thick ear, Talmadge!"

"So am I!" growled Talmadge feelingly.

Handforth began to look rather dazed. He was by no means convinced that the College House fellows were entirely innocent of the outrage. But there was such a noise going on that Handforth couldn't make himself heard for a few moments.

"Dry up a minute!" I yelled. "We don't want any misunderstandings, and we'd better get the hang of this affair straight away. You say that Christine and his chums collared you near the station, Handforth?"

"Yes, they did!" replied Handforth warmly.

"They treated you like hooligans would?"

"Exactly. I was knocked over and squashed into the mud——"

"Yes, we all know about that," I interrupted. "Now, look here, Handy, did you recognise Christine's voice?"

"No, not exactly."

"Or Yorke's voice?"

"No."

"Or Talmadge's?"

"You silly ass!" roared Handforth. "How do you think I could recognise their voices when they disguised them?"

"If you didn't recognise their voices, how on earth do you know that they're the chaps who did it?" I asked. "Did you see them clearly?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" snapped Handforth.

"How could I see properly in the dark? I just caught a glimpse of those flowing robes, and it didn't take me half a tick to guess that Christine and Co.——"

"Oh! So that's it!" I exclaimed. "You guessed, Handy? It simply amounts to this—that you didn't recognise the voices, you didn't recognise the faces, but you took it for granted that Christine and Co. were the culprits."

Handforth began to look rather confused.

"I—I was sure of it!" he exclaimed weakly.

"In your own mind, very possibly," I said.

"But that was no reason for you to come here and positively state that these Monks handled you. It was simply a supposition on your part, and it only proves that you mustn't take things for granted. It's a fatal mistake to make. Christine has positively declared that he hasn't been off the school premises since tea-time. Do you believe him?"

Handforth looked sheepish.

"Well, I—I suppose he's right!" he admitted. "Perhaps I was rather hasty; but if Christine and Co. didn't do it, who did?"

"This isn't a time to ask riddles," I retorted. "You'd better apologise to Christine for punching his nose; he's a good chap, and he won't mind, once the thing's settled up."

I expected Handforth to go up in the air: he didn't like apologising to anybody, and was rather inclined to ride the high horse when he happened to be in the wrong. But just now he was different.

"Well, I suppose I have been a silly fat-head!" he said candidly. "I hope I didn't hurt you, Christine?"

"Not at all," said Christine. "I enjoy having my nose punched!"

"Oh, rot!" growled Handforth. "I'm sorry, old man. You gave me a few swipes, so we're about equal. I'd jolly well like to know who pushed me into that ditch, though!"

"Begad! I should advise you to give up lookin' for the culprits, old boy," said Sir Montie. "You might make another mistake, you know—you might, really. It's even remotely possible that I might be accused, an' I couldn't dream of havin' my nose punched by a fist like yours!"

"I think Handforth ought to be ragged," suggested Watson. "He caused a House-row over nothing, and every fellow who's got a thick ear or a black eye ought to be allowed the privilege of giving Handforth thick ears and black eyes!"

I grinned.

"At that rate Handy would have a dozen of each by the time you'd done," I said. "No, the thing's over, and Handy's suffered enough, taking it altogether. But we shall have to get at the truth somehow or other."

The juniors dispersed, some of them rather disappointed that Handforth was to escape a ragging. Through his preposterous habit of jumping to conclusions he had caused a free fight in the Triangle, and a great many fellows were feeling sore. But it was far better to let the thing drop.

Most of the Removites concluded that Handforth had imagined nearly the whole incident—but I didn't. Handforth was an ass, but he wasn't given to delusions. He had been attacked by three mysterious men.

Who were they? And why had they dropped upon Handforth, only to let him go before they had finished binding him?

The problem was rather an interesting one.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS ARABS OF EL SAFRA!

JACK MASON stood at the door of Mr. Binks's shop, and looked impatiently up the dark High Street. Handforth and Co. hadn't turned up yet, and Mason concluded that the juniors were being detained for some reason.

He was not aware of the fact that Handforth and Co. had pelted past the shop at the double over ten minutes before. He had been busy at the counter at that time, and had heard nothing. And Handforth and Co., as I have already described, quite overlooked Mason in the tuck-shop.

"Oh, this is absurd!" muttered Jack to himself. "Mr. Binks will be wondering why I don't go, and he's getting ready to put up the shutters, too. If the asses don't turn up in two minutes I'll go and look for them."

Mason was by no means nervous, but he could not forget the face which McClure had seen through the hedge on the way down. Was it merely the face of an ordinary tramp, or had Mr. Grell been skulking in the wood? The possibility was by no means an absurd one.

But Mason considered himself quite safe in the village; it was on the lonely stretch to the school that his uncle might molest him. And Jack, plucky enough though he was, knew that he was no match for Grell and Starkey. Apart from any possible peril, he disliked his uncle intensely, and was particularly anxious not to meet him, nor to have anything to do with him.

Mr. Binks bustled about, and Mason decided to stroll along towards the station, feeling almost certain that he would meet the other juniors within a minute or two. He bade the shopkeeper good-night, picked up his parcel, and went out.

He saw no sign of Handforth and Co. as he walked along. He would have been a remarkable fellow if he had seen them, for they were within the Ancient House at that

very moment. But Jack never imagined that the three juniors would forget all about him. He naturally assumed that some delay had occurred.

He neared the station, and found the road very dark and deserted. He walked briskly, and, although on the alert, was not quite prepared for the startling thing which happened.

The incident, in fact, was a repetition of the disaster to Handforth.

Dim forms crept up behind Mason. The high wind made it impossible for him to hear the soft footfalls. And he was seized before he knew that any other being was near him.

"This is the boy!" exclaimed a deep, harsh voice.

"Look here!" shouted Jack. "What the dickens—"

He got no further. The same muffer which had gagged Handforth was forced over his mouth. He was pulled backwards through a gap in the hedge and thrown down upon the ground. One fact was apparent to Mason above all else. His captors were not Grell and Starkey—they were complete strangers, and foreigners at that. In the gloom Mason saw the flowing robes and turbans, and he was greatly startled.

But his struggles were useless, and his wrists and feet were rapidly bound. While this was in progress an electric torch flashed out and dazzled him. Not a word was said, but he heard several grunts of satisfaction.

Then the light went out, and something soft and thick was bound round his eyes, blindfolding him. He was pulled to his feet at last, his mackintosh muddied and crumpled. And then his captors lifted him bodily and carried him away.

It was rather an alarming adventure.

Unable to cry out, unable to see, unable to struggle, he was like a log in the hands of his persecutors. They carried him across the meadow slowly and steadily, and no words were said. Jack's mind was in a whirl, for he couldn't possibly imagine who these people were, or why they had attacked him.

Like Handforth, he half believed that it was a jape of some sort. Perhaps Fullwood and Co. had decided to play an elaborate trick— But Jack dismissed the idea almost at once. Even Fullwood wouldn't plan such an affair as this.

Mason did not know that Handforth had already shared a certain portion of his own trials. If he had known that fact he would have at once realised that Handforth had been seized in error, in mistake for Mason himself.

Having crossed the meadow, a ploughed field was negotiated. Fortunately it was only a narrow one, and it was soon apparent to Mason that he was being carried through trees. For the wind was sighing and whistling in the branches overhead.

A steep decline came next, and here it was necessary to go slowly. Obviously the party was descending into a gully of some sort, probably a steep hollow in the wood. There were many such hollows in the neigh-

hourhood, completely isolated and far from houses and buildings.

At length a halt was called, and Mason was set down. Muttering voices sounded close by, but he could not catch any words that were spoken. Then he was lifted once again and carried into what struck him as being a confined space, probably an old shed, or something like that.

He was roughly pulled upright, and then placed in a kneeling position. The gag was removed, and his eyes were freed from the cloth. Jack Mason gazed around him wonderingly, and not without a little trace of alarm.

He was kneeling in a tent—a curiously shaped tent—and the air was filled with a blue haze, while a pungent, aromatic scent caught his throat and filled his nostrils. This smoke, he saw, was arising from a small brazier almost immediately in front of him. The brazier stood upon a stool, and the glowing embers within provided the only light in the tent—a ruddy, flickering radiance.

Not a word had been spoken to the boy so far. Mason saw, in the dim glow, three curious forms on the other side of the tent. The brazier, with its curling wisps of smoke, intervened, and the whole scene was most uncanny and mysterious, reminding Mason of stories he had read of the East.

The three figures were clothed in voluminous robes which reached to the ankles. On their feet they wore sandals, and turbans adorned the three heads. The men were dark and bearded, and their eyes glittered in the strange light.

"Who—who are you?" asked Mason hesitatingly.

Truth to tell, he was rather bewildered. There was something unreal about the whole adventure, and he couldn't help wondering if it wasn't all a dream. Certainly, nothing like it had ever happened in his life before.

Within the space of fifteen minutes he had been transported from a cold, wintry Sussex road to the shores of Arabia! That's how it seemed to Mason, and it was hardly surprising that he was almost at a loss for words.

"Tell me thy name, boy!" exclaimed the man in the centre, in a deep, rumbling voice which betrayed an imperfect knowledge of English.

"Who are you?" demanded Mason again.

"Thou hast not answered my question," said the stranger. "Beware, lest thou anger me. Thy name, infidel!"

"It's Mason—Jack Mason."

"Thou art not deceiving me?"

"No, of course I'm not," replied Mason, recovering his composure in some measure, although still sorely confused in mind.

"It is well, Mason," said the spokesman. "Know, then, that thou art in the presence of Sheik Akram, high priest of the El Safra Temple, far away on the great wide deserts in hotter climes."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Jack, rather awed.

"Thou art pleased to make a foolish remark!" said the High Priest harshly. "Do

not dare to play with me, boy. I have been to much trouble to arrive at this vile spot, and now my will must be accomplished. Dost thou understand?"

"No, I don't understand," replied Mason quietly.

"Then let me tell thee that which I require," said Sheik Akram, folding his arms and gazing with embarrassing steadiness into Jack's eyes. "Thou hast in thy possession the half of a locket of gold—Ah, I observe thy start!"

Mason had indeed started, and his interest was increased.

"What about the locket?" he asked huskily.

"It is my order that thou shalt bring thy half-locket to me," said the High Priest. "Further, thou must understand that there is a sealed package also in thy possession. Art thou aware, boy, that this package contains the other half of the locket?"

"No, I'm not aware of it," replied Mason. "It's all nonsense. That little parcel was left behind by a friend of mine, and it can't possibly contain the other half of my locket. It's been missing for years——"

"Thy brains are of water!" snapped Sheik Akram. "What madness is this, to tell me to my face that I know not what I sayest? I tell thee, Mason, that the missing half is in that package. Dost thou know what the two halves comprise?"

Mason made no reply.

"I will tell thee," proceeded the High Priest. "Thou art in possession of the wondrous Sacred Locket of El Safra, and it is decreed that thou shalt return the golden charm before midnight strikes again."

Mason became hot with anger. These people, too, were after the locket! He didn't believe that Mr. Strong's package contained the missing half, but he was quite certain that these men were grimly determined to have their way.

Jack recalled the quaint Arabic signs which were engraved upon the inside surface of the locket: he remembered his uncle's startled expression when looking at the Arabic writing. What could it mean? What significance did that curious Arabic charm possess? Apparently the locket was a sinister thing to own.

"Has thy tongue dropped down thy throat, boy?" demanded the priest at last.

"No; I've been thinking," replied Mason. "I'm not going to bring you that locket. It's mine; I've had it ever since I was a baby. As for the other half, I don't know——"

"Silence, thou wretched youth!" thundered Sheik Akram. "Is it that thou hast dared to refuse my demand?"

"Yes, I have!" replied Mason, between his teeth.

"By Allah!" hissed the priest. "Thou shalt suffer for thy impertinence. Seize the wretched boy, my slaves. Slash him thrice with the whip, and maybe his mind will be different."

The two other Arabs came round to the helpless junior, and one held him tight

whilst the other wielded a heavy whip. The slashes, however, were of a mild character, and only stung for a moment or two.

"That is just a taste of what might follow," exclaimed the Sheik. "Be warned, boy, not to thwart me again."

"You can thrash me all you like, but I sha'n't—"

"Seize him!" shouted the Arab priest furiously. "By the beard of the Prophet I will show this brat that I am the master! Wield the whip fiercely, my slaves. Spare him not!"

This time Mason's back was considerably sore. The slashes were fierce and heavy, and the Romovite panted with pain and rage. At the same time he did not overlook the fact that these heathen had him completely in their power.

"You—you brutes!" he gasped painfully.

"Ah! Thy tone is different now," said the priest, smiling. "It is well, infidel youth. Thou art to heed my orders, and I warn thee to listen with care. At eleven of the clock to-night my slave will await nigh the hedge at the spot where thou wert seized. Dost thou understand?"

"Well?" asked Mason shortly.

"My orders are that thou shalt meet my slave," continued Akram. "Thou must bring with thee the articles I mentioned—the half-locket which has been thine for years and the sealed package. Thou must bring the two."

Mason set his teeth.

"I won't!" he declared grimly. "You can use that whip again if you like, but you won't get me to consent. I'm not afraid of pain—and I'm not going to be forced into—"

"Fool!" interrupted the Sheik. "Thrice fool! I have other weapons which thou wilt fear to a far greater extent. Refusal to comply with my demand will mean—death!"

Jack Mason shivered involuntarily.

"You—you wouldn't dare!" he muttered.

"I mean not thy own death," said the High Priest softly. "No, that would not suit me, boy. If thou art absent from the meeting-place at eleven of the clock to-night, thy friend, Mr. David Strong, will die ere the dawn comes."

"You—you murderous ruffians!" gasped Mason hotly.

"Thy words are merely those of panic," exclaimed the priest. "I care not a snap of the fingers for such expressions. A death will result if thou art obstinate. And know, also, that thy lips must be sealed. If a single word of this scene is breathed to thy schoolfellows, even though the locket is handed to me, Sahib Strong will die just the same. Is my meaning clear?"

"It's only a threat!" said Jack huskily.

"Thou art even more foolish than I took thee to be," thundered the priest angrily. "Art thou mad enough to suppose that I should use threats alone? Hast thou not read of the mysterious death of two men in London, the great city? I ordered that they should die—and they died. It will be the

same in thy case. And, remember, thy own life will be sacrificed after that of Sahib Strong unless the locket is within my hands to-night. I have spoken my word!"

Mason was quite scared, and he didn't mind owning it. He had reason to be startled. The mysterious nature of this whole adventure, the sinister threat which had just been uttered, the terrible fear that Mr. Strong would lose his life, all contributed to Jack's perturbation.

What could he do but comply?

The statement that Mr. Strong would die might be hollow, but Jack Mason knew that he could not risk the thing. Neither could he seek the advice of his chums or of Nelson Lee. If he did do so, or if he failed to obey the order, Mr. Strong would be murdered! And Mason would be responsible—for it was in his power to avert the disaster.

What possible course was there for him except to give his word?

It was a terrible position for the lad, and his state of mind was pitiful just then. His whole being revolted against knuckling under to these Arab scoundrels. But he had read stories of men who had refused to obey similar orders, and he knew that splendid men had been killed for less.

"What's the good of the locket to you?" he asked at last.

The Sheik laughed harshly.

"Thy question is a needless one," he said.

"Have I not told thee that it is the Sacred Locket of El Safra! Were I to wield my full power, I could have thee struck down for even placing thy infidel fingers upon the property of Allah. Well, boy, hast thou decided?"

"Yes."

"And what is thy will?"

"I don't understand why you are so murderous," replied Mason quietly. "How can I do anything but agree? It's not so much the locket—that's mine, and nobody else is responsible for it—but the package belongs to Mr. Strong, and you've no right to force me—"

"Hold thy foolish tongue," interrupted the Arab sharply. "Is it not known to thee that the package contains the half of the Sacred Locket which has been missing for so many years? Thou wilt not believe me! It matters not. But thou must bring both articles to the agreed-upon spot at eleven of the clock. Dost thou agree?"

"Yes!" said Mason, in a low voice.

"It is well. Thou hast sense, after all," said the Sheik pleasantly. "Be, then, prepared to take thy departure. And let me warn thee, boy, to hold thy tongue. One slip, and others might know. There must be no word spoken. Thou art already aware of the consequences which will follow to thy friend, Sahib Strong, if the truth becomes public. Go, Mason, and return later."

"Just against the station?" asked Jack.

"Thou art correct," replied the High Priest. "Thou wilt see my slave appear at thy approach. If thou art late in arriving

the consequences will be serious. Go, and bear in mind my wise words."

The two slaves had walked round behind Mason, and they quickly secured the cloths round his face, so that he could neither cry out nor see. Then he was carried out of the tent, the scent of the burning incense still in his nostrils.

As before, he was carried bodily, and his captors had some little trouble in getting him up the steep gully. And then Mason lost his sense of direction and had no idea as to where he was being carried.

He was jogged along for an eternity, as it seemed to him. Actually, the journey probably occupied about fifteen minutes. At last he was set down. No words were spoken, and he assumed that the slaves were taking a rest.

But the minutes passed and nothing happened.

Mason, numbed with cold, moved his hands, and was astonished to find that the ropes which bound his wrists were loose. He jerked them, and his hands came free. At the same moment he knew that his ankle bonds had also been cut, although not unwound. A few kicks and he was able to get to his feet. And he had been lying there without even knowing that he was free!

He tore the bandages from his head and looked round dazedly.

He was just against the hedge bordering the road. The wind whistled cuttily against him. He could see quite distinctly in the starlight, but he was alone—utterly alone.

The mysterious Arabs had vanished as though by magic into the night.

"Oh, great Scott!" muttered Jack. "It—it seems absolutely mad!"

There was no trace of his late captors, and it required all his efforts to assure himself that the startling events had actually taken place. It seemed as though he must have been lying there, suffering from nightmare.

But the ropes were still on the ground, and his clothing faintly exuded the smell of the pungent incense.

He broke through the hedge and found himself on the road. The bewilderment had now left him, but his worry was intense. At eleven o'clock he must be back again with the locket and the package.

At all costs he must obey the High Priest of the El Safra Temple!

CHAPTER V.

REGINALD PITT MAKES DEDUCTIONS.

STUDY E, in the Remove passage, was quiet.

A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the electric light was on. Reginald Pitt sat in the easy chair, gazing absently before him. The Serpent of the Remove—as he had been called—was in a thoughtful mood.

The House-row had been over for some little time, and the Removites had settled down in their various studies or in the common-room. But Pitt was worried, and keenly alert. His prep. received no attention whatever.

"It's queer—jolly queer!" he told himself. "I'm blessed if I know what to do, exactly. Handforth was attacked by Arabs, but nobody knows who they were or why they pounced on old Handy. Arabs! And Mason hasn't come in! I shall certainly have to make a move in some direction or other."

The cunning expression which had been almost habitual with Pitt was no longer in evidence. His somewhat sharp features had softened in a subtle manner, and his eyes were not at all shifty, as they had been.

The change in Pitt was really astonishing—I had noticed it more than ever of late. And I was quite certain that Jack Mason's influence had a great deal to do with the transformation.

There was a determined light in those keen eyes of Pitt's as he got up from his chair and crossed over to the door. No matter how the Removite's character changed for the better he would always be as sharp as a needle and as cool as any fellow could be. Hitherto, Pitt had used his sharpness for evil purposes, but that sharpness had other values.

He switched off the light and left the study. The journey he made was not a long one, for he merely went next door to Study D. Handforth and Church and McClure were in the midst of their prep.

"Buzz off!" said Handforth politely. "No time to jaw now—"

"I sha'n't keep you a minute," said Pitt, closing the door calmly. "I should just like to ask you one or two questions about those Arabs, Handy."

Handforth glared.

"If you're looking for trouble you'll find some!" he said darkly. "I'm just about fed up with those rotten Arabs! Half the chaps think I've been having delusions, and I don't want any sneers—"

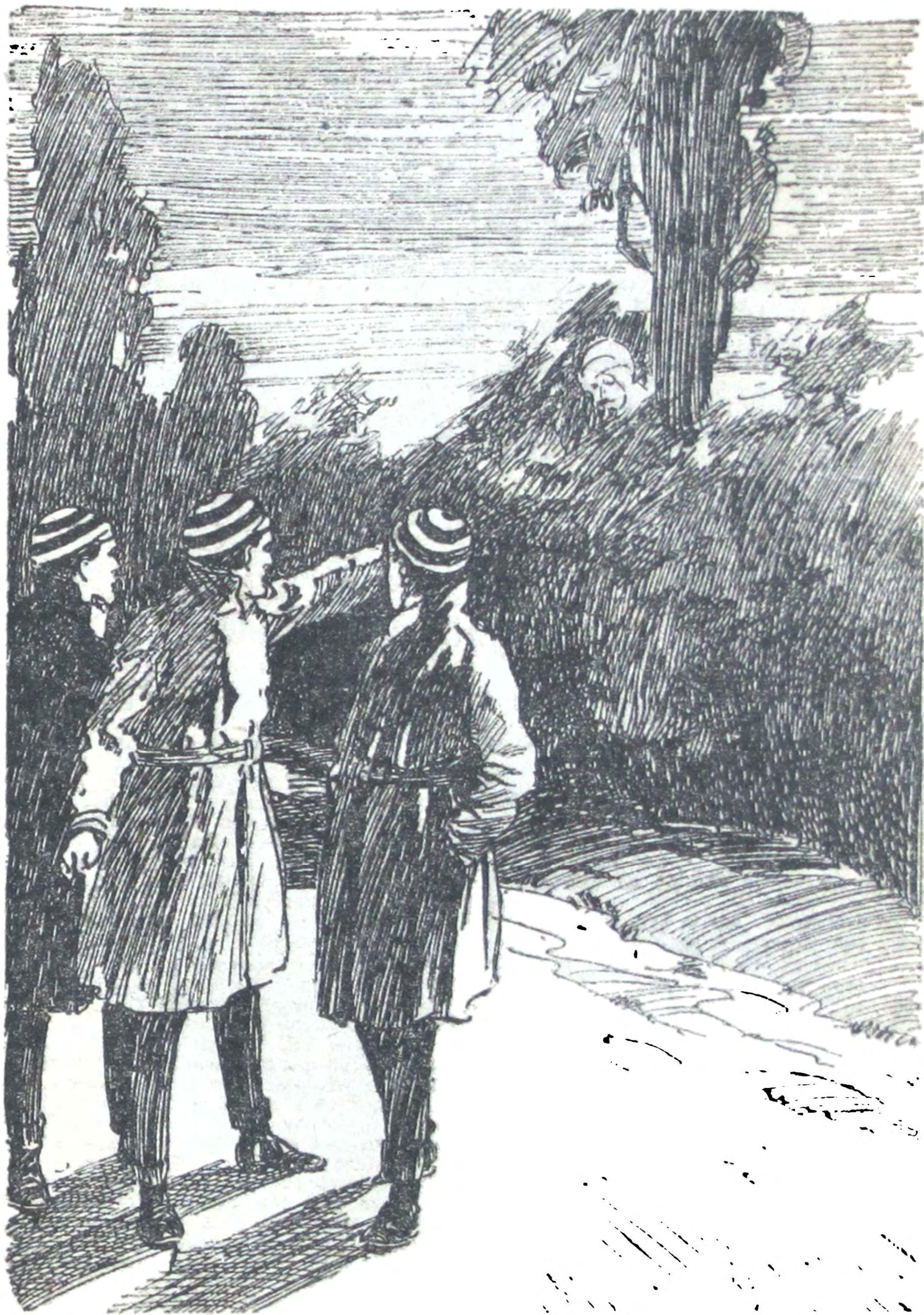
"My dear old chap, I'm not going to sneer," said Pitt. "I believe your story in every detail, and I think you've had every cause to feel annoyed. Being ducked in a muddy ditch is enough to make any fellow ratty."

Handforth laid down his pen.

"If you're not going to sneer, I don't mind talking for a minute or two," he said generously. "Do you know that half a dozen fellows have stuck their heads into the door during the last twenty minutes? Do you know that they've advised me to take liver salts and Eno's Fruit Salts, and goodness knows what else? They all seem to think my tummy's out of order! I'm rather wild—What the dickens are you grinning at, Church?"

"Oh—er—nun-nothing!" said Church hastily.

"Most unfeeling of the fellows," said Pitt.



"Great Scott!" gasped McClure, coming to an abrupt halt. "Don't you see it?"
He pointed wildly towards the hedge.—(See page 2.)

in a consoling voice. "But let me give you a word of advice, Handy. Don't take any notice, place yourself above all that kind of cheap humour. Ignore it."

"That's what I have been doing," said Handforth.

Considering that half the books in Study D had been hurled at the doorway during the last twenty minutes, this statement was hardly accurate. Some of those books had scored a bull's-eye, too. The fact that the volumes belonged to Church and McClure did not worry Handforth in the least, although they were looking the worse for wear. To be just, however, it must be said that Handforth was just as ready to hurl his own books about if necessary.

"I just want to ask you about Mason," said Pitt. "He went down to the village with Church and McClure, didn't he?"

"Yes," said McClure. "We meant to look in at the tuck-shop for him on our way back, but forgot all about it."

"So you left him in the village?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"Over an hour—oh, more than that," said Church. "Hasn't he come in yet?"

"No, but I expect he'll turn up soon," replied Pitt. "About that face you saw, McClure. Do you think it was an Arab—one of the rotters who attacked Handforth?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," replied McClure cautiously.

"But you couldn't say anything definite?"

"No."

"Well, what kind of overcoat was Mason wearing?" asked Pitt.

Handforth and Co. stared.

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Church.

"It may have nothing to do with it, but I've a fancy to know," smiled Pitt.

"Well, he wasn't wearing an overcoat at all—"

"Are you sure?" cut in Pitt sharply.

"He was wearing a mackintosh," grinned Church. "You ought to know, I should think, considering that you're his study-mate. It's just like Handy's—or was. Handy's isn't fit to give to a tramp now."

Reginald Pitt nodded.

"Thanks," he said, opening the door. "So long."

He paused outside, quite satisfied with the result of his inquiry. And he went back into Study E and stood staring into the fire.

"A mackintosh just like Handforth's—and the three of them were seen as they walked down to the village," he murmured. "Why, it's as clear as daylight. I don't need to be Mr. Nelson Lee to deduce a few facts out of this material."

Pitt dropped into the easy chair, frowning.

"Those Arabs were after Mason, of course," he told himself. "That's obvious, considering the locket with the Arabic writing on it. And it's easy to see how the mistake came about. Mason, in a light-coloured mackintosh, went down to the village with Church and McClure. On the

way a face was seen in the hedge—one of the Arab merchants on the watch. He spotted Mason, and considered that everything was all serene. He scooted on ahead, and warned his pals, who were probably on the watch, too, near the village. So far, I'm on safe ground. Now, what was the next move?"

Pitt stared steadily into the fire and nodded.

"Mason and Church and McClure were watched as they entered old Binks's shop," he muttered keenly. "Nothing easier than to watch the High Street on such a dark night. The three of them went into the shop—two in ordinary overcoats, and Mason in a mackintosh. Naturally, he was distinct from the others. They met Handforth in the tuck-shop, and that's where the confusion arose."

There was no doubt that Pitt was on the right track; he was reconstructing the events in the village with singular astuteness, and Nelson Lee would have been quite pleased if he could have heard him. Strictly speaking, I ought to have been doing this detective business, but I didn't know the facts as Pitt knew them; moreover, my time was full up with football matters just then, and I really didn't give Jack Mason a thought. Reginald Pitt was personally interested in his study chum.

"Yes, that's where the confusion arose," repeated Pitt. "Handforth, also wearing a light-coloured mackintosh, left the shop with Church and McClure. At a distance he must have looked exactly like Mason, who had entered a minute before. How were the shadowers to know that the three fellows who went into Binks's place weren't the three who came out? They naturally mistook Handforth for Mason. It was the easiest thing in the world. The Arabs waited for their chance, and it came when Handy's cap blew off."

Pitt was quite pleased with himself, but he was worried, too.

"The rotters pounced on him, thinking he was Mason," he went on. "Within a couple of minutes, of course, they found out their mistake and hurled Handforth aside. I expect he rolled into the ditch by accident. His own clumsiness probably. And he was so wild, and Church and McClure were so excited, that they forgot all about Mason in the tuck-shop. That was an hour and a half ago, and Mason hasn't come back yet. It looks rotten."

There was every reason for Pitt's anxiety. He knew that Mr. Binks must have closed his shop very soon after Handforth and Co. had left, and the other shops closed at about the same time. There was no earthly reason why Jack Mason should remain in Belton. Moreover, it was past locking-up time, and Mason was always particular about getting in early. He had taught Pitt many lessons with regard to abiding by the school rules.

It was more than likely that Mason had suffered the same fate as Handforth—with this difference. Mason was the fellow who

was wanted, and he hadn't been thrown aside at once. What had happened to him?

Pitt knew quite a lot about the boy from Bermondsey, and about the locket and the sealed package. In fact he knew more than Mason himself. For during the earlier stages of Mason's term at St. Frank's Pitt had been rather hostile, and had actually helped Mr. Simon Grell to gain possession of the coveted articles.

Owing to an idle curiosity—which Pitt had since regretted—he had opened that package, and had seen within it the missing half of the locket, which was identical outwardly with the other. At all events, Pitt had confused them and had replaced the wrong one.

It was really this action of his which had led to Mr. Grell's anxiety to obtain possession of the thing. For the Arabic writing on the newly discovered half was quite different from the other, and Mr. Grell knew that it related to a buried treasure of some kind. Hence his anxiety to get the complete locket; for without it he could do nothing.

The Arabs of El Safra apparently wished to recover the locket from different motives. The thing was, it appeared, of some sacred value to the Arabs, and they were determined to get it at all costs.

Pitt wondered what he should do. All his thoughts were concerned with helping Mason. He had done enough against the boy from Bermondsey in the past, and now he was doing his utmost to make amends. In some respects Reginald Pitt was a very splendid fellow.

There was no pretence about his anxiety for Jack. If he didn't come in within twenty minutes, Pitt decided, he would go to Nelson Lee. And Lee, as everybody knows, was the Housemaster of the Ancient House at St. Frank's.

But this measure was not necessary.

Pitt strolled out into the lobby, and then opened the big door and passed out on to the wide steps. The night was still starlight, and Pitt could easily see across the Triangle. And at that very moment he spotted a form drop over the wall and come running towards the Ancient House. Pitt started forward.

"That you, Jack?" he asked quickly.

"Yes," said the newcomer, panting. "I'm late, Pitt. Let's get indoors. I shall be reported if I'm seen—"

"Rot!" said Pitt. "Nobody knows you've just come in. I'm jolly glad to see you. I thought you'd got lost. Where the thunder have you been all this time?"

"Oh—in—in the village," said Mason awkwardly.

They passed inside, and made their way to Study E. When the door was closed Pitt glanced at his study-mate with interest. Jack Mason was not the same fellow as he had been at tea-time.

There was a gleam of real alarm in his eyes, and his cheeks were pale, except for two red spots caused by his exertion in running to the school. His mackintosh, too, was smeared with mud in places. And Pitt's keen

eyes did not overlook the red condition of his chum's wrists. It was quite a big clue.

"Is Handforth in?" asked Mason, with assumed carelessness.

"Hours ago," replied Pitt. "They went to the station—Handforth and his chums, I mean—and forgot all about you. I've been wondering where on earth you'd blown off to. You don't usually stay out after locking-up."

Mason looked at Pitt with eyes that were full of worry.

"I want you to do me a favour, Pitt," he said quietly.

"Go ahead."

"It's only natural that you'll question me as to where I've been all this time," said Mason. "Please don't. You'll only distress me, Pitt, because I can't possibly answer. I'm not in the habit of telling lies, so I shan't fake up any yarn—and I know you're too sensible to be put off with one, anyhow. Will you please ask no questions at all?"

Pitt lay back in his chair.

"In other words, you don't want to tell me anything?" he asked.

"I—I can't!"

"Why can't you?"

"Because— Oh, I can't say anything," said Jack, getting to his feet and pacing up and down restlessly. "I know it looks awfully queer, but I hope you won't think rotten things."

Reginald Pitt laughed.

"Shall I tell you what has happened this evening?" he asked. "To you, I mean?"

"How can you tell me that?" demanded Jack sharply. "Have you been watching— Oh, but I know you wouldn't do that, Pitt."

"I've told a few fibs in my time," said Pitt coolly. "But lying is a rotten game, Mason, and I've given it up. I haven't been outside the school grounds since tea-time—that's the truth."

"I—I'm sorry," said Jack. "But I'm upset, Pitt—"

"And I don't wonder," interrupted the Serpent. "Squat down, my son, and just listen to me. I'm going to tell you, approximately, what's happened. Don't interrupt until I've finished, but I'll bet I don't go far wrong."

Mason didn't know what to make of his study-chum, but sat still and listened with great anxiety. He was quite sure that Pitt would give voice to an altogether wrong account of the events. How could it be otherwise? How could Pitt know what had occurred?"

"You waited for Handforth and Co. in the tuck-shop," said Pitt. "After that, getting fed-up, you walked out. I don't know which way you walked, whether it was towards the station or the school—but that doesn't matter much. You were suddenly collared by two or three mysterious forms—Arabs, in fact."

"How—how did—" Mason gulped. "Go on!"

"You were collared by Arabs, and your ankles were bound, and your wrists were bound," continued Pitt, vastly enjoying the amazement on Mason's face. "It's quite pos-

sible that you were gagged, too, but I don't know for certain. Well, you were carried away to some place. This is where I've got to be hazy again. I don't know where the dickens you were taken to, but it couldn't have been far off. And then these Arab blighters made you promise that you'd hand over that half-locket and Mr. Strong's sealed package. I should say that you've been scared into promising that you'll take the things, but I don't know for certain. Am I right?"

Jack Mason stared with absolute consternation and amazement.

"You said you didn't follow me!" he panted. "You must have followed me, Pitt, or you couldn't know all this!"

"I haven't left the Triangle once."

"Then—then how did you know?" asked Mason huskily.

"You admit I've hit the nail on the head, then?"

"Yes—I—" Mason broke off. "I can't admit anything, Pitt. But it's simply amazing. I—I don't know how you found out—"

"I'm not half so clever as you think," interrupted Pitt pleasantly. "Look here, I'll just explain how I arrived at my conclusions, and then you'll understand perfectly."

Jack was suspicious, and he could scarcely be blamed for this. Pitt had not always been truthful in the past, and there was no guarantee that he would be truthful now. It seemed impossible to Jack Mason that Pitt could have told him so much without having seen or heard something of the startling adventure in the Arabs' tent.

"If you say that you haven't been out, Pitt, I'll believe you," said Mason quietly. "But somebody else must have followed me, and you have heard—"

"Your mistake," interrupted Pitt. "I haven't had a word with a soul about you and the Arabs. I arrived at my conclusions by a very simple series of deductions. And there's really no mystery in it. You see, Handforth met with a rather startling mishap, and I was able to guess things."

"I wish you'd be clear," said Jack impatiently.

Pitt smiled, and lost no time in describing how Handforth had been seized near the station by mysterious figures who looked like Arabs. Pitt explained how he had arrived at the conclusion that Handforth had been captured in mistake for Mason.

"So, you see," he concluded, "when you didn't turn up, old son, I practically knew what those Arab chaps had got hold of you. It was simply obvious."

"But—but how did you know about the locket?" asked Mason.

"That was a guess," replied Pitt. "I've seen that locket of yours, and I know there are some Arabic signs engraved on it. Well, those Arabs couldn't have wanted anything else, could they? And I assumed that their object in collaring you was to make you deliver up the goods."

Mason sat for some moments without comment. Pitt knew everything; by a very simple train of reasoning he knew all about

Mason's difficulty. Jack badly wanted to take his study-mate into his confidence. Well, why not? The Arabs had warned him to say nothing, under pain of dire consequences.

But Pitt knew the truth already—or even something more dangerous than the truth. For the Serpent had guessed, and only knew the bare facts; he wasn't aware that Mr. Strong's life hung in the balance. Unless warned, Pitt would probably talk about the story to others. And it wouldn't be fair to ask him to keep his tongue still without giving him some sort of explanation.

Mason had resolved to say nothing whatever; but this was quite different now. He looked steadily across at Pitt, and the latter returned the gaze. There was intense worry and concern in the Bermondsey junior's eyes.

"I'm going to tell you something else, Pitt," said Jack. "I'm going to trust you with a secret—and I hope you'll respect it."

"If I had always been a decent fellow I should resent that remark," said Pitt calmly.

"But you've had every cause to doubt me in the past, Mason. Well, if you tell me anything, you needn't be afraid. I give you my word of honour that I won't do a thing which will bring you the slightest harm."

Mason was satisfied. He did not take heed of the fact that Pitt had made no promise to speak to anybody else. Pitt's reply had been carefully worded, but it was frank and absolutely sincere.

"Well, those Arabs have come from some temple or other," said Mason quietly. "It seems that the locket is sacred; and I've been told that the missing half is wrapped up in that neat little package of Mr. Strong's."

"Really?" said Pitt gravely.

He had known for weeks past what the package contained, but he had been unable to speak to Mason about it without betraying himself. So now it was necessary to affect ignorance. A few weeks before Reginald Pitt would have felt highly amused; now his only sensation was one of shame and meanness.

"Do these Arabs want you to give them the locket?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Mason. "I feel like ignoring the whole thing, Pitt, but I can't. It's hateful to be forced to give up something which I have had all my life. And that package isn't mine at all. Yet I'm bound to deliver it."

"Why?"

"If I don't, those awful Arabs will murder Mr. Strong!" exclaimed Jack, his voice trembling. "I don't know whether to believe it or not, Pitt, but I can't risk it. I'm almost certain that nothing would happen if I refused, but how am I to be sure? Just think how ghastly it would be if poor old Mr. Strong was killed!"

Pitt laughed lightly.

"My dear chap, a yarn—nothing but a yarn," he declared. "If you'll take my advice, you'll do nothing. Let these Arab beasts go to the dickens; ignore them completely."

"That's how I feel," declared Jack fiercely. "If the danger was only to myself, I wouldn't move a finger. But it's Mr. Strong who will suffer, and I'm bound to obey the order. And I want you to keep quiet, because I was told that if I breathed a word about what had happened, the consequences would be just the same."

Pitt lay back in his chair and regarded Mason steadily.

"You don't believe all this rot, do you?" he asked. "You can't tell me that you've been gulled into crediting such a string of idiotic lies? You've got more sense, Mason!"

Jack looked very distressed.

"It's a terrible position," he said. "I'm just like you, Pitt; in my heart I don't believe a thing of it. I'm almost certain that it's nothing more than a fake. But is it right for us to accept that as positive certainty? I can't afford to take the risk. I'd rather lose the locket than place Mr. Strong's life in danger. Although I'm doubtful, Pitt, I must obey the order. Besides, there's no drawing back now, because I gave my word."

"And you really mean to knuckle under?"

"Don't put it like that!" said Jack uncomfortably. "What else can I do? I've got to meet one of those Arabs down the lane at eleven o'clock. It's no good trying to get out of it, Pitt."

The Serpent rose to his feet.

"Do you want to hear my advice?" he asked slowly.

"What is it?"

"Take no notice of the whole affair. Go to bed to-night, and sleep like a top," said Pitt. "Mr. Strong won't come to any harm, and you needn't be uneasy. Just snap your fingers at those heathen rotters."

"That's the very advice I should like to take," replied Jack Mason. "But I've given my word, Pitt, and I've got to go through with it. I'm glad I've told you, because it's hateful having a secret all to yourself."

There was a note of finality in Mason's voice which Pitt could not ignore. He knew that further discussion was quite useless.

Jack Mason was determined.

CHAPTER VI.

PITT SEEKS AID—AND FINDS IT.

"DEAR fellows, it's simply amazing—that's all I can say," declared Sir Montio Tregellis-West, as he placed his slippered feet upon the fender. "Why was Handforth captured? Why was he thrown into the ditch? Why was he released two minutes after being made a prisoner? It's up to you, Nipper, old boy, to explain the things. You're a detective, an' it's your job."

"Well, I haven't thought much about it," I replied. "We've been too busy with these football arrangements. Do you know I've written six letters this evening to skippers of other elevens—"

"Come in!" growled Watson, as the door-handle rattled.

"That's just what I am doing," said Pitt, entering Study C. "It's a good thing you invited me to come in, because I was coming all the same. I want to have a word with you fellows—a very private word."

Pitt closed the door mysteriously, and I nodded.

"We've got some cotton-wool in the cupboard," I remarked. "We'll stuff up the keyhole and all the cracks, if you're very particular. I'm quite obliging, you know, and I don't mind taking a little trouble."

Pitt frowned.

"This is no joking matter, let me tell you," he said. "Honestly, it's rather serious. Have you thought anything more about that attack on Handforth? Do you know its significance?"

I sat up.

"I was just thinking about it; I've been too busy up till now," I explained. "Now, lemme see. Handforth was collared, wasn't he? It stands to reason that nobody would collar Handforth by design, therefore it must have been a bloomer."

"Good!" said Pitt. "You're rather hot stuff at reasoning things out, ain't you? I've had a shot at it, and I'm feeling rather pleased with myself. Let's see if you can go one better."

"So you've been having a shot, have you?" I remarked. "Well, I must say that you're as keen as mustard, Pitt, and it's quite possible that I shan't be able to whack you. But perhaps you know more facts than I do?"

"I don't think so," said Pitt. "Church and McClure went down to the village with Mason. They left him in the tuck-shop and went to the station—Handforth with them. Handforth was seized and roughly handled by a bunch of rotters who looked like Arabs. That's all the material I had to go upon."

I suddenly became quite serious.

"Mason went down to the village with Church and McClure," I repeated. "By Jupiter! I hadn't quite realized the significance of that before. What an ass I've been to bother about these footer fixtures when I ought to have been attending to this other business. There's only one thing to think, Pitt."

"What's that?"

"We know that somebody looked through the hedge while Mason was going to the village with Church and McClure," I replied. "That somebody was on the watch. He saw Mason, and, later on, Handforth was mistaken for your study-mate. It was Mason who ought to have fallen into the trap. By the way, has he come in?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's good!" I said with relief. "That chap Grell has been hanging about, as you know, and he's a pretty desperate rascal. How long ago did Mason come in?"

"He arrived about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Then what the dickens was he doing in the village all that time?" I asked sharply. "Look here, Pitt, you know something more than you've stated, don't you?"

"As it happens, I do," replied the Serpent, sitting on the edge of the table. "I'm not feeling quite so backed as I was. My deductions weren't anything out of the ordinary, after all, because you've repeated 'em. But I went a little further than you've gone."

"Begad! This won't do!" remarked Sir Montie. "You mustn't let Pitt beat you, Nipper, old boy."

"You don't seem to understand that Pitt is hot stuff," I replied. "I haven't had a word with Mason, and so I'm handicapped. Has he explained why he kept out so long, Pitt?"

"He refused to explain at first."

"Then that looks as though something happened," I went on. "I should say that he was collared by those Arabs, in connection with that locket of his. But he can't have given it up, because it's in my guv'nor's keeping. By Jupiter! Has he promised to — No, he's got more sense!"

Pitt leaned forward.

"You've practically hit it," he said in a low voice. "Mason made me promise that I should respect his secret——"

"Then you can't say anything to us, my dear chap," I put in promptly.

"I can, because I left a loophole," said Pitt. "Surprising, isn't it? You wouldn't think that I should care tuppence about respecting a secret, would you? But my ideas have changed a bit, and I'm not such a howling rotter as I used to be."

"Glad you admit it!" remarked Watson, with a nod.

"A chap who admits his faults gains respect," I said grimly. "You've gained my respect, Pitt, and I've high hopes that you'll be a credit to the Remove yet. Mind you don't backslide!"

Reginald Pitt grinned.

"What were we talking about?" he said. "Oh, Mason's secret. I told him that I would respect it, and I gave him my word of honour that I wouldn't do a single thing which could bring him the slightest harm. That doesn't prevent me from doing something for his good, does it?"

"You artful bounder!" I exclaimed. "Well, what's the idea?"

Pitt came right over to the hearthrug, and forthwith told us what had happened to Mason only a short time before. He told us of the threat to kill Mr. Strong if the locket was not handed over. And we finally learned that Mason was determined to keep his appointment at eleven o'clock.

"He mustn't know that I've said anything to you," concluded Pitt. "I'm talking to you fellows in absolute confidence, and I know that I can trust you. It's no good arguing with Mason; he's as firm as a rock."

"The chap's dotty!" snorted Watson. "Fancy believing that bosh! Those Arabs wouldn't dare to kill——"

"That's not the point," interrupted Pitt. "Mason's not dotty, either. He's practically certain that the threat's a hollow one; but there's just a flimsy chance that it isn't. And Mason won't dream of leaving the thing as it stands. He's not going to take any

risks, because of his regard for Mr. Strong."

"Well, Mason is to be honoured for it," I said quietly. "I'm glad to learn that he hasn't been completely spoofed. But I'm of the opinion that those Arabs are no more Oriental than I am!"

Pitt nodded.

"Grell!" he said calmly. "Grell and his pals!"

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez and gazed at us.

"But how could Grell be an Arab?" he asked mildly. "I understood that Mr. Simon Grell was an English rascal—I did, really."

"It's a trick, Montie," I explained. "I'll bet my boots on it."

"Dear fellow, I shouldn't do that if I were you," said Tregellis-West, shaking his noble head. "Bettin' is a bad practice, an' it would be shockin' if you lost your boots, you know. But all this talk is beyond the limits of my small brain. I'm out of my depth, begad!"

"It's rather queer how we agree on every point," said Pitt. "Mason hasn't a single suspicion—but I have. Grell is at the bottom of this Arab stunt, I'll swear. It's just a trick to scare him."

I nodded grimly.

"I've had a few experiences with Nelson Lee," I remarked. "I can't remember any case of Arabs coming to England after a locket and threatening to murder somebody. It's not—— Well, I can't swallow it. But we know for an absolute fact that Mason's uncle, Grell, is anxious to get hold of that half-locket and the package. He's made several attempts already, and we've had no indication that he intends to give it up. It's my belief that Grell is lying low, and has decided on this wheeze in order to play upon Mason's fears. It's nothing more nor less than a piece of elaborate bluff!"

"Of course it is," agreed Pitt. "It's no good saying that to Mason, though, because he's too fond of that friend of his, Mr. Strong. He'd rather die himself than have anything happen to the old chap. He'd say that he couldn't risk placing Mr. Strong's life in danger. These Arabs have made it quite clear that all they want is the gold locket. Grell is after that locket, and he wants it badly. Therefore isn't it natural to suppose that the Arabs are merely tools in the game?"

"Of course," I nodded. "Grell is in the background somewhere, and we're certainly not going to let him diddle Mason in this bare-faced fashion. Yet I don't think it would be wise to say anything to Mason himself. It would put you in a queer position, Pitt, and Mason would probably refuse to drop the thing."

"He's already refused," said Pitt. "I think the responsibility is too great for us to carry on our own shoulders. I'm agreeable, of course, but I should feel far more comfortable if Mr. Lee knew all about it."

"Pitt, you're getting more sense every day," I said heartily. "We'll go straight

to Mr. Lee's study and tell him all about it. Something's got to be done—and my guv'nor is the man to map out the course of action. He'll be jolly pleased with you, Pitt."

"That's what I was wondering," said the Serpent thoughtfully. "Will he? Don't you think that he'll consider that I've betrayed Jack's confidence? I sha'n't like Mr. Lee to —"

"Don't be an ass," I interrupted. "You've betrayed no confidence. You told Mason that you wouldn't do anything to harm him—and Mr. Lee will fully understand that you acted in this way because you're genuinely anxious to do your study-mate a good turn. Anyhow, we'd better let the guv'nor hear about it."

And so, leaving Sir Montie and Tommy in Study C—for we didn't want to cause comment by going in a crowd—Pitt and I went along the passage and tapped at the door of Nelson Lee's apartment.

"Come in," came the Housemaster's voice.

We entered, and found Nelson Lee at his desk, writing. He laid his pen down as I closed the door and regarded us closely. He could tell that our mission was a serious one.

"Well, Nipper?" he asked. "Sit down, my boy—sit down, Pitt."

"We've come about Mason, sir," I said, getting straight to the point. "Something queer has happened this evening, and Pitt is rather anxious. He came to me, and I thought the best thing we could do was to tell you all about it—and so did Pitt himself. In fact he suggested this visit."

Nelson Lee looked at Pitt curiously.

"Do I understand, Pitt, that you are desirous of helping Mason?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You must not mind my making that inquiry," said the guv'nor quickly. "I have had reason to doubt your motives on previous occasions, Pitt, but I have been extremely pleased to observe a very marked improvement in your manner and habits of late. Not the least significant is your friendliness towards Mason. I feared, I must confess, that it was assumed, but—"

"You're wrong, sir," I interrupted. "Pitt may have been a bounder in the past, but I'll vouch for his decency now."

Reginald Pitt was rather red.

"Thank you, Nipper," he said quietly. "It's not open to me to resent implications. I have done so many caddish things that people naturally distrust me. But I'm trying to live down all that rot, sir," he added earnestly, turning to Nelson Lee. "I hope you'll believe me when I say that I'm really friendly towards Mason and wish to do all I can to help him."

Nelson Lee patted Pitt's back softly.

"Yes, lad, I do believe you," he said. "I fancy I am something of a judge of human character, and I have long believed that you were struggling with the vicious

traits in your nature. Apparently you have expelled them at last, but my final opinion will depend solely upon your own actions. Now, let me hear this item of news concerning Mason."

Without further ado we explained the whole position, and Nelson Lee listened with a grave expression upon his keen, clear-cut face. When we had finished he sat silent for some few moments. Then he rose to his feet.

"Undoubtedly Simon Grell is at the bottom of the business," he said grimly. "Pitt, you were very sensible in going to Nipper—and you did the right thing when you came to my study. Left to himself, Mason might easily have played into his rascally uncle's hands. I am not intimating that Mason is a foolish boy, or even simple. He possesses his full share of common-sense. But that threat against Mr. Strong—hollow though it undoubtedly was—impressed him, and he is even willing to relinquish the locket, although his better sense tells him that he ought not to do so."

"And what shall we do, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I hardly know, Nipper," said Lee. "Some action must be taken, of course—some decisive action, too. As you suggested, it will be wise for us to give Mason no hint of what is being arranged, since the lad is so positive that Mr. Strong is in peril. Moreover, there is another aspect to consider."

"What's that, sir?" asked Pitt.

"We have no evidence which actually points to the fact that Simon Grell is implicated," said Lee. "There is nothing to prove—"

"But you said that it's obvious, sir!" I protested.

"A very different matter, Nipper," said the guv'nor smoothly. "It may be obvious—but that does not mean to say that it is the truth. It is a most unwise plan to assume that the obvious is the actual fact. It might possibly be precisely the opposite. There is a chance that these Arabs are real Arabs—"

"Oh, sir!" I said, staring.

"A chance, Nipper—but a very slim chance. I will admit," proceeded the guv'nor. "However, it is not my habit to take things for granted. Our plans must be made according to the facts which are in our possession. It would be most foolish for us to order our movements on the assumption that Grell is the culprit. What we must do is to employ extreme caution. Our plans need careful attention before they are finally settled."

"That means to say that you're not going to decide now, sir?" I suggested.

"Exactly," replied Nelson Lee. "However, I shall want your help, boys, and I will let you know the programme later on. It is possible that Mason will come here at any minute, and it would not do for him to find you in this study. He would suspect things

at once—and we wish to give him no hint of the measures which are to be taken for his benefit."

"We'll clear, then," I said, jumping to my feet. "Come on, Pitt."

We left the gov'nor's study a moment later—after he had quite unnecessarily warned us to refrain from chatter. Pitt was looking thoughtful as we re-entered Study C in the Remove passage.

"Do you think Mr. Lee will do anything?" he asked.

"Do anything?" I repeated. "Why, my dear ass, he's as keen as pepper on this job. And we sha'n't be left out of it, either. Just you wait."

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was standing with his back to the fire in his study, smoking a cigarette with slow deliberation. He had not finished the cigarette when a tap sounded on the door and Jack Mason appeared. The gov'nor's hint that Pitt and I would be better out of the way had not been ill-timed.

"What is it, Mason?" asked Nelson Lee smilingly.

"I—I've come about that locket of mine, sir, and the sealed package," said Mason, with obvious embarrassment. "You're taking charge of them for me."

"Well, my boy?"

"Can I have them, sir?" asked Mason.

"Certainly, Mason," replied Lee, at once. "They are yours, and if you wish to have them returned to you, I raise no objection. I should advise you to be very careful, however, considering what has happened in the past."

"Yes, sir," said Mason. "I will be."

Nelson Lee walked over to his safe, unlocked it, and produced the little sealed packet and the half-locket. He slipped them both into a foolscap envelope and sealed it up. Then he handed it across his desk.

"There you are, my boy," he said, smiling. "I don't like to see you looking so worried, Mason. Can I help you in any way?"

"I—I don't think so, sir, thank you," said Jack quietly.

He was extremely glad to leave the study, for he realised that it looked very queer asking for the return of the articles in this way. He had feared that Nelson Lee would ask him all sorts of questions—questions which he couldn't answer. It was therefore a relief for him to be spared that ordeal. Mason would have understood better had he known that Nelson Lee was already in possession of the facts.

The gov'nor himself smiled after Mason had closed the door.

"I have given them to you, my lad," he murmured, "but I have an idea that they are still quite safe. At all events, they will not be handed over to your enemies on this occasion."

For Nelson Lee's scheme for safeguarding Jack Mason was already complete.

CHAPTER VII.

NO JOY FOR MR. SIMON GRELL.

TEN-THIRTY sounded from the old tower, and by that time the Remove ought to have been fast asleep. But a figure rose from one of the beds and quickly commenced dressing. Jack Mason was bent upon keeping his appointment.

He had been awake ever since lights-out, and had been listening for the half-hour to strike. He reckoned that he would be able to get down to the station comfortably by eleven o'clock.

Within five minutes he was dressed, and then he crept down the dormitory and silently passed out into the passage. Mason disliked this part of the business as much as any. He was acting like a thief in the night, creeping out of his bed and stealing off whilst others slept.

But in this he was mistaken.

His fond belief that every other Remove junior was sound asleep would have received a bit of a shock if he had decided to go back into the dormitory. For I was already out of bed, and Pitt, on the other side of the dormitory, was slipping his coat and waistcoat on.

Tregellis-West and Watson, having fallen asleep as usual, had been roused by two heavy digs from me, and they were on the floor at once. We had taken precautions earlier.

Immediately after lights-out, while there was still a certain amount of noise going on in the dormitory, we had slipped into nearly all our clothing—unseen in the darkness. Then we had got into bed between the top blanket and the quilt. By adopting this scheme we were ready to leave the dormitory less than a minute after Mason.

He had no idea that so many well-wishers were looking after him. Creeping downstairs, he entered his own study and slipped into his overcoat and cap—which had been left there in readiness.

Immediately afterwards we crept into Study C. Here, also, everything was ready. The only light we used was my electric-torch, and this was carefully placed so that the beam did not show towards the window.

"Slip your boots on quickly!" I muttered. "And don't make a sound. If Mason receives a hint that we're after him, there's no telling what he'll do. We're going to see that he comes to no harm—but he mustn't know it."

"I'm ready," breathed Pitt.

"Pray wait for me, dear fellows," gasped Sir Montie. "One of my laces positively refuses to come out of a knot. Isn't it shockin'? Whenever a fellow is in a hurry, his bootlaces always get into the most frightful knots!"

Our boots had been specially prepared for the work in hand. Some old stockings had been raked up, and these were donned over the boots—an old trick, but an effective one.

Our feet would make very little noise upon the roads.

Going to the window, I cautiously opened it after the light had been extinguished. And I was just in time to see Jack Mason hurrying across the Triangle towards the wall. I turned my head.

"We'll pop out in about half a minute," I breathed.

Meanwhile, Mason had reached the road, and he set off at a brisk walk, the high wind whistling past him noisily. This wind was an ally for us, for it prevented Mason hearing any slight sounds in his rear.

And we were not the only shadowers. For after Mason had been walking for a hundred yards a dim figure emerged from behind the hedge and softly followed in his tracks. Further behind still, we kept this second figure in view.

Needless to say, the other shadower was Nelson Lee. We formed quite a nice little procession, and there was not much fear of Mason coming to any harm with so many guardians on his track.

Nelson Lee's scheme was quite simple.

He intended keeping as close to Mason as possible, and he knew that in the event of any emergency we should be on hand. The chief idea was to discover the identity of the Arabs—or supposed Arabs.

Mason continued his way to the village without even once glancing behind him. He was entirely unsuspecting, and when he arrived at the section of road near the station he came to a halt and peered into the darkness.

Nelson Lee was comparatively close by, but he took great care to remain quite still; there were probably other eyes in addition to Mason's on the watch. Indeed, it was quite likely that Mason himself would be under observation by the people he was going to meet until they were satisfied that he was quite alone.

I followed on quite a long way behind, with Pitt and the others just in my rear. We felt glad that the night was very dark, for our mission would have been extremely difficult otherwise.

"Now then, you asses!" I whispered, turning my head as I heard Montie and Tommy murmuring together. "Don't give the game away!"

"Dear boy, I was just remarkin'——"

"Well, don't remark!"

"But there's nothin' to be seen, Nipper," objected Tregellis-West. "Mason's a long way ahead, round the bend. And I ain't at all sure that Mr. Lee is with us—I haven't seen a sign of him."

"I have," I replied. "Your job is to stick behind me and be ready to charge to the death if necessary."

"We're the reserves, so to speak," grinned Pitt.

"I'm going to slip forward now," I went on. "You come after me when I wave—but don't move before. The guv'nor would never

forgive us if we gave the show away by acting rashly."

I left them, and crept along close against the hedge until I faintly made out the shape of Mason some two hundred yards ahead. Nelson Lee was between Mason and the spot where I stood, but there was certainly no sign of him.

And just then a form appeared from a gap and came into the road. It was the figure of a man, but he was clothed in long, flowing garments. Mason walked forward a pace or two.

"Thou art here in good time, boy," came a foreign-sounding voice from the figure. "It is well. Stand quite still and make no cry."

Mason knew that this man was not the High Priest or Sheik, or whatever he called himself. He was one of the slaves, and Mason allowed himself to be blindfolded, and then his wrists were bound behind his back.

"What's the need of this?" he asked, rather impatiently.

"Thou must ask no questions," murmured the other. "Walk, and I will guide thee."

The junior realised the futility of argument. Besides, what did it matter? He wanted to get the whole thing over as soon possible. And the Arab led him across the meadow swiftly and without speaking.

Nelson Lee was quite satisfied that nobody else was on the watch, and he beckoned to me. In the dense gloom I only just managed to see him. In my turn, I waved to the others behind.

"Well, sir?" I whispered, as I came up.

"They have gone across the meadow," said the guv'nor softly. "I intend to follow, Nipper, but I think it will be as well if you and the other boys remain in somewhat closer attendance. There might be some rough work to accomplish. And your support will be welcome. I am half-inclined to think that I was foolish in not securing outside aid——"

"We can manage the rotters all right," I put in quickly.

"Very well, we will do our best," breathed Nelson Lee. "Lead your companions up to the next meadow, Nipper, and then run along behind the cover of the hedge as fast as you can go. You'll reach the next field in advance, probably, so you'll have to be careful. Wait there until I give you further instructions."

Sir Montie and the others had heard, and they quickly followed me further along the road, while Nelson Lee crossed the meadow direct. He could rely upon himself doing so unobserved, but with five of us it was a different proposition.

So my chums and I hurried round, and were soon racing up the adjoining meadow. At one spot, where the hedge was low, I took a good look, and saw Mason and his escort going along a short distance away.

This whole adventure was rather mysterious, and I wondered what would happen if it turned out that Simon Grell had nothing to do with it. But this was a possibility.

which really didn't enter into our calculations.

We reached the top of the meadow, and then waited. Before us lay a ploughed field—a long field, but comparatively narrow. We had not to wait long before the figures of Mason and the Arab appeared, and they went straight across the field without pausing, or without looking to right or left.

Nelson Lee himself was soon on hand, and now he came towards us.

"You must remain here, boys, until the others have disappeared into the wood which stretches along the other side of the field," he whispered sharply. "This position is very exposed, and even I must take extra care."

"What shall we do then, sir?"

"Come across as quickly as possible."

Nelson Lee went off at once, and he crouched low as he walked across the rough earth of the ploughed field. By this time Mason and the robed figure had practically reached the other side, and they merged into the hedges and trees almost at once. Nelson Lee soon followed their example.

"We seem to be out of it, Nipper, old boy," murmured Sir Montie. "All the fun might be over before—"

"We're going ahead now," I whispered keenly. "Come on!"

As a matter of fact I was getting impatient. I didn't like the idea of Nelson Lee going on first. So we ran across the ploughed field quickly, making straight for the spot where I had last seen the guv'nor.

As it turned out, I need have had no fear of losing him, for there was a quite well-defined path leading through the wood, and it was quite certain that Mason had been led along this, and that Nelson Lee was following him.

Mason, in fact, was already down in the deep hollow.

His guide had stuck closely to him during the whole journey, and at length pushed him into the small tent which stood in the tiny clearing at the bottom of the hollow. The Arab followed Mason in, and the flap closed.

The bandage was removed, and Jack saw the same scene as before. The High Priest stood before him, expectant and with outstretched hand.

"By Allah!" he exclaimed. "Thou hast fulfilled thy mission?"

Mason did not speak, but he handed over the locket and the little package, which he had removed from the envelope. Sheik Akram seized them eagerly, and nodded his head several times.

"It is well," he exclaimed. "Receive my blessing—"

"Am I to understand that Mr. Strong isn't in any danger now?" asked Mason steadily.

"Let thy mind be easy, O infidel boy!" said the High Priest. "Thou hast fulfilled thy trust, and the High Priest of the El Safra Temple is a man of his word. Go, and all will be well. Thou hast pleased me—"

And then, breaking upon the Sheik's soft voice, a cry of warning came from outside.

The three Arabs gazed at one another anxiously. What was the meaning of that cry?

The meaning was quite clear, much to Nelson Lee's fury.

The guv'nor had crept to the edge of the hollow, and was still lying there when we others came up. We could dimly see a curiously shaped tent below us, with a light glowing through—a very dim light.

"Mason has just gone in," breathed the guv'nor. "Really, boys, nothing could be better. We have merely to creep down, surround the tent, and call upon the occupants to surrender. I fancy they will do so at once. If not, a slight amount of force will be of some avail."

Without waiting further, we commenced the descent. And it was then that the cry of warning sounded. Unsuspected by us, somebody was on the watch outside, or, if not on the watch, somebody happened to be there. We saw a dark form dash down ahead of us and tear open the flap.

"Quick, you fools!" shouted a harsh voice. "Run—run like mad!"

All was confusion a moment later. Nelson Lee charged down just as the two Arab "slaves" came staggering out.

Crash!

One of them collided with Lee, and went down, dazed. The other attempted to get away, but the guv'nor's fist decided that he shouldn't leave the spot. The tent was swaying about wildly, and Nelson Lee burst inside, while Pitt and I rushed round to the back.

We just caught a glimpse of a form fleeing up the slope among the trees. He disappeared, and we knew that it would be almost futile to follow. The tent by this time had collapsed, and wild movements underneath it proved that somebody else was there.

"Help me, boys!" rapped out Nelson Lee sharply. "I fear that Mason is hurt."

We tore the canvas aside, and Jack Mason crawled out, gasping, but by no means harmed. He stared at us with amazement and consternation.

"How—how did you—"

"I will explain later, Mason," interrupted the guv'nor. "Hold these two men, boys. I wish to question them closely. I fear, Mason, that you have been the victim of a trick—"

"A trick, sir?" gasped Jack.

"Exactly."

Nelson Lee's torch blazed out, and within a minute the robes had been torn from the Arabs, revealing ordinary suits beneath. Their beards followed, and the men were revealed as coarse-looking fellows of a foreign type.

"Who are you?" demanded Lee sternly.

"Don't take us, sir!" gasped one of the men in broken English. "We do nothing—we only paid to make effect."

The other fellow maintained a stolid silence. Both were passive, and made no attempt to get away. The truth was they were thoroughly scared, and knew that escape was hopeless for them.

"But—but I don't understand, sir!" panted Mason wildly.

"As you can see for yourself, Mason, these fellows are not Arabs," said Nelson Lee. "The whole story they told you was a fabrication—a trick. I have not the slightest doubt that your uncle is at the bottom of the whole affair. It is extremely fortunate that I was able to take a hand in the game, and thus prevent the plot succeeding."

Mason looked around him shakily.

"But—but it has succeeded, sir!" he shouted hoarsely. "I gave the things to the man who played the High Priest, and he's vanished! Oh, what an idiot I've been, and Pitt warned me, too!"

"I think I may safely say that Pitt is the real cause of this satisfactory ending to the affair," said Nelson Lee pleasantly. "As for your locket and Mr. Strong's package—well, Mason, you needn't worry. I have an idea that they are safer than you imagine."

"But the man took them away, sir!" I said quickly.

"Yet they are not lost, Nipper," replied the gov'nor.

I couldn't understand what he meant, but I should have received enlightenment if I had been in a meadow at that moment about half a mile away. Akram had fled, and with him went the man who had given the warning, who was none other than Mr. Jake Starkey.

Simon Grell was hovering on the edge of the hollow, awaiting the delivery of the locket. At last, he told himself, he was to succeed in his plans. When he heard the commotion he was anxious, but the "High Priest" handed over the locket and the package, safe and sound.

"By thunder!" said Mr. Grell, his eyes glittering. "I thought things had gone wrong, old man. These are the things I want, an' you'll git your extra two quid straight away. I reckon——"

Mr. Grell had struck a match in order to gaze upon his prize more closely. And then a string of oaths left his lips as the match blew out.

"Curse the boy!" he snarled. "We planned to trick him, an' he's tricked us! This ain't the locket—it's a copy! And the package ain't worth a brass farthing! We've been done, Jake—proper done!"

Mr. Starkey was too utterly disgusted to say a word. Certainly Mr. Grell made up for this lack of eloquence, for he made the night air literally blue. But bad language did not improve matters in the least.

In spite of all Simon Grell's elaborate trickery he had failed in the end. It had cost him a great deal more than he could afford to pay the men he had hired for the occasion. It wouldn't have mattered if the end had been satisfactory. But he had gained nothing.

Meanwhile Nelson Lee had come to a decision. It was quite evident that the two

captured wretches were only tools, and utterly in ignorance of the true state of affairs.

"You can clear off as soon as you like," said Nelson Lee sternly. "And you may consider yourself lucky that you have not been handed over to the police. Do you understand me? Go!"

The two fellows understood perfectly, and they scuttled away into the darkness, hardly able to believe their good fortune.

"We should have gained nothing by taking the two rascals to the police-station, Mason," said Nelson Lee. "They are merely ignorant men, paid to do this particular piece of deception. Your uncle, Grell, is the actual culprit, and he has not been in evidence, although I strongly suspect that he was hovering near."

"But—but the locket, sir——"

"The locket is safe, Mason," interrupted the gov'nor smilingly. "I took the precaution to purchase a locket in Bannington some days ago, in the event of an attempt at burglary. It was quite a fair match, and it was a simple task to scratch a few haphazard Arabic signs upon the inner surface. The package, of course, presented no difficulty; it was easy enough to make a duplicate."

"My hat!" I exclaimed, grinning. "That was a smart wheeze, sir. I'd give quids to see Grell's face when he examines those things! He'll have about five fits in succession!"

Jack Mason was still rather confused, but was recovering himself rapidly. And he flushed with self-consciousness as he realised how completely he had been deceived. It was not a nice moment for him.

"I—I don't know what you'll think of me, sir," he said in a low voice. "I've been an awful idiot. And I want to thank you, sir, for helping me——"

Lee patted the junior's back reassuringly.

"Not such an idiot, after all, Mason," he said. "You were deceived by the elaborate nature of the whole trick, and your motives in complying with the demands were really excellent ones, for you wished to avoid any possible peril for Mr. Strong. As for thanking me, you are quite wrong. It is Pitt whom you need to thank for this fortunate exposure. If Pitt had not acted in the most sensible manner, you might have delivered the real articles instead of the fake ones. For Pitt warned us, and we acted accordingly."

Mason gripped his study-mate's hand warmly.

"You're a brick, Pitt," was all he said.

With regard to Mr. Simon Grell, Nelson Lee remarked, as we walked home, that the rascal ought to give up his game after this fiasco.

But would he? I had an idea that we had not seen the last of Jack Mason's uncle.

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. Challis plays a splendid innings for the Sixteen against the Eleven, and becomes quite popular.

(Now read on.)

THE HALF-MILE RACE.

THE result was that Challis became one of the best-dressed boys in Littleminster. Even as he blossomed forth in sensational fashion at the cricket-match, so did he sun it in the school-house and playground.

The effect was magical. Boys who had hitherto shunned and avoided him began to take an interest in him and like him, and he was asked to join them in many an expedition from which he would at one time have been excluded.

Myers and one or two more were, of course, furiously angry at the change.

"I wonder what he's done?" sneered Myers. "I expect his father's robbed a bank or forged a cheque. I'll swear he didn't come by the money honestly."

Meanwhile Grainger, in order that Challis should not escape him, for he was determined to probe Challis's capacity for athletics and games to the bottom, reminded the big boy of his promise to take a trial spin upon the running track.

John, in his absent-minded way, had made a mental note of the promise, and then turned it into some remote recess in his

brain, where it would have remained forgotten, had not Grainger reminded him.

Challis was a boy of his word. A promise once given was held sacred by him.

So he got the running things down from home, and turned out one evening, when the sun had begun to sink towards the horizon, wearing a smart pair of white running shorts, with the school colours running down the seam, and a thin white vest.

His feet were clad in thin socks and running pumps, the socks rolled down over the leather so as to be out of the way.

Grainger, similarly dressed, joined him, while Andrews, Vernon, Chalfont, Griggs, Moreash, and one or two more who had been practising, eased up to watch them.

Sitting on the pavilion steps was Ponsonby, with Basil Hood by his side.

Basil had got wind of Challis's intended appearance upon the running track, and had told Ponsonby of it. Hence their appearance on this eventful afternoon.

Further away was Myers, wearing running things, with a blazer pulled over them. He had been playing about the track for an hour and a half without having indulged in any form of exercise.

When Grainger left the pavilion, accompanied by Challis in running shorts, Myers's face was a study. As soon as his amazement permitted he uttered a mocking laugh.

"Looks as if Grainger's going to adopt the cad," he sneered. "But if he thinks he can ever turn a clumsy clodhopper like that into a runner he's a fool!"

Byfleet, a Sixth-Former, standing by, eyed Myers with upraised eyebrows.

"Never known Grainger play the fool yet," said he. "And, to my mind, Challis looks as if he'd shape uncommonly well. Look at him. He ought to have no end of a stride."

Myers looked on enviously, and had to admit inwardly that Challis did indeed look as if he ought to make a runner.

Raymond and Fawcett, Basil's chums, now came hurrying up.

"Wonder what old Challis will do, Basil," said Fawcett, as Grainger and Challis walked along the well-kept cinder track.

"Do! He'll do splendidly, of course," cried the young hero-worshipper. "Just you wait and see!"

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

As he spoke Grainger gave the word, and, with Challis at his side, the pair set off at a swinging pace along the track, taking the turn in finished style.

Grainger was one of the finest runners, if not the best of all, that Littleminster had ever produced.

He was always fit and well, and as he went now he kept a critical eye on Challis, while the latter, his face flushed, his eyes flashing with delight at the exercise, strode out manfully, his arms swinging easily.

Under foot the going was splendid.

Grainger laughed.

"Go along! That's splendid, Challis!" he cried. "I guessed you'd make a runner. Don't force the pace yet. Time for that later on."

And so they reached the half-circuit, a distance of two hundred and twenty yards, and Basil chirruped uproariously.

"Look at old Challis!" he shouted. "Isn't he grand!"

CHALLIS SHOWS GOOD FORM.

As the two ran on together, stride for stride, Grainger, keeping a yard or a little more away from the novice, watched his method and style carefully.

"Swing your arms more easily," he advised. "Get on your toes a little more. That's it. Don't strain or make too big an effort of it. Run easily, naturally."

Challis did his best to obey. As he ran he breathed deeply, naturally, and they completed the first quarter-mile circuit in quite fair time, as Byfleet declared after referring to his watch.

They did not ease up then, but pounded on, and Vernon, leaving the pavilion, joined them.

So the trio sped round the well-kept and beautifully level cinder path again until there remained but two hundred and twenty yards or so to go.

Grainger, quickening his stride, sprang forward like a racehorse.

"Now for a sprint in, Challis," he commanded. "Do your best. Let's see what pace you've got."

Grainger pumped the words out, breathing deeply. Challis instantly responded. So they fought their way onward, Vernon darting by to try and stretch the Littleminster crack.

Accepting the challenge, Grainger fought him stride for stride, and gradually forged ahead.

Fifty yards away now were the white posts between which the worsted was stretched on the occasion of the sports—the winning posts.

Challis saw them, knew what they represented, and, swinging wide, rushed up.

Neither Vernon nor Grainger expected the novice to join issue there. Yet here was Challis swinging past them.

Instinctively Grainger increased his effort. Vernon faltered and was left behind. Shoulder to shoulder, with teeth set and arms swinging forcefully, Grainger and Challis passed the line of the winning post with hardly an inch between them.

The captain of the school instantly swung on to the grass and pulled up.

Challis joined him, pumped and white-faced from his effort.

There was a quizzical gleam in Grainger's eyes and a whimsical smile upon his lips.

"Upon my word, Challis," he cried. "I am beginning to believe that you are an arch-hypocrite. Nobody thought you could play cricket, and yet your form surprised the school. Now when I take you out for a spin on the track you as good as beat me in a run in after a fair half mile. Is there anything you can't do?"

"Oh, but we were only playing at it!" protested Challis, reddening.

Grainger looked up and down, taking in the lines of his well-set and stalwart frame. A little soft the big boy might be, perhaps, for want of proper training, but all the possibilities were there.

"Were we?" he cried. "At any rate, we did a quarter at least at a fair bat, and there was no play in the dash in. You've got to enter for the school sports after this. Will you promise to devote a little of your time to training?"

Challis frowned and hesitated.

"I don't know," he cried. "Do you think I ought?"

"Certainly. I ask you to."

"Very well," answered Challis, as they returned at a walk to the pavilion.

Meanwhile Basil and the juniors were delighted. Good old Challis. He had shown up well against Grainger, and he had licked Vernon in that dash home, and Vernon, you know, was reckoned to be one of the best men at a mile at Littleminster, and likely to give Grainger a good race on the day the sports were held.

Myers listened sourly to their acclamations; Yet he found some comfort in the thought that Grainger had been stuffing Challis up, holding back his best form. If it had really been a race, Challis wouldn't have stood a dog's chance, he thought.

He turned to Digby, who had once been a very close chum of his.

"It's coming to something when our captain has to rot about with a chap of Challis's class," he sneered. "Listen to those kids? Anybody would think Challis was a champion, to hear them yelling. I thought his running was rotten. He didn't

(Continued overleaf.)

shape well at all. But I hope he'll enter for the sports later in the term. My, won't there be a show up if he does!"

But Digby regarded Myers with a stony stare. Ponsonby had told him how he had thrown Basil over with that string in the passage and smashed up his crockery, and of the scene that had followed. He was beginning to actively dislike his old friend.

"Will there?" he replied coldly. "I'm not so sure. Since when have you pretended to be a better judge of running form than Grainger? I used to think a lot of hard things about Challis, but I'm beginning to change my mind."

Myers's face flamed.

"What," he stormed. "Has the cad got you under his thumb, too?"

Digby flushed.

"Look here," he snapped. "You're getting a bit too personal. And I'm not going to stand it. I'm not as good-natured as Challis. If you make any personal remarks about me I'll knock you down."

And so he swung upon his heels and strode away whistling.

Myers watched him with a sullen smile on his lips. So Digby had been won over by his enemy, too. Littleminster was getting to be a nice sort of place when a cad like Challis ruled the roost.

But he didn't care. He had always regarded Digby as a stuck-up prig. His friendship would be no loss.

A SURPRISE FOR MYERS.

MEANWHILE Digby, whistling to soothe his ruffled feelings, followed Challis and Grainger towards the pavilion. Suddenly he came to an abrupt stand. Hallo! Who was that ill-

dressed loafing fellow standing there with his hands in his pockets and a cigarette in his mouth, watching Vernon as he began to practise with a hammer?

Digby stared in astonishment. The lout had nothing to do with the school, that was a certainty, and the cheek of his smoking on the athletic ground angered the Littleminster boy, who made a bee-line for him.

"I say!" cried Digby. "Who are you, and what do you want here?"

"Found the gates open and thought I'd have a look round," was the insolent answer.

Digby looked the speaker up and down. He was a boy of seventeen or eighteen years of age, perhaps, with some straggling curly hairs upon his unshaven chin. His face was ugly to repulsiveness, and his lips were framed into a perpetual sneer. Dirt ringed his eyes and his hair was all tumbled. His coat was shiny with grease at the collar and behind the sleeves. His trousers were patched and muddy, his boots broken, and in need of a shine.

A soiled soft collar, a broad-peaked cap set sideways on his head, and a dirty tie, completed his make-up.

"Well, you've no right here," said Digby shortly. "And the sooner you find your way out the better. We don't want any loafing cads round here."

The lout stiffened, and facing Digby with clenched hands, let the cigarette dangle from his lips as he made answer.

"If you give me any of your lip, young tot, I'll soon show you who I am. I'm pretty handy with my dooks, let me tell yer."

Digby was not to be frightened. Pointing in the direction of the gates, he cried:

"Get out, or if you won't go I'll soon get some of my chums to help me, and we'll throw you out."

(To be continued.)

NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

UNDER THE TITLE OF

"The Secret of the Gold Locket!"

Will deal with the further Magnificent
Adventures of NELSON LEE, NIPPER,
and their Friends at St. Frank's.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

THREE-HALFPENCE.