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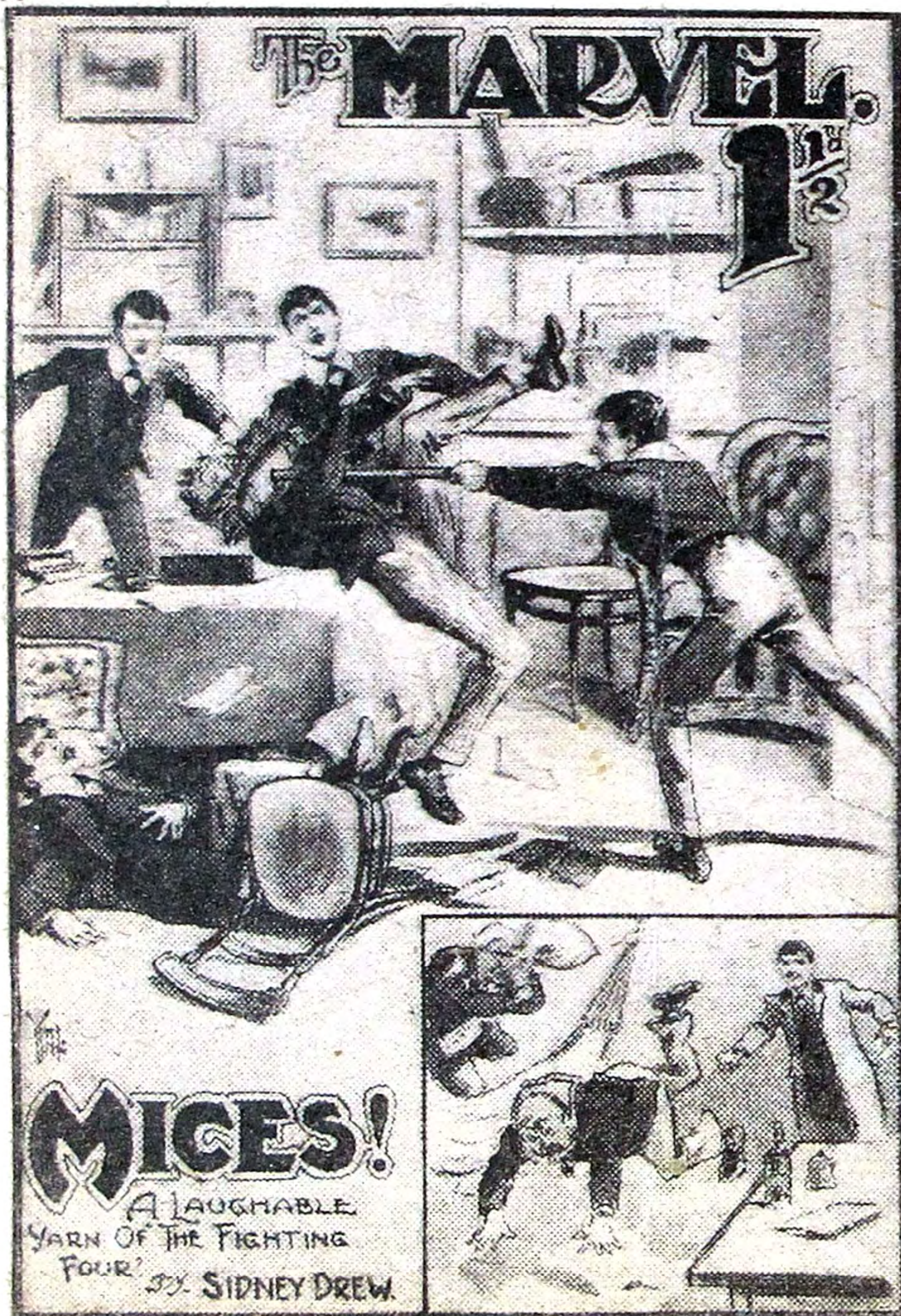
THE SECRET OF THE GOLD LOCKET!

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 "Going to the Bad," "The Ancient House Burglary," "The Arabs of El Safra," etc. December 14, 1918.

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LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Going to the Bad," "The Ancient House Burglary," "The Arabs of El Safra," etc.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

FULLWOOD IS VERY CLEVER.

"**S** NOW is coming before long," remarked Ralph Leslie Fullwood, casting a critical eye up at the sky. "I hope it doesn't come before we break up, that's all. Snow's a rotten bore when you're travellin'."

"I don't know so much about that," said Gulliver. "A good fall of snow will make it seem more like Christmas, anyhow."

The Nuts of the Ancient House of St. Frank's were lounging against the gateway. Morning lessons were over, and the dinner gong would soon sound out. The December day was rather cold and the sky was overcast.

Fullwood and Co., well wrapped up in overcoats and mufflers, preferred to lounge about idly whilst other fellows punted a football about the Triangle, or engaged in other healthy exercise of a like nature.

"Who's this kid coming up the road?" asked Bell languidly. "Looks like one of the telegraph girls from the post-office. Perhaps she's got a wire for you, Fully, calling you home before the end of the term."

"No such luck," grunted Fullwood.

They watched the telegraph messenger approach. She was a very small girl, rather untidy, and decidedly timid-looking. It was characteristic of Fullwood and Co. to bar the gateway so that the young lady could not pass. She looked at them doubtfully as she came up, and Fullwood and Co. grinned.

"May I get past, please?" said the little girl nervously.

"You can if you call me 'sir,'" said Fullwood, grinning more than ever. "I say, who's the wire for, anyhow?"

"It's for Master Mason, of the Ancient House," replied the messenger, studying the inscription upon the buff envelope.

Fullwood and Co. exchanged glances.

"Oh, is it?" said Fullwood. "All right, kid, you can hand it to me. We're just going in, and we'll give it to Mason. He's one of our pals."

The girl hesitated for a moment, but decided it would be quite safe to hand over the

telegram to Mason's friends. Besides, these boys didn't look at all nice, and she was almost afraid to refuse. It was rather unfortunate that some decent fellows were not near the spot, or Fullwood and Co. wouldn't have had things their own way.

"Silly game, I call it," remarked Gulliver, as the girl went back towards the village. "What the deuce did you want to do that for, Fully? I don't see why we should make ourselves Mason's giddy servants!"

"Come indoors," said Fullwood languidly. "What right has that beastly Bermondsey kid to have telegrams, as though he were somebody of importance? We'll deliver this at our leisure—see?"

"I say, we can't stick to that wire," objected Bell. "You'll get into a frightful row if a master gets to know—"

"Come indoors," repeated Fullwood, "and don't be an ass!"

He led the way towards the Ancient House, and his chums followed. They were quite ready to perform any vindictive action against Jack Mason, of the Remove, but Gulliver and Bell did not relish taking any risks.

Mason had come from Bermondsey, and this fact alone utterly condemned Mason in the eyes of the noble Nuts. The Bermondsey junior had proved himself to be one of the best fellows going, and was probably far better educated than Fullwood himself. But this counted for nothing. He was a "poor" kid, and therefore no class.

Fullwood and Co. had had their knife into Mason ever since he had arrived, and their animosity had increased owing to the fact that Reginald Pitt had been undergoing a gradual, but nevertheless positive, change during the last few weeks. Pitt had been one of the Nuts for a time, and had been extremely thick with the occupants of Study A—Fullwood and Co. themselves.

But Mason's influence had wrought a change, and it was an undoubted fact that Reginald Pitt was now another fellow. I was particularly delighted, for I had always had an inkling that Pitt would allow his better qualities to overpower his evil ones. And now, happily, the evil qualities seemed to have left him for good. And Mason was

really the cause of Pitt's break with Fullwood and Co.

This, of course, was insufferable. For a beastly Bermondsey kid to rob Fullwood of one of his followers was an unforgivable sin. It reflected upon Ralph Leslie, and he was ever eager to seize an opportunity to make things uncomfortable for Mason.

Reaching Study A, the three young rascals threw aside their overcoats and caps and collected in front of the cheerful fire. Fullwood held the telegram in his hands, and looked at it with a grin.

"You'd better hand it over to Mason," said Gulliver uneasily. "It's nearly dinner-time, Fully, an' there's no time to play any tricks. Goodness knows, I ain't a nervous chap, but I draw the line at tamperin' with other fellows' telegrams. We might get into trouble."

Fullwood's lip curled.

"That's all you think about—your own beastly skin!" he sneered. "Look at this flap—it's nearly unstuck. Why shouldn't we squint at the wire? It might be from one of Mason's beastly relatives, an' there's no tellin' what use we can make of it. Anyhow, I'm goin' to risk it."

It was a simple matter to pull up the flap without damaging it, and Fullwood and his two chums read the wire with great interest and curiosity. It was quite short—and rather disappointing:

"Jack Mason, Remove, Ancient House, St. Frank's College, Sussex.

"Will arrive Bellton at 5.15 this evening.

"DAVID STRONG."

"Serve you jolly well right!" said Gulliver. "There's a fat lot of information in that, ain't there? Strong is that old chap who came down some weeks ago—lookin' like a giddy rag-merchant."

"Yes, I know that," said Fullwood. "Sauce, I call it, comin' to a place like St. Frank's. Can't we think of some wheeze to choke him off?"

"Oh, don't be potty!" snapped Bell. "Stick it up again."

Fullwood grinned suddenly.

"I'll tell you what!" he said, with a chuckle. "Strong's coming by the 5.15 train—an' those figures ain't very clearly written. Chuck over a piece of indiarubber, Gully."

Gulliver stared.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

"You'll see."

Fullwood chuckled again as he proceeded to erase the figures from the telegram. This was quite a simple task. Then he opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out a length of black crayon. The point was sharp, and he carefully filled in the now blank space with the figures "7.25." The crayon impression did not shine as lead pencil would have done, and it was almost impossible to detect it from the carbon writing of the telegram.

"What's the good of that?" asked Bell testily.

"I'll tell you the idea after dinner," said Fullwood. "The gong will go in two ticks, an' we can't waste any time. Mason will

think that his precious visitor ain't comin' till the 7.25 train, an' that'll give us a chance."

Gulliver and Bell began to get an inkling of the scheme, and they felt more comfortable when the telegram was resealed in its envelope. A glance from the window showed that Jack Mason was just crossing the Triangle from the playing-fields with Pitt and De Valerie.

"Now's our chance," said Fullwood calmly.

He crossed to the door, motioning to his chums to stay where they were. It was the work of a few seconds to slip into Study E and place the telegram on the table. Nobody saw Fullwood enter or leave.

Consequently Mason would naturally assume that the wire had come while he was on the playing-fields, and that Tubbs, the page-boy, had placed it on his table. There was nothing to indicate that the telegram had been tampered with.

Mason came in a few minutes later, just as the dinner-gong was sounding. He and Pitt parted with De Valerie in the passage, and turned into Study E.

"Hallo, what's this?" said Pitt. "Something for you, Jack."

Mason turned, and took the telegram with surprise.

"I suppose it must have come while we were out on Little Side," he remarked. "I wonder who it can be from? By jingo! I—I don't suppose—"

Jack paused and tore open the flap. A moment later his eyes were sparkling with excitement and delight.

"It's from Mr. Strong," he explained. "Have a look at this, Pitt. He'll arrive by the 7.25 train this evening."

Pitt only took a casual glance at the wire, otherwise his keen eyesight might have detected the alteration—for Pitt didn't miss much.

"I'm glad Mr. Strong's coming," he said. "It's a good time since he was down here, and perhaps that mystery of the sealed packet will be cleared up now. About time it was, too."

"Rather!" agreed Jack. "I'll tell Mr. Lee about this. We'll go and meet that train, old man. What do you say?"

"Any old thing you like," said Pitt. "It's just as well he's not coming till the 7.25, because our cupboard's rather bare, and we couldn't very well entertain a visitor to tea. Still, it wouldn't take long to get some grub in, if necessary."

"It won't be, worse luck," remarked Mason. "It's no good asking Mr. Strong to tea at eight o'clock, is it? It's rather a pity he couldn't get here earlier, but I'm not going to grumble."

Jack Mason, indeed, was thoroughly delighted, and a few minutes later he ran into me in the passage, while I was going into dinner with Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"Mr. Strong's coming this evening, Nipper," said Mason cheerfully.

"That's good," I replied. "I'm jolly

pleased to hear it, Mason. I've been expecting that Mr. Strong would put in an appearance for some few days past. Perhaps he'll be able to help you over that locket business. Your precious uncle won't have any more chance of getting hold of it, anyhow."

"Begad! He nearly did the trick last time, old boys," said Tregellis-West. "It only shows how necessary it is to be careful. I'm a frightfully careful chap, an' if I had those things of yours, Mason, they'd be as safe as houses."

"For about two minutes," I added, "and then you'd forget all about 'em! A tailor's circular would come in, or something, and then you'd forget all earthly matters in conning over the absorbing questions of fancy vests, trousers, and all the latest styles of rainbow socks!"

Sir Montie gazed at me frigidly.

"There's not a fellow in the Ancient House who likes a joke better than I," he exclaimed, with deliberation. "But jokin' about clothes is rather bad taste—it is, really. An' I must refute the suggestion that I should permit fancy vests to interfere with matters of greater importance."

"Are there matters of greater importance?" I asked, in surprise.

"Begad! I refuse to answer."

And Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez upon his noble nose and walked along the passage with much dignity.

His reference to "those things of Mason's" were connected with a gold locket and a sealed packet—the latter the property of Mr. David Strong. Mason merely looked upon Mr. Strong as a good friend, but, actually, it was this genial old gentleman who was paying Mason's fees at St. Frank's.

Jack had saved the old chap's life some months before, and Mr. Strong, knowing that the lad would accept no financial reward, had played a little trick on him. Mason believed that a relative of his had left a legacy for the special purpose of providing him with a complete education at St. Frank's. So Jack was quite comfortable, and did not feel himself under an obligation to his elderly friend.

And then, of course, there was the affair of Mr. Simon Grell. The latter was Mason's uncle, and he was several kinds of a rascal. For years he had been away from home, at sea most of the time, and Nelson Lee knew him to be a man who had nearly placed himself within the clutches of the police.

Upon returning to England he had discovered that his nephew was at St. Frank's, and Mr. Grell had seen no reason why he shouldn't inquire into matters and seize the legacy for himself. This idea had soon been knocked on the head, but something else had cropped up—something of far greater importance.

For Mr. Grell had discovered that Jack Mason was in possession of a gold locket bearing an Arab inscription on the inner surface—and that inscription related to a valuable treasure. Mason had always possessed half the locket, but the other half, strangely enough, was contained within Mr. Strong's

package—which he had unintentionally left behind during his last visit.

There was, then, every reason for Jack to feel pleased that the old gentleman was coming to the school again. It was quite likely that the mystery would be cleared up. For Mason had no idea why Mr. Grell was so anxious to get hold of the locket; it was a complete puzzle.

Grell had used every effort; he had even resorted to burglary and to trickery. Only the previous week he had employed several ruffians, and had dressed them up as Arabs, thinking that he could trap his nephew into giving up the locket. Undoubtedly he would have succeeded, but for the timely intervention of Pitt, who had seen through the plot.

Grell had been quiet of late, but the position was really no different. He was still in the neighbourhood, and it seemed fairly certain that he had not given up all hope. Had he not been Mason's uncle he would have been arrested long since; but Nelson Lee did not wish to create a scandal.

I told the gov'nor that Mr. Strong was coming down that evening, but he didn't seem at all surprised. In fact I had an idea he knew all about it beforehand. There was something between Mr. David Strong and Nelson Lee of which I knew nothing, and I felt rather hurt about it. But possibly Nelson Lee was bound to secrecy by some promise or other.

The most astounding feature of the whole affair was that the missing half of Mason's locket should be in Mr. Strong's package. The significance of that fact is liable to be missed, unless the point is considered carefully.

Just look at the facts as they stood. Mason hadn't met Mr. Strong until about six months previously; he had possessed his half of the locket ever since he could remember, and believed it had been given to him by his mother. And yet Mr. Strong—who, after all, was practically a stranger—possessed the other half! There was surely some curious coincidence there.

Not only that, but Mason didn't know anything about Mr. Strong's half, and Mr. Strong didn't know anything about Mason's half! What was the explanation of this singular state of affairs?

The arrival of Mr. David Strong would perhaps be the signal for a complete clearing up of the problem.

It was—but considerable excitement was to attend Mr. Strong's visit, too!

CHAPTER II.

MEETING THE FIVE-FIFTEEN.

BELLTON Station was dim and gloomy in the darkness of the December evening. The feeble platform lamps cast a dim glow immediately beneath each post, and there were only three altogether.

Fullwood paced up and down the platform with a genial smile upon his aristocratic features. He was intent upon performing an

ill-natured trick, and Fullwood was always happy at such times.

It was already a quarter-past five, and the train was signalled. Fullwood's plan was cut and dried, and he knew exactly what he had to do. During Mr. Strong's previous visit the Nuts had made themselves very objectionable, but Fullwood trusted to the gloom of the platform and to the nature of the story he had to tell. Besides, Mr. Strong would probably have forgotten all about the other affair.

The train came into sight, and finally pulled up with many jerks against the platform. It was only a "local," being the connection from Bannington Junction.

Fullwood looked up and down quickly, and had no difficulty in spotting Mr. Strong as he emerged from a first-class compartment. This was rather strange, for Fullwood had always thought that Mason's elderly friend was quite poor. However, this was no time for thinking over the matter.

Fullwood waited till the old chap was in a dark part of the platform, and then he approached. Mr. Strong gazed at him benevolently.

"Ah, Jack, my boy, I'm pleased——" Mr. Strong paused. "Dear me! I beg your pardon, my young friend. I mistook you for a boy I expected to see on this platform. You belong to St. Frank's? Do you know if Jack Mason——"

"I've just come from Mason, sir," interrupted Fullwood, his voice betraying a note of anxiety. "He asked me to come along and meet you. The poor chap's met with an accident."

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Mr. Strong starting.

"And he wants me to take you to him, sir," went on Fullwood. "I think——"

"But, my dear lad, you are not telling me that Jack has met with a serious accident?" interrupted the old gentleman, clutching Fullwood's arm. "Such a thought is appalling—terrible! Tell me quickly, boy—is Jack hurt much?"

"Well, it all depends, sir," replied Fullwood glibly. "He was on his way to the station when a man on a bicycle knocked him down. I happened to be coming close behind, and I was asked to meet you. I'm not one of Mason's friends, but I couldn't exactly refuse such a request."

"It is very considerate of you, my boy—very considerate indeed," exclaimed Mr. Strong, with much agitation. "Thank you—thank you exceedingly!"

Fullwood almost grinned. His candour about not being a friend of Mason's completely disarmed Mr. Strong, it seemed, who might have had suspicions. But the story was straightforward. Jack had been knocked down by a cyclist, and Fullwood had come to the station to impart the news.

"I don't think he's very badly hurt, sir," went on Fullwood. "They picked him up unconscious, but I don't believe in the yarn that his skull's fractured. Just a little bump, I expect. Anyhow, they took him into the parlour of the White Harp and sent for the doctor. I came here to tell you, sir."

"I must go to Jack at once," said Mr. Strong, concernedly. "Poor boy—poor boy! But I am almost a stranger in this village, and I have not the slightest idea where the White Harp is situated. I presume, from the name, that the establishment is an inn?"

"That's right, sir," agreed Fullwood. "I don't mind showin' you the way in the least. I'm goin' in that direction myself, anyhow. It would be rather a pity if you got there too late, but I don't think Mason's as bad as that."

They left the station together, Mr. Strong exceedingly perturbed. Fullwood took advantage of the darkness to grin. He was hugely pleased over the success of his ill-natured scheme, and saw that it was going to be a complete triumph all along. For the game wasn't half played yet.

They passed through the village quickly, Mr. Strong walking with rapid footsteps. Fullwood's elegant lounge would have left him far behind, so he was compelled to hurry, too.

The White Harp, although Mr. Strong didn't know it, was the most disreputable public house in the village—a very low place indeed. Several lights were gleaming from the grubby windows as Fullwood and Mr. Strong approached.

"They took him into the front entrance, sir," said Fullwood, pausing. "If you'll go in that doorway you'll soon get to know all the facts. I'd come in with you, but I mustn't."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"St. Frank's boys ain't allowed in public houses, an' I wouldn't dream of breakin' the rules," said Fullwood, in a shocked voice—"not even in an exceptional case like this. I shouldn't mind the floggin', but it's a question of principle."

"Quite right, my boy—quite right," said Mr. Strong approvingly. "Thank you for your guidance. I am much obliged."

And the old gentleman pushed his way into the shabby entrance and the door swung to behind him. Fullwood turned quickly, grinning all over his face, and five figures emerged from beside the hedge opposite.

"As tame as a newly-hatched chicken," grinned Fullwood softly.

There were many chuckles from the other five—Gulliver and Bell, and Merrell, Marriott and Noys, of Study G.

"Well, there'll be six witnesses," grinned Gulliver. "I didn't think you'd do the trick, Fully. It's a wonder he wasn't suspicious."

Fullwood chuckled.

"He was ready to eat out of my hand!" he said calmly. "Just wait until he comes out—we'll greet him with a general roar. The disgraceful old bounder! Can't walk up to St. Frank's without goin' into a pub for a booze!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll have the yarn all over St. Frank's within an hour," went on Fullwood maliciously. "Let's hope somebody else comes by at the same moment, that's all. Mason's friends boozin' in the White Harp!"

"Oh, my hat!" grinned Merrell. "Ain't it rich?"

"The best jape of the term!" said Gulliver. There was no doubt that the plan had worked beautifully so far. It had the advantage, also, of being the partial truth. Mr. Strong would be unable to deny that he had entered the White Harp, and that fact alone would be sufficient for quite a number of fellows.

Fullwood and Co. waited, hugging themselves, and getting ready for the roar.

But Mr. Strong did not emerge. At the end of five minutes the Nuts began to wonder, and concluded that the old gentleman had indeed stayed to partake of liquid refreshment. No other reason could keep him there.

"All the better," said Fullwood. "We shall have a stronger case."

"Cave!" whispered Marriott suddenly.

"What for?"

"Old Crowell's just coming down the road!" hissed Marriott.

Fullwood and Co. faded into the darkness behind the hedge, and watched. Mr. Crowell, the Remove Form-master, was striding down towards the village, and Fullwood's eyes gleamed.

"By gad! I hope old Strong comes out now!" he murmured.

"Yes, rather!"

But the Nuts were disappointed, for Mr. Crowell strode right past, and Mr. David Strong had made no sign of emerging. Somebody had left the White Harp—a farm labourer—but Mr. Crowell was not interested in him, neither were the Nuts.

"Rotten!" grunted Fullwood. "Look here, it's over five minutes since old Crowell came in sight, and still Strong hasn't come out. It's a good ten minutes ago that he went in there."

"What's he doing all this time?" asked Bell wonderingly.

"Better go an' see!" grunted Gulliver, stamping about. "I'm gettin' fed-up with this. My feet are like chunks of ice already. I don't think much of your rippin' wheeze, fully!"

"Oh, give it a chance!" snapped Fullwood.

They descended to the road once more, now thoroughly impatient. It was most inconsiderate of Mr. Strong to keep them waiting such a long time. Fullwood's yarn about Jack Mason being run over by a bicycle was, of course, a mere fabrication. Mason was still at St. Frank's, probably partaking of tea.

Fullwood and Co. had delayed their tea an hour in order to indulge in this terrific jape. They were hungry, and the December evening was decidedly cold, the wind blowing icily along the muddy road.

The Nuts waited and waited. The ten minutes lengthened into fifteen, and then into twenty. It was now practically certain that something had occurred quite outside their calculations.

"We must have missed him," suggested Merrell gloomily.

"Rot!" snapped Fullwood

"That's all very well —"

"Rot!" repeated Ralph Leslie. "Haven't we been watchin' the door all the time? He's still in there, an' I expect he's guzzlin' beer or whisky—makin' hay while the sun shines, so to speak."

"I wish the sun was shinin' out here," said Gulliver, tucking his hands under his arms. "I'm chilled all through. What's the good of a jape like this? I call it a fat-headed idea——"

"How were we to know that the old fool would stick in there all this time?" snarled Fullwood, thoroughly losing his temper. "Hallo! There's somebody comin' out now! Get ready to yell!"

His companions grunted, but were not very enthusiastic. The next moment they saw that the man emerging was only Mudford, the village postman.

"Let's ask him if Strong's in there!" whispered Bell hurriedly.

Fullwood nodded, and crossed the road to Mudford, who was pausing to light his pipe. The postman was rather startled to find himself surrounded by the six juniors, and he looked at them uncertainly.

"None o' your larks, young gents," he said. "I ain't——"

"That's all right, Muddy," said Fullwood. "We only want to ask you a question. You've just come out of the pub, haven't you?"

"The fust glass I've 'ad since dinner time!" protested the postman. "There ain't no 'arm in a man 'avin' a glass now an' agin. My missus allus wants me to 'ave my own way, an'——"

"Never mind about your misaus," interrupted Fullwood. "Were you in the bar when an old gentleman came in—about twenty minutes ago?"

Mudford nodded.

"Why, yes—a stranger in these 'ere parts?" he said. "A nice-lookin' sort, with wrinkles all over 'is face."

"That's right," said Fullwood. "You saw him?"

"O' course I did! He come in while I was talkin' to Bill Walters about the lock-gates they're settin' up down the river," said Mudford. "He 'ad a few words with Mr. Porlock, an' then went out."

"Went out!" yelled Gulliver.

"That's wot I said, young gent."

"Don't talk rot!" snapped Fullwood. "We've been watchin' the door all the time, Muddy, an' we saw no sign of him."

"Which it ain't 'zackly surprisin', Master Fullwood," said the postman, with a grin. "The gent was took through the back passage, an' I reckon 'e went out by the side door. The gate's further along, behind them trees, so you wouldn't see 'im come out."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Fullwood blankly.

"I suppose you're not havin' a game with us, Muddy?" demanded Gulliver.

"I wouldn't dream of no such thing," declared the postman. "Seems to me that you've been playin' some o' your games, an' things ain't gorn right. Ah! It oughter

teach you not to try such tricks on pore old gentlemen!"

"Go an' eat coke!" snapped Fullwood savagely.

This was scarcely a nice method of thanking Mudford for the information he had imparted. But the Nuts were feeling decidedly sore at that moment, and they were not made happier when they heard the postman trudge off chuckling to himself.

"You silly ass!" said Marriott witheringly.

"Are you talkin' to me?" demanded Fullwood.

"Yes, I am!"

"Look here——"

"I've been waitin' about long enough!" snapped Marriott. "We've mised our tea, an' got ourselves cold to the bone, an' you've let us into it. A fat lot of good your japes are, ain't they?"

Fullwood nearly danced with rage.

"You—you awful rotters!" he shouted.

"Weren't you just as keen as I was? How the dickens was I to know that Strong would go out by the back way! I expect he thought it would look queer for him to be seen——"

"Pillie!" interrupted Gulliver. "He guessed what you were up to all along, I expect, an' went in the White Harp on purpose to get rid of you. He suspected that something was on. Let's get up to the school!"

"An' don't suggest any more dud ideas," said Marriott sourly.

Fullwood had nothing to say. He and his noble Nuts were feeling very sick, for they were forced to the conclusion that Mr. David Strong had been "wise" and that he had tricked the tricksters.

The jape had fallen flat and was a ghastly failure. It was Fullwood and Co. who had been made to look extremely foolish. It was a bitter pill to swallow, and the Nuts were in a vile temper.

But their little jape was to bear fruit, after all, but it was fruit of a very different character from that which was intended.

CHAPTER III.

MR. SIMON GRELL IS DESPERATE.

MR. SIMON GRELL was very much like Fullwood in one respect.

He was in a vile temper, and his companion, Mr. Jake Starkey, was in no better condition. The pair were seated in the back parlour of the White Harp, and their expressions were eloquent of their feelings.

The close atmosphere of the little room was filled with strong tobacco-smoke and spirit fumes, and the table was littered with glasses and bottles. Simon Grell sat in the big chair before the fire, and Starkey pretended to read the morning's local paper.

"It's no good, Jake, I can't see no way!" growled Captain Jim—as Grell was called by his intimates. "It's all because that bound

of a Nelson Lee is on the spot. Without him we could do jest wot we liked."

Jake Starkey nodded.

"That's wot I've said all along, Simon," he replied. "Why don't you take my advice?"

"Wot advice?" growled the other.

"Pack up an' clear out!"

"Durn you!" snapped Mr. Grell. "You're allus rammin' that down my throat! If you don't like to see the thing through, clear! I don't care—shove off as soon as you like. But if you do you won't git no more brass out o' me."

Mr. Starkey looked pained.

"Now, there's no need for us to quarrel, old mate," he said. "Why don't you look at this thing sensible like? We've tried time an' again to git that blamed locket, an' we don't 'ave no luck. Besides, I don't reckon we're safe 'ere—we might be pinched any minute. Lee knows that we broke into the school."

"You're a fool, Jake—that's wot's the matter with you!" snapped Grell. "Do you think Lee's goin' to waste his time by juggin' us? Wot good would it do? Nothin'—and young Mason would be in disgrace. We're safe enough."

"Well, I won't argyfy," said Mr. Starkey, filling his pipe. "I'll leave it to you, Simon. Arter that last affair, though, I don't see wot we can do. It must 'ave cost you ten quid to git them three blokes down 'ere with the Arab dresses an' the tent——"

"Nice sort o' comforter, ain't you?" said Captain Jim harshly. "It didn't cost me no more than four-pun-ten. Them costumes an' the tent ain't paid for—an' never will be if I can help it. We had to leave 'em behind in the hurry, an' then we didn't get that durned locket!"

The other man shook his head sagely.

"Tricks won't do no more," he said.

"They'll be on the look-out for 'em, an' it 'ud be a waste o' time. That locket's bein' kep' by Lee, an' it's in a safe place. Give it up, Simon, an' let's git back to London. I'm fed-up with this place. Who's that old cove out there?"

Starkey nodded towards the glass-topped door of the parlour. There was a heavy blind fixed, but it was not down at present. And through the clear glass both Grell and Starkey saw a well-dressed old gentleman talking to the landlord in the bar. At least, he was well-dressed regarded from Grell's standpoint.

"Why, by thunder!" muttered Captain Jim. "I ain't never seen him, but I'll bet a fiver that chap's Strong!"

"'E don't look it!" remarked Starkey, shaking his head.

"Don't look wot?"

"Strong," replied the other. "Rather weak-chested——"

"You blamed fool!" rapped out Mr. Grell. "I mean Mr. Strong, that old cove who's made a pal of young Jack. 'Didn't the kid tell me that this old gent was all wrinkled an' clean-shaven? Why, it fits to a T! It's Mr. Strong—an' we're done!"

"'Ow do you make that out?"

"Shut up!" muttered Grell. "Listen!"

They remained silent, and could distinctly hear the words which were being uttered.

"Yes, I shall be most obliged if you'll allow me to make use of your back way," Mr. Strong was saying. "Of course, I am quite prepared to pay for the favour, my dear sir. Will this cover the expense?"

Grell saw a half-crown pushed across the bar.

"That's all right, sir," said Mr. Porlock genially. "Wot's the trouble?"

"Oh, nothing much," smiled Mr. Strong. "Some impertinent boys are attempting to play a joke with me. I observed several of them opposite your establishment as I came along; I am quite certain they intend to play some trick upon me when I emerge. That is why I should like to turn the tables."

"Of course, sir," said the landlord, grinning. "Just foller me, an' you'll be as right as anything. I take it you're a stranger hereabouts?"

"Quite so—quite so," replied Mr. Strong. "I am visiting St. Frank's."

They passed out of hearing down the passage, and Mr. Grell gave his companion a significant look.

"That settles it!" he exclaimed tensely. "Visitin' St. Frank's! We're done, Jake—we're properly done!"

"That's wot you said afore."

"Ain't that package the property of this Strong?" demanded Grell fiercely. "There's the half-locket in that package, an' Strong will get hold of it. Wot chance shall we have then, you fool?"

"No need to git abusive——" began Starkey.

"To-night's our last chance!" went on Grell, ignoring the interruption. "Strong will take his half of the locket away with him. Mebbe he'll take the whole thing. Then we'll be left out of it altogether."

Starkey grunted.

"Wot's the good of grumblin'?" he demanded. "We can't do nothin', can we? It's 'ard luck, that's wot it is, Simon. We'll 'ave to take ourselves off, as I said, an' give it all up. I sha'n't be sorry."

"I'm not going to be put off like that!" snapped Captain Jim. "Look here, Jake, we must act now—at once—or not at all. Understand that! It's the last chance, an' we should be fools to let it slip by."

"Wot can we do?" asked the other.

"I'm goin' to follow Strong up to the school," said Grell rapidly. "I might be able to peep in through the window—it's as dark as Old Harry to-night. You come along arter me, an' stay just outside the school gates."

"Yes, but I can't do nothin' there."

"I never said you could," exclaimed Captain Jim. "I'll do all there is to be done, if I get the chance. See? You wait outside in the road until I come. That's all. I'm goin' now, an' you can follow in a minute."

Mr. Starkey was inclined to protest, but Grell had left the room before he could frame any words. His private opinion, how-

ever, was that Grell was on a fool's errand, and that his wild idea was probably the outcome of disgusting selfishness regarding the whisky-bottle.

Mason's uncle, meanwhile, had left the White Harp garden by means of the little side gate—unseen by the waiting Fullwood and Co. Grell hurried for the first hundred yards or so, but slowed down when he dimly saw the figure of Mr. David Strong striding along ahead.

"I ain't goin' to be done now!" muttered Grell savagely. "By thunder! Arter all I've risked—arter all my trouble! I'll get that blamed locket to-night—or go to quod!"

He was certainly rather desperate, and he was in just that state when he would commit actions which he would not dream of committing at ordinary times. He was reckless. The very thought that all his work had been in vain was maddening.

Mr. Strong turned in at the imposing gateway of St. Frank's and made straight for the Ancient House. Grell, arriving a moment later, dimly saw the visitor entering the wide doorway into the lobby.

Grell couldn't follow now; he couldn't enter the Ancient House himself. But he saw that the Triangle was quite deserted and bare. The fellows who weren't at tea in their studies were either in the common-rooms or in other parts of the building. It wasn't an evening for remaining in the cold Triangle.

The intruder knew well enough which was the window of Nelson Lee's study—the great detective being the Housemaster of the Ancient House. Grell had already paid a nocturnal visit to Lee's study, and could find his way to it blindfold.

He guessed that Mr. Strong would go to the Housemaster—and then, of course, the matter of the golden locket would be referred to. That was only natural. So it seemed that Grell's only course was to get to Nelson Lee's study.

What he could do when he got there was a problem. He certainly had no plan in mind. With light footsteps he crossed the Triangle until he stood immediately outside Lee's window. He realised that this was by no means an advantageous position. He could be seen by people crossing from one House to the other. And although the Triangle was deserted at present, there was no guarantee that it would remain deserted for long.

Moreover, Mr. Grell's ears, although sharp, were quite unequal to the task of hearing any sounds or voices which came from within the study. The window was only slightly open at the top, and so Mr. Grell's spirits sunk.

The reckless feeling was still on him, and he pressed his face close to the window-panes, and then found that he could obtain a clear view into the apartment. There were thick curtains placed across the deep window recess, and these were not pulled closely together. Consequently, Mr. Grell distinctly saw Nelson Lee sitting at his desk.

This was by no means satisfactory. Grell knew that Nelson Lee was there, so seeing him was nothing of a surprise. In fact, the rascal began to tell himself that his last chance had gone, and that he was only taking unnecessary risks by remaining in his present precarious position.

But just then something occurred.

Captain Jim saw Nelson Lee get to his feet, walk round the desk, and go to the door. He switched off the electric light and passed out. A second later he returned, turning on the lights again, and taking a paper which he had apparently forgotten. This time he left the light burning and the door ajar.

Mr. Grell's wits were unusually sharp just then.

Although he couldn't see all the room, he knew that it was now empty. Lee would never have switched off the light on the first occasion otherwise. And the fact that the detective had now left it on proved that his absence would only be a brief one. Mr. Grell would have to act quickly, if at all.

But how could he act? What could he do?

Possibly the whisky he had imbibed at the White Harp had something to do with his next action. For Simon Grell cast all caution to the winds and acted with utter rashness. It was all or nothing with him, and he was not the type of man to tamely give in without a big fight at the last.

Here his final opportunity had presented itself. It was a risk—an enormous risk—and probably Mr. Grell did not fully appreciate the extent of it. What he did was to quickly and silently push up the lower sash, climb through the window, pull the sash down again, and stand in the recess.

There was ample room for him, so long as he remained perfectly still. A movement of the curtain would betray him, but there was no reason why Nelson Lee should pull the curtains aside. And in this position Grell could hear every word which was uttered in the room.

The die was cast now, and the man regretted his action.

He had been a fool, he told himself, for there would be no escape, and he would stand before his captors a housebreaker—caught redhanded. Moreover, there was nothing to indicate that Mr. Strong would talk to Lee in the latter's study.

Grell cursed himself for being a mad idiot. But he fought down the desire to turn and escape. As likely as not he would be spotted by somebody in the Triangle and captured. Besides, footsteps were sounding in the passage already.

Grell set his teeth and stood his ground. There was nothing else for it. This position was one of his own making, and he could blame only himself if he met with disaster. It was too late to withdraw, and, mad as his actions had been, there was still a faint hope within him that events might pan out in his favour.

Mr. Simon Grell, quickly changing again, cast aside his doubts and waited with every nerve on the stretch. Would he be able to achieve his purpose? Would luck come his way? There was certainly a chance that it would.

Captain Jim was nothing if not an optimist!

CHAPTER IV.

AN ASTONISHING REVELATION!

"BUCK up!" said Reginald Pitt crisply. "Sha'n't be long," replied Mason, glancing up at the clock. "Why, there's no particular hurry, is there?"

"Well, we've hardly started yet, and it'll take us a good hour to do our prep.," replied Pitt. "It's just upon six now, and the train comes in at seven-twenty-five. So there's no time to waste."

Jack Mason nodded, and settled himself to work.

The two Removites were in Study E, and they were hurrying over their prep. in order to get it done before the time to start for Bellton, in order to meet the train. They had already obtained permits from Mr. Crowell to be out after locking-up, so everything was all right.

A somewhat frugal tea had been concluded shortly before. The frugality of the meal was not owing to lack of funds, but because Mrs. Hake, of the school tuck-shop, had run out of supplies for the time being. This was a frequent occurrence. An epidemic of tips by the morning post generally resulted in Mrs. Hake being cleared of all eatable supplies before the evening.

Mason and Pitt were silent as they worked away; only the scratching of their pens and an occasional crackle from the fire broke the stillness of the study—except, of course, for the loud voices which proceeded from next door. But this study—D—was occupied by Handforth and Co., and wild noises from that quarter were so frequent and so continuous that Mason and Pitt would have felt quite lost without them.

But Pitt suddenly lifted his head and looked at the door. A footstep had sounded in the passage—and it was a footstep which was quite unfamiliar. The next moment the door of Study E opened and Mr. David Strong stood framed in the doorway.

"Ah, Jack!" he exclaimed heartily. "How are you, my boy?"

Jack Mason jumped up in surprise and delight.

"Why, Mr. Strong, I—I didn't expect to see you yet!" he exclaimed, hurrying forward. "I'm tremendously glad you've come, sir."

Mr. Strong wagged his finger.

"Why didn't you come to meet me at the station, you young rascal?" he asked, his face wreathed in smiles. "But there! I suppose you were too busy——"

"But—but you said in your telegram

that you wouldn't arrive until the seven twenty-five train!" exclaimed Jack quickly. "Pitt and I were hurrying over our evening lessons so that we should be able to meet the train!"

Mr. Strong closed the door.

"There is surely some little mistake?" he suggested mildly. "I distinctly wrote on the form '5.15.' I really cannot understand how it could have been mistaken for '7.25,' Jack. But it is a minor matter——"

"No, it isn't, sir," declared Mason. "I'm feeling awfully ashamed of myself for making such a mistake. The telegram's here, so we'll soon see."

He fetched it from the book-case and opened it.

"Yes, here it is, sir—7.25," he exclaimed. "It's quite plain, too——"

"Dear me! Dear me!" murmured Mr. Strong, gazing at the wire through his spectacles. "You are quite right, Jack. Ah! I am beginning to suspect—— Look at these figures, my boy."

Both Mason and Pitt regarded them closely; and then, of course, they detected the crayoned alteration. Without very careful attention the deception had been invisible.

"Somebody's been tampering with it!" gasped Jack, staring at Pitt. "The wire was on the table when we came in at dinner-time, wasn't it? Who would open the telegram and alter the figures?"

Mr. Strong polished his spectacles.

"I have my suspicions," he said genially; "but I'm not going to sneak, my boys. That's the word, isn't it? I'm not going to sneak. A certain young rascal met me at the station with a fine story, and nearly hoodwinked me, too. But I turned the tables on him—and on his companions. I'm afraid they will be getting cold by this time, Jack—very cold!"

And Mr. Strong chuckled, while Mason and Pitt regarded him in astonishment.

"But I don't understand, sir," said Jack at last.

"It was merely a joke, lad—rather ill-natured, but a joke," explained Mr. Strong softly. "For a few minutes, too, I was deceived; but I think the young beggars are being adequately punished."

Without giving his young companions any inkling as to the identity of the culprits, Mr. Strong related the principal points of his adventure in the village. Pitt and Mason grinned with delight at the neat way in which Fullwood and Co. had been foiled. For, of course, they instantly guessed that the Nuts were responsible.

"As it happens, sir," said Jack, "there's no harm done; but I'm sorry some of our chaps should have been so disrespectful. You'll have tea with us in here, won't you?"

"Why, yes—certainly," said Mr. Strong. "A cup of tea is just what I do want. Capital! How long will you require to make your—er—preparations?"

"About twenty minutes, sir," replied Jack.

"More like half an hour," put in Reginald Pitt quickly.

Mr. Strong beamed.

"Admirable!" he declared. "Half an hour will suit me very well indeed. I am anxious to have a few words with Mr. Nelson Lee, your Housemaster. I am well aware that you will not want me bothering about just now. I'll return by six-thirty—no, we'll say a quarter to seven, boys. That will give you ample time."

And the visitor took his departure. As the door closed Mason and Pitt looked at one another with curious expressions.

"By George!" said Pitt grimly. "I'll make Fullwood sit up for this!"

"No, we can't do that," interrupted Mason. "We don't know for certain that it was Fullwood, and Mr. Strong dished them, anyhow. But what the dickens are we going to do for tea? That's the main point at present."

Pitt grinned.

"Twenty minutes!" he exclaimed. "We couldn't have done it in the time, my son. I said half an hour, and that only just gives us a minute or two to spare. Mrs. Hake's stock is exhausted, so we shall have to go to the village. It won't take us long if we hurry ourselves."

They didn't waste much time in getting off.

And, meanwhile, Mr. Strong proceeded to Nelson Lee's study. As it happened, he met the schoolmaster-detective in the passage outside. Lee had been to Mr. Crowell's study for a few minutes, and he came forward with extended hand.

"I was expecting you about this time, Mr. Strong," he said pleasantly. "Come in—come in, my dear sir. Have you seen Mason?"

"I have just left him," replied Mr. Strong. "I have promised to partake of tea in the lad's study, and have arranged to get back in about half an hour. Meanwhile, I have taken the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with you, Mr. Lee."

"I expected to see you at St. Frank's before this—er—Mr. Strong," said Lee, with a smile. "But now that you have come I have quite a lot to tell you. I believe you will be able to clear up one or two points which have been somewhat puzzling."

Mr. Strong elevated his eyebrows as he took a seat.

"I must really confess that I do not know to what you are referring, my dear sir," he said mildly. "And please be perfectly frank with me—if I am hindering your work in any way, pitch me out. Do not consider me in the slightest."

Nelson Lee laughed.

"My work is not of such importance that I cannot put it aside for an hour," he said, proffering his cigar-case. "Yes, Mr. Strong, the fact is, Mason's uncle has been causing him a great deal of worry and annoyance."

"Mason's uncle!" ejaculated Mr. Strong blankly. "But—but, my dear sir! Pray con-

sider what you are saying! The lad's uncle is dead."

"I don't think you would say so if you had been at St. Frank's during this last three or four weeks," replied Nelson Lee. "I was quite surprised when I learned the news, but it is an undoubted fact that Mr. Simon Grell is as much alive as I am, and he is in this district at the present time."

Nelson Lee would have been considerably astonished had he known that Mr. Simon Grell was in that very room! The reckless rascal stood behind the curtains, hardly daring to breathe, and certainly not daring to move!

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed the visitor, taking a deep breath. "I am astounded, Mr. Lee. Not only that, but this piece of news is most disconcerting. Jack understood that his uncle left him the money for his education. What on earth can the lad think now? I really don't know what I can say to him——"

"Surely there is no necessity to say anything?" put in Nelson Lee. "The boy is content, and has a vague idea, I believe, that some obscure relative of his thought of him before dying. And that point, after all, is of very secondary importance. The main thing is to settle this affair of Grell. The man is a scoundrel, and I am anxious to drive him out of the neighbourhood."

"A scoundrel!" echoed the other. "I am well aware of that fact. Jack never made any complaints, but I was able to gather that Grell made the lad's early boyhood an utter misery. Then, of course, he left his wife and home for years together—and no man who could do that is worth his salt. I will say, however, that Mrs. Grell is a most objectionable person, and probably as bad as her good-for-nothing husband. A pair, Mr. Lee—a most disreputable pair. That is why I was so anxious to get that splendid lad away."

Mr. Grell, in concealment, ground his teeth together helplessly. It was not at all pleasant to listen to this portion of the conversation.

"I really don't know what brought Grell here originally," said Lee. "But he very soon displayed an intense desire to obtain possession of Jack Mason's half-locket——"

"I beg your pardon!" interrupted Mr. Strong, starting.

"Surely you are aware of the fact that Jack possesses half a gold locket, which bears some Arabic signs?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Indeed, I was not aware of the fact," ejaculated the other quickly. "I really think that you must be mistaken. Ah, but wait—wait one moment! Of course—of course! During my last visit I inadvertently left behind a small sealed package. That package contained the half-locket to which you refer, Mr. Lee, and I was naturally rather startled when you spoke of it as belonging to Jack. The lad evidently opened the package under the impression that it was left for him."

Nelson Lee pulled his keys out and walked over to the safe. He returned after a moment with Jack's half-locket.

"Is this it, Mr. Strong?" he asked.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Strong at once, examining the thing. "I merely brought it to St. Frank's to show it to Jack, because I value it highly—not on account of its intrinsic value, which is comparatively little, but because it has a most remarkable history—indeed, a sad, terrible history. I cannot understand why this scoundrelly uncle should desire to possess it."

"The Arabic writing relates, I believe, to some valuable treasure, although the message is incomplete," said Nelson Lee. "Mason asked me to take care of it for him, and I have been doing so. But I think that there is some mistake, Mr. Strong. You believe that this locket was within your sealed package?"

Mr. Strong looked up wonderingly.

"I do not believe it—I know it!" he replied.

"Then how is it that the sealed package is still perfectly whole?" said Nelson Lee quietly. "Either there are two half-lockets, or there has been a substitution of some kind."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the visitor. "This is most extraordinary, Mr. Lee. The seals appear to be unbroken; and yet this half-locket was certainly wrapped up—— Good heavens! What is this—what is this?"

The seals had been broken by now, and Mr. Strong stared in utter amazement at the second half of the locket, which lay revealed. Nelson Lee, too, was astonished.

"I am amazed—I am utterly amazed!" exclaimed Mr. Strong. "This is—this is more than staggering. I have had that locket since—— Oh, but I cannot grasp the full significance of this very singular discovery."

Mr. Strong rose to his feet and paced up and down with great agitation.

"It is beyond me, Mr. Lee," he went on. "I feel that I must confide in you—that it will be necessary for me to explain how my own half of the locket came into my possession—or, indeed, the whole locket. For this other piece is the fellow, without the shadow of a doubt."

Nelson Lee indicated Mr. Strong's chair.

"Pray reseate yourself, my dear sir," he said gently. "There is not the slightest need for you to become agitated. It is only too apparent that this locket has far greater significance than we know of at the present moment. Complete frankness, however, will possibly put us on the right trail."

Mr. Strong sat down again, but his expression was one of bewilderment and suppressed excitement. Simon Grell, behind the curtain, was now intently eager. The locket was on the table, almost within reach of his grasp—and he had come here to obtain it!

"Well, Mr. Lee, you are already aware of my little secret," said Mr. Strong. "You know that I pretended to be poor, whilst I am actually rich. You know that I gave

myself another name, so that Jack should be deceived. It would have disturbed him, possibly, had he known that my real name is Sir Crawford Grey, and that I am a baronet."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I understand your motives, Sir Crawford," he exclaimed. "After all, we are quite alone here, and there is really no reason why we should keep up the little pretence in private. I have done so hitherto because you have not referred to the matter, but I do not think it is at all necessary."

Here was another surprise for Mr. Grell. The somewhat shabby-looking "David Strong" was none other than Sir Crawford Grey, the immensely rich baronet! He had been mentioned in the newspapers only recently, in connection with a large donation to charitable funds.

Jack Mason would certainly have been astounded had he known the truth. Sir Crawford had taken Nelson Lee into his confidence from the very first, and it was owing to the baronet's influence that the school governors had allowed Jack Mason to enter St. Frank's as a scholar. Without such powerful influence the lad could never have gained an entry.

I knew all about "Mr. Strong's" identity soon afterwards, for Nelson Lee told me. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion, I shall always refer to him from this point by his real name. It will be much better.

"With regard to the locket, I shall take your advice and be perfectly frank," said Sir Crawford quietly. "The story is a most sad one, Mr. Lee, but it will not take long in telling. The discovery that Jack possesses the missing half of the locket is leading me to think the most outrageous things, and I scarcely know whether I am on my head or my heels. My dear sir—I am bewildered—I am becoming mad with a hope which has been dead for thirteen years!"

"You are puzzling me, Sir Crawford," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Of course—of course!" the baronet hastened to explain. "But you must remember that I am excited, and I crave your indulgence. I was attracted to the boy, too, because he reminded me so much of—Oh, but it is hopeless, quite hopeless! I am crazy to imagine such an impossible thing!"

Sir Crawford sat forward suddenly, gripping the arms of his chair.

"But again I am wandering," he went on. "If you only knew what this revelation has awakened in my heart, Mr. Lee, you would share my excitement. The lad has the same eyes as—Upon my soul! What is the matter with me? I must begin at the beginning, and not ramble on in this aimless fashion."

"It would certainly be more satisfactory, my dear sir."

"You will have no cause to complain again, Mr. Lee," said Sir Crawford Grey. "The history of this locket is a terribly tragic one, but the passing years have

softened the blow, and I can tell the story without flinching. Well, you are aware that I am a widower, Mr. Lee. My poor wife died close upon thirteen years ago, when my little son was just two years old. He, poor little lad, died at the same time. Unless—unless—Oh, but it is impossible!" he added hurriedly. "We were on a railway journey, Mr. Lee; my wife, myself, and our little child. For a companion we had a very old friend of mine, Colonel Morley. All this, you must understand, occurred thirteen years ago."

"I am following you perfectly," said Nelson Lee.

"Well, the first I saw of this locket was from Colonel Morley," continued Grey. "He had been a great explorer in his time, and was, indeed, intent upon fitting out an expedition to a remote region of Northern Africa at the time of his death. He presented this locket to my little baby son while we were travelling upon that never-to-be-forgotten journey. Little Norman—that was my boy's name—was naturally delighted with his present, and, child-like, immediately tried to open the locket—as all babies will. Colonel Morley, however, declared that it would not open, and believed that it was not made in that way. He had found it near the bones of a dead man in an African desert oasis, and had never given it very much thought, having slipped it into his pocket as a mere souvenir of that particular trip. Being interested in the thing we made serious attempts to force it open, and succeeded. Naturally, the colonel was rather astounded."

"On account of the inscription?"

"Of course. For it seemed pretty obvious that the Arabic writing on the locket—as you now see—related to a treasure of diamonds and other precious stones cached on that little known oasis. To my belief, that treasure still exists there, having never been recovered. According to the locket, it must be worth an enormous sum!"

Mr. Simon Grell nearly betrayed his presence by the sudden excitement which assailed him. Here was cause for jubilation, indeed! His belief that the locket was of value had now received first-hand corroboration. The treasure was worth an enormous sum! It was indeed worth a great amount of risk to obtain the thing!

"I presume that Colonel Morley regretted having given the locket to your little son?" asked Nelson Lee.

"No, he was a true sportsman, Mr. Lee," replied Sir Crawford. "He declared that the locket was the property of my baby boy, and the treasure, too, if it could be recovered. But Morley was, of course, immensely rich. Poor fellow! He only lived for a few minutes after making that presentation."

"An accident happened?" asked the detective. "Now that you have reminded me, Sir Crawford, I seem to vaguely remember a disaster about that period."

"The train ran off the metals at a curve," said Sir Crawford, his voice suddenly becoming grave and sad. "I will go into no details, because to talk long on the subject pains me exceedingly. While we were looking at the locket the crash came, and I have only vague memories of what followed. By a miracle I escaped almost unhurt, but all the other occupants of the compartment were—killed!" The baronet was silent for a moment or two. "My darling wife—and a better wife no man could ever have—was taken from me," he went on huskily. "My baby son was killed also, and Colonel Morley died before he could be extricated from the wreck."

"A terrible affair, indeed," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I realise that it must sadden you immeasurably to converse on the subject, and I beg of you to—"

"No, Mr. Lee, I must complete my story," interrupted the baronet firmly. "The years have passed, and they have softened my grief. The locket was never recovered complete. Only half came to light, and I found that myself, lying on the permanent way. The other half had completely vanished, and I have never set eyes on it until this evening. You will readily understand my complete amazement and excitement. For this lad—this brave lad who saved me from death—possesses the half which was lost in that railway accident. It is almost unbelievable, Mr. Lee. What can it mean? What in Heaven's name can it mean?"

"There may be any one of many explanations," replied Nelson Lee gently. "This world is not so big—and England is only a tiny morsel of it. There were other passengers on the train, and I can only suggest that some stranger picked up the half-locket and kept it, not knowing the real owner."

Sir Crawford nodded sadly.

"That, I am afraid, is the real explanation," he said. "You have thrown a cold douche over me, Mr. Lee, and it was necessary. I had allowed my brain to run riot for a moment. It is a singular fact, however, that I was strangely drawn towards Jack as soon as I got to know him, some months ago. He reminded me so much of my poor wife. Heavens above! How he reminded me of her! And now comes this fresh revelation. I am beginning to hope—"

"Let me advise you, Sir Crawford, not to allow these thoughts to carry you too far," said Nelson Lee gravely. "A terrible disappointment may be the result. I will admit that there is a chance that Jack Mason is your real son, your own boy—"

Sir Crawford jumped up, his face flushing with excitement again.

"You think there is a chance, Mr. Lee?" he asked tensely. "Oh, you have given me fresh hope—fresh spirit!"

"Then my words have had the opposite effect to that which I intended," said the detective softly. "I repeat, my dear sir, that such a chance is not absolutely un-

tenable, but the probability is that Jack Mason is really Jack Mason. However, the facts are most significant, and I shall use my utmost efforts to help you in this investigation."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee, you are indeed a friend!" exclaimed the baronet enthusiastically. "To think that Jack may be my own flesh and blood! Somehow, I have a feeling that God will be merciful, that this apparent miracle will turn out to be true. My dear sir, I scarcely know what else to say, and I fear that I shall betray myself when I go back to the lad's study."

"You must not do that," said Nelson Lee. "It will be far better for you to say nothing whatever until the point is either proved or disproved. Moreover, it will be just as well for you to remain 'Mr. Strong' for the time being. Rest assured that I will not let the grass grow under my feet."

A minute later Sir Crawford Grey took his leave from the study. And Nelson Lee was not blind to the fact that his visitor now seemed ten years younger. He no longer looked an old gentleman, but an upright man in the prime of life. He had grown inches taller during that short interview, and left the study with a springy, light step.

And, truth to tell, although Nelson Lee had discouraged the idea, he was becoming more and more convinced that Sir Crawford's hope would prove no idle one. It was an intensely interesting matter, and Nelson Lee was enthusiastic.

He looked at the locket, which still lay upon the table, and then turned to the mantelpiece in order to help himself to a cigarette from the box which stood there. And at that very moment Simon Grell acted.

The hidden scoundrel knew that his chance had come now, that he would probably never get another opportunity of seizing the coveted locket. And so he sprang out from behind the curtain. In his hand he held a small cloth bag, half filled with silver—one of those old-fashioned purses which are sometimes seen. In a moment of emergency it proved to be an excellent weapon.

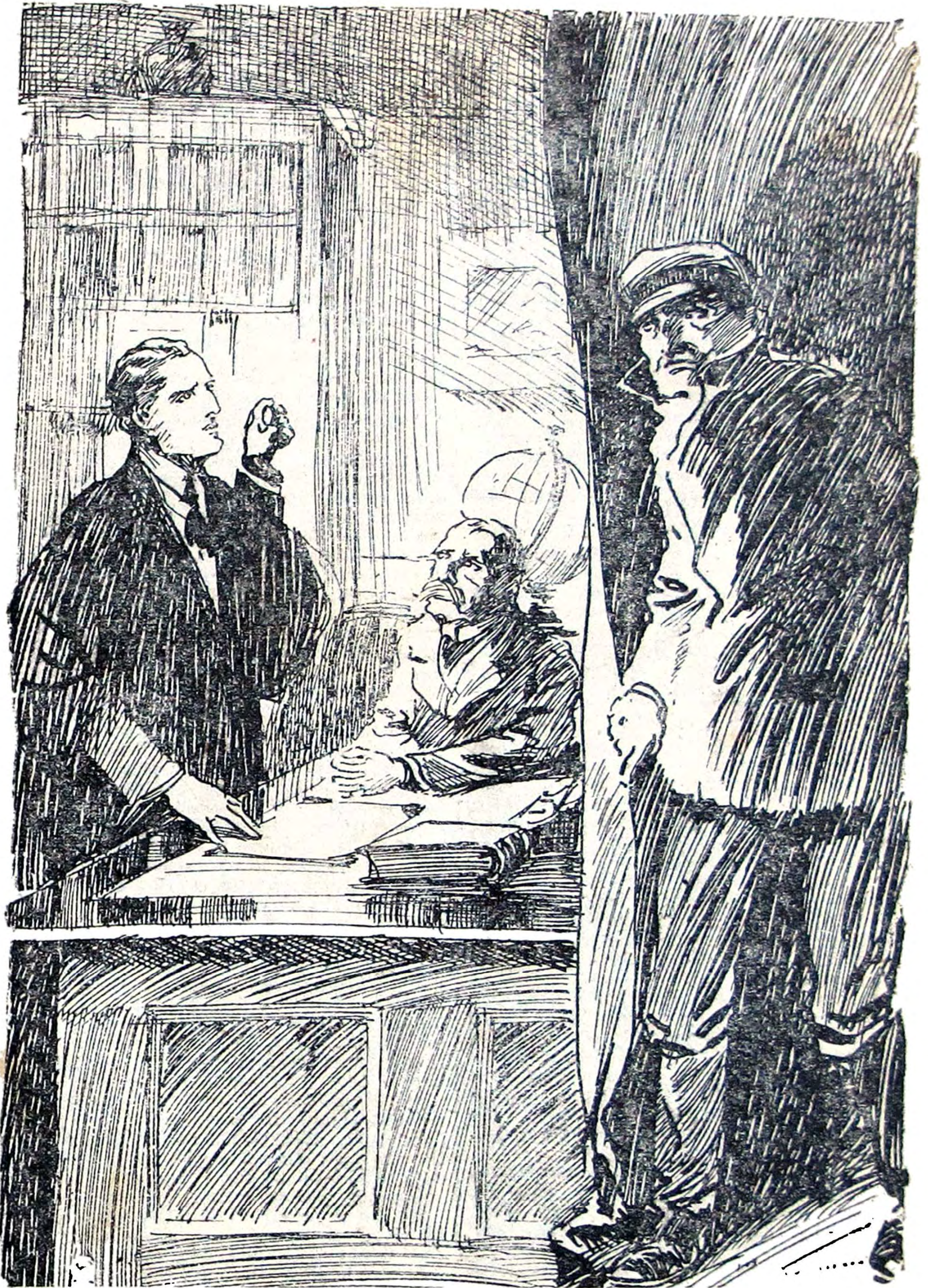
It swung through the air as Nelson Lee was in the act of turning, and caught the detective heavily upon the head. He stumbled back and collapsed over a chair—by no means put out of action, but greatly handicapped.

Grell, panting hoarsely with excitement, did not follow up his attack, or take advantage of Nelson Lee's position. He made a grab at the locket, seized the two halves, and dashed to the window.

Siam!

The sash went up, and Captain Jim recklessly dived head-first out into the darkness of the Triangle. He had succeeded! That thought lent him speed, and he pelted across, towards the gates like a rabbit.

His desperate venture had ended in victory, but would he be able to retain the advantage he had gained?



Nelson Lee held up the locket, and Mr. Simon Grell nearly betrayed the sudden excitement which assailed him!—(See page 11.)

CHAPTER V.

REGINALD PITT ON THE TRACK!

"WE shall only just do it!" Jack Mason made that remark in a rather breathless voice as he and Reginald Pitt hurried along the muddy lane from Bellton to the school.

They were both loaded, having made extensive purchases at the tuck establishment presided over by Mr. Binks. This was a special occasion, and it was necessary to do Mr. Strong honour. For, of course, both the juniors imagined their visitor to be just plain "Mr. Strong"—and an impecunious gentleman at that.

They had been longer than they had reckoned upon, and were now hurrying.

"We don't want to find the guest of honour squatting down in the study twiddling his thumbs," remarked Pitt. "Let's hope Mr. Lee kept him talking. Once we get this stuff into the study, Jack, we can do the rest in five minutes."

"Yes, there's nothing to be cooked," replied Mason.

"Except the tea!" grinned Pitt. "But we left the kettle on the fire, so it ought to be boiling by the time we get in. What about that locket, old son? Are you going to tell Mr. Strong anything about it?"

"Of course. I shall tell him everything," replied Jack. "But it's pretty certain that Mr. Lee will have given him most of the facts. I daresay all that mystery will be cleared up now."

"Let's hope so," replied the Serpent.

Reginald Pitt had earned that nickname during his early days at St. Frank's—for he had been extremely snaky in his ways. Hardly any of the fellows called him that now, however, for he had changed so remarkably.

"Somebody coming down the lane," said Mason a moment later.

"Somebody in a hurry, too," remarked Pitt. "Well, we're safe enough—it's not locking-up time yet, and we've got permits anyhow. By jingo! They are in a hurry, and no mistake."

For it was now seen that there were two figures hastening down. They approached at a run, and Mason and Pitt stood still in order to see who the couple were. Something was apparently wrong, for they were running very swiftly.

The boys recognised the men at about the same second as the men recognised the boys.

Simon Grell and Jake Starkey!

What were they doing, running down from the school in this hurried fashion? Pitt was instantly suspicious, and so was Jack Mason. They expected to see the two men rush past, but Mr. Grell came to a halt.

"Quick, Jake!" he snapped. "It's the boy—it's Jack! Hold him!"

"By George!" muttered Pitt. "Dodge, Jack, we can't possibly fight these two rotters—"

Before Pitt could get another word out

Starkey's fist crashed upon the side of his head, and he went over like a ninepin. It was a brutal blow, and Pitt lay motionless upon the ground.

And Jack Mason, attempting to flee—for that was his only course—found himself held tightly by his uncle and Starkey.

"Bring him along!" hissed Grell. "Never mind the other kid! He'll come to himself afore long. Quick, Jake, into the wood!"

Jake Starkey grunted.

"I don't see what the game is, Simon—" he began.

"Durn you!" snarled Grell. "Don't waste time now, you fool!"

Starkey offered no further objection, but helped the other man to force Mason down the road. Jack struggled valiantly, but he knew very well that his task was a hopeless one. How could he expect to get away from these two powerful men?

Something had happened—something up at the school, apparently. And Jack was filled with vague alarm—not for himself, but for Mr. Strong. He had a terribly uncomfortable feeling that the old gentleman was somehow involved in this unexpected development. For Simon Grell had obviously met with some success. This was apparent from the very tone of his voice.

Meanwhile Reginald Pitt lay upon the road perfectly still. He had been knocked over by a savage blow, and Jake Starkey, as he helped his chief to force Mason along, was troubled with doubts. Pitt had looked very white and still, lying there upon the road!

Had he come to any grave harm?

If Mr. Starkey could have seen Reginald Pitt at that moment his fears would not only have been allayed, but he would have been considerably surprised.

For Pitt was on his feet, and he didn't look at all stunned. He certainly rubbed the side of his head rather tenderly, but there was no sign of any serious damage. He gazed down the lane grimly.

"So that's the game!" he muttered. "Well, there's only one thing that I can do. Why aren't there a dozen of our chaps handy? We'd soon settle those rotters then!"

But the lane was quite deserted except for Simon Grell, Starkey, and their prisoner. Pitt walked down the road softly but swiftly.

As a matter of fact he hadn't been stunned at all. He hadn't even been particularly hurt. But this does not mean to say that he had faked a fight with the scoundrels who had attacked Mason.

No, Pitt was very keen.

He knew quite well that no help was at hand, and Grell had already seized Jack. Pitt might have fled, but that would have told the rascals that a rescue party would soon come rushing down.

To attack Starkey would have been fatal, and so Pitt had remained upon the ground, quite still, pretending to be stunned. He knew that if he struggled to his feet he

would go down again, and this time he would almost certainly be stunned in earnest.

It was a cute dodge on Pitt's part to remain inactive. Against these two powerful men the boys would have been helpless. It was only Mason Grell wanted, and Pitt would have been ruthlessly knocked on the head.

He preferred to be content with the knock he had already received. And now Pitt was in a position to follow the rascals and to see what their game was. He couldn't understand it at all; he could think of no reason why Simon Grell should want to kidnap his nephew.

Without a doubt, events had happened which were totally unexpected, and Grell had acted upon the spur of the moment, taking advantage of the fact that he had met the lad on this dark portion of the road.

Pitt, full of eagerness, followed down the lane, and saw Mason's captors plunge into the wood.

"This is going to be tricky!" muttered Pitt grimly.

His head was aching abominably, but he took no notice of this. He was the only person who could be of any use to the unfortunate junior in the wood, and Pitt did not hesitate to take action, although he did not feel like exerting himself.

But his determination to help Mason was strong.

Of late Pitt had grown to like his study-mate more and more. And he was now filled with alarm lest Jack should be in any peril. It was a great change, for not so long before—only a few weeks—Pitt had been very different in his attitude.

Grell and Starkey tried to make no noise as they forced their way through the wood. But Pitt was easily able to follow—not by the use of his eyes, but by keeping his ears on the stretch.

The darkness beneath the leafless trees was intense, and Pitt became more and more alarmed. Why were these men taking the lad into the recesses of the wood? What was their object in doing so?

Pitt had no intention of leaving until he had discovered the truth. Besides, there was quite a good chance that he would be able to help. His presence was unknown to the scoundrels, and he might be provided with a sudden opportunity. This, indeed, was the main reason for Pitt's eager desire to keep on the track.

He wanted to rescue Mason—single-handed. For this would prove his friendship more than anything else; and Reginald Pitt, in his changed frame of mind, was doing his utmost to make amends for his vindictive actions of the past.

At last the crackling of the dead twigs ceased, and by this time Pitt reckoned that Grell and Starkey were near the other end of the wood, where it jutted out close to the village, against the tiny side lane which led to one or two outlying farms.

Very cautiously Pitt crept forward.

He heard voices now, and his movements were like those of an experienced tracker. Finally, he lay full length at the edge of a little hollow. Gazing down he could see two dim figures moving about.

"He'll do, Jake," came Grell's voice. "I don't reckon he'll be able to move an inch with them strings round him. You git off, an' be back here within ten minutes."

"It can't be done, cap'n——"

"It can't if you stay here talkin'!" snapped Grell. "Git off!"

Starkey disappeared, and Pitt wondered where he was going and what his object was. At all events, an idea which had come into Pitt's head was quickly dismissed. He had thought of rushing back to the school and fetching help.

But that would occupy fully twenty minutes, and by that time Mason would have been taken off into the night by his captors. And then, of course, any chase would be practically hopeless.

It was far better to remain here, on the watch. The very fact that Grell had bound Mason proved that he intended taking him off somewhere without unnecessary delay. So the best thing would be to wait and to track the scoundrels to their ultimate destination.

"Don't you git frightened, Jack," came Mr. Grell's voice out of the hollow. "As long as you remain quiet you won't come to no harm. You've given me enough trouble these last weeks, an' I'm not going to stand no more."

"Oh, you scoundrel!" panted Mason hotly. "You've half-killed poor Pitt!"

"Not quite!" murmured Pitt, grinning to himself.

Mr. Grell laughed harshly.

"Bah! Don't git them fears into your head," he said. "The kid didn't come to no harm—only a punch from Starkey's fist. I expect he's all right by this time, an' squealin' to his kind masters. But they won't git on our track, Jack, my boy. We've bin too quick for 'em."

"What are you going to do with me——"

"It ain't your place to ask questions," interrupted Grell. "Just you lay quiet an' do as you're told. Not a hair of your head will be hurt, an' you'll be given a real holiday."

Jack made no reply, and Pitt wondered if he could do anything now. He decided that a rescue would be impossible. Grell was on guard, and Mason was bound. If Pitt revealed his presence he would soon be rendered helpless.

He could, of course, creep up behind Captain Jim and take him by surprise—but only by great good luck. The chances were that his approach would be heard, and then only disaster would follow.

Grell was on the alert, listening intently, and keeping his eyes well open. And the minutes passed steadily, and at last Pitt heard the grating of iron-tyred wheels upon the lane, just beyond the trees.

A trap was approaching, evidently.

Just for a second Pitt thought of yelling for help, but an exclamation of satisfaction from Grell made him change his mind. The arrival of the trap was expected, and the truth came to Pitt on the instant.

Starkey had been to the village to fetch the trap—Porlock's, from the White Harp, probably. The distance to the inn was very short from this point, for the wood lay just behind the White Harp garden.

Grell and Starkey intended carrying Mason away in the trap. It was a daring scheme, but there was really nothing against it. Bound and helpless, and probably gagged. Jack would lie at the bottom of the trap unseen. The darkness of the night was intense, and the prisoner would certainly not be seen.

Less than a minute later Pitt knew that his surmise was correct.

Jake Starkey appeared, and he and Grell lifted their prisoner and carried him through the trees towards the lane. The watching Removite followed. Grell called a halt before entering the lane, and Pitt guessed that the gag was being applied.

Then Mason was bundled into the trap, the two men took their seats, and the vehicle drove off. It went towards the village, and Pitt stood in the centre of the lane, helpless—in a state of complete consternation.

What was he to do now?

How could he follow? For the moment the only method was to run—and Pitt pelted down the lane at full speed. But he was hopelessly outdistanced by the fast trap, and when he reached the main road he saw the vehicle bowling down the high street boldly and daringly.

It was already at the other end of the village, and Pitt knew perfectly well that he could do nothing further. He clenched his fists fiercely, and determined to rush to the policeman's cottage. This, at all events, would be the best thing to do under the circumstances.

But then he changed his mind—and this was caused by catching sight of Bob Christine, of the College House.

Christine had just ridden along the High Street on his bicycle, and he halted outside a shop within a hundred yards of Pitt. He entered, leaving his bike outside, with the lamps burning.

"By jingo!" muttered Pitt tensely.

He didn't wait another second, but dashed forward and jumped on to the bicycle straight away. There was no time to ask for permission—Christine was a good fellow, and he wouldn't mind in the least when the affair was explained to him afterwards.

Intensely eager again, Pitt pedalled down the street with all his power. Arriving at the end, there were two roads to choose from—the one leading to Bannington and the other to Caistowe. Far up the latter road, which was straight for half a mile, Pitt saw two twinkling little red lights.

He grinned to himself, and followed.

Before he had proceeded a hundred yards, however, he bent over his machine as he was riding, and turned out both the lamps. He didn't want his quarry to know that a bicycle was following.

Pitt was in his element now.

He was on the track in earnest, and he told himself that he would thank Bob Christine in the most cordial terms for arriving on the scene with his bicycle just at that very critical moment.

Nothing could have happened better. It was far more satisfactory to follow the trap than to inform the muddle-headed police-constable at Bollton, P.-c. Sparrow, no doubt, would have got into a fine fluster, and would have done his best. But the chances were that Grell and Starkey would have eluded pursuit. There was also the possibility that the policeman would have scouted the idea, thinking it to be a joke—for Pitt's story would certainly have sounded tall.

To follow direct was much better. The trap could not go very far, and Pitt had no difficulty in guessing that the destination was to be Caistowe. At all events, he would stick to the trail until the journey's end was reached.

He kept quite a long way behind, but never allowed the trap to get out of sight, except at occasional corners. The vehicle was travelling smartly, but Pitt had no difficulty in keeping pace with it.

At length Caistowe was reached, but the trap drove straight through the sleepy little place until it arrived on the sea-front. All the shops were closed by this time, and the darkness was intense.

Rather to Pitt's surprise, the trap drove straight to the dark quayside, and there came to a halt. There was not a soul in sight, and everything was still and quiet. Out in the channel a small steamer was riding at anchor, and near by were other craft—most of them fishing vessels, snug for the night.

Pitt dismounted from his machine and waited. Dimly he saw Mason lifted out, carried down the steps, and then the watching junior could see no more. Starkey came up almost at once and drove off in the trap.

Pitt crept nearer, wondering what on earth it could mean. Why had Mason been taken to this spot? A cold shiver passed down the junior's back when he thought that murder might be in Grell's heart.

The Removite edged nearer, until he could gaze down over the side of the quay and look along to the steps. To his relief, he saw Mr. Grell sitting in a boat, and Mason was certainly there also, although Pitt could not see him.

"Don't you git frightened, my boy," Grell was saying, in a low voice. "You're just going to be took out to that nice little steamer. You'll have a sea-voyage for your health. How does that strike you—hey?"

Mason, of course, could make no reply, and Pitt judged that Grell was waiting until Starkey returned. There was no possibility of anybody interfering, for there was nobody within sight. And here, again, Pitt knew that he would have no opportunity of carrying out a rescue. Starkey had only driven to one of the inns which lined the front, and he had probably handed the trap over to an ostler.

This conjecture was probably correct, for Starkey returned while Pitt was turning over one or two alternatives in his mind. They were useless, for there was no time for action.

A reckless fellow would probably have dashed forward without thinking—and disaster would have followed. Reginald Pitt, by remaining in the background all the time, was not proving himself deficient in pluck, but full of quick-wittedness. Grell and Starkey thought themselves secure—and they weren't. It was far better to let them go on thinking it.

Mason was to be taken to the steamer which was lying just out in the channel. That information, at all events, was of the first importance. Pitt knew his chum's exact destination.

All he had to do was to hurry back to St. Frank's and give the alarm—Nelson Lee would attend to the rest. Pitt had great faith in the Housemaster-detective, and he knew that Lee would be able to awaken the local authorities and have Jack Mason rescued in a very little time.

Pitt had done splendid service, and he only waited to see the boat being pulled out towards the steamer. Then he remounted Christine's bicycle and pedalled back towards St. Frank's with every ounce of speed of which he was capable.

CHAPTER VI.

ROGUES IN COUNCIL.

BUT Jack Mason was not inclined to suffer his fate without attempting to break away. So far he had had no chance, having been bound almost since the moment of his capture. But the determination was firm within him.

He was worried concerning Pitt, for he firmly believed that that junior had been seriously hurt by Starkey's blow. He was not aware of the fact that Pitt had deliberately lain upon the road, pretending to be injured, whilst only momentarily dazed.

And Mason was also startled with regard to his own position. What could it mean? Why had Grell captured him in this way? It was utterly unaccountable, because Grell knew well enough that the locket was being taken care of by Nelson Lee.

And the very nature of his adventure was startling. He was not merely being taken to some prepared retreat of Grell's, but to a steamer—a ship that might be bound for

some place a thousand miles away! It was small wonder that Jack Mason became rather bewildered and scared.

And to happen on this day, of all days! Just when Mr. Strong had come down to St. Frank's! It was the height of misfortune.

Jack was left in the boat with Starkey while Grell climbed on board the steamer. Fully a quarter of an hour passed before Grell returned, and then the captive was hauled up to the deck.

The steamer was only a small one, and looked—and smelt—extremely dirty. Apparently, scarcely a soul was on board, for Jack saw nobody until a short man in a shabby uniform appeared out of a deck-house.

This was the skipper, and every member of the crew was at present ashore—although they would come on board within the next fifteen minutes or so, for the tide would then be favourable.

The skipper, Captain Davis, looked at Mason critically.

"Bring him inside, Grell," he said, removing a pipe from between his teeth.

Mason was taken into the grubby deck-house, and the skipper regarded him closely and with great interest.

"So this is the kid?" he said. "Well, Grell, I don't much care for the job, but you're willin' to pay my terms, so I'll take it on. You'd best come with me to the cabin an' we'll talk it over a bit more."

Jack was left in Starkey's care, and Grell followed Captain Davis down the companion into a somewhat foul cabin. Here the pair partook of rum, and then Grell comfortably lit a cigar.

"It's this way, Davis," he said. "You an' me are old pals, an' I took advantage of your bein' in Caistowe with your ship. This job ain't goin' to harm you in the least, an' it'll do me a good turn. The kid's my nephew, an' I've got a right to do wot I like with him. See?"

"That's all very well, but I don't see it," said the other. "I didn't know that a man could treat his relatives like this 'ere—bringin' 'em aboard a steamer, bound up an' gagged. You're likely to git into trouble if the kid's found, Grell—an' then I shall git into trouble, too."

"No, you won't," said Captain Jim easily. "The whole thing's easy. All I want you to do is to take the youngster to London. You're startin' within half an hour, so there won't be no inquiries this end, an' you can't come to no harm. I sha'n't make the voyage with you, 'cos that 'ud be too risky. Me an' Starkey will go by train, an' we'll be down at Wappin' by the time you arrive. Everything will be arranged, an' all you've got to do is to pocket the brass."

"An' suppose the ship's searched?"

"Well, they can't touch you——"

"Not if the boy's found?"

"No. You can shove him down in a hold or in some odd corner, an' keep him there

unknown to the crew," replied Grell. "I should pack him away aft. if I were you. If he's found, you can swear you don't know nothin'. Understand? The kid'll be took for a stowaway--an' you ain't responsible for stowaways, are you?"

Captain Davis nodded.

"It ain't a bad idea," he agreed. "You won't be aboard, so there'll be no complications like that. An' the kid will be a stowaway, as you say. I sha'n't even tell my mate."

"That's the best way," said Simon Grell. "Nothin' can't be proved. You're safe either way, an' you're gettin' your own price. As for grub, the kid won't want more than one feed, an' you can take that down to him in the middle watch--some time arter midnight."

"An' you'll see me in London?"

"As soon as ever you drop anchor in the river," declared Grell. "Me an' Starkey will git up there to-night, an' you won't arrive until to-morrow evenin'. So that gives me plenty o' time to make arrangements."

"Well, you'd best git off the ship as soon as you can," said Captain Davis. "The crew'll be aboard soon now, an' there's no reason for you to be seen."

"You're right, Davis--we'll clear."

They went up on deck, and returned to the place where Mason was being guarded by Jake Starkey.

"He's a quiet youngster," said Mr. Grell, regarding Jack. "You won't have no trouble with him, cap'n. I'll leave it to you wot you do--where you stow him--but I shouldn't think it 'ud be necessary to keep him bound up. Might as well give the kid a bit o' freedom. I'm a soft-hearted man, an' the journey'll be a long one."

"An' wot about us, Simon?" asked Starkey.

"Us?" repeated Grell. "Why, we're goin' straight to London by train, old man--back to our old lodgin's at Mother Hackett's, in George Terrace, Wappin'. Sounds a swell address, don't it?"

"It ain't!" said Starkey, with conviction. "Still, you know best, Simon. I'm in your hands, but I'm darned if I know wot your game is!"

"I haven't had time to tell you yet, but you'll soon know," replied Grell. "Now, Jack, my boy, don't you be frightened. Jest take it quiet, an' you'll see your kind uncle agin to-morrow evenin'."

Mason was unable to reply, but he was inwardly furious at this treatment. He began to fear that he would have no opportunity of breaking away. Before Grell and Starkey left they helped Captain Davis to take the prisoner below. He was stowed into a small store-room aft, which was well away from the men's quarters and could not be visited without permission from the captain.

It was a noisome hole, small, with iron walls and a heavy door, the latter being provided with an extra-stout lock.

"This'll do fine," said Grell, looking round approvingly. "He'll be able to yell to his heart's content, an' won't attract no attention."

"Mebbe!" said Captain Davis grimly. "But if I hear 'im yellin', he'll soon git somethin' he don't want. You'll 'ave to do without a bed, kid, until we're at sea. I'll bring you down some blankets an' some grub later on."

Mason's ropes were cut and the muffler was removed from his face. But the lad knew better than to speak. Any words he uttered would only be jeered at, and, although he felt like shouting out what he thought of his uncle, he kept himself in check and only glared defiance.

"That's right!" grinned Mr. Grell. "Look at your uncle as though you'd like to eat him--I don't mind!"

Grell and Starkey took their departure, and Captain Davis looked at the prisoner searchingly.

"What's your name, kid?" he asked.

Mason made no reply.

"Sulky, eh?" went on the captain. "Well, it ain't to be wondered at. But it wants a bit o' believin' that a swell kid like you is the nevvie of old Simon Grell. I've got an idea there's some trickery somewhere. Are you Grell's nevvie?"

"Yes," said Jack quietly. "I'm not going to ask you to help me, but perhaps you don't know that you might get yourself into prison for keeping me on this ship? My uncle is an absolute scoundrel--"

"I ain't denyin' it," said Captain Davis. "Grell's a man I don't trust much, but if you say you're 'is nevvie, I reckon I'm safe. No need to look scared, kid. I sha'n't hurt you while you're aboard this ship."

Just for a moment Jack clenched his fists, intending to make a dash to the doorway. But the skipper forestalled the movement, and closed the door until only an inch or two remained open.

"An' don't git shoutin'," he said. "You'll only make yourself 'oarse, an' git a 'idin' arterwards. I do as I like on my own ship, an' you'll stay in this 'ere store-room till we reach London."

The door closed, and Jack Mason was left in darkness. He heard the key turn in the lock, and he heard Captain Davis walk along the passage, and then the footsteps died into silence.

In a moment Jack had a box of matches out of his pocket. He shakily struck one, and held the light so that he could survey his prison.

There was not the slightest chance of escape. The only exit was by way of the door, and this was so thick and strong that a battering-ram would have been required to smash it down.

As for shouting for help, Mason bitterly realised that it would be quite useless. Even if his voice was heard, what would be the result? The captain would be brought down, and he would be harsh and brutal. If the

crew got to hear that the boy was on board it would make very little difference—for, in that event, Davis might consider it wise to haul Jack up, and to make out that he was an intruder on the ship. There would be no escape, for the vessel would be at sea. And one part of the steamer was as good as another.

Jack had no chance whatever of making a break for freedom—as yet. Later on, as events turned out, he would be able to act in an extremely decisive manner. But that episode cannot be described at present.

The thing which bewildered Jack more than anything else was why on earth he had been kidnapped at all. Grell had not even made any mention of the half-locket and Mr. Strong's sealed package. Until to-day Grell's whole energy had been concentrated upon obtaining the two halves of the locket. And yet he had now succeeded in capturing Jack, but had not even referred to the locket itself. This was certainly extraordinary.

But Jack would not have been so puzzled had he been able to hear the conversation which was even then proceeding between the two rascals who had succeeded in spiriting him away from St. Frank's.

They had left the ship, and even on their way back to the quay had passed a boat filled with loudly talking men—obviously members of the old coasting-steamer's crew. The vessel would take her departure almost at once.

Grell and Starkey paid a short visit to the inn where the trap had been left, arranging that it should be taken back to the White Harp on the morrow. Then they turned their steps towards the station.

"We shall jest be in comfortable time to catch the last train," said Grell. "Things have been happenin' quick to-night, old man—so quick that you're lookin' fair bewildered."

"I ain't only lookin' bewildered, but I'm all muddled up," confessed Starkey. "I can't see wot your game is, Simon. You ain't explained a single word to me. Since you come out o' the school gates we've bin on the go the 'ole time. Wot happened at the school, anyway?"

Mr. Grell chuckled.

"You'd never believe it, Jake," he replied. "Talk about luck! I've never had such luck as that of to-night! We've had some disappointments jest lately, but they're all made up for now—every durned one of 'em."

"Well, I can't see it," said Starkey flatly. "It looks like a fool's game to me to take that kid an' shove 'im on that boat. Wot's the good of it, Simon? Wot in thunder's name's the good of it?"

"I'm arter making money—that's the good of it," replied Mr. Grell. "I've found out things wot I'd never dreamed of afore this evenin', an' I'll tell you all about 'em. Fust an' foremost, Jake, I've got that locket."

"You 'ave?" said Mr. Starkey incredulously.

"In my pocket at this minnit," went on

Grell. "Not only half of it, but the whole thing. An' this old chap named Strong ain't much an innercent cove as he looks. He's Sir Crawford Grey, Baronet."

Starkey halted in the road.

"You will 'ave your joke, cap'n," he said weakly.

"You needn't believe it unless you like," went on the other. "But here we are at the station. We'll continue this talk on the platform, while we're waitin' for the train. It'll be in within five minutes."

They took their tickets, and then waited on a secluded seat on the little platform. Starkey was greatly astonished, and more so when Grell proceeded to tell him of the events which had occurred at St. Frank's.

"I heard everything," concluded Mr. Grell. "Ordinary luck ain't in it, Jake; it was wonderful luck, an' no mistake. Mebbe you ain't heard much o' this Sir Crawford Grey?"

"Ain't 'e a Cabinet Minister?" asked Starkey vaguely.

"No, he ain't!" replied Grell. "He's a privit gentleman o' means; he's got piles of money—pots of it. That's why I seized the opportunity to bring Jack along with us. It was only a bit o' chance that brought Jack into our way to-night. But, there, when once my luck sets in, it does it proper."

Starkey shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't foller you now," he said impatiently.

"Well, you was born thick-headed, so I don't blame you," said Mr. Grell genially. "Wot about that story I heard? Why, it's pretty certain that that kid ain't my nevvie at all; in fact I've had an inkling of it for years past. This seems to prove it. He's the son of Sir Crawford Grey, an' the old baronet himself is pretty certain of it, too. Wot will he do when he finds that Jack is missin'?"

"Raise a blazes of a fuss, I should think," replied Jake.

"That's just where you're wrong; he won't do nothin' o' the sort," replied Grell cunningly. "He an' Lee will guess within an hour that I've took the boy, an' they won't want to make any big fuss of it. They'll try an' find Jack on the quiet an' won't. Then this Sir Crawford will get a letter from me, sayin' that he can have the boy for keeps if he hands over the sum of five thousand quid."

"'Ow much?" gasped Starkey faintly.

"Five thousand quid!"

"You're mad—you're stark, starin' mad!" ejaculated the other. "Why, 'e wouldn't pay all that money, Simon."

Mr. Grell laughed softly.

"Wouldn't he?" he said. "Well, I'm goin' to try it on, an' that's why I've took the boy. See? The idea struck me all at once, an' I believe it'll work. If I can't git five thousand, I'll git three—or even two."

"You're comin' down," remarked Starkey.

"I shan't go below two—that's the limit," continued Grell firmly. "Wot can the old feller do but pay up?"

"Well, 'e could put the cops on to us——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Grell. "Sir Crawford Grey won't want the whole thing talked of in the papers, don't you make no mistake. He'll do it quiet, an' he'll pay up willin'ly, rather than that boy should be lost. He thinks Jack's his son, an' he's nigh off his head with excitement. I tell you, Jake, we'll get the five thousand easy."

"But it's an awful lot," said Starkey wonderingly.

"Mebbe it is to you. To him it's just a trifle," went on Captain Jim. "He's worth hundreds of thousands, an' a measly five ain't goin' to hurt him for a minute. An' how can he put the cops on us? You seem to forgit, Jake, that Jack Mason is my nevvie in the eyes of the law, an' I'm his guardian. Ain't I brought him up since he was a baby? He's under age, an' he's in my care. Nobody can't force me to give him up."

"But you said that 'e's Sir Crawford's son—"

"No, I didn't; I said he might be," replied Grell. "There's no proof of it, Jake, an' until there is proof the boy's mine. If I like to send him to London on a ship, that's my business. I shall tell the old gent that I'll do him a great favour an' renounce all right to the boy for the sum of five thousand o' the best. That's business. There's nothin' crooked in the game at all, an' you an' me are absolutely safe."

Mr. Starkey regarded his chief admiringly.

"My! If you ain't got some brains, Simon!" he exclaimed. "I see it all now. Why, we'll git it; but that there locket business is a different matter. You might stumble over that there, old mate."

"I'm too fly," said Mr. Grell, getting to his feet as the signal went down. "You won't find me comin' no cropper over the locket. Nobody saw me take it—not even Leo himself—an' they can't prove nothin'. An' you don't seem to have realised the importance of this other business."

"Wot other business?"

"Why, bleedin' Sir Crawford for money," replied Grell. "We've got the locket, an' I know for certain now that there's a big treasure tacked on to it. How are we goin' to git it? Who's goin' to pay our expenses? Why, Sir Crawford Grey himself—see? Ain't it rich?"

"That—that five thousand?" gasped Starkey.

"Exactly," agreed his astute companion. "With that money we shall be able to go to Africa in style, an' all our expenses paid. Did you ever look at such a rosy picture, Jake?"

"I 'ope it ain't too rosy," said Jake cautiously.

Mr. Grell slapped his friend's back.

"You allus was a wet blanket, Jake," he said. "But our luck's fair turned, an' we're in for a good time—you trust me. Gettin' the locket was good, but it wasn't much use to us alone. I've realised that all along. But this way we're goin' to provide ourselves with the brass to do the trip. It's all

connected, an' takin' the boy away was necessary."

It could not be denied that Simon Grell's scheme was undoubtedly a clever one. He had seized his opportunities swiftly and without hesitation. Just when things had seemed their blackest the tide had turned.

And now, as Grell himself had said, the prospect was rosy in the extreme. The two rascals had the locket in their possession, and Jack Mason was a prisoner. There seemed nothing in the way of complete victory.

The train steamed into the station and the precious rogues took their seats in a smoking compartment. They left the scene of their many adventures, not bowed down with gloom, as they had half expected, but buoyed up with the greatest hopes of winning a fortune.

Everything had gone splendidly from their point of view. But they would not have been so easy in mind had they known that nearly all their secret movements of that evening had been watched by Reginald Pitt, of the Remove.

And one thing was certain. Pitt would not keep that information to himself. His one idea was to give the warning—to wreck Simon Grell's plan before it actually developed into anything like approaching success.

Things were not slumbering at St. Frank's!

CHAPTER VII.

THE RACE TO CAISTOWE.

"**D**EAR fellow, its appallin'!" exclaimed Sir Montie Tregellis-West, panting hard. "I don't know what it means—I don't really."

"Well, I can tell you," I said grimly. "Both Mason and Pitt have been collared, and it's almost certain that Grell is at the bottom of it. The locket's gone, too, and I'm blessed if I know what we're to do."

I was standing with my chums almost in the centre of the Triangle. We had just been scouring the school-grounds from end to end, but had found no sign whatever of Pitt or Mason.

What we had found, however, was sufficiently significant—and, after all, I suppose it was a sign. In the lane, quite near the school, two or three parcels of eatables had come to light. Pitt and Mason had gone to the village to buy things for tea, so it was obvious that they had been attacked on their way back, and had been forced to abandon their packages.

The first we knew of it was that Mr. Strong—or, rather, Sir Crawford Grey—came into study C, asking if we knew where Mason was. We didn't, but had been making inquiries when the guv'nor appeared.

Nelson Lee was looking rather pale, and there was a decided bump showing upon the side of his head. Taking us to his study, he explained that somebody had sprung at him from behind the curtains, had bowled him

over, and had succeeded in getting away with the gold locket.

He was simply furious, and Sir Crawford went nearly off his head. But his anxiety was nothing compared with that which followed, for, while hurrying down the road to see if we could find any trace of the thief, we came upon the parcells. They told their own story.

Without the slightest doubt Simon Grell was responsible. He had kidnapped Jack for some reason. Presumably Pitt had been taken as well, but Pitt's inclusion was only because he had been with Mason at the time and it had been unsafe to take one without the other.

The guv'nor was in a shocking temper at first, but then he became as cool as ice. He knew well enough that Grell must have been in the room during the interview with Sir Crawford. Therefore Grell knew the truth, and there was a distinct motive for his crime in kidnapping Jack Mason.

Nothing was absolutely certain. We had no evidence of any kind. So Tommy and Montie and I rushed about looking for the missing juniors, on the faint off-chance that our original surmise was incorrect. The College House fellows might have been up to a jape, or something of that kind.

But our quest had been fruitless, and we were now taking a breather in the Triangle. I hadn't taken much active part in this affair so far, but it certainly seemed as though there was excitement brewing now.

Bob Christine, of the College House, had been raving about for some time, but we were not interested in his woes. Some scoundrel, it seemed, had gone off with Christine's bicycle whilst Bob was in a shop. But we did not connect this incident with Mr. Simon Grell—not at first, at all events.

But after every other suggestion had been cast aside, after every field of inquiry had been exhausted, I thought of that affair of the stolen bicycle. It was certainly unusual for a bike to be pinched in Bellton. Had Grell taken it in order to aid his flight?

It was just possible, and Nelson Lee was even now busy at the telephone, sending warnings to the police at Bannington, Helmford, Caistowe, and other surrounding places. Sir Crawford Grey had aged again with this fresh worry, and he scarcely knew how to contain himself.

And while Sir Montie and Tommy and I stood in the Triangle we heard the tinkle of a bicycle bell out in the road. As we turned we saw a machine shoot in at the gateway, and it came straight across to where we were standing.

"Hallo! Who's that?" shouted Watson.

"Just the fellows that I wanted!" replied a breathless voice.

"Pitt!" I yelled, dashing forward.

"Begad! Just as we were bemoanin' your fate, old boy!" exclaimed Tregellis-West. "Where's Mason? Haven't you brought him with you?"

Pitt stood before us, perspiring freely, splashed with mud from head to foot. It

was easy to see that he has been riding furiously.

"Poor old Jack is in the wars!" he said tensely. "Where's Mr. Lee? There's not a minute to waste, you chaps. Grell's got Mason, and there's no telling what he's going to do with him. We've got to dash to the rescue!"

"Come on!" I exclaimed. "Good for you, Pitt! I'm blessed if you're not better than all the lot of us put together!"

We were just making for the Ancient House, when I paused.

"Whose bike is that?" I asked keenly.

"I don't know; Christine's, I think," replied Pitt, grinning. "I found it outside a shop in Bellton, and borrowed it—without asking permission."

"So that explains it," I said. "Christine's nearly raving; he'll have your blood later on. But I reckon the emergency was an acute one, and he might forgive you, after you've explained."

There was no time to give Christine the tip that his machine was safe and sound, for Pitt was wildly anxious to see Nelson Lee.

Tregellis-West and Watson were rather doubtful as to whether they should come too, but I told them to chance it. It seemed as though some quick action would be necessary, and we all wanted to be in the excitement.

The return of Pitt meant an enormous lot, for he obviously knew exactly what had happened; his very attitude told that. Besides, he had been riding hard, and I gathered that he had been following the scoundrels and had located their destination.

When we arrived at Nelson Lee's study we found the guv'nor still busy at the telephone. Sir Crawford was pacing up and down restlessly, his hands clasped together, his eyes gleaming with anxiety.

He turned quickly as we entered.

"Ah, boys—" he broke off. "Why, what is this? My dear lads! Have you—have you brought news of Jack—"

"Yes, sir," said Pitt promptly.

"Thank heaven for that!" said Sir Crawford fervently. "Did you hear, Lee? Pitt has returned with news—with news!"

Nelson Lee hung up the receiver and turned in his chair.

"You are very welcome, Pitt," he said, eyeing the junior with favour. "I can see that you have been riding rather hard. No doubt you can tell us what happened in the lane, and where Mason is at the present moment?"

Reginald Pitt leaned against the table rather shakily.

"Sit down, my boy—sit down!" said the guv'nor quickly.

"I've been riding rather hard, sir, as you said, and it's taken it out of me a bit," said the junior. "Besides, I had a punch on the head which made me see stars, and that ride hasn't improved matters. Mason's at Caistowe, sir—"

"We must go at once—at once!" interrupted Sir Crawford.

"I really think it would be better to hear

Pitt's story from the beginning, Mr. Strong," said Nelson Lee, calling the old gentleman by his assumed name now that they were in the presence of the juniors. "It will make things so much clearer, and time will be saved in the long run. Now, Pitt."

"Mason and I had been down to the village, sir, to get some supplies for tea," began Pitt. "We were on our way back, when Grell and Starkey came rushing down the road, and they charged into us. I was bowled over, but I pretended to be unconscious, because I knew that I should be smashed up if I resisted. So I lay there, thinking that I should be of more use conscious than unconscious."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"A very sensible conclusion, Pitt," he said. "Well?"

"It's not necessary to give Pitt's full story, because I've already related it. He described how he had tracked Grell and Starkey into the wood; how he had followed to Caistowe; and how he had seen Jack Mason taken on board the steamer."

When he arrived at the conclusion of his narrative Sir Crawford's agitation was greater than ever. He jumped up, his eyes blazing, his fists clenched.

"The scoundrels!" he exclaimed angrily. "The impudent scoundrels! To place that boy upon a steamer, with the intention, no doubt, of sending him off to China, or some such place!"

"I think not, my dear sir," interrupted Nelson Lee. "To my knowledge, the only steamships which call at Caistowe are small coasting vessels. Probably the intention of Mr. Grell was to take Mason up to London, and this method presents the fewest difficulties. I think I can fathom his motive."

"But we must rescue the lad—we must go to him at once!" exclaimed Sir Crawford quickly. "Good gracious me! There must not be a moment's loss of time. That wretched steamer must be delayed; it might even now be putting out to sea."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"We must certainly act promptly," he agreed. "Pitt, my boy, I congratulate you heartily upon your achievement. You have shown wonderful ingenuity and persistence, and I am quite sure that you have earned the gratitude of Mr. Strong. You have certainly earned mine. Your behaviour has been splendid."

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Pitt, flushing with pleasure. "I—I was only thinking of Jack. He's a friend of mine, and—and I'm anxious."

"Of course you are, my lad—we are all anxious," said Sir Crawford, grasping Pitt's hand warmly. "I am sure I don't know what we should have done had you not acted in this brave and ingenious manner. By your strenuous efforts we now know exactly where poor Jack is located, and we can go straight to the spot and rescue him. I must thank you later on, my boy, for I am too agitated now to choose adequate words."

"Pitt, you're a brick!" I said quietly, slapping his shoulder, and looking straight

into his eyes. "You and I haven't been very friendly until recently, but I hope we shall be the best of pals in future. You've done wonders, and we're all proud of you."

"Begad! Rather, old boy!"

"Oh, pile it on!" grinned Pitt calmly. "I've done nothing to make a song about. Can't a chap help his own chum?"

"That's just it!" I said. "You've hit the nail on the head, Pitt. Mason's your chum, and you've proved your friendship. That's why I'm so jolly pleased. I always knew that you'd turn out to be one of the best."

"Thanks, Nipper," said Pitt quietly.

There was real gratitude in his voice, and I knew why. For some time past he had been anxious to gain the true friendship and esteem of the decent fellows in the Remove. And now he knew well enough that Study C, at all events, would always make him welcome.

Nelson Lee was making active preparations. All his inquiries were now cast aside, and the instructions he had sent broadcast were unnecessary. Pitt had supplied all the information he wanted, and the only thing was to act upon it without a moment's delay.

The gov'nor's plan was quite simple—indeed, it could be nothing else. He would ride to Caistowe without a moment's delay and detain the ship; if, indeed, it was necessary to detain it. The vessel might not be sailing until the morning.

Sir Crawford suggested ringing up the police at Caistowe, but Nelson Lee pointed out that that would be quite useless. Pitt's evidence, although valuable, was not sufficiently strong for the country police. There was no proof that Mason was on board the ship; and, indeed, it would be necessary to obtain a warrant before the authorities could search the vessel. They couldn't walk aboard without any warrant.

If possible, Lee wanted to effect Mason's rescue unofficially. He knew well enough that the police would be useless at this juncture; there would be so many delays owing to red tape that the game would be more trouble than it was worth.

So the gov'nor hurried out and fetched his powerful touring-car out of the school garage; he always kept it ready for instant departure. It was roomy, and accommodated the lot of us—that is, Nelson Lee, Sir Crawford, Pitt, Tregellis-West, Watson, and myself. Sir Montie and Tommy really had no excuse for accompanying us, but as Nelson Lee didn't order them out of the car when they entered they naturally stopped there. It wasn't likely that they'd allow this adventure to come to a close without their presence—if they could help it.

The loss of the locket was of secondary importance just now. The main thing was to recover Jack Mason—and, if possible, to get hold of Simon Grell and Jake Starkey. They would certainly have no mercy this time.

Pitt and my chums were rather at a loss to account for "Mr. Strong's" terrible anxiety concerning Mason. They had always looked upon the old gentleman as a mere friend. But he was now acting as though

Mason were his own son, and it was certainly rather mysterious.

I, of course, was in the same boat at the time. But I afterwards learned the truth, as I have set down. Sir Crawford believed that Mason actually was his own son, and he was naturally wild with worry now.

We drove to Caistowe like the wind. It was absolutely a race, and we covered the ground at terrific speed. But even this was not fast enough for Sir Crawford; he was certainly not nervous.

At last we arrived in Caistowe, and Nelson Lee swung the car round on to the quay and pulled it to a halt. Pitt was standing up in his seat, gazing out into the channel of the River Stowe.

"The steamer's gone, sir!" he exclaimed huskily.

"Gone!"

"It's not there now, sir——"

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Sir Crawford, his voice quivering. "But you must be mistaken, Pitt. There has not been sufficient time——"

"I think the lad is correct," put in Nelson Lee. "If you will look, my dear sir, you will see the lights of the vessel out in the bay. She can only have raised her anchor a short time ago."

We all gazed out, and then faintly saw the steamer's lights in the haze. For a mist was drifting in over the bay, obscuring the headlands and enshrouding the fishing craft which were anchored close by.

"This is a disaster—a sheer disaster!" exclaimed Sir Crawford huskily. "Poor boy! To think that he is on that vessel and we can do nothing to aid him. But we must, Mr. Lee—we must!"

"You can be assured, Mr. Strong, that Jack will come to no real harm," said Nelson Lee soothingly. "Pray do not allow your fears to get the better of your judgment. I urge you to remain calm."

"But can't we do anything, sir?" asked Pitt. "Oh, this is rotten! I thought we should be able to rescue him! There must be some motor-boats in the town, and we could easily overtake that old tramp."

"No doubt, Pitt," said Nelson Lee; "but such a step is impracticable."

"Why is it, sir?" I asked quickly.

"Because, for one reason, the captain of the vessel would almost certainly refuse to allow us on board," replied Nelson Lee. "We may take it that the man is a rascal, and it is most probable that Grell is on board, too. When at sea a captain is the absolute master of his craft, and this man would certainly resist any attempt to board the ship. To go in chase would be a mere waste of time."

I realised that the gov'nor was right. It sounded easy enough—hire a motor-boat and chase a ship; but it was an impossible task. We might catch up with the ship; but that

was no guarantee that we should get on board. We couldn't fire revolvers, and act like people in a cinema play.

"Then what is to be done?" asked Sir Crawford Grey, pacing up and down beside the car. "What is to be done, Mr. Lee?"

"Our first plan must be to make inquiries here," replied the gov'nor.

And this plan was carried out. It wasn't long before we learned that the steamer was called the Foreland, and that her port of destination was London. She would drop anchor in the Thames, and was due to arrive on the following evening. A most important point was that she had no intermediate call.

Our next inquiry was at the station, and here we learned that Grell and Starkey had taken the train to London. The clerk remembered them perfectly, and this disposed of the idea that the rascals were on board the Foreland.

We collected outside the station, an anxious group, for it seemed to most of us that we had failed miserably, and that there was no telling when we should see poor Jack Mason again.

But Nelson Lee was calmly confident.

"Let me say at once that the position is entirely satisfactory," he exclaimed. "There is no cause for alarm whatever——"

"Satisfactory!" echoed "Mr. Strong," clenching his fists agitatedly. "No cause for alarm! Why, bless my soul, I cannot understand you, Mr. Lee. There is every cause for alarm, and the position is serious."

"That's what I think, sir," said Pitt.

"Then I must alter that point of view," said Nelson Lee easily. "To begin with, the Foreland will not touch land until it arrives in the Thames to-morrow evening. That gives us plenty of time to make our preparations. The school breaks up to-morrow for the Christmas holidays, and we can get to London in good time, and be on hand to board the vessel as soon as she drops anchor. Jack Mason will come to no harm meanwhile, although he may spend a rather uncomfortable twenty-four hours. Viewed calmly, the position is really excellent. By careful planning we can rescue Mason, recover the locket, and have Grell arrested. After that our other inquiry will go forward apace."

Sir Crawford knew exactly what Nelson Lee meant, and he was greatly relieved in mind. He lost his agitation, and actually smiled.

"I trust to you, Mr. Lee," he said simply.

"Thank you," said the great detective.

"I hope that I shall prove worthy of that trust, Mr. Strong. At all events, I shall do my very utmost to bring this affair to a satisfactory conclusion to-morrow evening. For the present we must restrain our impatience and return to St. Frank's."

And that's what we did, hoping for the best.

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.**DAME HODD** 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 **COOPER** are two bullies who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Club," 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 Hodd fishing in a pond, 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 David 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 David suspects Myers. Challis plays a splendid innings for the Sixteen against the Eleven, and becomes quite popular. Challis also takes up running, and one afternoon puts up a good show against Grainger. Digby, once a friend of Myers, meets an ill-dressed loafer on the ground and tells him to clear out.

(Now read on.)

DIGBY and the lout stood glaring into each other's eyes, but Digby was not to be cowed. The lout, seeing this, burst into a laugh and puffed at his cigarette.

"Easy with your lip," he jeered. "I've come to have a talk with one of your mates. What's the name of that chap standing over there?"

He pointed across the ground, and Digby, starting, turned.

To his surprise it was at Myers the lout pointed. Myers!

The schoolboy's face darkened. What could there be between such a cad as this and Myers? He stood silent, hesitating.

Just then Myers turned and looked towards them. There was nothing in his manner to show that he recognized the cad. Indeed, he began to stroll towards them, and as he drew nearer an amused and malicious smile stretched his lips.

"Introduce me to your friend, Digby," he enquired. "Or is he your brother? Can't say I congratulate the gentleman upon his clothes. Are you going to take him into tea? Perhaps you'll introduce him to the Head? I've no doubt he'd like to meet him."

Digby looked hard at Myers, then turned to the stranger.

The latter was smoking stolidly, standing with his hands in his pockets and his feet set wide apart. An ever-broadening grin stretched his ugly, grimy face as he looked keenly at Myers.

Digby did not know whatever to make of it. Was there anything between these two? Surely not, since Myers did not betray the slightest sign of recognition.

"Come, speak up, Digby," Myers went on, raising his voice, for he saw Grainger watching them from the pavilion, with Ponsonby by his side, while the juniors were gathered in a group and staring at the three in blank amazement. "Do introduce your friend?"

"Myers," returned Digby, speaking coldly. "I don't know who he is. I ordered him to leave the school grounds, but he wouldn't go, and he asked me who you were. Perhaps he wants to have a talk with you." Myers started, reddened, and drew back.

His surprise was genuine enough. He was evidently unprepared for this. What did it all mean?

"I don't know the cad. I don't wish to know him," said he. "And if you intend this for a joke, I don't see the humour of it."

He riveted his eyes on the cad's face, and something he saw in the evil, glinting eyes sent a cold shiver through him. There was menace in the fellow's glance.

"Fine grounds you've got here," said the cad. "And a tip-top, proper sort of school it is. I never had the luck to get into a place like this. Perhaps if I had, I'd be different. Anyway, I don't see why you blokes should go chucking cheek about at me. I came here to have a look round, and I hoped that perhaps I might see you."

Had a bombshell fallen at Myers's feet he could not have been more startled than he was.

"See me—Look here——" he blurted out. "I don't know you, and if you don't hook it quickly I'll have you chucked out."

"Perhaps you will and perhaps you won't. I'd like to 'ave a little private chat with you, Mr. Myers. If your chum here will excuse us a moment."

By George, the fellow was in earnest! Digby turned aside in disgust.

"Oh, don't let me interfere in any private conversation between you," he cried. "Only

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

I warn you, fellow, if one of the masters sees you there'll be trouble."

He strode away, and Myers would have followed him. But the lout stepped in front of him, barring the way.

"I've been wanting to know what your name is, mister," he said. "I've hung about the lanes and down by the Magpie Inn many an afternoon, 'oping as how you'd turn up, and as you didn't I came here to look for yer."

"To look for me," cried Myers, looking afraid. "What do you mean?"

BLACKMAIL!

THE cad stepped up to him.

"Well, one afternoon," he said, speaking in a tense whisper, "I lay down for a snooze on the river bank. It was very hot, and everything was quiet and peaceful like. Two chaps from the school—the big boy who's just been running, and a little chap who stood looking on—came along in a punt and, hitching up, began to fish."

Every vestige of colour faded from Myers's cheeks. He looked from left to right as if he were seeking for a way of escape. A glance at the pavilion showed him Grainger, Ponsonby, and Challis standing there, the latter watching with an indifference which the others did not even pretend to simulate.

"Well, what about it," he muttered, licking his lips. "There was nothing unusual in that? Two boys can fish if they want to, I suppose?"

"Of course they can. Why not? I got interested like, for the big fellow seemed to know all about it. He hooked a beauty, and would have landed it, too, if an accident hadn't happened."

A hoarse cry burst from Myers's throat and his lips trembled violently.

"An accident," he murmured, passing his hand across his forehead, while everything seemed to suddenly spin round and round. "Ah, yes, I think I heard something about it! Challis and young Basil Hood got adrift—"

The lout looked swiftly round to him to see if there were any listeners near, and having assured himself that they could not be overheard, went on.

"Yea, they got adrift," he said. "The punt floated away, and if it hadn't been for the big fellow they'd both have gone over the weir. I suppose you know what would have happened to them if they had? They'd have been drowned—drowned. They wouldn't have stood a ghost of a chance in the tumbling waters, with every sluice roaring open, mister."

"Nonsense," gurgled Myers thickly. "They'd never have gone near the weir. Challis got out of it easy enough—"

The lout brought his hideous leering face nearer.

"Got out of it 'cos he'd grit and pluck, and even then it was touch and go with the kid," said he.

"Why do you tell me all this? I don't want to know anything about it. I won't listen, do you hear?"

"But you must, Mr. Myers. I saw it all. That punt didn't get loose by accident. Shall I tell yer what I saw? I saw a school-boy belonging to this 'ere school hiding among the willows, saw him draw nearer and nearer to the tree round which the rope was tied, and I grew curious. I saw him undo the knot, and cast the rope loose. Then the punt swung round, and——"

"It's a lie, I tell you. A lie. I——"

The cad chuckled.

"Better talk quiet like," said he, "unless you want the others to hear. They're curious about you and me. Don't wonder. I'm not your class, you see. Shall I tell you who it was sent that punt drifting down the Ayle?"

"No! No! No!" he whined. "Tell me what you want, and go."

Myers's face was ghastly now.

His tormentor laughed, and rolled a fresh cigarette.

"You want to know what I want?" he asked. "Well, what do I want? I'm poor, you see. Haven't got any reg'lar work. Never did any reg'lar work. Don't like work. But I know all about that accident, Mr. Myers, and if you don't pay up, I'll put some of 'em here at Littleminster school wise. There's Mr. Challis, for instance. I dare say he'd like to know all about that little affair."

Myers looked around him like a hunted animal. He saw that Grainger and Ponsonby had now been joined by Vernon, that Digby, further away, was watching him.

He swung round.

"I can't talk to you here," he said desperately. "Let's walk towards the school gates. I'll do anything you ask. If you want money you shall have it. But for pity's sake don't let them see me on the rack."

His companion chuckled.

"Now you're talking sense," said he, as he turned and walked along by Myers's side. "Thought you'd be reasonable when I explained. Now, a quid to go on with wouldn't be amiss, and later on you can make it a bit more."

The wretched Myers quickened his pace, as if he hoped by that means to shake himself free of his enemy. He closed his eyes every now and again, hoping when he reopened them to find that it was all an ugly dream, and that the lout by his side was a phantom conjured up by his distraught imagination. But no, the fellow was still there, smoking his stinking cigarette.

At the school gates they paused.

"Go outside, go outside," pleaded Myers, and his companion obeyed.

Some schoolboys came thronging up, and

(Continued overleaf.)

as they caught sight of Myers and his shady companion they stopped and stared.

Myers passed them without a word and walked off down the broad road.

As soon as they were alone he pulled what little money he had—some silver coins and a few coppers—out of his pocket and handed them to the blackmailer.

"Hallo!" said the rascal. "This ain't enough for me. You've got to make it a quid, mister."

"I'll make it anything you like," said the desperate boy. "But you must give me time. It's all I have now. Take it and go. Tell me where I can find you. I'll keep any appointment you care to make, only I can't stand any more now."

"Oh, all right," said the youth, pocketing the coin. "Only mind, I'm not to be bluffed. I mean business. My name's Joe Sharp. I live in Marsh Lane, at the other side of the bridge down by the allotments, last house on the right. My dad's Joe Sharp, the gardener. Everybody knows 'im. I'll write."

Myers winced.

"And if I write you've got to answer quick and meet me wherever I appoint. If you fail, the Head-Master shall know. Remember drowning's murder, and you sent that punt adrift."

"All right," answered Myers, turning about and reeling away. "Write, and I'll come."

So saying, he walked unsteadily back to

the school gates and passed them with his head in a whirl, while the blackmailer, with a chuckle, swung onwards, smoking his cigarette.

"I've fixed him. And I'll make him squirm," he muttered.

As for Myers, feeling more dead than alive, he blundered up to his study and opened the door. Why hadn't he defied the cad? Why hadn't he bluffed it out? He knew that by giving way he'd compromised himself with the cad for good and all. He was in the toils, and he had made no attempt to break them.

Truly—truly his sin had found him out.

As he made to close the door, swift footsteps echoed along the passage and a boy thrust his head in.

It was Raymond, Basil's pal.

"Myers, who's your chum?" he cried.

"Why didn't you ask him in?"

Myers, with an oath, aimed a blow at the head, which swiftly vanished.

Then closing and locking the door, he threw himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Why had he sent that punt adrift? And by what strange freak of ill-fortune had that brute, Joe Sharp, come to be there, on that deserted river bank, to see?

He felt that the fates had served him a foul trick indeed.

(To be continued.)

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