

No. 196.—ENTHRALLING SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE YARN!

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Thwack! thwack! went the cane till Kenmore howled for mercy!

THE COLLEGE HOUSE MARTYRS

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and PIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Soldier Housemaster," "The Colonel's Secret," "The Mysterious X," etc., etc. *March 8th, 1919.*

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A THIRD-FORM PLOT.

"THE rotter!"

"The cad!"

"The bully!"

Those three exclamations, uttered simultaneously with fierce indignation, came from Owen minor, Heath, and Conroy minimus, of the Third Form at St. Frank's. They were standing in the lobby of the Ancient House, and glared out into the gloom of the Triangle.

A burly form was dimly visible, marching over towards the College House, and it was the form of Walter Starke, of the Sixth. It was he who had been referred to so disparagingly by the angry fags.

Not that their expressions were without justification. Starke, of the Sixth, was certainly a bully, he was without doubt a cad, and everybody in the Ancient House knew that he was several sorts of a rotter.

"It's about time we had a bit of our own back!" said Owen minor darkly. "Kenmore's just as bad; he caught me a frightful cuff this morning, and only because I happened to bump the wheel of my bicycle against his trousers."

"The mean beast!" said Chubby Heath, with feeling.

"How was I to know that Kenmore was there?" went on Owen minor. "I was trying one of those tricks, you know—riding the jigger backwards—and I'm not supposed to see out of the back of my head!"

"It was rather muddy this morning, you know," remarked Conroy.

"Kenmore jolly well deserved to have his trousers messed up," growled Owen minor. "My hat! You ought to have seen them! Mud from top to bottom! And then the cad goes and cuffs me for it!"

"Awful!" agreed his chums indignantly.

"Things are getting serious," went on Owen minor. "Starke and Kenmore leave the Remove alone as a rule—it's the Third which has to suffer. Do you call that fair play?"

"No!"

"Oughtn't the Remove to be bullied as well?"

"Yes!"

"You silly asses!" snorted Owen minor. "There oughtn't to be any bullying at all!"

"But you just said——"

"Blow what I just said," snapped Owen. "The Remove wouldn't stand much bullying if Starke and Kenmore tried it on, and I don't see why we should. Things have reached a crisis. Didn't you see the way Starke pulled your ear just now, Heath?"

"I felt it, the cad!" growled Heath, tenderly fingering his ear. "How the dickens could I see it, you potty idiot? And all I did was to kick a football down the passage! He shouldn't have turned the corner so quickly. It was his own silly fault that the ball hit him in the face!"

"Of course it was!" declared Owen minor. "But there's no arguing with a prefect—especially a bully like Starke! We've got to rise up in our might and strike a blow for liberty and freedom!"

"Hear, hear!" said Conroy. "Down with bullying!"

"Down with prefects!"

"Down with all authority!"

"Hurrah!"

"Hallo! What's this—a Bolshevik meeting?" inquired Owen major, of the Remove, appearing at that moment. "What the dickens do you kids think you're doing? This is rank revolution!"

"Oh, rats!" said his younger brother disrespectfully.

"You'd better go easy, my son!" said Owen major, regarding his minor with a fatherly gaze. "I shall have to teach you a few—— Yaroooh!"

The Remove sat down abruptly on the mat, having been bowled over by a sudden charge. Owen minor had no respect for his elders—particularly his own brother—and Heath and Conroy backed him up loyally.

Then, having relieved their feelings to some extent, the heroes of the Third marched off down the passage to the Third-Form room.

The sags were not provided with studies, and so the Form-room was much frequented.

"Oh, rats!" grunted Owen minor, as he opened the door. "We can't jaw in here—the din's too terrific. I've got an idea—and I want to tell you kids about it. We're going to make Starke and Kenmore sit up."

Owen minor was rather mysterious, and his chums were somewhat puzzled as they followed him along the passage again, up the stairs, and into one of the junior box-rooms. Here they stood in complete darkness, after the door had been closed.

"What's the idea of this, you ass?" hissed Conroy, out of the gloom.

"Can't you wait a bit?" growled Owen. "I've got a stump of candle in my pocket somewhere—yes, here it is, stuck to that chunk of toffee you gave me, Chubby. I expect it'll light all right. You can have that toffee back if you want it."

Heath declined this generous offer, and then some few minutes were spent while Owen minor struggled valiantly with a patent lighter. The spark came all right, but nothing would light. It was then discovered that the wick had dropped into the socket. This having been successfully fished up, the thing worked.

The candle end—resembling a piece of coal in colour—was then lit. Heath and Conroy were somewhat impatient by this time, and they had no scruples about saying so.

"Oh, don't growl!" said Owen minor. "I've got a spanking idea, and you've got to back me up. Starke's gone over to the College House, and Kenmore's there, too. Their study's empty—deserted. The coast is absolutely clear."

Heath snorted.

"If you think we're going to wreck Starke's study, you're mistaken!" he said. "There'd be a frightful row, and we should get flogged, and—"

"I'm not going to borrow a mouldy old idea like that," interrupted Owen minor. "Mine's something new—something which hasn't been done before. I happen to know that the fire in Starke's study is laid, but not alight. The rotters will light it when they come in."

"Well, suppose they do?"

Owen minor grinned.

"Do you remember those cannon crackers we let off a month or two ago—those things which sounded like big guns?" he asked. "Well, why shouldn't we shove a few in Starke's fireplace—all hidden up in the wood and paper? Just think of the terrific fright the rotters will get!"

"You—you ass!" growled Heath. "Where do you think we're going to get any of those crackers now?"

"Jones has got a dozen in his box—wants to take 'em home, the ass!" replied Owen. "We can easily use half of 'em—and tell Jones about it afterwards. We'll pay for 'em, so he can't say anything."

"My hat!" breathed Conroy. "It's absolutely ripping!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Starke and Kenmore will jump yards when they light that fire!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And they'll never be able to find who did it, either," went on Owen minor. "It might be us, or the Remove—or anybody. The beasts will never be able to drop on us for it."

And Owen minor and Co., having completed the details of their nefarious plot, proceeded to rifle Dicky Jones's box. This was close at hand—for Owen had had his scheme in mind before coming upstairs. The crackers were found, and six of them annexed.

Then, creeping downstairs, the three young rascals made their way to the Sixth-Form passage. This in itself was a hazardous undertaking, for it wouldn't do for them to be seen anywhere in the vicinity.

In fact, before the Sixth-Form passage was reached Owen minor called a halt, and the sags held a hurried consultation.

"We can't do it this way," whispered Owen minor. "If we're not spotted going in we shall be spotted coming out. I vote we buzz outside into the Triangle and try the window. If it's locked we'll think of something else."

"Good idea!" murmured his chums.

Luck favoured them, for the window proved to be unfastened. All was dark within the study, and the three plotters raised the sash and crept into the room. But here again Owen's leadership was required.

"We can't all three do it," he hissed. "You buzz outside again, Chubby, and keep your eye on the College House. If you see those rotters coming across, give us the warning. See?"

"Oh, all right," said Heath readily.

As a matter of fact, he wasn't at all sorry to be given that task—it was much safer than being in the Sixth-Formers' study. And while he was on guard his chums very thoughtfully remade the fire for Starke and Kenmore.

By the time they had finished there was no alteration in appearance. But a match applied to that fire would certainly result in some startling developments. And the plot had been carried through successfully.

Five minutes later Owen minor and Co. were chatting carelessly in the lobby, apparently as innocent as three babes. They were really on the watch—waiting for the fun to commence.

"My only aunt!" whispered Heath suddenly. "We were only just in time!"

For at that moment Starke and Kenmore mounted the Ancient House steps and passed through the lobby without even glancing at the sags. They entered the Sixth-Form passage, and were just in time to see a small figure leaving the doorway of their study.

"What have you been doing in there, kid?" demanded Kenmore sharply.

The figure was that of Lemon, of the Third.

"I—I wasn't in there at all, please, Kenmore," he said nervously. "I'd only just opened the door when you turned the corner. I thought Starke was inside."

"Well, Starke wasn't," said Starke.

"What do you want me for?"

"I was only going to ask you about that top you took away from me this morning."

said Lemon. "It's a patent one, you know, and spins for hours. It cost an awful lot, and it was given to me by my pater——"

"Clear off!" interrupted Starke roughly. "I took the thing away because you were spinning it in the passage—and you won't get it again till the end of the week. Understand? Get back to your own quarters!"

Lemon gulped hard, and went. It was certainly hard lines on him, for he hadn't been testing that top for more than five minutes before Starke had taken it away from him. Lemon's feelings as he went down the passage were too deep for words. The poor little boulder was almost on the point of crying.

"It's a jolly good top," grinned Starke, as he entered the study and switched on the light. "One of those gyroscope things, you know. I took it away from the little ass because I wanted to try it myself. Put a match to the fire."

Kenmore obliged, and while he was doing so Starke went out—with the intention of fetching in a couple of other seniors to join in a little game of cards. For these Sixth-Formers, although prefects, had no particular scruples about smoking or gambling.

Almost as soon as Starke had gone Rees dropped in. Rees was a Sixth-Former, but not one of Starke's set. He was a quiet, studious fellow, wore glasses, and was slightly nervous.

"I wanted to borrow one of your——" he began.

Sizzzzzz!

"What on earth is that?" asked Rees, looking round.

"Sounds like something in the fire," said Kenmore curiously. "It's queer, too. There's nothing but wood and coals burning."

The curious sound, however, had been caused by one of the crackers—which went off gradually, instead of suddenly. The sound ceased, and Rees turned once more to Kenmore and began again.

"I wanted to borrow——"

BANG!

"Great Scott!" yelled Kenmore, as a portion of the fire flew out into the room. The crash was terrific, and both Rees and Kenmore jumped about four feet. And before they could catch their breath there were two more explosions in quick succession.

BANG! Sizz! BANG!

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Rees, dropping his glasses.

"It—it must be the coal," shouted Kenmore in alarm. "Pick up those bits of coal, you duffer! The carpet will be burnt——"

BANG! BANG!

"Good heavens!" roared Kenmore.

By this time the passage had become filled with other seniors, and the doorway of Starke's study was already crowded. The mysterious explosions had caused no actual damage, although the fire had been practically blown out into the fender, with a few lumps of warm coal and smouldering wood on the carpet.

"What's wrong in there?" asked half a dozen voices.

"I—I can't tell you!" panted Rees. "The—the fire seems to be exploding. Let me come out, please! There's no telling——"

"No need to get alarmed," interrupted Kenmore. "It's all over now, by the look of it; there's no fire left to explode. Why, what—— Well, I'm hanged!"

Kenmore dived forward suddenly and picked up something out of the fender. It was very ragged at one end and blackened. The other end appeared to be circular, and the whole thing was made of compressed paper or cardboard, with a red exterior.

"A cracker!" shouted Kenmore furiously. "A rotten Chinese cannon cracker!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who's been playing jokes on you, old man?"

"We thought the war had started again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Now that everybody knew the explanation of the alarming bangs there was much hilarity amongst the seniors. Kenmore didn't like it—he hated being laughed at. Moreover, there was a considerable litter to clear up in the study, and the fire would have to be remade completely.

"Who the deuce did it?" demanded Starke, looking round angrily.

"How the thunder do I know?" snapped Kenmore.

"You must have been an ass to light the fire with those crackers there," said Starke.

"You might have seen——"

"I didn't see anything!" snarled Kenmore savagely. "Do you think my eyes can bore through wood and paper? The rotten things were buried in the fire—amongst the paper and coals. I'll bet a quid those confounded juniors——"

Kenmore paused, and stood staring at Starke.

"Don't you know me yet?" asked Starke sarcastically.

"I was thinking," replied the other prefect. "By George! Don't you remember that Lemon, of the Third, was in this study when we came along the passage? He made some excuse about that top, but I'll bet a fiver he planted those crackers in the fire—as a sort of revenge."

Starke took a deep breath.

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "You've got it, old man. We'll half skin that little puppy——"

"No, we won't!" interrupted Kenmore. "I'll attend to him myself. You weren't here when the things went off, so it's my concern. The brat will deny it, of course—those fag lie like troopers; but I'll cane him till he can't stand!"

Kenmore strode to the door and looked out. A Removite was just in sight at the end of the passage.

"Hi, Hubbard!" shouted Kenmore. "Tell young Lemon, of the Third, that I want him. And be quick about it!"

"Tell him your giddy self!" retorted Hubbard defiantly.

The prefects had no authority to order Removite fellows about, and Hubbard was not one of the meek sort, who always knuckled

under. Kenmore ground his teeth, and mentally resolved that Hubbard should suffer on the morrow. He went in search of Lemon himself, and found the sag in the Third-Form passage.

"I want you!" said Kenmore grimly.

"Oh, have you got that top for me?" asked the Third-Former.

"Hang the top! Come with me!"

And Kenmore, to make sure, grasped the sag by the coat-collar and yanked him along the passage. Lemon was a decent little chap, and he generally sagged for Morrow, who treated him leniently and kindly. Kenmore had no right to give him orders; but the bullies of the Sixth of late had been getting rather arrogant.

Lemon was rather scared by the time he arrived at the Sixth-Former's study. He instinctively felt that trouble of some sort was in the air, and he tried to think of his various misdeeds during the past day or so.

"You cheeky little rotter!" said Starke, as the pair entered.

"Please, Starke, I don't know what you mean," faltered the Third-Former.

"I suppose you'd deny that you shoved a lot of crackers in this fire?" demanded Kenmore savagely. "Not that lies will do you any good; we saw you coming out of the study."

"But I didn't go in the study, Kenmore!" protested Lemon. "I'd only just opened the door when you came. I—I don't know anything about any crackers. I heard some bangs—"

"And you'll hear some swishes in a minute and feel them, too!" interrupted Kenmore roughly. "I'm going to tan you until you can't sit down for a week—understand? I'll teach you to play tricks like that!"

Lemon backed away.

"But I haven't done anything, Kenmore—really, I haven't!" he protested shrilly.

"If I reported you to the Housemaster, you'd get a flogging for the rest of the term!" said Kenmore. "But I'm not going to do that. I shall swish you myself. Hand over that cane, Starke!"

Starke obliged with alacrity, and the next moment Lemon was wriggling and gasping and yelping. Swish! Swish! Swish! Kenmore laid it on brutally, and didn't desist until he was aching, and until the Third-Former was too sore to yell any longer.

Lemon fell back when he was released, pale, and with his face screwed up with agony. The tears were flowing, too, for he had received drastic punishment—which was all the more painful because it was undeserved.

"Now you can cut off!" panted Kenmore. "And write three hundred lines, and bring them to me by tea-time to-morrow. It ought to be a lesson to you for as long as you live!"

Lemon scuttled off, and when he arrived at the Third-Form passage he was blubbing profusely. There was no appeal against this sort of thing; sneaking was impossible. For if Lemon informed any master of what had happened, his life would be made unbearable by Kenmore for weeks afterwards.

"What the dickens are you turning on the tap for?" asked Owen minor, running into Lemon round the bend of the passage. "You ain't usually a giddy cry-baby, Juicy! Who's been bullying you?"

"Ken-Kenmore!" faltered Lemon, with a gasp. "Oh, the brute—the awful cad! I—I'm sore all over! He lammed into me with a cane, and I bet I've got weals all over my back!"

"But what for?" asked Heath, who had come up with Conroy.

"I—I don't know!" blubbered Lemon. "They—they said that I'd put some crackers in the fire, and it wasn't me at all!"

The three other Third-Formers gazed at one another in dismay.

"Oh, my only giddy aunt!" muttered Owen minor. "Why the dickens didn't you tell us about it, Juicy? If we'd known, we wouldn't have let you take any punishment for that cracker affair—not that it's any good talking now."

"Do—do you know who did it, then?" asked Lemon.

"We did it, my son," replied Owen minor. "But why you should have been swished is more than I can imagine. But it's just like those bullies to whop a chap without any proof."

Lemon explained how he had looked into Starke's study at the moment when Starke and Kenmore were coming along the passage. There was really no evidence at all that Lemon was guilty. The prefects must have known that. But they had dropped upon him because there was nobody else to drop on.

The injustice of the punishment aroused Owen minor and Co. to a great pitch of wrath. But they could do nothing. Nothing, that is, except tell the other juniors and wax indignant together. Lemon received much sympathy. All sorts of presents were showered upon him, so that his agony would be lessened. And it must be admitted that Lemon's spirits were greatly improved. Judging from his face when the Third went up to bed it seemed almost likely that Lemon considered the unjust punishment worth while.

And the Third, meanwhile, boiled. But that's about all it could do.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS X AGAIN!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST raised his cap politely.

"Good-morning, sir," he said, with an engaging smile. "It's frightfully mild, ain't it?"

"Yes, Montie, it is very mild indeed," replied the gentleman who had just entered the porch of the Ancient House. "Good-morning, Nipper—good-morning, Watson. You're looking quite up to the mark, I see."

I grinned and nodded.

"Rather, sir?" I agreed. "But you're worried, Mr. Ridgeway! Anything wrong—if you don't mind my asking?"

"I don't mind in the least, Nipper," replied Mr. Howard Ridgeway. "But just now I am in a great hurry, and you'll have to excuse me. Shall I find Mr. Lee in his study?"

"Yes, I think he's there, sir."

"Thank you."

Mr. Ridgeway passed through the lobby, and we watched him until he disappeared. Then I looked at Sir Montie and Tommy and nodded.

"Something doing, my sons," I observed. "I don't know what it is, but it must be pretty serious."

"Rot!" said Watson. "How can you know that?"

"The deduction, my dear Watson, is singularly elementary," I grinned. "We know that Mr. Ridgeway is a cheerful gentleman, and that worries of a trivial nature sit lightly upon his shoulders. Yet he comes here with lines beneath his eyes, and there is ample evidence that he dressed hurriedly. He didn't shave this morning, and he can't have had his breakfast yet. Would he come here to see the gov'nor if the matter wasn't important?"

"Dear fellow, you do it wonderfully—you do, really," exclaimed Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez and eyeing me with great interest. "I didn't notice that Mr. Ridgeway had dressed hurriedly, an' that he hadn't shaved. But you seem to see these things at the first glance, begad! I suppose it's a matter of trainin'. I'm afraid I shall never be any good at detectin'. It's too frightfully exactin', you know. A chap has to have his wits about him all the time—an' sometimes I forget to bring mine out with me!"

"Well, I should like to know what the trouble's about, anyhow," I remarked.

And while we were wondering what was in the wind, Mr. Ridgeway made his way to Nelson Lee's study. Mr. Ridgeway, I may as well explain, was a novelist, and he resided at the old house known as The Mount, on the road to Bannington Moor. We all knew him well, and he was the right sort.

He tapped upon the door of Nelson Lee's study and entered.

"Why, hallo!" exclaimed the schoolmaster-detective. "This is an early call, Ridgeway—"

"Yes, I must apologise," said the visitor. "But I have rather a good excuse for intruding at such an awkward hour. You haven't had breakfast, have you?"

"No; but that doesn't matter," smiled Nelson Lee. "Sit down, and tell me what's troubling you. I can see that there's something wrong."

Mr. Ridgeway nodded.

"I didn't think my face betrayed me so much," he said. "Nipper asked me why I was looking worried. What keen people you are, to be sure! The truth is, I am rather upset—although it's not exactly serious. You remember that burglary affair last week—when Dr. Brett was almost arrested for taking some things out of Dr. Stafford's study?"

"My dear man, of course I remember it," replied Lee. "Inspector Jameson acted most

foolishly; but he had the courage to admit it, so it's hardly fair to criticise him. The affair is not settled even now, although the stolen goods were returned. I have not yet discovered the identity of the thief, who called himself 'The Mysterious X.'"

"Perhaps you'll have another opportunity of getting hold of the man," said Mr. Ridgeway grimly. "The impudent rascal took a fancy to my house last night, and took everything of value that he could lay his hands on—which, fortunately, didn't amount to much."

Nelson Lee whistled.

"So soon?" he remarked. "I thought it was merely an isolated case, but the fellow is evidently enterprising. Having given up his first haul, he has now replaced it. I'm sorry he chose you as his next victim, Ridgeway."

"You're not so sorry as I am," growled the novelist.

"Can you tell me any details?"

"Not many. The ruffian didn't succeed in getting hold of much; but that's because I'm a poor author," said Mr. Ridgeway drily. "I should think the value of the stolen articles is about seventy or eighty pounds—quite sufficient, I can assure you. I can't afford to have things stolen at that rate."

"But what is the nature of the robbery?"

"Oh, silver plate and a few ornaments, and two of my wife's rings, which she left downstairs by mistake," was the reply. "The infernal scamp only entered the drawing-room, luckily, and ransacked the cabinet and my wife's writing-table, and generally picked up the light articles of value."

"Have you informed the police?"

"Yes, I telephoned to Bannington; but I hope they won't send Jameson along," replied Mr. Ridgeway. "Still, I should like to see the fellow captured—I want to get the things back, if I can."

"Naturally," agreed Nelson Lee. "It's only right that you should, even if their value only amounted to a few shillings. No man likes to have his house plundered. But how do you know that this theft was committed by the man who broke into the Headmaster's study?"

"Didn't I tell you? He left his card behind," said the other. "The confounded check of it, you know! It reminds me of one of the yarns I wrote years ago. Yes, a card with 'The Mysterious X' printed in the middle of it. I've brought it along to show you."

He took the card from his pocket-book and handed it across the table to Nelson Lee. The latter took it, and examined it with interest.

"Exactly the same as the other one," he remarked, holding it up to the light. "I had just a faint suspicion that some local enthusiast might have imitated the unknown. But no! This card is a replica of the first. But we can compare them, if you like."

Nelson Lee took another card from the drawer of his desk, and the two were placed side by side. There was not the slightest doubt that this second robbery had been committed by the Mysterious X.

Who was the unknown marauder?

Nelson Lee, if I must confess the truth, was rather pleased. He was glad to have another opportunity of getting on the mysterious one's track. He was granting no favour by consenting to investigate.

"We'll go at once, Ridgeway," he said crisply.

"But your breakfast——"

"That can wait," interrupted Lee. "Or perhaps I might be able to steal a bite at your house, after I have had a preliminary look round. I should like, if possible, to get there before Jameson. The inspector will be more cautious this time, but he's not exactly brilliant."

"It's good of you, Lee—deucedly good of you," said Ridgeway gratefully.

They set off at once, and soon arrived at the Mount. Before going indoors, Nelson Lee carefully walked round the garden path until he arrived outside the drawing-room window. This was big and old-fashioned, and the burglar had gained entry by the simple expedient of smashing a pane of glass.

"H'm! That's rather a pity," remarked Nelson Lee.

"I should say it is," growled the other. "I shall have to get a glazier over from Bannington, and there'll be delay——"

"I didn't exactly mean that," smiled Lee. "A man who breaks into a house this way—the most straightforward way of all—leaves practically nothing for a poor detective to get hold of. You can't get a clue out of a mass of broken glass, can you? And this path is hard, and hasn't taken the slightest impression. No, I'm afraid we can't do anything out here."

They walked round to the front again, and mounted the steps.

"Didn't you hear anything during the night?" asked Lee.

"Not a sound," said the owner of the Mount. "It was windy, you remember, and the window of our bedroom rattles abominably. My wife was kept awake for some time, but she heard nothing unusual. And the servants sleep right on the other side of the house. Come in, old man."

They entered, and met Mrs. Ridgeway in the hall.

"It's so good of you to come, Mr. Lee," she exclaimed. "This must seem a very paltry affair to you, I'm sure. It's hardly worth troubling you about."

"On the contrary, Mrs. Ridgeway, I have frequently found that the small affairs prove the more interesting—from an investigator's point of view," replied Lee. "It doesn't matter whether a thousand pounds has been stolen or a bent penny. It's the case itself which claims interest. And this one has some very attractive points. This Mysterious X has issued something very much like a challenge."

"And you have accepted it?" said Mrs. Ridgeway. "How interesting, Mr. Lee. I'm quite sure that you will beat him—whichever he may be. Will you have time to join us at breakfast?"

"Of course he will," put in Mr. Ridgeway.

"But we shan't be ready just yet, Alice. Mr. Lee wants to have a look round before the police arrive."

They passed along the hall and entered the drawing-room. When Nelson Lee had reached the centre of the apartment he paused. The air was rather heavily scented, and Lee easily recognised the flower. It was narcissus. But such flowers were out of season, and it was obvious that Mrs. Ridgeway scented her drawing-room rather lavishly.

"Has anything been touched?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Well, I think my wife set one or two articles straight," admitted Mr. Ridgeway. "She was the first to discover anything wrong, and came rushing up to me, full of excitement. I was just stropping my razor; and I succeeded in nearly slicing the strop in half—the result of looking round in a hurry."

"That was better than slicing your hand," smiled the detective.

He walked round the room slowly, examining different objects with apparent carelessness, but actually with minute attention. While he was engaged in this task, and before he had properly commenced, the front gate sounded, and then a ring came at the bell.

"Jameson!" grunted Mr. Ridgeway, hurrying out.

And Inspector Jameson it was, accompanied by P.-c. Sparrow, the Bellton constable. The inspector was told of the burglary out in the hall, and he was considerably surprised. At length he entered the drawing-room, and found Nelson Lee lighting a cigarette.

"I half expected to find you here, Mr. Lee, although I wasn't told anything," said the inspector. "What do you think of it, eh? Another job done by that confounded X fellow. I hope he isn't starting a regular campaign in the district. If this goes on much longer I shall get into trouble."

"You'll have your work cut out to get hold of this fellow, Jameson," said Nelson Lee. "He's cautious. He only takes things that are handy—and doesn't smash open desks or cabinets. That's rather a pity!"

"Eh?" said Mr. Ridgeway.

"He might have left some finger-prints or other clues," explained Lee, with a smile. "As it is, the place is a perfect blank. There's nothing—it's a sheer waste of time to remain on the scene."

"I'm afraid you're right, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, scratching his head. "All I can do is to set our men on the watch throughout the county—particularly in this district. The thief must be somewhere, that's certain."

"Well, he's not Dr. Brett," said Mr. Ridgeway slyly.

The inspector coughed.

"No need to remind me of that, sir," he said ruefully. "Dr. Brett's in London just now, so I sha'n't suspect him. But you must admit that the circumstantial evidence in that other affair was rather serious. However, we needn't talk about it. I'll just have a look round, and then make my plans."

Jameson was left in the drawing-room with

the constable, and Nelson Lee accompanied his host to the dining-room and partook of breakfast. After that he took his departure, promising Mr. Ridgeway to pay a visit in the early afternoon. Lee wanted to have another look round then.

"I thought your curiosity would assert itself in this way, Nipper," remarked the guv'nor as he approached the gateway of St. Frank's some little time later. "Come into my study, if you want to hear what is afoot."

I had been waiting at the gates for over twenty minutes, and Sir Montie and Tommy had been with me nearly all the time. But they had been called away by Jack Grey and Pitt.

Following Nelson Lee to his study, I knew very well that the business which had taken him away was of interest to him. He looked pleased—and that meant a lot. Within five minutes I knew everything.

"I thought we'd seen the last of that chap, sir," I said slowly.

"We haven't seen the first of him yet, Nipper," the guv'nor reminded me. "It seems that the mysterious thief intends making a whole series of plundering raids in the district. And if he continues to act with his opening caution—well, I'm afraid we can't do much."

"I don't believe that, guv'nor," I replied. "It'll be a queer thing if you can't collar this merchant. You've tracked down murderers and international crooks and forgers—"

"And have sometimes been baffled by a mere trifle," Lee put in. "Quite so, Nipper. In a way, these affairs are trifles. But there is no telling what they may lead to. A criminal who begins in this fashion will become a dangerous fellow before long. I intend to clip his wings before he does become dangerous—if it can be managed."

"Oh, you'll manage it all right, sir," I said confidently.

CHAPTER III.

FOLLOWING A GOOD EXAMPLE.

MORNING lessons were over.

It was a Wednesday, and a half-holiday. And Bob Christine and Co., the leading lights of the College House Remove, were holding a solemn consultation. The occasion was evidently one of some importance.

The three chums of Study Q—Christine and Yorke and Talmadge—were supported by Clapson and Nation. And the five juniors were standing in a group against the wall of the gymnasium, talking earnestly.

"The kid told me everything about it this morning, just before lessons," Bob Christine was saying. "I happened to clap him on the back, and the way he yelled out surprised me. Of course, I asked him what was the matter—and then he told me about the frightful lamming that Kenmore gave him last night."

"Jolly hard lines on the kid, I'll agree," said Talmadge. "He didn't know anything about the crackers, did he?"

"Not a thing."

"Just like those bullying cads to jump on him without any proof," said Clapson indignantly. "Things are coming to a nice pass, I must say."

"That's what I'm trying to explain," went on Christine. "Lemon was treated rottenly—shamefully. Three other kids were responsible; although they would have owned up in a second if they'd known that Lemon was booked for a licking. But that's not the point. The point is that Kenmore acted like a blackguard and a bully. And it's time something was done."

"Rather!"

"We all agree with that, Christy."

"There's been too much bullying lately—more this term than ever before."

The College House juniors were unanimous on that point.

"But what's it got to do with us—this affair, I mean?" asked Yorke. "Lemon is a Fossil—and Starke and Kenmore are Ancient House seniors. We've got nothing to do with the Ancient House, and if we did anything we should be interfering."

Christine smiled knowingly.

"That's just it," he said. "Starke's nothing to us, and Kenmore's nothing to us. They haven't got an ounce of authority over College House juniors. They can't even give us lines for cheekin' 'em!"

"Then what's the idea of this jaw?" asked Yorke bluntly.

"Because we're in a position to do the Fossils a good turn. We're rivals, of course," said Christine. "As a rule we're at loggerheads in a friendly kind of way. But why not make a change? Why not do them a good turn? You'll agree that we're all united against bullying—Monks and Fossils alike?"

"Oh, rather!"

"Well, then, this is where we get busy," said Bob Christine.

He looked round in a mysterious kind of way, and drew his chums closer towards him.

"My idea is to follow the good example set by Brewster and his pals, of the River House School," he went on softly. "Do you remember that little affair last week? Starke acted like a cad in the village—knocked a kid down in the street—and Brewster and Co. rolled him in the mud."

"He deserved to be rolled all the way home from the village!" said Talmadge grimly. "It taught him a lesson, too. But where does the point come in?"

"Why did Brewster and Co. rag Starke?" asked Christine.

"You silly ass, you just told us why!" said Nation.

Christine grinned.

"That was only one reason," he replied. "Those River House chaps ragged the beast because they knew that they couldn't be punished. Get the idea? Starke's power didn't extend to them. They handled him just as they liked."

"Well, we all know that," said Talmadge.

"Nipper and Co. couldn't have rolled Starke in the mud without getting into frightful trouble. But we might have done it, because Starke isn't a College House prefect—"

"You've got it!" interjected Christine brilliantly.

"Got what?"

"The idea. Is there any reason why we shouldn't follow the good example of Brewster? Kenmore is the chap who bullied young Lemon—and Kenmore hasn't an ounce of authority over us," exclaimed Christine. "He deserves ragging as much as Starke deserved it the other day. What's wrong with the idea of us administering the well-deserved punishment?"

"By jingo!" said Yorke, taking a deep breath.

"So that's what you've been driving at," exclaimed Clapson. "Kenmore couldn't touch us. I'll agree, but it would be a risky thing to do."

"How would it?"

"Well, he might report the whole thing to Mr. Stockdale," replied Clapson. "Then we should get it in the neck properly."

Bob Christine sighed.

"My dear, thoughtless ass," he said. "Do you think Kenmore would dare to report us? What would be the result?"

"We should be flogged!" said Yorke grimly.

"Perhaps so; but I wasn't thinking of that," continued Christine. "In our defence we should tell old Stocky why we ragged Kenmore. That wouldn't be sneaking. If Kenmore reported us, we should have a right to tell the truth. Stocky would consult with Mr. Lee, Mr. Lee would make inquiries, and Kenmore would be in the cart. He'd be deprived of his prefectship, at least. So we needn't be afraid of the rotter reporting us. We've got him on toast."

"I'm blessed if you're not right," agreed Talmadge, with a grin. "In a way, it's a matter of duty. Nipper and his crowd can't touch Kenmore, but we can. Well, Christy, how do you propose to get to work?"

"I don't propose anything yet," replied Christine. "We shall have to think the thing over—"

"Kenmore's just come out," interrupted Yorke. "Why not go for him now?"

Christine sighed.

"You fathead!" he exclaimed. "Do you think we can rag him here—in the Triangle? We should be dropped on in two ticks. We'll wait until after dinner, and then seize an opportunity when it arrives. There's nothing on this afternoon, so we can take our time."

And the project, having been finally settled, the Monks dispersed until after dinner. They were actuated by a desire for justice. Bob Christine had heard all about it from Lemon, of the Third, and he had been filled with righteous indignation.

This was the net result of it—that Kenmore was booked for a severe ragging.

The avengers met with good luck, as it happened. For after dinner Nation happened to be near the bicycle-shed when Starke was

wheeling his machine out. Kenmore came up at that moment.

"I'll meet you down in the village, Starke," he said briskly. "I'll be down in about twenty minutes—so look out for me. We can go on to Bannington afterwards."

"All right," said Starke, mounting his machine.

Kenmore went indoors again, and Billy Nation, full of excitement, pelted away to the College House. He collected Talmadge and Clapson on the way, and Yorke and Christine were found in Study Q.

"Great pip!" exclaimed Christine, as the others burst in. "What's up?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Talmadge. "Nation's gone dotty, I believe."

"Now's our chance!" hissed Nation breathlessly. "I've just heard that Kenmore is going down to the village on his bike—starting in about a quarter of an hour. If we buck up we can prepare an ambush for him in the lane and collar him beautifully."

"Ripping!" exclaimed Christine. "But are you sure of this?"

"Of course I am—I heard Kenmore say so himself."

"Well, that's good enough, my sons," said Christine briskly. "We'll cut across the playing-fields straight away."

The five Monks lost no time. Kenmore was going out—to Bannington—and another opportunity probably wouldn't occur during the whole day. It was now or never.

And less than ten minutes later Christine and Co. were in their positions. From the lane not a sign of any human presence could be seen. But Christine and Yorke were crouching behind one hedge, and Talmadge and Clapson and Nation were behind the other.

They had not long to wait.

Before they had regained their breath Kenmore was sighted, coming down the lane at some speed. Not another soul was in sight, and this was all that could be desired. Christine, in command, gave the word.

"Now, then!" he yelled. "All at once!"

The five juniors sprang out, and threw themselves across the roadway in a chain. There was a slight danger of Kenmore charging into them; but the juniors risked that. Kenmore valued his own skin quite highly.

"Hi! Get out of the road!" roared the prefect.

Christine and Co. took no notice, and Kenmore jammed his brakes on and slowed down almost to a walking pace.

"What the deuce do you think you're doing, you cheeky young rotters?" he demanded roughly. "If you don't clear—Why, of all the— I'll smash you for this, Christine! Let go, confound you!"

But the juniors had no intention of letting go. They pulled Kenmore from his machine, and managed to throw him over on his back. The prefect was big and burly, but no match for the five juniors.

"Got the ropes?" panted Christine. "Tie his feet, for goodness' sake!"

"You—yon young demons!" gasped Kenmore, in alarm.

He was lashing about with his feet violently, and Talmadge and Yorke received two nasty kicks. But this only made their determination all the stronger, and Kenmore's feet were soon bound together at the ankles.

"Now his hands!" said Christine cheerfully.

"You confounded young cubs!" snarled Kenmore. "I'll—I'll—Ooooh!"

The prefect subsided with a smothered gasp as Talmadge jammed his cap over Kenmore's mouth. The whole incident was over within a minute.

"I say, buck up!" muttered Yorke. "I can see some fags in the distance."

Kenmore was hustled through the hedge into Bellton Wood. His bicycle was hauled through the gap after him, and deposited out of sight in a little hollow. Kenmore was carried—or, rather, dragged—further into the wood. The ground was damp beneath the trees, and Kenmore's clothing was by no means improved.

"You'll all get sacked for this!" gasped Kenmore furiously.

"Think so?" said Christine, grinning. "If we shall get sacked for this, we shall be executed for what we're going to do in a few minutes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you dare to——"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Yorke. "You ain't one of our prefects, Kenmore. You can't touch us——"

"I'll report you to Mr. Stockdale——"

"Will you?" asked Christine sweetly. "I don't think so, Kenny!"

Kenmore was propped against a tree, and the juniors stood round in a circle, regaining their breath. One or two of them were rather dubious about the ragging, but the affair had gone too far to stop now. They had to go through with it. And Kenmore certainly deserved a lesson.

He sat with his back to the tree, glowering with hatred and rage at his tormentors. Escape was impossible—he knew it. If he started struggling the juniors would drop on him at once. So Kenmore recommenced the threats.

"Look here, you little sweeps," he said, between his teeth. "If you don't let me go I'll lick you until you can't stand——"

"Why don't you try it on?" asked Yorke sarcastically.

"You—you infernal brats!"

"Thanks!"

"I'll half skin the lot of you!"

"Good!"

"I'll have you expelled!"

"Splendid!"

"I'll—I'll——" Kenmore nearly choked.

"If you don't let me go," he roared, "I'll report you to the Head, and you'll be flogged in public. —I'm not a College House prefect, but——"

"It's no good, you cad," interrupted Christine coldly. "You can threaten until you're blue in the face and purple in the neck, but we're not scared. You've been brought here for a special purpose."

"Look here," said Kenmore, with an effort.

"If you let me go now I'll say nothing more about it. I suppose it's only one of your idiotic japes, so I won't be hard. Cut these ropes, and don't be such young asses!"

Christine grinned.

"Soft words!" he remarked. "It's no good, prisoner at the bar. You've got to be tried and sentenced. My hat! That's a good idea!" went on Christine. "We'll put the rotter on trial. You can defend him, Yorke."

"Rats!" said Yorke. "I'm not going to defend the cad."

"Only a matter of form, you duffer!"

Christine gazed at the prisoner eternally.

"The charge against you," he went on, "is one of singular brutality. It has been stated in evidence—by an eye-witness—that you, without just cause or reason, caddishly flogged a young gentleman named Lemon, known in the Third Form as 'Juicy.' Do you deny the charge?"

Kenmore began to understand—and he glared with greater fury.

"What the thunder has it got to do with you?" he shouted thickly. "Lemon's an Ancient House kid——"

"We intend to see that justice is done," said Christine coldly.

"If Lemon told you that I hurt him, he's a young liar," declared Kenmore. "And you needn't talk any rot about an eye-witness. There was nobody else there, except Starke. It's all a faked yarn!"

"The eye-witness I referred to is Lemon himself—and he, surely, is most capable of stating the truth?" said Christine, with a magisterial air. "It is not Lemon who is the liar, Simon Kenmore. You have that doubtful honour. We all know that Lemon was whopped unmercifully—we've had proof of it——"

"Weil, suppose he was?" roared Kenmore. "Didn't the little beast put fireworks in my study grate? I only gave him what he deserved!"

"You punished him unjustly," replied Christine. "You punished him simply because there was nobody else handy. He was innocent—and you knew it. Other hands performed the jape—a most excellent idea, I may add. Lemon knew nothing about it, and yet he was bullied for it. In consequence of that act, prisoner at the bar, you are hereby sentenced——"

"Hold on!" said Talmadge. "What about the defence?"

"Go it, Yorke!"

"Oh, all right," said Yorke. "It's only fair that Kenmore should be defended, I suppose. I contend that the prisoner is innocent—absolutely innocent——"

"You silly ass!"

"I contend that he is innocent of all decency," went on Yorke. "Such a thing is not in his composition. Just consider his record. Is it possible to find one like it? I ask you, could this prisoner have performed such a caddish, bullying trick? His record as a prefect is one of continuous caddish actions and bullying behaviour. Under these circumstances, can he be found guilty of this present charge?"

"Yes!" said the court, with one voice.

"Then my defence fails?" asked Yorke regretfully.

"It does!"

"Good!" said Yorke.

"You—you silly young fools!" snarled Kenmore. "If you dare to lay a finger on me I'll go straight to Mr. Stockdale and report you. That'll mean a flogging all round—and you know it."

Bob Christine nodded.

"Perhaps it will; but we shall get over it, I dare say," he said calmly. "And don't be quite so threatening, you rotter—I mean, prisoner at the bar. If you make any report we shall defend ourselves. And our defence will include the telling of the whole story. Lemon will be fetched—and, if necessary, Lemon's back will be bared. It will then be seen that Lemon is half peeled!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is no laughing matter!" went on Christine sternly. "Don't forget, Kenmore, that young Lemon still bears the marks of your brutality. If Mr. Stockdale sees them, well—woe betide you! Your threats are idle, and the sentence of the court will now be promulgated!"

"It'll be what?" asked Talmadge, staring.

"That means performed," explained Christine.

"You ass!" said Yorke. "Promulgate means to publish——"

"Well, we shall publish the sentence all right," said Christine calmly. "I'll publish it right away, in fact. The prisoner is to be flogged with a cane as he flogged Lemon—a sort of eye-for-an-eye business. Bring forth the instrument of torture, Clapson!"

Clapson produced from the leg of his trousers a cane which had a most business-like aspect. He swished it through the air casually, and Kenmore went red with renewed fury and alarm.

"Don't—don't you touch me with that rotten thing!" he panted hoarsely.

Christine waved his hand.

"Turn the prisoner round so that his dorsal aspect is presented," he ordered.

Kenmore was grasped and yanked over roughly. His back view now being in the right position, Christine lost no time. This was no mere ragging—it was a question of justice.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

Down came the cane, again and again. Kenmore roared with pain and rage. He twisted and struggled in vain.

"Stop, you young rotter—— Yow!" he howled. "I'll—— Yarooooh!"

Swish! Swish!

"I don't like doing it," panted Christine, working vigorously, "but"—swish!—"it's a matter of"—swish!—"duty!"

The leader of the Monks was doing his duty well, and Kenmore received one of the best hidings which had ever befallen him. It was thoroughly deserved. Christine hardened his heart as he thought of the brutal manner in which Kenmore had treated the innocent Third-Former. Kenmore wasn't innocent, and

he therefore deserved a more severe punishment than ever.

At last it was over, and Christine threw the cane away.

"Now you can do your giddy worst," he said contemptuously. "You've been paid in your own coin, Kenmore, and there's nothing more to be said. If you like to report us, we don't mind answering for our fearful crimes."

And the avengers, without another word, disappeared through the trees. Kenmore's wrists had already become freed in the struggle, so he could easily get away. But if Bob Christine and Co. imagined that the affair was ended they were mistaken!

They were very sadly mistaken, indeed!

CHAPTER IV.

BOZ ON THE SCENT.

MEANWHILE, other events were occurring.

I knew nothing of the activities of Christine and Co. until later on, but I then congratulated the Monks heartily, and, as skipper of the Ancient House Remove, I also thanked them. They had performed a really splendid service.

But I was quite busy that afternoon—with the gov'nor. For Nelson Lee had decided to make some further investigations at the Mount. The affair of the Mysterious X was puzzling, and Nelson Lee was anxious to make some headway. Mr. Ridgeway's house had been burgled by the unknown marauder. Apparently, however, he had left no clue.

As it was a half-holiday, I had gained permission to accompany the gov'nor. And Tregellis-West and Watson, of course, accompanied me. In other words, we were all together.

"I can't promise that we shall achieve any result this afternoon, boys," said Nelson Lee, as we trudged along the lane towards Mr. Ridgeway's place. "It is quite probable, indeed, that we shall do nothing. I have already had a look round, as you know, and the thief seems to have done his work with great caution. But perhaps Inspector Jameson is already hot on the trail," he added drily.

"Begad! That would be frightfully interestin', sir," said Sir Montie. "I suppose the inspector could get on the trail? It seems shockin'ly improbable, but wonders are never ceasin'."

The gov'nor laughed.

"I'm afraid that your opinion of the Inspector is not a very high one, Montie," he said. "Mr. Jameson is all right, but he is unaccustomed to this type of work. His forte is the ordinary routine tasks of a country police-station. The poor man is rather out of his depth when it comes to a case of this type."

"But you're on the scene, sir," I remarked, "and it's not out of your depth. Compared with some of our cases, it's only a trivial business."

"That is really nothing to the point, Nipper," the gov'nor reminded me. "Trivial businesses, to use your own expression, are

frequently the most knotty. So we must not be too optimistic."

When we arrived at the Mount we found Mr. Ridgeway in the front garden. He greeted the gov'nor warmly, but shook his head when asked if any result had been arrived at by the inspector.

"Jameson's gone off to see if any reports have come in from the outlying districts," said the novelist. "He's got an idea that the thief may be attempting to get away by road, and he's having the whole district watched."

"I'm afraid that won't do much good," said Nelson Lee. "It is my opinion that this mysterious individual is here—amongst us."

"Begad!" ejaculated Montie. "You ain't suspectin' us, sir?"

The gov'nor laughed.

"You are taking me too literally, Tregellis-West," he said. "When I say amongst us, I mean in this neighbourhood—not in our own immediate circle. The Mysterious X is an unknown quantity, and he apparently thinks himself secure. I don't think he'll flee while his safety is not threatened."

"It's a pity he didn't choose some other house for his second job," growled Mr. Ridgeway. "I'm a hospitable man, but I like visitors to come at decent hours—not in the middle of the night."

I glanced down the path towards the drawing-room window.

"That's where the rotter broke in," I remarked.

"Dear fellows, suppose we have a look at closer quarters?" suggested Montie. "There's no tellin', you know. We may see something."

Tregellis-West led the way down the paved terrace, walking with his usual elegant stride. He failed to observe, however, a slight projection, and his boot caught against it. The next moment Montie sprawled headlong.

"Oh, begad!" he gasped painfully.

"You might do that again, old chap!" I said, grinning. "You went over beautifully, and Tommy wasn't looking."

"Pray don't be so frightfully absurd!" protested Tregellis-West, getting to his feet and dusting himself down. "But that's queer, you know—awfully queer."

"What's queer?" I asked.

Montie looked round, sniffing the air.

"I distinctly smelt flowers, old boy," he declared. "A whiff came to me—Yes, begad, an' I know what it was, too! It was the scent of a narcissus!"

"Quite dotty?" I asked politely.

"But I'm serious, dear fellow—I am, really!"

"How the dickens could you smell flowers like that?" I demanded. "It's winter-time, and there's not a flower in the whole garden, except a few early tulips—and I've never known a tulip to smell like a narcissus!"

"Pray be sensible, Nipper!" said Sir Montie. "Tulips have no scent at all—at least, not a pleasant one. But this was most distinct, an' it seemed to be more pronounced when my face was against the ground. It's

really a wonder my nose isn't frightfully scratched."

"Oh, he's off his rocker," said Watson.

Montie froze him with a glance—at least, he meant to—and deliberately went down upon his knees and sniffed at the ground. He looked up triumphantly.

"I can smell it distinctly," he declared.

"What on earth are you trying to do, Tregellis-West?" asked Nelson Lee, looking down the path at us. "Did I see you sniffing the ground just now?"

My noble chum was slightly confused.

"I can smell the scent of narcissus, sir," he explained mildly.

The gov'nor became alert in a second.

"You can smell narcissus, Montie?" he repeated sharply. "Where?"

"Just down here, sir."

Nelson Lee was down in a moment, sniffing eagerly at the ground. We watched him with amazement, for it seemed—and was—an extraordinary action. I couldn't understand the gov'nor's motive. Neither could Mr. Ridgeway.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"No; but I think that Montie has made an interesting discovery," replied Nelson Lee, getting to his feet. "Do you know if there was a bottle of scent in the drawing-room previous to the burglar's entry—narcissus scent?"

Mr. Ridgeway nodded.

"Why, yes," he replied. "And, what is more, the thief knocked it over, and spilt the stuff on the carpet. Didn't you notice how heavily scented the atmosphere was this morning?"

"I did," replied Lee; "but I assumed that Mrs. Ridgeway was in the habit of using the scent—"

"Of course not," interrupted our host. "The plunderer upset the bottle, and my wife found it on the floor this morning. I didn't mention it because I thought it was of no importance."

"And yet it is of the very greatest importance," said the gov'nor quietly. "The scent is very pungent. The Mysterious X, without a doubt, trod in the pool of scent essence, and saturated one of his boots. That is why Montie received a whiff just now. Surely you realise the importance of this?"

"I can't say that I do."

"But, my dear man, the thief has left a trail—a clear trail, capable of being followed," went on Nelson Lee. "A very third-rate bloodhound, incapable of following a human scent, would have no difficulty in following this."

"Even taking that for granted, we've got no bloodhound," said Mr. Ridgeway.

"But we've got a dog equally as good," said the gov'nor quietly.

"Boz!" I shouted.

"Exactly, Nipper—Boz!"

Sir Montie and Tommy and I were quite excited now. This discovery had altered the aspect of the whole case. I could easily understand why Nelson Lee was so delighted. A tangible clue had been discovered, and

there was every possibility of its being followed up.

There was not the slightest doubt that the Mysterious X had trodden upon the scent-soaked patch of carpet in the drawing-room—with one foot, at least, and possibly with both. Such a trail would be quite fresh even now, and Boz would have no difficulty in following it.

Boz, my little spaniel, was a most extraordinary dog. He had been tried and tested, and had proved himself the equal of any pedigree bloodhound. In fact he was far more serviceable.

"Boz!" repeated Mr. Ridgeway, in surprise. "You are referring to that little dog of yours, I presume? But what can he do, Lee? The thief escaped more than twelve hours ago, and it isn't reasonable to suppose that the dog can get on the track now."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I shall be very disappointed if he doesn't, Ridgeway," he replied. "One of you boys had better hurry back to the school and fetch Boz at once."

"I'll go, sir," I said promptly.

I wasted no time, but hurried off at once. As a matter of fact I was very anxious to see what Boz could do, for here was a splendid chance for him to win fresh laurels.

I found the little beggar fast asleep in his kennel, enjoying an afternoon nap. He wasn't much to look at, but that did not make him any the less valuable.

"Now then, come out of it, lazybones," I said briskly.

Boz squinted out of the little doorway, thumped his tail against the floor of the kennel, and then condescended to emerge. He stretched himself leisurely, scratched his off-side ear, and looked up at me sleepily.

"Finished?" I asked grimly. "Wake up, you little sluggard! There's work to be done—understand? Work! You've got to get busy!"

Boz pricked up his ears alertly.

"Good! I'm ready!" he said.

At least, that's what he would have said if he had been blessed with the powers of speech. He barked instead, and frisked round eagerly. A moment later we were off, hurrying back to the Mount.

When we arrived we found Nelson Lee and Mr. Ridgeway still in the garden, standing near the smashed windows.

"Anything fresh turned up, sir?" I asked.

"No, nothing, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "I have made another examination, but our mysterious friend is a very careful individual. It was only by sheer chance that he happened to tread in that pungent scent. If any further progress is to be made, Boz must make it."

"He'll do his best—that's one thing, sir," I remarked.

And Boz did. He was given the scent-bottle to sniff at, after which he had quite a long sneezing fit—probably because he sniffed too hard. Then he looked up rather reproachfully at the gov'nor, wondering what the game was.

"I'm afraid it's asking too much, you know," said Mr. Ridgeway doubtfully.

"You wait a minute, sir," said Tommy Watson. "That little beggar's a wonder."

Boz was led to the paved terrace beneath the window, and he knew exactly what was wanted of him. After sniffing about eagerly for some few moments, and running round in circles, he set off down one of the gravel paths towards the lower wall.

"By gum! He's hit it!" I said eagerly.

Boz was not capable of jumping the wall, so he stood and barked at it, as though he expected it to fall down. He was lifted over, and we climbed over after him. There was only a short delay on the other side, and then the wonderful little spaniel hastened off on what was evidently a strong scent.

Mr. Ridgeway remained behind, but wished us luck. He wanted to be on the spot when the inspector returned, so that he could explain what was happening to the representative of the law.

"Begad! This is turnin' out to be a rippin' holiday, dear old boys," said Sir Montie languidly. "Detective work is frightfully interestin'. I wonder if we shall really track the Mysterious X?"

"We may have to trudge twenty miles, my son," I said grimly.

"Good gracious!" said Montie. "I really couldn't think of such a thing, dear fellow. I am afraid I shall drop out after the first five miles. Detective work ain't quite so interestin' after all."

"You'd find that out if you had more of it to do," I said drily. "Following trails and all that sort of thing is awfully interesting to read about, but when you get down to it personally it's simply another name for hard work. And there's always the possibility that you've had the hard work for nothing."

"You're takin' all the gilt off it, you know," protested Tregellis-West.

"That's better than piling it on," I replied. "Still, there's no reason to look worried, you see. This trail may be quite a short one, for all we know. It will be if the Mysterious X is still in the district."

"And do you mean to say that Boz will lead us straight to him?" asked Watson.

"He might," I replied; "but it's far more likely that he won't!"

"I'm afraid I must agree with you, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, looking round. "Luck does not often come so abundantly."

And the gov'nor turned out to be right.

We were taken across the meadows to the towing-path, Boz keeping to the trail without a falter. But after we had followed the course of the river for some little distance we met with a check.

In short, the trail abruptly ended on the extreme bank of the river. Boz stood there and barked at the water, and we all looked at one another in a disappointed kind of way.

"This is shockin', old boy," murmured Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez and regarding me with a startled eye. "The thief must have dived into the river, you know—there's nothin' else to explain this."



1. BANG! SIZZZZZ! BANG! The crash was terrific, and Rees and Kenmore jumped about four feet. (See page 3.)

2. The figure moved across the space deliberately, and Nelson Lee waited no longer. (See page 21.)

"Suicide!" said Tommy Watson, in an awed whisper.

Nelson Lee laughed.

"My dear boys, you should not get such alarming notions into your heads," he said calmly. "The explanation of this is quite obvious. The thief at this point stepped into a boat which was waiting here."

"I—I never thought of that, sir," said Watson lamely.

"Yet there is nothing else to think, for there is certainly no evidence to show that our quarry dived into the water," went on the gov'nor. "He presumably came in a boat to this spot, left the little craft here, and went on his plundering mission. Having succeeded, he came back."

"But why a boat, sir?" I asked. "There's the footbridge a little higher up."

The gov'nor nodded.

"Quite a nice point, Nipper," he agreed.

"Why, indeed, should a boat be employed? The explanation is surely a simple one?"

"That the thief wanted to reach a spot which couldn't be reached by the bridge?"

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "And the only spot within sight is Willard's Island, just down the river. No, don't look excited, boys. I do not expect to find the Mysterious X on Willard's Island."

"At the same time, sir, we might as well go across to it," I said eagerly.

"Certainly. We will do so at once."

The island was rather a famous one in St. Frank's history—and recent history, at that. For it was on Willard's Island that the Remove had held out against the powers that were in the great barring-out.

On the island there was a kind of building—a miniature castle, erected by a crank many years since. It was locally known as Willard's Folly, and it was certainly of little use, except as a picturesque addition to the local scenery.

Boz, having done his duty, was no longer required—at all events, not for the moment. We walked down the river to the boat-house, put a light craft into the water, and then rowed steadily towards the island.

"We'd better go cautiously now, sir," I whispered. "No speaking, I mean."

"I really don't think it matters, Nipper," said Lee, shaking his head. "If the man is on the island he will have seen us before this, so silence is pointless. However, we will act with caution."

The nose of the boat drove through the reeds at the lower end of the island, and as it bumped against the bank I jumped ashore and secured the painter to an outgrowing root. The others followed me ashore, Boz included.

We did not attempt to set him on the trail again. If we had done so we might have met with no result. As it was, he found the trail for himself. That's just the way of things in this world.

We knew Boz had picked up the scent all right, because he suddenly commenced barking with excitement, and he was bristling with eagerness.

"Good old boy!" I exclaimed. "Find him, Boz—find him!"

Boz hurried through the trees—for the island was heavily wooded at both ends—until he emerged into the central clearing, where the quaint building stood. And the little dog disappeared through one of the doorways before we arrived, only to appear again, barking still.

"My hat!" said Watson. "He's found something!"

And so did we find something. Entering the bare, damp apartment, we saw that Boz was standing against a pair of old boots. These articles of footwear were placed against the wall, but there was nothing else whatever.

"And there stands all that we shall find of the Mysterious X," said the gov'nor drily.

"On this trip, at all events, boys. I warned you not to be too optimistic, didn't I? We have simply found the fellow's boots—and you will agree that such a result is not exactly promising."

I stared at the gov'nor squarely.

"This looks rather queer, sir," I remarked.

"My only hat! Do you think the chap's had a game with us? Doesn't it look as though he trod in that scent deliberately, and then made this trail—just to bring us on a wild-goose chase?"

"Appearances point that way, Nipper. I will admit; but I don't think that you are right," replied Nelson Lee. "It is hardly likely that the thief would know that we had a dog capable of following a scent. I am inclined to think that the man simply keeps these boots here as a matter of precaution—he evidently knows the value of footprints, and has no intention of being caught that way."

"And what's to be done now, gov'nor?" I asked.

"I fancy we have reached the end of our little investigations," replied Nelson Lee. "I intend to remain on the island for some little while; but don't let me detain you, boys."

"I suppose you'll swim across, sir?" I grinned.

"Oh, yes, the boat," said Lee. "Well, you can get across, and then I will haul the boat back—there is a long length of rope in the locker, I think. That will get over the difficulty."

"But why do you want to stop?" I demanded.

"I have a fancy to—that's all."

The gov'nor, I knew, was merely keen upon searching the island from end to end. It wasn't likely that he would meet with any success, and I didn't see the fun of wasting the rest of the afternoon.

So Montie and Tommy and I rowed across to the main bank, and Nelson Lee hauled the boat back. And there we left him to go his own sweet way.

"And that's an example of how a hot trail may turn out to be a dud," I said grumpily, as we went off. "We've simply drawn a blank, my sons."

But I was rather premature in my remark,

for, as later events turned out, that trail was not a "dud" in any sense of the word.

CHAPTER V.

STARKE'S GREAT IDEA.

WHY the deuce didn't you meet me, as you promised?"

It was Starke who asked the question, and he did so with some acidity. He had just entered his study in the Sixth-Form passage. He found Kenmore there, lounging in the armchair before the fire in a rather curious attitude. It really seemed as though Kenmore was afraid to sit down squarely.

"Why didn't I come?" snarled the prefect fiercely. "I'll tell you why!"

"You needn't jump down my throat!" said Starke, closing the door. "What's wrong with you, Kenny? Got a pain somewhere?"

"Those Remove puppies collared me as I was riding to the village," said Kenmore with suppressed fury. "They rolled me over, bound me, dragged me into the wood, and then whacked me with a cane! What's why I didn't meet you!"

Starke stared.

"The Remove kids did that?" he asked amazedly.

"Yes, the little demons!"

"You're not joking, I suppose?" asked Starke.

"Joking!" shouted the other prefect. "You confounded idiot! Do I look in a joking mood?"

"Don't yell at me. I can't quite believe it—that's all. Why, you can report the little ruffians, and have them all publicly flogged——"

"They were College House juniors," growled Kenmore savagely. "Christine, Yorke, and three others."

Starke sat down and lit a cigarette.

"It's no good getting in a rage about it," he said. "Let's talk about this quietly. It makes a difference, the kids being some of Stockdale's lot. We've got no authority over them. But why the deuce should they touch you? You haven't been interfering on that side, have you?"

Kenmore nearly choked.

"They were College House juniors," yesterday," he replied. "Those kids had the infernal impudence to tell me that I was being punished for caning Lemon unjustly. They laid it on frightfully—they swished me! Me—a prefect! Did you ever hear of such a thing in all your life?"

"Haven't you reported it yet?" demanded Starke. "Haven't you seen Stockdale?"

"No, I haven't!" snapped Kenmore. "Do you think I want those brats to blurt everything out? Have some sense, for goodness' sake! If I report the rotten affair everything will have to come out."

Starke nodded thoughtfully.

"And young Lemon's back would be examined, probably," he said. "You did lay it on thick, you know, old man. And I don't believe the kid put those fireworks in the

grate, either. It seems as though you can't do anything—you'll have to let it pass."

"You—you madman!" shouted Kenmore. "I'm sore all over—do you think I'm going to take such a thing lying down? Those kids are going to pay for this afternoon's work——"

"It's all very well to talk like that," interrupted Starke. "You can't make them pay, Kenny. You daren't report them, and if you gave them lines they wouldn't take any notice. You're helpless."

"And we've got to stand it, I suppose?" asked Kenmore, glaring. "Why, you don't know what this means! The juniors have beaten us. Starke—we shall never be able to hold up our heads again. If we take no action the little brutes will do it all over again—and with you next time, perhaps. If you happen to hurt a fag's arm or something, you'll be collared by those College House juniors and ragged. I tell you, we can't let it pass. If we do, we shall put ourselves in the juniors' hands."

"By George!" said Starke. "You're right, old man. Something must be done—and quickly, too. But what——"

Starke paused, and sat looking at his companion for some few moments in complete silence.

"I'm not a ghost!" growled Kenmore crossly.

"By George!" repeated Starke, his face breaking into a smile, and the smile changing into a grin.

"Very funny, isn't it?" snapped Kenmore, kicking the fender.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Starke. "Yes, rather! I've just thought of an idea, Kenny. We'll make those kids wish they'd never been born! Oh, it's a great idea—it's simply topping!"

"You—you cackling idiot!" snarled Kenmore savagely.

"But I'm serious," went on Starke. "You're sore, of course, and I don't suppose you feel like grinning. But you will in a minute. Look here. We can't report those College House kids, and we can't even swish them. But there's something else that we can do!"

And Starke proceeded to explain what that something was. Kenmore listened impatiently at first, then he calmed down, and his eyes shone with vicious satisfaction. Finally he found himself grinning.

"Yes, it might work out all right," he admitted.

"Might!" said Starke. "It will! And, what's more, the juniors will never be able to repeat their rotten games. We shall have the upper hand, Kenny—and that's what we want. If we're able to keep our places in this old barn we shall have to assert ourselves."

"But supposing Mills and Jesson won't agree——"

"They will," interrupted Starke. "They'll have to. It's as much in their interests as ours, don't forget. We'll combine—and make the juniors under-dogs for good and all. We'll be complete masters!"

Kenmore rose to his feet.

"Well, let's go over," he said grimly.

They left the study and passed out of the Ancient House at a brisk walk. It was not yet tea-time, and a good many juniors were lounging about the Triangle. Kenmore's temper was not improved when he noticed the open grins of the Removites.

The Ancient House fellows took care to remain solemn; Kenmore was one of their prefects—an unnecessary evil, as Reginald Pitt remarked—and he was in a shocking mood just at present.

But Christine and Co., who were also in the Triangle, chuckled audibly, and they wore grins which wouldn't come off. They were feeling particularly pleased with themselves. Practically the whole junior school knew of Kenmore's licking by this time; and the Third, particularly, was in high glee. Lemon had been avenged.

"The cad can't do anything," said Christine comfortably. "If he's got any sense he'll let it drop as soon as possible."

"Anyhow, he hasn't reported us," remarked Yorke. "We should have had old Stocky on our trail before this if Kenmore had said anything. If we only keep the game up we shall put down bullying altogether."

Bob Christine nodded.

"It'll make a difference, even as it is," he said. "Starke and Kenmore won't dare to ill-treat a fag another time——"

"But why have the cads gone over to the College House?" asked Tamadge thoughtfully. "It looks a bit off-side, you know. I suppose they haven't gone to tell Stockdale, have they?"

"Not likely," said Christine. "Stocky's with the Head, I think. It's far more likely that Starke and Kenmore have gone to talk matters over with the prefects of our house—not that talking will do much good."

"I'm not at all sure that I agree with this drastic behaviour on your part, Christine," said a gentle voice from the rear. "It was really opposed to all authority to seize Kenmore and treat him so drastically."

The Monks turned and grinned. The Trotwood twins were standing before them, and the two Ancient House Removites were both looking solemn. Nicodemus and Cornelius were as alike as two peas, and nobody ever knew which was which.

"My dear chap, your opinion doesn't interest me at all," said Christine politely. "I don't know who I am talking to—but it's one of you. And you ought to be jolly glad that we taught that beastly prefect of yours a lesson."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Nicodemus. "You are surely labouring under a misapprehension, my good Christine. Kenmore is not mine—I wouldn't own him. I consider that he is an unmitigated rascal."

"Good!" said Christine.

"Nevertheless, it seems to me that there might have been some other method to employ—other than corporal punishment, I mean," went on Nicodemus gravely. "The situation was one which, in my opinion, called

for finesse and subtlety. Rash action, such as you employed, was somewhat ill-advised."

"Oh, was it?" growled Yorke. "Kenmore got it in the neck, anyhow!"

"I am not daring to deny that obvious fact," said Nicodemus—"that is, accepting the term in the commonplace sense. Strictly speaking, Kenmore got it somewhere far removed from the neck——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He did!" grinned Christine. "But we won't mention places!"

"And I am afraid that Kenmore will not take such treatment lying down——"

"But he did take it lying down," interrupted Tamadge. "He couldn't help himself, my son——"

"Really, my good friend, I am afraid you misunderstand me deliberately," said Trotwood, shaking his head. "You are of the opinion, I believe, that Kenmore will do nothing—that he is incapable of retaliation. Yet I shall be much surprised if such is the case. It is rather a pity you did not seek my advice originally."

"Oh, a frightful pity!" said Christine sarcastically.

"Had you done so, I might have been able to suggest a plan—a subtle scheme whereby Kenmore would have been punished just as severely, but with no risks attaching themselves to the avengers," said Nicodemus. "However, my talk is now idle."

"As usual," said Yorke politely.

"That, of course, is a matter of opinion—and I am not vain enough to imagine that my conversation is always beneficial," remarked Nicodemus, with a bland smile. "However, let me advise you to be most careful. Come, my good Cornelius, we will make our way indoors, for the hour for tea is imminent."

"You addressed me, my dear Nicodemus?" asked Cornelius mildly.

"They talk like a couple of dictionaries, don't they?" grinned Yorke.

"Yes, Cornelius," said the other twin. "We will go indoors to our study."

"Not quite so bad as it was last week, surely?" said Cornelius.

"Eh?"

"You mentioned that the Triangle is muddy, I believe?" went on Cornelius, who was afflicted with deafness. "It was my own opinion that——"

"My good fellow, I did not refer to the mud at all," interrupted his brother. "It is tea-time, and we must repair to our study. We have some excellent tongue for this evening's meal."

"Two excellent tongues, in fact," observed Christine. "Why don't you take that gate-post of yours away, Nicky? You ought to provide him with a couple of gramophone horns. He never hears what people say to him."

"Cornelius always hears essential points," smiled Nicodemus. "For example: My dear brother, can you lend me the sum of ten shillings?"

"Really, Nicodemus, I am rather short at present," said Cornelius promptly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a funny thing he heard that!" grinned Christine. "I don't call that an essential point. If anybody wants to borrow tin from me, I'm generally deaf!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Nicodemus and Cornelius, arm in arm, wended their way towards the Ancient House. Meanwhile, Starke and Kenmore had gone straight to the Sixth-Form passage in the College House, where they entered the study occupied by Mills and Jesson.

These two seniors were prefects, and, although not such bullies as their Ancient House colleagues, they were, nevertheless, heartily detested by the juniors. And they were in the same boat as Starke and Kenmore with regard to smoking and gambling.

"Dropped in to tea?" asked Jesson, looking up as the door opened. "We can't offer you much, I'm afraid, but you're welcome——"

"No, we weren't thinking of tea," interrupted Starke. "The fact is, we've come to have a serious talk. I suppose you've heard all about that affair with Kenmore?"

"What affair?" asked Mills.

"Why, hasn't the yarn reached these back-woods yet?" asked Starke. "Some of your kids—Christine and his lot—collared Kenmore this afternoon, dragged him into the wood, and swished him with a cane."

Mills and Jesson looked startled.

"No, we haven't heard about it," said Jesson. "The infernal young rotters! You've reported the whole thing to Stockdale, of course? It'll mean a public flogging—at least!"

"It won't mean anything," said Starke. "Kenmore's not going to make any report. That's why we've come here. Those kids have thrown down the gauntlet, so to speak—they've challenged us, the prefects, to a tussle. Well, we're going to win. We've got to win, Jesson."

"But why on earth can't you report——"

"Oh, you'll understand in a minute," growled Kenmore.

And, without delay, he explained the circumstances. Mills and Jesson listened with interest, and were serious when Kenmore had finished.

"Of course, that puts a different complexion on the thing," remarked Mills slowly. "If you really marked young Lemon, it would be unsafe to report this business to Stockdale. You'd only get into hot water yourself, Kenmore. But you were a bit harsh with that lag, weren't you? I don't see that you can grumble because the juniors took matters into their own hands. It's all settled now—so what's the good of coming here to discuss it? If we punish Christine and the others, they'll only try some other dodge."

"I thought what it would be!" snapped Kenmore savagely. "I knew these fellows wouldn't agree, Starke——"

"They've got to agree," interrupted Starke. "You don't understand the position, Jesson. I didn't at first. But just consider all the points, and you'll find that we're all in a hole."

"We're in a hole?" said Mills, staring.

"Yes, you—all of us," was Starke's grim

reply. "Just because you had no hand in this affair, you needn't think that you're safe. Can't you understand that the juniors have challenged us? If we let the matter drop they'll claim a victory—and, what's more, they will have gained a victory."

"Over Kenmore—yes," said Jesson. "But not over us."

"My dear chap, don't make any mistake," went on Starke. "It's the thin end of the wedge. Unless we pull that wedge out it'll go in deeper and deeper. For example, suppose you happen to swish one of the kids in this house—suppose you hurt him a bit more than you meant to? That kid will remember what Christine did——"

"But Christine doesn't touch me," said Jesson.

"Perhaps not; but Nipper and Co. could," declared Starke. "And you can be quite certain that Nipper's lot will seize the first opportunity to repay the compliment. They'll treat you as Christine treated Kenmore. And if we let it go on, it'll be the finish of us all. We've got to put our foot down now—and we've got to put it down hard."

"But how?" demanded Mills.

"Five juniors ragged Kenmore—Christine, Yorke, Talmadge, Nation, and Clapson," said Starke. "Those five kids have got to be punished. You can't do it openly, I know. But you can use other methods. And they'll understand quickly enough, and they won't try any more of their little games."

"What other methods can we use?" asked Jesson doubtfully.

"Those," replied Starke.

And he outlined his great idea fully. By the time he had finished Mills and Jesson had a better knowledge of the situation, and they were in full agreement with all the proposals and suggestions.

"Yes, it's the only way," replied Mills, with a grin. "And it'll settle the hash of those kids once and for all. After treating you like that, Kenmore, they deserve to be punished."

And the four prefects, having come to a complete understanding, settled down to tea feeling quite good tempered. Kenmore, indeed, forgot his aches, and only grinned when he thought of the retribution which would swiftly overtake Christine and Co.

The juniors had asked for trouble—and they would find plenty!

CHAPTER VI.

THE MARTYRS OF THE REMOVE!

BOB CHRISTINE grinned amiably. "It's the biggest victory we've had this term," he remarked, as he looked round at the smiling faces in Study Q. "And you can bet your boots that Nipper will repay the compliment if one of our prefects runs loose."

"Why, in that way, we've got the seniors on toast," said Yorke. "Before long they'll be afraid to bully anybody."

"That's the idea!" agreed Christine. "They'll be as meek as little lambs by the

end of this term. There's been too much bullying altogether—and this will put an end to it. The beauty of the whole thing is that the rotters can't touch us. They are Ancient House seniors, and haven't got an ounce of power on this side. And, to make it richer, Kenmore daren't report us."

"We're on velvet, in fact," said Clapson cheerfully.

The five juniors who had ragged Kenmore were taking tea in Study Q—Clapson and Nation being honoured guests. There had been no mention of the ragging from any of the powers that were, so it was obvious that Kenmore had let the matter drop.

It was really the only thing he could do, Christine and Co. told themselves. But before long, they were rather severely disillusioned. The first inkling came about half an hour after tea, when Christine and Co. strolled out.

Yorke was so happy, in fact, that he whistled as he went down the passage. Not that there was anything unusual in this. Whistling in the passages was forbidden, but it was generally done. Masters and prefects alike always ignored it.

But there came a change this evening.

"Yorke!" came a sharp voice from the rear.

Yorke looked round, and saw Jesson, of the Sixth.

"Hallo!" he said. "Want me?"

"Yes, I do want you," replied the prefect.

"You were whistling just now."

"Was I?" said Yorke. "Well, what about it?"

"Don't you know that it's forbidden, you young sweep?"

Yorke stared, and his chums stared also. All the juniors came to a halt, wondering what had taken possession of Jesson, to complain of whistling. The prefect had never taken any notice of it hitherto.

"Forbidden!" said Yorke. "Oh, rot! It may be against the rules, strictly speaking, but I've passed Mr. Stockdale himself, whistling. He's never said a word. Why should he?"

"Well, you'd better understand that I don't allow you to whistle here, Yorke," said Jesson grimly. "You'll take five hundred lines."

Yorke grinned.

"I didn't know you were a humorist, Jesson," he remarked.

"You silly young ass—I'm serious!" shouted the prefect. "You'll take five hundred lines—and I want them before supper-time. Understand?"

Yorke gave a gulp, realising that Jesson was serious.

"Fi-five hundred lines?" he gasped. "Five hundred lines for whistling?"

"Yes!"

"But—but—"

"I don't want to hear any jaw!" snapped Jesson. "I've given you the imposition, and don't forget to bring the lines to me before supper. If you don't get them done, the impot. will be doubled."

"He's dotty!" gasped Christine. "What about Turner?"

Turner, of the Remove, was strolling along the passage just ahead of Jesson, and he was whistling shrilly. To be absolutely truthful, he deserved five hundred lines for that whistle. But Jesson smiled sourly.

"Never mind about Turner," he said. "I gave you lines for whistling, Yorke."

And the prefect turned on his heel and walked away. Christine and Co. gazed at one another rather blankly. Yorke was red in the face with anger, and for some moments he couldn't exactly form his words.

"I—I won't write the rotten lines!" he declared at last.

"I should think not!" said Talmadge indignantly. "Why, I've never heard of such a thing before! Old Crowell gave me twenty lines once for whistling; but that was because I was trying to imitate Turner."

"Eh?" said Turner, who had paused. "What's wrong with my whistle?"

"If you don't know what's wrong with it, it's no good telling you!" snapped Talmadge.

"But five hundred lines! Don't you do 'em Yorkey!"

"I won't!" declared the victim.

"You naturally feel like that," said Christine slowly. "But you'd better do them, Yorke. You can't very well ignore a prefect's impot., you know. If you don't take him the lines before supper, you'll be reported to Stockdale. And Stocky will be bound to uphold Jesson."

"It's a shame—it's absolutely rotten!" panted Yorke furiously.

They passed outside, emerging into the evening light. The Triangle was fairly deserted, and the College House juniors walked across towards the old elms feeling less cheerful than when they had departed from Study Q.

Christine absent-mindedly picked up a small stone and tossed it towards a group of sparrows near the gates. He hardly knew he did it, and it was only a trivial action. The sparrows scattered as the pebble hit the ground.

"Christine!"

Bob looked round wonderingly.

"What the dickens do you mean by throwing stones in the Triangle?" demanded Mills, of the Sixth, striding forward. "Don't deny it—I saw you with my own eyes. You tried to hit one of those sparrows."

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Christine crossly. "A dozen pebbles of that size wouldn't hurt the giddy sparrows. I only threw it to scatter 'em. No harm in throwing a little pebble, I suppose?"

"Well, you'll take five hundred lines!" said Mills grimly.

Christine gasped.

"What!" he panted. "Five hundred lines for chucking—"

"And I want them before supper!" interrupted the prefect. "Don't forget!"

And he walked off, leaving Christine and Co. almost in a state of collapse. What on earth had come over the prefects? Such

punishment for insignificant offences were unheard of.

"What can it mean?" asked Yorke, in a little better humour. "You've got lines now, Christy. I shall have company, anyhow, thank goodness!"

"Why, you mean rotter!" snorted Christine. "I can't make it out—it's absolutely the limit. Who ever heard of giving a chap five hundred lines for throwing a pebble in the Triangle? It may be against the rules, but dozens of rules are always being broken. Kicking a footer about in the Triangle, for example. I don't believe it's allowed, actually, but we always do it. The Head himself never tells us to stop. It's one of those school rules which are always broken."

"Of course," agreed Talmadge. "Life wouldn't be worth living if we had to stick to everything. What's the matter with you, Clappy? If you must sneeze, why the dickens don't you do it quietly?"

Clapson was searching his pockets and sneezing at the same time.

"Blow!" he said. "I've left my handkerchief indoors."

"Then go and fetch it—and blow all you like," said Christine.

Hubbard and Owen major and Farman and several other Ancient House juniors were punting a football about on the other side of the Triangle, and it suddenly came speeding towards the College House group.

"Thanks!" yelled Hubbard, in anticipation.

Talmadge obliged, and kicked the ball back to the Ancient House side. The next moment Jesson, of the Sixth, came bearing down upon the five Removites. He was looking grim, although amused.

"You kicked that football just now, Talmadge!" he exclaimed curtly.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Talmadge. "Can't I kick a football in the Triangle?"

"No, you can't!" snapped Jesson. "Take five hundred lines."

"Wha-a-a-at?" breathed Talmadge faintly.

"You heard me!" said the prefect. "Kicking a football in the Triangle is against the rules. Bring me those five hundred lines before supper. If you don't do them, I'll report you to Mr. Stockdale for a caning in addition."

"But those chaps are kicking a football!" snorted Talmadge hotly.

"Never mind what they are doing," said Jesson.

He walked away, grinning. Then he came to an abrupt halt. Clapson had gone off to obtain his handkerchief, and was using a short cut, via the window of Study Z, which he shared with Nation and Oldfield. This method of entering a junior study was quite common, and was practised dozens of times a day.

"Half a-minute, Clapson!" shouted Jesson sharply.

Clapson was almost through the window opening, and he paused and glared.

"Have I broken a giddy rule now?" he demanded.

"That's an unnecessary question," replied

the prefect. "Entering a study by means of the window is not allowed——"

"Eh?"

"And you'll take five hundred lines!" said Jesson with relish.

"But—but——"

Clapson paused, gasping for words.

"I mean to see that you juniors pay more attention to rules!" went on Jesson. "Bring me those lines before supper—and don't fail. If you do, you'll be reported."

The prefect went off, and Clapson collapsed weakly against the window-frame. It was like a nightmare. The fourth time! Yorke, Christine, Talmadge, and himself! All had been punished similarly, and all for nothing. Their offences were so trivial that any punishment was ridiculous. And yet they had been punished with great severity. Five hundred lines was a serious imposition.

What could it mean?

Even at that very moment other juniors were committing the same offences—kicking footballs, throwing stones, whistling—and, yes! One fellow was actually climbing through a window right in front of Jesson's eyes! And Jesson walked past without taking the slightest notice.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" gasped Clapson faintly.

He forgot all about his handkerchief, and rejoined his chums.

"Did—did you hear that?" he asked amazedly.

"Yes, of course we did," replied Christine. "They must be off their rockers—there's nothing else to account for it. But why do they drop on us? Why not on all the other fellows?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Billy Nation. "They haven't jumped on me, thank goodness—and I'll see that they don't!"

Nation was rather sorry for his unfortunate chums, and he considered the time ripe for consolation in material form. Words were not of much use. So Nation produced an orange from his pocket and proceeded to peel it. It was his generous intention to distribute the fruit to his chums, in four quarters. He would nobly deny himself a share.

"It's so mysterious——" he began.

"You untidy young beggar!" snapped the voice of Mills, the prefect.

"Eh? Speaking to me?" asked Nation, looking round.

"What the dence do you mean by littering the Triangle with this beastly orange peel?" demanded Mills harshly. "Pick it all up, you little sweep!"

Nation stared at him dazedly.

"But there's orange peel all over the place!" he protested. "Scores of chaps peel oranges out here, Mills! Old Warren sweeps the Triangle every morning——"

"I don't care what Warren does," interrupted Mills. "I'm a prefect, and I'm not going to see you turning the Triangle into a rubbish heap. No, you needn't pick that peel up. You'll take five hundred lines instead!"

"Oh, help!" said Nation weakly.

"And I want the lines before supper," added Mills. "You'd better get indoors

straight off, or you won't have time to do them. I'm not standing any nonsense!"

The prefect walked away, and Christine and Co. wondered whether they were on their heads or their heels. Each one of them had received five hundred lines—all within the space of ten minutes! And not in one instance had they deserved even ten lines. It was altogether staggering.

"The five of us!" said Bob Christine, taking a deep breath. "And it's as clear as daylight that Mills and Jesson were on the watch—waiting to catch us. They've both gone in now—chuckling hugely."

"What can it mean?" asked Yorke huskily.

Christine clenched his fists.

"Why, there's only one explanation," he said grimly. "It was a plant."

"A—a plant?"

"Don't you remember that we saw Starke and Kenmore go in to the College House before tea?" asked Christine. "What for? Not to report us for swishing Kenmore, but to make this arrangement with Mills and Jesson. They've got their own back—or, rather, Kenmore has."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Talmadge.

"Don't you see?" asked Bob. "They couldn't drop on us for whacking Kenmore—they daren't. So they played this dodge—they've given us lines simply for nothing. Oh, my hat! We're completely diddled!"

"But we needn't do the lines!" snorted Yorke.

"My dear chap, it's no good talking like that," said Christine. "The cunning bounders took good care to punish us for a punishable offence. See? If we don't do the lines we can be reported. Stocky would probably say that the lines were undeserved, but he'd make us do 'em. He could hardly act in any other way."

The Monks were completely dismayed.

"And this is what comes of doing a good turn for those beastly Fossils!" growled Talmadge. "We've become martyrs—we're victims of the bullies! And we've got to bear the bullying and say nothing. It's—it's rank tyranny."

"Of course it is," agreed Christine. "But there's no sense in grumbling at the Fossils—they didn't ask us to rag Kenmore. It was my idea from the start. Oh, don't growl at me! How was I to know things would turn out like this?"

Christine raised his voice slightly. His temper was like that of his chums—decidedly short just now. And Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I, strolling across the Triangle, saw that something was wrong.

"Ructions, dear fellows," murmured Montie. "Do you think it will be wise for us to butt in? I hate joinin' in other fellows' upsets—I do, really."

"There's no upset," I said. "They're not squabbling, although I must say that their faces are unusually long."

We drew near, and Christine and Co. regarded us grimly and gloomily.

"Whose funeral?" I inquired politely.

"Eh?"

"I thought you'd just been discussing somebody's death," I explained. "Why all these black and thunderous expressions?"

Bob Christine smiled weakly.

"We've been dished—that's all," he said. "We're martyrs. Like a set of asses, we thought the prefects couldn't do anything to us for whopping Kenmore. But the chopper's come down—hard."

"Begad! That's frightfully rotten," observed Sir Montie unconcernedly. "But I understood that you were safe, dear fellows. It was rippin' of you to take up the cudgel for young Lemon, so to speak, an' Kenmore deserved a thrashin'. But you told us that he couldn't report you."

"He hasn't reported us," growled Yorke. "He's fixed things up with Mills and Jesson, of our House. And now we've got five hundred lines each. Five hundred lines—to be done before supper-time!"

Christine and Co. lost no time in explaining how the thing had been worked. We listened gravely, and with some alarm. For this meant a great deal more than the College House juniors seemed to realise.

"It means a fight—that's all," I said grimly.

"What do you mean, you ass?"

"Exactly what I say," I replied. "We all believed that Kenmore would take the licking lying down. Well, he hasn't. It's quite clear that the College House prefects have combined forces with your prefects—and that's a thing which has never occurred before. There's always been a kind of rivalry, and——"

"We know that," interrupted Christine. "There's been an unwritten law that the rival prefects should attend to the business of their own Houses, and not interfere with one another."

"That's at an end now," I said. "They've combined, and they're working together—against us. It's serious!"

"You're frightenin' me, old boy," said Montie languidly.

"I tell you it's serious," I repeated. "This incident in itself isn't of much importance——"

"Isn't it?" growled Yorke. "What about our lines?"

"My dear chap, your lines are of no account," I declared. "The worrying point is—what will this lead to? Just think it out. We can't retaliate on Mills and Jesson—copying your tactics with Kenmore—because we should be persecuted in the same way. With the Sixth-Formers working together like this we're helpless. I don't mind betting that the prefects will keep the game up."

"How do you mean?" asked Christine.

"They'll try to gain the upper hand in everything," I replied grimly. "It's my opinion, my sons, that this is the overture of a big tussle—a real fight against bullying. There's trouble in the wind, mark my words."

And, as events turned out, I was correct. A regular conflict for the upper hand was soon to come. When it did come we weren't quite ready for it. But this is hardly the

place to go into details. I shall describe them later, in due course.

But one thing was certain—the juniors would find it necessary to use all their skill and ingenuity to hold their own in the coming tussle.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE UNKNOWN.

NELSON LEE was uncomfortable. Not mentally, but physically. This was scarcely surprising, considering that he was crouching in a corner of Willard's Folly, exposed to a cutting draught. However, he had taken up his position, and he did not intend to move.

The hour was just after eleven, and everything was still.

What was the schoolmaster-detective doing on Willard's Island at such a late hour—and alone?

The explanation was quite simple. Nelson Lee believed that the Mysterious X would visit the island that night, and he wanted to be on the spot, so that he could welcome the unknown marauder.

The detective, in fact, was anxious to settle the problem without delay—to expose the Mysterious X and to put an end to his depredations. Success to-night would be most encouraging.

St. Frank's itself was asleep by this time. Nelson Lee had come down the river by boat, and had concealed his little craft amongst the reeds at the end of the island. It was very cunningly hidden, and would have been almost invisible even in broad daylight. In the present gloom there was no chance of it being spotted.

Physical discomfort did not worry an old hand like Nelson Lee. He had gone through many vigils of a like nature in the past. Many of them had been fruitless; but they were all in the day's work, and Lee never grumbled.

He waited patiently, and would have waited half through the night if necessary. He heard the half-hour strike from the parish church, but no other sound reached his ears except the slight rustle of the trees outside the quaint old building.

Another fifteen minutes passed—and then Nelson Lee stiffened.

Faintly he heard the sound of oars. They were muffled, but he was not mistaken. His guess had been a true one. Somebody was visiting the island—and who could that somebody be except the Mysterious X?

Lee heard the boat's nose thud against the bank, and then came other sounds; and finally a dark, shadowy figure entered the doorway. Nelson Lee watched it with curiosity, remaining quite calm. The darkness was so intense that it was really impossible to see who the man was, or to even guess at his identity.

This part of the building was not so well preserved as all the rest. It had only been partially built, and the walls were crumbling and weather-beaten—for here there was no

roof, and the place was exposed to all rains and winds.

The figure moved across the space deliberately, as though intent upon a certain object. And Nelson Lee did not wait any longer. He crept forward like a shadow himself and sprang.

"O-o-oh!"

It was a gasp of sheer fright and terror. The unknown was taken completely and absolutely by surprise. And Nelson Lee's arms encircled him and held him tight. The capture was extremely neat and smart.

"Now, my friend, I intend to see who you are," said Lee smoothly. "No, don't struggle—you won't get away—Oh, all right!"

For the unknown had commenced wriggling like an eel, and he was difficult to hold. Nelson Lee felt a coarse beard on one occasion, and the man's heavy breathing was hoarse and frightened.

He was fighting with the energy of desperation. Lee was easily his better, and knew that he would have no difficulty in exhausting the fellow after a minute or two. The fight could not be a long one.

And, in order to shorten it, Lee seized his man squarely and jammed his back against the wall. Thud! The fellow's body struck the wall forcibly, for it was slightly nearer than Lee had believed.

Then the disaster happened.

There was a sudden grating noise above, a rush of loose debris, and a heavy chunk of stone fell vertically, alighting squarely on Nelson Lee's head. It was purely an accident, and one that could not have been anticipated.

The detective staggered back, half stunned by the blow. He tripped on the object which had fallen, and fell sprawling on his back. But for his hat, his injury might have been serious.

The detective staggered to his feet unsteadily, still dazed. His wits were sufficiently about him for him to realise what had happened—and what was now happening. The Mysterious X had seized the opportunity which Fate had provided, and was fleeing into the night.

As Lee emerged out of the building he heard the hurried working of oars—and knew that his man had escaped him. His own boat was at the top of the island, and by the time he could reach it and get it out into the open river, the unknown would be gone. So it was idle to attempt pursuit.

Moreover, Lee was in no fit condition at the moment. Lights were dancing before his eyes, and he found it impossible to stand steady without clutching at a wall for support.

This sensation, however, did not last long. The effects of the blow soon passed, and left Nelson Lee with nothing worse than a considerable bump on his head and an ache which would have made another man helpless for hours.

Lee did not waste time or his temper in grumbling at the luck. What was the use? The thing had happened, and there was no altering it now. He brought out his electric

torch and grimly examined the wall which had treated him so shabbily.

"H'm!" he murmured. "It was my own fault, I suppose: but how was I to know that that infernal brick was ready to fall?"

There were several loose bricks at the top of the wall, in fact, and it was only sheer chance which had averted a similar disaster to the Mysterious X himself. The whole thing was galling in the extreme.

Lee had fairly captured the man; he had had the fellow in his arms. And yet he knew no more now than he had known previously—except that the unknown wore a coarse beard. And that meant nothing. There were such things as false beards.

Nelson Lee made his way to the main bank as quickly as possible. There was no object to be gained in staying behind. For the Mysterious X would certainly not venture back on the island that night.

Lee saw no signs of the man, and when he arrived back at the school he was feeling disappointed and hurt—hurt in more ways than one. Fate had played him a scurvy trick. But the detective's determination to capture the Mysterious X was stronger than ever.

He went to bed and slept soundly. In the morning his head was clear within, but tender without. However, this did not trouble Nelson Lee much. I went to his study before breakfast, and knew nothing at first.

But then the gov'nor was good enough to tell me what had occurred. I listened with interest and concern.

"What rotten luck, sir," I said at last. "Let's have a look at your head."

"My dear Nipper, my head can get on quite well without your inspection, thank you," replied Nelson Lee, smiling. "There is nothing to see—and I don't fancy you jabbing your fingers about to find the tender spot."

"But why were you on the island, sir?" I asked. "How did you know that the Mysterious X would come?"

"I didn't know; I thought it possible."

"Well, then. Why did you think it possible, gov'nor?" I asked curiously. "You must have had some pretty obvious inkling that the fellow would pay a call."

"The fact is, Nipper—Dear me!"

The gov'nor broke off as the door opened. Mr. Ridgeway bustled through excitedly, and then realised that his entry was rather precipitate.

"Forgive me, Lee," he panted. "Fact is, I've been running like the deuce, and I'm excited and amazed——"

"Why, has something fresh happened?" asked the gov'nor drily.

"I should think there has!" declared Mr. Ridgeway. "A parcel came for me by this morning's post, and when I opened it I found that it contained every article which had been stolen from my house!"

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated.

"It's simply astounding," went on Mr. Ridgeway. "The parcel was posted in Bellton last night, but there's not a mark on it to show who posted it, or anything. This is the second time the Mysterious X has delivered up his loot!"

Nelson Lee smiled, and shook his head.

"No, Ridgeway, you're wrong," he observed, his eyes twinkling. "It wasn't the Mysterious X who posted that parcel. You must not thank the thief for returning your goods."

"How do you know he didn't post it?" asked our visitor.

"Well, I do know," chuckled Lee.

"That means to say that you know who actually did post it, sir?" I put in.

"Exactly, Nipper."

"Well, gov'nor, who was it?"

"Myself!"

Mr. Ridgeway and I stared.

"You?" I gasped. "You posted it, sir?"

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Mr. Ridgeway.

"I must confess openly," smiled the gov'nor. "The fact is, Ridgeway, I have played a little joke on you, and I hope that you'll forgive me."

"This looks jolly suspicious, sir," I said severely. "If you're not careful, Mr. Ridgeway will go off for the police; he'll suspect you of being the Mysterious X! Otherwise, how did you return the stuff?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I had already thought of that possibility, but it did not unnerve me," he observed. "The fact is, Ridgeway, I found the goods yesterday, and there was really some method in my seeming madness. I had an object in posting that parcel to you, instead of handing over the articles to you in person."

"But where did you find everything, sir?" I asked.

"In a crevice in the wall of the building on Willard's Island—after you and your chums had left me," replied the gov'nor. "Well, I had got the stuff, but I hadn't got the thief. The position required some thought. If I returned the goods to you at once, Ridgeway, the Mysterious X would have known of it, perhaps. So I made sure that you would not have the goods delivered to you until this morning."

"But why?"

"Because I thought it quite likely that the man would return to Willard's Island last night—to take the stuff away," said Lee. "That hiding-place was obviously only a temporary one. If a man had known that his booty had been seized he wouldn't have gone—and I wanted him to go. I was there late last night, waiting, and the thief would now be in custody but for an unfortunate mishap."

And Nelson Lee proceeded to explain to Mr. Ridgeway what had occurred.

"Confoundedly hard lines," declared the novelist, when the gov'nor had done. "But you've done well, Lee, in spite of everything. My property is in my possession again, thanks to you, and it won't be long before the marauder himself is under lock and key."

"I hope you are right," Ridgeway," said Nelson Lee. "At all events, I am confident. I mean to beat the Mysterious X before long. There is just a chance that he will flee from the neighbourhood after this, but I hope

not. I am quite anxious to unmask the fellow."

Mr. Ridgeway nodded.

"Naturally," he agreed. "And now, Lee, I want you to tell me to what extent I am indebted to you. We are friends, I know, but this has been a professional matter, and I insist——"

"You can insist until doomsday if you like," interrupted Nelson Lee grimly. "And look here, Ridgeway, never mention that matter to me again—unless you want to offend me. Good gracious! It is preposterous to call the affair a professional one. Professional rubbish, old man!"

"But, really, Lee, I should like to——"

He broke off as Nelson Lee casually picked up a book, and poised it.

"All right," he chuckled. "I won't press the matter. But I give you fair warning, Lee, that you won't stop me from giving you an extra handsome present on your birthday. Hang it all, I'm entitled to that!"

They both laughed, and that was really the end of the affair, so far as Mr. Ridgeway was concerned. But we encountered the

Mysterious X again before very many days had passed, and there was further excitement.

In addition, I was greatly worried about the unexpected development in the "prefect" question. Starke and Kenmore had made a deliberate move, and they had the support of Mills and Jesson, of the College House. Christine and Co. had been obliged to do their lines. True, Yorke had refused to do his, and he had been reported to Mr. Stockdale.

Yorke protested that the punishment was unjust—that whistling in the passage was no real offence. But Jesson calmly stated that Yorke had been creating a terrific din, and that he had refused to stop when ordered to. Yorke's word could not be accepted against the prefect's, and he had to do the lines in the end. It was obvious, therefore, that ordinary resistance was hopeless.

If we were to beat the bullies, we should have to use our own methods. And we were quite prepared to do this if necessary.

What was the next move to be—and how would it come?

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

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THE HOUSE IN THE JUNGLE; OR, JOHN HAMMOND'S DELUSION.

A Tale of the Adventures of an English Lad and a Young American in the
Wild Heart of Africa in Quest of a Mysterious Valley.

By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

Author of "*Red Rose and White*," "*Cavalier and Roundhead*," etc., etc.

READ THIS FIRST.

ALAN CARNE is a young Britisher captured by the Germans during the fighting in German East Africa. He is kept a prisoner in a little camp far in the north-west when the news of Germany's defeat comes to his captors. Full of rage, they pretend to give him his freedom, and cast him out alone, without food, in the African jungle, knowing that he must either starve or be killed by some wild beast. Bravely the lad sets out. Before he has gone far he is surprised to hear footsteps coming along the trail behind him. It is

JAN SWART, a Hottentot servant of the Germans. He has brought food, and Alan is glad of his company. They set out again and spend a day on the march. The next morning they find the northward trail of a safari, and Jan finds the bootprints of a white man. They determine to follow the safari.

(Now read on.)

IN DEADLY PERIL.

SO, altering their course, the lads held to the northward. They had been on the point of exhaustion, but the stimulus of hope gave them strength and endurance. They had drunk at the pool, brackish though the water was; and they forgot hunger and fatigue, suffered less from the burning heat of the sun, as the day wore on.

They kept to the trail, and rapidly at that. Alan would have lost it at the start, but Jan, with his keen eyes and infallible instinct, was seldom at fault. By means of broken twigs and crushed blades of grass, by occasional sprigs of foliage that dangled limply from bushes, he unerringly followed the route of the safari, which is the East African word for a party of travellers.

Grazing herds of eland and zebra and gazelle were seen, but no savage wild animals appeared. The sun drooped to the west, and the air grew cooler. At the verge of a tiny brook the Hottentot again studied the trail.

"Baas, they are still an hour's march ahead of us," he said.

"That's all right," Alan cheerfully replied. "We'll overtake them before nightfall, for they won't wait until darkness to pitch their camp. They'll do it by daylight."

The stretch of country that was like a park melted into a narrow plain of tall grass, and when the lads had crossed it they found themselves in a wonderful and beautiful jungle. And here they had for guidance a path several yards in width that had probably been beaten by Arab slave-caravans years ago, and was still used by natives and wild beasts.

The trees were high and branching, and the broad leaves of palms and bananas and hanging vines formed a canopy overhead and cast purple shadows beneath. The air was fragrant with the scent of flowers. Parrots and green pigeons, and other birds of brilliant colouring, flashed to and fro.

For a couple of miles the jungle was threaded, while the shade under the trees deepened and the sunset glow faded above. The chattering and fluttering of birds ceased. A jackal yapped, and in the distance some big animal grunted. Alan began to feel uneasy.

"Darkness will come suddenly," he said. "I'm afraid we'll have to sleep in a tree again, and push on early in the morning."

"No, baas, the safari is near," Jan answered. "I can smell the smoke of a wood fire."

"I can't. But you have a keener sense of smell."

"I am sure of it, baas. If we go a little farther——"

"Listen!" interrupted Alan, startled by a rustling noise. "What is that?"

"Oh, look!" cried the Hottentot, as he swung round. "Look, baas!"

Alan turned at the same instant, and the two stared in fright at a monstrous lion that had just slipped into view from a bend of the path behind them, and had very likely been slinking stealthily at their heels for some distance. It was within eight or nine yards, and when it had advanced a few paces it stopped and crouched low, uttering an

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

angry purr. Its mouth was open, and its black-tipped ears were flattened on its yellow head.

Its flaming eyes were fixed on the lads, who slowly retreated backward to a large stone that was at one side of the trail.

Here they stood trembling, their blood chilled with fear. There was a slim chance for them, perhaps, if they remained still. Should they take to flight they would be pounced upon immediately.

"If only I had some cartridges!" panted Alan, as he gripped the useless rifle by the stock.

The lion crept nearer, and stopped once more, its tail switching and its massive limbs quivering. It gave a deep, rumbling roar, and as the sound died away in reverberations a sudden clamour arose close by, from the direction in which the lads had been going.

"It is the safari!" gasped Jan. "The white man may save us! Call to him, baas, before we are——"

His voice sank to a wail of terror, and he clung frantically to the English lad, who shouted for help as loudly as he could. He heard answering shouts and the swift patter of feet. Another thunderous roar dinned in his ears, and he saw a yellow object soaring towards him. The great beast had leapt, and was bounding forward. It dropped with a thud to the ground, within a couple of yards of the stone, and then, as it was in the act of leaping again, there was the heavy, shaking report of a gun, followed by a second shot.

The lion was down, floundering and kicking, snarling ferociously. A third shot was fired, and a voice called a warning to the lads. Jan ran for his life, and Alan, as he was about to dart after him, was hurled violently to the earth. Hot breath was streaming on his cheeks. His senses swam into vacancy, and he remembered nothing more.

"He is dead!" Jan cried in distress. "Oh, the baas is dead!"

The rest was a blank to the young Englishman. When he recovered consciousness, with a taste of brandy on his lips, he was stretched on the grass by a tree, and a big fire of wood was burning near by him. He sat up, weak and dizzy, and perceived that he was in a camp which had been pitched in the midst of the jungle.

While he collected his confused wits and recalled what had happened, he gazed around him and observed the various details of the scene by the warm, red glow of the fire—a white tent, camp-stools, heaps of boxes, rolls of cloth, and a score of natives, whose motley attire ranged from blue jerseys to strings of beads and waistcloths.

"It is the safari," Alan reflected. "It is fortunate that we were near to it. But where is Jan? I hope he wasn't killed."

Footsteps approached from behind, and the little Hottentot appeared, clapping his hands with joy.

"The baas is better!" he exclaimed. "He is awake!"

Other footsteps drew near, and the English lad, looking up, saw a youth, who was of about his own age. He was tall and lean,

with bronzed, clean-shaven features, and brown eyes and hair. He wore a sun-helmet and a shirt of grey flannel, khaki trousers that reached to the knees, and high-laced boots and thick woollen socks.

"Well, my boy, how are you feeling?" he asked.

"A bit shaky, that's all," Alan replied, as he rose to his feet with a helping hand. "I don't think there's anything wrong with me."

"No, there isn't," said the stranger. "There might have been, though. You had the narrowest kind of a squeak. I polished off the lion, and my gun-bearers are skinning it now. But I had to pump three bullets into it before I hit a vital part, and when the brute was doing its last kick it bounced on to you and knocked you flat, and snuffed out with its head on your chest. By the way, I must introduce myself. I'm Dick Selby, of New York, and at your service."

"I thought you were an American. My name is Carne—Alan Carne."

"So I heard from the Hottentot while you were lying here pulling round. He's been telling me the story—how you were turned adrift to starve by the Germans, and were joined by the little black; and how you stumbled on to the trail of my safari and trekked after it, which I'm mighty glad of."

"You're not as glad as I am," declared Alan. "You saved my life, and I'll never forget it."

"That's all right," said Dick Selby, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'm grateful to you for giving me the chance to bag my first lion. I've seen others, but they wouldn't let me get a shot at them. They bolted instead of showing fight. Come along to supper now," he added, "and afterwards we'll have a smoke and a palaver."

THE SOUND IN THE NIGHT.

IT was a night that Alan Carne could never forget, so vividly was it in contrast to the many months of nights he had spent amongst the German soldiers. They had treated him brutally, and they had fed him far worse than they had fed themselves, which was bad enough. But here, in the camp of the young American, seated on a stool under canvas, and at a table that was spread with a cloth, he ate a hearty and luxurious meal.

"It is like a dream," he declared, when the Swahili cook had brought the soup. "I can't believe I am in the heart of Africa."

Dick Selby, seated opposite to the youth whose life he had saved, laughed at his bewilderment.

"I've got an up-to-date safari, my boy," he replied. "I guess it would be an eye-opener to Livingstone and Stanley, and those other fellows who roughed it in the old days."

He did most of the talking, giving a brief and modest account of himself to the English lad, who had already taken a strong liking to him. Dick Selby was an orphan, and he had inherited a considerable fortune from his

(Continued overleaf.)

father. Having graduated from one of the American universities, he had studied medicine for a time, and had tired of it. The taste for travel and adventure was in his blood, and he had gratified it to such an extent as he could in his own country. He had shot deer in the Adirondacks, killed cougars in Dakota and grizzlies in Montana, and made a flying trip into the Northwest Territory.

"It was fine sport, all of it," he continued. "But I knew it wasn't a patch on African travel and adventure and big-game shooting. That was what I looked forward to from the first, meaning to have my fill of it some day. I had an intimate friend in New York, a man much older than myself, who had been to Africa three or four times, and had come home with a lot of trophies. John Hammond spent many an evening with me, telling thrilling tales that filled me with excitement and envy."

When he prepared for another African trip, intending to explore the unknown regions to the north and west of Uganda, I was ~~mad~~ to go with him, and vowed that I would. I can remember just what he told me.

"No, Dick, not now," he said. "Wait till you are a little older. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take a double outfit with me, and leave one of them at Mombasa in your name. I have an idea that I'm going to get lost in the wilds, and if you haven't had any word from me after two years, you can come out and search for me." "Very well, Hammond, that's a bargain," said I, "and you can bet I'll stick to it."

"So that's how matters stood, Carne," the young American went on. "It was in the spring of 1914 that John Hammond sailed, shortly before the big war began. I waited for a couple of years, meanwhile hearing nothing from him, and I was getting ready to start for Africa myself when America came into the war. That dashed my plans, of course. I had to——"

Dick Selby paused, his eyes sparkling.

"I did my duty, and I was glad to do it," he resumed. "I was one of the first to enlist, and when I had been trained I was sent over to France, where I did my share of fighting with Uncle Sam's boys, and pulled through without a scratch."

"Then the war ended suddenly, and it took me only a week or so to get my discharge, my commanding officer having been a chum of mine at home. I was free. There was nothing to prevent me from going to Africa. I cabled for money, and sent another cablegram to John Hammond's brother in New York, who wired back that John was still missing."

"So off I went to Mombasa as quickly as I could. My outfit was waiting for me there in storage, and as soon as I had bought what other things were needed, and had hired my

safari, I travelled up country to railhead, and struck north-west.

"That was some weeks ago, and since then I've been following, as nearly as I could, the route that John Hammond meant to take. They told me down at the coast, and at Nairobi, that he must be dead. But he wasn't the sort of man to be snuffed out easily. I guess there's a pretty good chance of my finding him alive somewhere or other."

The narrative was finished, and supper was over. The native who served as cook and waiter cleared the table and withdrew. Outside the tent burned a fire, shining on the skin of the slain lion, which had been brought in from the jungle. Not far off was another blazing fire, and gathered around it, Jan Swart with them, were the porters and gun-bearers, who were mostly of the Swahili and Wakamba races. They also had been fed, and were chattering in strange tongues.

Dick Selby produced a spare pipe, and gave it to the English lad, who filled it with tobacco and enjoyed a smoke for the first time in months. The American glanced at the tattered khaki his companion was wearing.

"So you've been fighting the Huns, too," he remarked. "You are a British Africander, perhaps?"

Alan Carne shook his head.

"No, my home is in London," he said. "I have a mother living there."

"I can imagine how you feel, then. She must be anxious about you."

"Yes; no doubt she believes that I have been killed. I haven't been able to write to her since I was captured. As for my story, there isn't much to tell. I was born in England, and I have always lived there. After my father——"

Alan broke off abruptly. He was silent for a few seconds, staring into vacancy with a grave, thoughtful expression on his face.

"There's not much to tell," he repeated. "I was rather delicate, and that's why I couldn't get into the Army, as I was keen on doing. A couple of years ago my mother sent me out to South Africa, to visit a cousin of hers. And the dry, bracing climate pulled me together and completely restored my health. I was as hard as nails and fit for anything. So I persuaded my relative to get me into Driscoll's Scouts, which he did with a little difficulty."

"That was plucky of you, Carne. I've read a lot about Driscoll's Scouts."

"They were fine chaps. I saw some stiff fighting with them. We mopped nearly all of the Germans out of their East African possessions, and there was only a small bunch of them left, when I had the bad luck to be caught by the Huns."

(Another long instalment next week.)