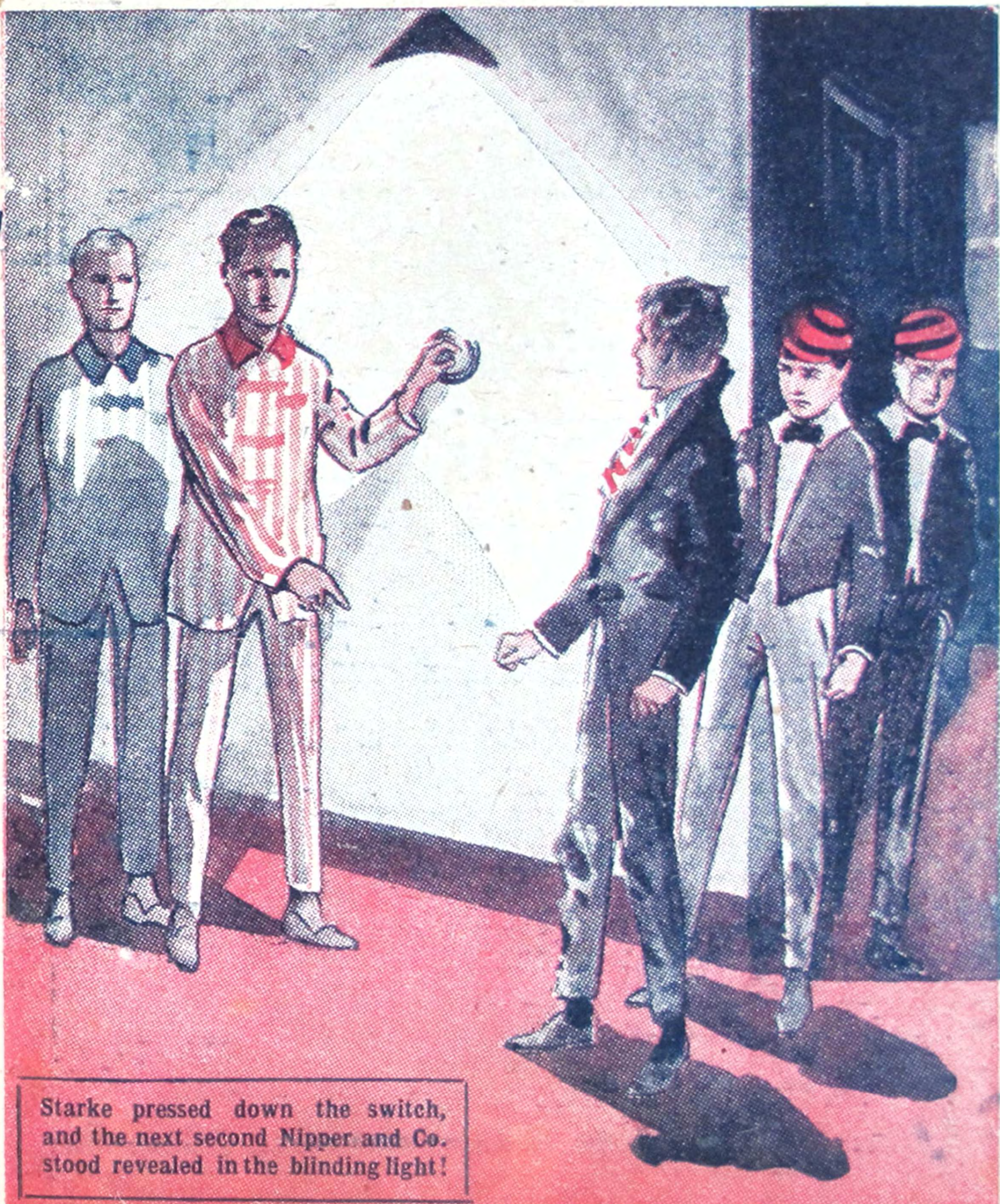


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

NELSON LEE'S ADVICE.

"**B**EGAD! Look what the wind's blowin' up, dear fellows!"

It was Sir Montie Tregellis-West, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, who made that languid remark. He and Tommy Watson and I were chatting against the gates, waiting for the dinner-bell to sound.

"I'm not interested in the wind, Montie," I said, without turning. "Now, Tommy, about Handforth. He's a good man in goal; there's no denying it. He can't do much in the field——"

"He says he wants to be placed in the forward line," interrupted Watson.

"Oh, rot!" I said. "Handforth would be like an elephant in the forward line. He'd ruin everything. There's always a welcome for good men in my eleven, and Handy can remain goalie as long as he exhibits his present form——"

"Hallo!" said Watson. "Here's old Jameson!"

"I mentioned that the wind was blowin' somethin' up, dear old boy," murmured Sir Montie. "I wonder if there is anythin' wrong?"

I turned now, and beheld a cyclist pedalling up the slight rise from the village. He was attired in blue uniform, and I recognised him as Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington police.

He dismounted a few yards away from us and nodded curtly. Inspector Jameson was always off-hand, probably because he had an idea—but quite a wrong one—that he was the most important individual in the whole county.

"Is your master in, Nipper?" he asked, fixing me with his eagle eye.

I winked to my chums.

"Which master, sir?" I asked innocently. "I've got two or three, you know. There's Mr. Crowell, my Form-master; there's

M'sieur Leblanc, the French master; there's Dr. Stafford, the Headmaster——"

"I am in no mood for joking, young man!" interrupted the inspector icily. "You are well aware that I was referring to Mr. Nelson Lee."

"Oh, Mr. Lee!" I said. "Yes, he's in, sir. You'll find him in the Ancient House, I expect. Is it anything important?"

Jameson prepared to walk on.

"I do not discuss my business with boys," he said sourly.

"And that's what Bannington can show in the way of police officials," I said, gazing wrathfully after the inspector's retreating form. "The pompous old ass! These country policeman are generally too big for their boots. Now, a chief detective-inspector of Scotland Yard would treat me as an equal, but I'm a mere kid in Jameson's eyes. I suppose he thinks he's as clever as all the detectives at Scotland Yard put together!"

"Oh, he doesn't know any better," said Watson pityingly.

"It's a wonder he's condescended to come to the guv'nor," I went on. "I'll bet he wants advice of some sort, the old rotter."

"Perhaps it's something about the Mysterious X," remarked Watson.

"Might be," I agreed. "We haven't heard anything about that gentleman for over a week, but there's no telling."

Meanwhile, Inspector Jameson had announced his arrival to Tubbs, the Ancient House page, and he was impatiently kicking his heels in the visitors' waiting-room. His business, as Watson had suggested, actually was connected with the unknown criminal who had styled himself "The Mysterious X."

There had been two burglaries recently—one at the school itself, and one at the residence of Mr. Howard Ridgeway, a local gentleman. In the first instance the stolen goods had been returned by the thief, in order to save Dr. Brett, the village medico, from suspicion. In the second instance Nelson Lee had recovered the property.

But the gov'nor, in spite of all his efforts, had not captured the thief himself. Nobody had ever seen the Mysterious X except Nelson Lee—and that had only been in the gloom of night, when recognition had been impossible. The man's identity was unknown.

Yet it was believed that he still lurked in the neighbourhood. As Nelson Lee had pointed out to me, the most likely explanation was that the thief was somebody we all knew—somebody we frequently came in contact with. But he kept his secret so well that it was really impossible to drop on him.

Inspector Jameson had made a proper mess of the whole affair ever since he had started upon it. He had investigated the burglary at the Mount, Mr. Ridgeway's place. But the stolen goods had been recovered by Nelson Lee; the police had done nothing.

It was for this reason, perhaps, that Jameson had come to-day. He was in a somewhat difficult position, and he badly wanted to hear what the famous private detective had to say before making any definite plans.

The inspector eyed Tubbs sharply when the page-boy appeared.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Mr. Lee will see you at once, sir," said Tubbs cheerfully.

He led the way out of the waiting-room, which was situated in the private section of the Ancient House, and along two corridors to the Housemaster's study—which was occupied, of course, by Nelson Lee.

"I must apologise for calling at the luncheon-hour, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, as he was ushered in. "But my business is important, and I know you will excuse me."

"Of course, inspector," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "Sit down, and make yourself easy. Cigar or cigarette?"

"Neither, thank you," said Jameson impatiently, taking a seat. "A most disturbing thing has occurred, Mr. Lee, and I may as well tell you at the outset that it is connected with that confounded rascal, the Mysterious X."

"Indeed," said Nelson Lee. "Splendid!"

"Splendid!" snorted the inspector.

"My dear sir, surely you are pleased?" asked Lee. "We cannot hope to capture the man unless he shows himself. For the past few days we have been helpless, solely because our plundering friend has been inactive. I shall welcome another opportunity of getting on his track. Which unfortunate household has he visited on this occasion?"

"He hasn't visited any yet," said the inspector. "But I have every reason to believe that there will be a burglary to-night. The astounding ruffian has had the audacity to send a warning!"

Jameson eyed Nelson Lee grimly, expecting to see him exhibit surprise. But the schoolmaster-detective merely lounged back in his chair and applied a light to the end of a new cigarette. His clear-cut features were immobile, and his grey eyes expressed merely casual interest.

"You don't take it seriously, do you?" he asked, looking across the table.

The inspector fumbled in his pocket,

"Just read this, sir," he said, handing a letter over. "It was delivered by post this morning, and Mr. Maple knows nothing—so far. I'm not sure whether to tell him, or whether to act otherwise."

Nelson Lee took the letter, and saw that it was addressed to Inspector Jameson, at the Bannington Police Station. There was nothing to show where the letter had come from—that is, except by the postmark, which was "Bannington." But that was of no value whatever in this instance.

Both the envelope and the letter enclosed were printed—very roughly, and probably with a rubber-stamp outfit. But there was nothing whatever to show who the writer was, or where he hailed from.

Nelson Lee took the sheet of notepaper from the envelope—a common type of paper, such as can be obtained from almost any stationer's. It was quite useless as a clue. Lee handled the paper very gingerly, however.

"Have you fingered this very much, may I ask?" he inquired.

"I have taken it from the envelope several times."

"But surely you examined the paper before fingering it?" asked Lee, raising his eyebrows. "Paper of this type takes excellent finger-prints—"

"My dear Mr. Lee, there are no finger-prints. See for yourself."

"No," said Lee. "Of course not."

It was idle to explain to inspector Jameson that the notepaper ought to have been subjected to careful treatment at the earliest moment. Both surfaces should have been powdered, and the result would probably have been enlightening. Now, of course, it was too late for anything of that sort.

Lee read the printed words with interest:

"The Poplars, Bellton, tenanted by Mr. William Maple, will be burgled by me at 11.30 to-morrow night, Tuesday."

"THE MYSTERIOUS X."

Twice Nelson Lee read the message through, examined every word intently, and then he handed it back to the inspector.

"Well, Mr. Lee?"

"What do you want me to say, Jameson?" asked Lee.

"Well, I should like to hear your opinion, sir."

"I have no objection to giving it," smiled the detective. "But I should just like to hear if you have made any plans yet. What notice have you taken of this letter, inspector? What do you intend doing with regard to it?"

"I don't think I shall tell Mr. Maple anything," replied Jameson. "I shall be on the spot at eleven o'clock to-night, however, with half-a-dozen men. I really came here because I thought you might like to be there, too."

"Thank you, Jameson, but I don't think I shall go."

"But surely you want to see the man captured?"

"I do. But I'm afraid I shan't see him captured in the vicinity of the Poplars,"

replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "Man alive, you don't expect to get him, do you? You don't take this warning seriously?"

"What else can I do?" demanded the inspector gruffly.

"Well, I know what I should do if I were in your shoes," said Lee. "I should ignore this warning, Jameson. At least, I should not bother about sending any more than one man, just to satisfy my conscience. And even that man's time would be wasted."

The inspector was rather taken aback.

"But he says he will be there, and we know the man is an unusual criminal," he said. "I figure that he had done this out of bravado, anticipating that no action will be taken——"

"No, no," interrupted Lee. "The Mysterious X is not a second edition of the fictitious 'Arsene Lupin.' He has more sense than to run into the hands of the police. He wouldn't have sent that message unless he had been very well prepared for all emergencies. If you go to the Poplars to-night, Jameson, you will be disappointed. I shall certainly stay away."

The inspector rose stiffly to his feet.

"In that case, Mr. Lee, there is no object in my remaining," he said coldly. "In my opinion this warning is a genuine one, and I see no reason why you should scoff at it. The thief has become over-confident; he thinks his plans are so well laid that we shall be deluded. He does not know who he is dealing with!"

"And yet I fancy he does," said Lee drily.

The inspector hardly knew how to take that remark, and he picked up his hat and moved towards the door.

"At all events, I shall carry out my plan," he said. "What else can I do? What would the superintendent say to me if the Poplars is burgled to-night and I took no action? In the face of this warning I should be dismissed the Force!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Looking at the thing in that light, Jameson, perhaps you are right," he said. "You must think of your position, of course. I quite agree with that. I only urge you not to hope for any result."

"Well, I do hope, sir, in spite of what you say, and I believe I shall get the man," declared Jameson. "Time will show, at all events. He will be a smart thief if he slips through my fingers to-night. I am only sorry that you won't be there to share my triumph!"

And the inspector, with a stiff bow, took himself off. He left Nelson Lee wondering what kind of triumph would be gained that night. The triumph, if any, would probably belong to the Mysterious X.

The Remove was at dinner when Jameson departed. Consequently, Nelson Lee was late in taking his place in the dining-hall. I noticed that he was looking rather thoughtful, and I mentally resolved to make inquiries before afternoon lessons.

Dinner over, I trooped out with the rest of the Remove, and then hurried away to Nelson Lee's study, to arrive at the door

at exactly the same time as the guv'nor himself. He regarded me severely.

"Your curiosity, Nipper, will lead you into trouble one of these days," he declared, leading the way into the study. "You needn't tell me why you've come. You want to hear why the inspector called and what his business was."

I grinned.

"What a marvellous deduction, guv'nor," I said. "And I don't call that being curious, either. Why shouldn't I know these things?"

"I'm afraid you'll never be a real school-boy, Nipper," chuckled the guv'nor. "You still remain my assistant—eh? Well, the fact is, Jameson is booked for a wild-goose chase to-night, and he wanted me to go with him. I didn't fancy the idea of being laughed at by the neighbourhood to-morrow, however."

"What the dickens do you mean, sir?" I asked.

The guv'nor lost no time in telling me of the warning letter which the inspector had received. I listened with interest, and I was in full agreement with Nelson Lee that nothing would come of the vigil.

"At the same time, sir, the old ass is in a queer position, isn't he?" I asked. "He can't ignore the letter, because there's one chance in a million that it might be serious. And he'd be kicked out neck and crop if a burglary really happened at the Poplars."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"And that is really the long and the short of the whole matter," he said. "The Mysterious X has sense enough to know that Jameson will be there with all his available forces. The obvious inference, therefore, is that the burglar will not be there, but elsewhere. It is, I judge, just a little cheap advertisement for the Mysterious X. The fellow seems anxious to make himself notorious."

"The inspector would do far better to watch a few other houses, sir," I remarked. "Mr. Maple's place is on the other side of the village, and it's not very large. He's only a retired tradesman, I believe, and he can't have much of value in his place. That warning is a blind, sir."

"You share my opinion, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "The only possible clue that might have been gained was wasted by the inspector. The note was a mistake on the thief's part, unless he took very elaborate precautions while preparing it. But it's useless talking now. The only visible fingerprints on the paper will be those of the inspector himself."

"And what do you mean to do, sir—to-night?" I asked.

"I don't know yet, my boy," replied Nelson Lee. "But don't let that worry you. To-morrow will be the interesting day, I imagine, and we shall probably find it necessary to get to work in earnest."

A minute or two later I left the guv'nor and hurried straight to Study C. in the Remove passage. Here I found Sir Montis and Tommy.

"Where the dickens did you mizzle off

to?" demanded Watson, as I entered. "And what's the twinkle in your eye about?"

"I've got an idea," I replied briskly. "Tonight, my children, you've got to follow your uncle where he leads you. We'll commit the awful sin of breaking bounds after lights-out. There's going to be some fun, or I'm a Dutchman, and I don't see why we shouldn't have a look in."

"Explain yourself, you ass!" said Tommy Watson.

"Begad! Be sportin', old boy," added Montie, regarding me through his pince-nez in a critical way. "I don't mind breakin' bounds in a good cause, but I bar breakin' bounds for nothin'. Besides, what about our beauty sleep, dear fellow?"

"All the sleep in the world would never make you beautiful—I mean more beautiful, Montie," I grinned. "The fact is, old Jameson looks like capturing a fine specimen of a mare's nest, and——"

"Why can't you explain, you silly idiot?" roared Watson.

"All right; keep your hair on!"

And I did explain. Tommy and Montie listened with great interest, and when I had finished they were both grinning.

"We'll be there—rather!" said Watson. "And I say, couldn't we work a bit of a joke? Why not lead all those giddy policemen on a chase?"

"We'll leave that until we're on the spot," I replied cheerfully. "But don't forget that we creep out of our little cots tonight at eleven o'clock to the minute."

And the subject was dismissed until after lights-out.

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE BREWING.

"PLEASE, Starke, it ain't fair!" protested Heath shrilly.

"If you give me any more of your cheek, I'll cuff you on the ear!" said Starke of the Sixth. "Cut off, you little beggar, and be quick about it!"

Heath of the Third didn't move.

"But—but I can't, Starke!" he gasped. "I—I don't know where the matches are kept. And what would happen if Mrs. Poulter collared me? I should be reported to Mr. Lee——"

Smack!

Starke's hand descended heavily upon the fag's left ear, and Heath staggered against the wall. The pair were standing in one of the rear passages of the Ancient House, and it was just that period of the evening when most of the fellows were in their studies, either enjoying their leisure or busy at prep.

Walter Starke, the prefect, was in his element when bullying a helpless fag. Of late there had been a great deal more bullying than ever, and the matter was becoming quite serious.

Not only the Third, but the Remove had suffered, too. Starke and Kenmore were the chief culprits, and they had made things hot

for the juniors generally. The bullies, in fact, were gaining power.

"Are you going to get those matches or not?" said Starke harshly.

"It's against the rules!" sobbed the fag. "'Tain't fair, Starke, to make me go! Why can't you ask the matron for some matches, or buy some——"

"You cheeky young puppy!" snapped Starke. "I'll give you just two seconds!"

Heath placed his back against the wall.

"I'm not going—so there!" he shouted defiantly. "You've got no right to order me to go, and I—— Ow! Oh—oh!"

Starke was cuffing the fag right and left. They were not just ordinary cuffs, but brutal blows. Heath was sent spinning, dizzy and utterly helpless. His grubby little fists were of no avail against Starke's vicious blows.

"What's the trouble down here?"

I asked that question as I turned the corner. I had heard Heath's cries from a distance; and, guessing that something of this sort was in the wind, I hurried down the passage. I was just in time to see Starke kick young Heath as the fag collapsed on the floor.

"You beastly brute!" I shouted indignantly.

The prefect turned and stared at me.

"Clear out of this, you brat!" he roared.

"Not just yet, Starke," I said grimly.

"If you touch that kid again I'll——"

"Well?" said Starke, as I paused.

"You'll do what?"

"I'll knock you down!" I said quietly.

"You can report me afterwards, but I shall have the satisfaction of flooring a black-guard!"

Starke gulped, and took a step towards me, his face black with fury. Young Heath seized his opportunity, and fled. The prefect and I were left alone in the passage, facing one another. I thought for a moment that Starke meant to lay hands on me, but he changed his mind.

I probably looked rather dangerous. I'm not boasting when I say that I could have knocked Starke down in less than three minutes. He was big and burly, but in bad condition—and he couldn't box for toffee.

"Well?" I said, at last. "I seem to have caught you fairly, Starke."

"You—you caught me!" stuttered the prefect. "Who the thunder do you think you are, you confounded little rotter? Take two hundred lines for cheeking me! And if you're not careful I'll——"

"You'll do nothing," I put in. "We're alone now, Starke and I'm not scared of you at all. Understand? And, what's more, I'm not going to do those lines. You're a brutal, bullying ruffian!"

Walter Starke seemed to be on the point of choking. To be spoken to like that by a junior was a novel experience. He, a Sixth-Former—a prefect—was being slanged by a Removite!

"You—you——" Starke paused, and gulped. "You'll do me five hundred lines, Nipper!" he roared. "And if they're not

done by dinner-time to-morrow. I'll make the imposition a thousand."

"I don't care if you make it ten thousand," I said contemptuously. "I've done nothing that you can give me lines for, Starke—and you know it. There's been too much bullying lately, and you're the worst rotter of all. You see, I'm not a bit afraid of you, and I'm taking this opportunity to speak my mind."

"By gad! I'll make you smart for this!" snarled Starke.

"Will you?" I asked. "How? I'm quite interested to know."

The prefect made a move towards me, but I didn't budge an inch.

"You know better than to start on me, Starke," I went on. "You only bully fags and meek Removites. A prefect's authority doesn't allow him to knock juniors about, and I defy you to do your worst."

Starke took a deep breath, and forced himself to remain calm.

"You contemptible little worm!" he sneered. "Just because Mr. Lee is what he is, you take advantage of it—you think you can ride the high horse as often as you like. If I wasn't afraid of you sneaking——"

"You needn't be afraid of that," I interrupted coldly.

"I'm not afraid of it," snapped Starke. "But it makes me sick to talk to you. You'll go flying off to your precious guv'nor for protection as soon as you're touched. I can't deal with a young cad like that!"

I blazed out furiously.

"You can do just what you like," I shouted hotly. "You'll never find me appealing to a master about the bullying. I've never done it yet, Starke, and I never will do it. And, as skipper of the Remove, I'll guarantee that no other fellow will sneak, either. We're quite capable of holding our own."

Starke glared at me, and prepared to move off.

"Hold on!" I said sharply.

He paused, arrested, in spite of himself.

"You'd better not give me any more cheek——" he began.

"There's no question of me cheeking you, Starke—a fellow can't cheek a blackguard," I replied contemptuously. "I'm not mincing my words this evening, and you can do just what you like. For weeks I've been promising myself this heart-to-heart talk, and now we're having it. I want to just give you a warning."

"Oh!" said Starke sourly. "I don't take warnings from Remove kids."

"If you don't it'll be your own fault," I said. "I'm going to tell you squarely that you'd better not go too far—that's all. If you do, things will become hot. They may be hot for us, but you can bet your last dollar they'll be hotter for you. The Remove isn't going to stand any tomfoolery."

"Why, you—you——"

"Oh, let me finish!" I snapped. "I'll just tell you a little story, Starke. Months ago a brute named Hunter was temporary House-master here. He tried to bully the Remove

—he tried to squash the Remove. What was the result? The Remove wasn't squashed but Hunter was. We wouldn't stand his rot, and it's not likely that we're going to stand yours. That's all. So just take my advice, and ease off this bullying. If you don't, there'll be trouble—in chunks!"

And, without another word, I turned on my heel and walked away. I did so with an irresistible feeling that Starke was my inferior—that I had talked to him as though I were the prefect and he the junior. And Starke must have had that feeling, too. It was probably the first time that he had ever been lectured by a Removite.

And yet it didn't seem out of the way. He wouldn't report me—I knew that. The fact was, he daren't. He knew only too well that I was in grim earnest, and that matters wouldn't be improved by his going to Nelson Lee. Starke always took very great care to avoid the guv'nor whenever possible.

I made my way to Study C and strode in. My chums were at the table, just finishing their prep., and they looked up with casual interest. But something in my expression must have struck them.

"Who's going to be the victim, old boy?" asked Montie politely.

"Eh?"

"You look like murderin' somebody, that's all," said my noble chum. "Begad! There are some frightful thunderclouds gatherin' on your brow, Nipper. I'm beginnin' to feel quite frightened."

I closed the door with a slam.

"Oh, don't rot, Montie," I said impatiently. "I've just given Starke a piece of my mind; I've told him plainly what I think of him. The cad was knocking young Heath about brutally."

"And you stopped him?" asked Watson, starting.

"I called him a blackguard and a ruffian, and defied him to do his worst," I explained.

"He won't do anything."

"You silly ass!" gasped Watson. "You'll be half-skinned!"

"Not by Starke," I replied grimly. "Oh, this is getting frightful, you chaps. For weeks Starke and Kenmore have been bullying right and left. It's got to stop, or life won't be worth living."

"But how the dickens can we stop it?" demanded Tommy. "We can't sneak, I suppose? And we can't fight the prefects. We've simply to grin and bear it. There's no remedy, old son."

"That's the worry of the thing," I said.

"And Starke and Kenmore are gaining more power every day. They don't dare to touch us, in this study, but that doesn't say that we sha'n't take any action. We've got to think of the whole Remove—and the Third, too. The Third's helpless—a mere collection of youngsters who are scared to death of every prefect."

"Things are certainly getting rather warm, dear fellow," observed Tregellis-West.

"You know what happened last week," I continued. "Christine and Co., of the College House, ragged Kenmore. What was the

result? Kenmore and Starke plotted with two College House prefects, and Christine and Co. were persecuted. It seems to me that the bullies are combining, and when a thing like that happens they become powerful."

Watson grunted.

"It's easy enough to talk," he said. "But that's where it ends. Half the fellows are talking—but they can't do anything further. We're something like the crew of a ship under a rotten set of officers. The crew can't do anything, because that would be mutiny. They've just got to stick it. And that seems to be our position. It's either a rebellion, or we put up with it."

"There's no need for us to openly rebel," I said. "And we're not going to stick it, either. But before we take any real action, we shall have to see how things go on. Starke may be better after the lecture I gave him; I frightened him a bit, I believe."

Sir Montie smiled joyously.

"You're a wonder, old boy—you are, really," he declared. "Just fancy you frightenin' a prefect. But I believe you. You're just the fellow who could frighten Starke. The way you talk to people you don't like is amazin'. You make them look frightfully small."

"Well, I don't know about that," I said. "But it seems to me that the bullies have formed themselves into a kind of gang, and they're working together. They mean to terrify the juniors and gain an absolute mastery. If it goes on, there'll soon be declared warfare."

"It'll mean some shockin' ructions, old fellow."

"All the better," I replied grimly. "There's no sense in— Who the dickens is that? Oh, clear out, Handforth—"

"Rot!" roared Handforth, charging into the study. "I want to know if we're going to stand it, Nipper?"

"No, we're not!" I said. "I don't know what it is, but we're not going to stand it. Will that do, Handy? Close the door after you!"

Edward Oswald Handforth snorted.

"You silly fathead!" he roared. "I came here to complain. You're captain of the Remove, and it's up to you to act. I've never seen such a howling cad in all my life!"

"Are you talking about me?" I demanded hotly.

"Oh, don't rot!" snapped Handforth. "Do you think I'd dare to call you a howling cad, Nipper? Hang it all, I can use my fists, but I wouldn't start a scrap with you! Besides, I don't think you are a howling cad. I was talking about Kenmore, of the Sixth."

"Oh, my hat!" I exclaimed. "More bullying?"

"Kenmore and Starke are always at it," growled Handforth. "But just lately they're running riot. Not ten minutes ago I found Kenmore out in the Triangle. And he was whopping Teddy Long with a whacking great ashplant. I thought murder was being

done at first. And Long's a Remove chap! I tell you, things are coming to a pass!"

"Don't worry your head, Handy," I said quietly. "Before long we'll take matters into our own hands—"

"Before long!" snorted Handforth.

"That's what I said."

"But why not now—to-night?"

"Because it's impossible—that's why not!" I replied shortly.

"And do you call yourself a leader!" roared Handforth. "It's my idea to get the whole Remove together in a body. Then we'll collar Starke and Kenmore, duck them in the fountain, and kick them round the Triangle."

"Oh, that's your idea, is it?"

"Yes, it is!"

"Then the best thing you can do with that idea is to bury it!" I said. "What would be the result of that game, Handy? About ten of us would get public floggings, and—"

"I don't mind being whopped for the good of the cause!" said Handforth.

"That's not the question," I replied. "It wouldn't be for the good of the cause. Starke and Kenmore would be worse than ever afterwards. Can't your little brain see that? It would be a victory for them—and victory means encouragement."

Sir Montie nodded wisely.

"Nipper's right, you know, Handy," he observed. "We don't see these things until they are pointed out, begad! There's nothing so bad as doin' a thing hurriedly. We've got to consider all the points beforehand."

"I don't see why we couldn't go for Starke and Kenmore to-night," said Handforth obstinately.

"Haven't I just told you why we can't?" I said. "We should have the pleasure of ragging the cads, I'll admit, but we should pay dearly for it, and Starke and Kenmore, instead of being squashed, would have more power than ever. No, Handy, if we do anything at all it must be done cautiously. But one thing is certain—the bullies are not going to have everything their own way. I'll see to that."

"Pity you can't leave it to me!" growled Handforth. "I'd soon make things hum, I can tell you!"

I grinned.

"They'd hum all right," I agreed. "But we should suffer more than the enemy. Ram-headed action, Handforth, is useless. I'm afraid you wouldn't make a good general—you're too impulsive. Just leave it to your uncle, and you won't be disappointed. The Form has relied on me in the past, and I won't let it down now."

"Oh, have your own silly way," grumbled Handforth.

"And sneaking is barred—"

"Do you think I shall sneak?" roared Handforth. "I've got nothing to sneak about, anyhow. Those rotters know better than to start on me! They'd bite off more than they could chew!"

"Yes, you would be a bit tough, Handy," I agreed. "And I wasn't thinking that you

would sneak. You're not that sort. But I have given word to Starke that the Remove would hold its own without appealing to a master. And the Remove will, too. We're quite capable of dealing with the bullies of the Sixth!"

And so, for the time being, the matter ended there.

We didn't know how far Starke and Kenmore, assisted by their College House supporters, were prepared to go. Perhaps the prefects would moderate their habits, and there would be no fight at all.

It was far more probable, however, that Starke and Co. would become worse. Well, if it really happened, the Remove was prepared. It wasn't likely that we should tamely submit to the tyranny of the Sixth-Form bullies!

CHAPTER III.

ON THE STROKE OF TWELVE!

"HUSH!"

That somewhat curious exclamation was uttered by Tommy Watson. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I were close beside him; and, to confess the truth straight away, I must explain that we were trespassing.

The time was approaching eleven-thirty, and we crouched within the front garden of The Poplars, the residence of Mr. William Maple. The cold night wind was blowing rather gustily, causing the trees to rustle and groan about us.

This was all to the good. A perfectly still night would have been awkward. For, somewhere near us, Inspector Jameson and his men were on the watch for the Mysterious X. The sighing wind prevented our movements from being heard.

"Don't make that noise, you ass," I whispered.

"I was warning Montie not to tread on so many twigs," explained Watson.

"Begad! That's frightfully unfair, you know," protested Sir Montie. "You were treadin' on the twigs yourself, Tommy—"

"Blow the twigs!" I snapped. "Can't you be quiet?"

We had no desire to let Inspector Jameson find us on Mr. Maple's property—yet. For we wanted to see what would happen at eleven-thirty. It was my own private opinion that the whole thing would turn out to be a mare's nest. And it would give me real pleasure to witness the discomfiture of the pompous inspector.

"Steady now!" I breathed. "I can see somebody!"

We had edged our way through some bushes, and now the house was right before us. We regarded it from an angle, so that we could see the front and one side. The building was an old one, and rather pretty, for it was covered with ivy from ground to roof. The rustic porch was a mass of creeper.

And my eyes, accustomed to the gloom, distinctly saw a man's figure beside the porch,

crouching against the ivy. At such a distance it was impossible to see who he was, or whether others were in the vicinity.

"One of Jameson's sleuths, I expect," I whispered. "Don't move from here, my sons. We can see splendidly, and if we go forward any further we might be spotted and mistaken for three editions of the Mysterious X!"

"Begad!" murmured Tregellis-West. "That would be frightfully awkward, old boy."

I smiled to myself as I tried to imagine myself in the unknown thief's place. Had I been the Mysterious X, I could have easily got past Jameson's cordon. Even as it was, I was fairly certain that my chums and I had passed two rural constables without their being aware of our proximity.

Several trees grew quite near to the house, and their branches overhung the low roof in places. There would have been nothing easier than to lurk in one of those trees well in advance, and to enter the house at the stroke of eleven-thirty without the police knowing anything about it.

The thief could make his exit by the same route and get clear away. I found myself seriously wondering if the Mysterious X really meant to commit the burglary as he had intimated. The prospect was by no means an impossible one.

But at the same time I did not expect any dramatic event to happen here. Later on we were to find that our night escapade would not conclude without some excitement; we were to discover that the jaunt was not to be entirely barren.

For the present, however, there was nothing doing.

"Past the time, isn't it?" breathed Watson cautiously.

I glanced at the luminous dial of my watch.

"No," I replied; "only twenty-five past yet. But you needn't think that anything startling will happen at half-past, my son."

"Oh, you never know," said Watson.

Meanwhile, Inspector Jameson was concealed behind a laurel bush just near the house. He had made his plans well—in his own opinion—and he was now having a last whispered word with P.C. Sparrow, the Bell-ton constable.

"If the fellow comes, Sparrow, we shall get him," declared the inspector confidently. "The time is drawing near now, so you must keep your wits about you."

"I'm ready enough, sir," said Sparrow.

"The other five men are stationed round the house, and if anything suspicious is seen we shall get the report," went on Jameson. "Now, Sparrow, I won't say that anything dangerous will happen, but we must be prepared."

"Dangerous, sir?"

"The burglar will probably be armed."

"My heye!" muttered the constable. "You mean with a stick or somethin', sir?"

"Not a stick, Sparrow," replied the inspector grimly. "A revolver, probably."

"And—and mebbe he'll shoot air?"

"It is quite probable."

"My heye!" said Sparrow again. "I—I hope he don't shoot me, sir!"

"That attitude won't do, Sparrow," said the inspector sharply. "We are after a desperate man, and you must do your duty—whatever the danger may be. If you fail, others will take your place."

The constable swallowed hard, but made no reply.

"And always remember, Sparrow," went on the inspector, "that this is a chance in a thousand. If you capture this rascal single-handed it will mean immediate promotion for you. That much I can promise."

"I've been very comfortable down here, sir," said Sparrow. "This village kind o' suits me. Promotion's all very well for them as wants it, but I'm not a man with ambitions, sir. Never was. I'd rather one o' the other men tackled this 'ere Mysterious Hex!"

"You must do your duty, Sparrow," said the inspector grimly.

As a matter of fact, Jameson himself was not feeling at all happy. The darkness, the wait, the moaning wind—all contributed to making the vigil eerie. And there was the knowledge that the desperate criminal was waiting, perhaps, somewhere near; lurking among the trees, ready to strike!

As a rule Jameson was not imaginative. But just now he found himself thinking of most unpleasant things. He had heard of cases where men had been struck down in the darkness silently and mysteriously.

What if this Mysterious X was armed with some kind of noiseless pistol? How easy it would be for him to shoot down his enemies, one by one! The worthy inspector heartily wished the night was over.

And from the village, borne on the night wind, came the chime of the church clock. Half-past eleven! It was the hour mentioned in the warning! Would the Mysterious X carry out his project?

Inspector Jameson held himself alert. He peered into the darkness on all sides anxiously and almost apprehensively. Affairs of this kind were not in Jameson's line at all. He was an excellent man for the ordinary routine work of the district; but this was different. Calm and collected to all outward appearance, Jameson was, nevertheless, nervous within.

But the minutes passed, one by one, and nothing happened.

The wind, if anything, was more blustery than ever, and at every fresh creak and moan the inspector's nervousness increased. As for Constable Sparrow, he was momentarily expecting an end to all existence.

But as nothing had occurred after a lapse of five minutes, Sparrow plucked up courage, and attempted to pull himself together.

"Don't seem as if he's comin', sir," he whispered hoarsely.

"Silence, man—silence!" muttered Jameson.

The constable's voice, to tell the truth, had rather startled the inspector, and he was irritable. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the burglar was fooling him in some

way. Jameson positively refused to consider the possibility of the Poplars being burgled under his very nose. Such a thought was too appalling. It would mean complete and lasting disgrace.

Jameson was rather sorry now that he had not taken Nelson Lee's advice. It would have been far better to have ignored that warning altogether. Now he came to think of it, the inspector realised that the Mysterious X had been bluffing.

At a quarter to twelve the situation was still the same, and the disappointed Jameson was forced to conclude that nothing would happen. His disappointment, however, was not quite so great as his relief.

Tregellis-West and Watson and I, in our place of concealment, were becoming rather chilled. But we were determined to "stick it" as long as the inspector. He certainly wouldn't withdraw his men until after midnight.

"And this is what you dragged us out of our beds for," growled Watson grumpily.

"Oh, don't make a fuss!" I said. "The night isn't over yet."

"My hat! We're not going to stop here all night, are we?"

"Of course not, you ass!" I muttered.

"Begad! Thank goodness!"

"In any case, it was only a bit of a jaunt," I went on. "I didn't expect much to happen, anyhow. Our time will come when old Jameson goes off, empty-handed. We'll nip round and meet him, and ask him where the Mysterious X is. I can just imagine the expression on his face!"

We chuckled, and felt rather better.

Waiting patiently, the time passed slowly, but at length the village church boomed out the hour of midnight. Mr. Maple's household, of course, were fast asleep; they knew nothing of the activities so near at hand.

"Oh, there's nothing doing," I murmured. "Half an hour over the time, and there isn't a sign of anything. If the inspector doesn't—"

"Begad!" breathed Montie. "What's that, old boys?"

There was really no need for Montie to ask. A bell was ringing insistently, and the sound came from the direction of the rustic porch. I peered forward into the gloom, but saw nothing.

"Queer!" I murmured. "What can it be?"

"Jameson ringing the front door bell, I suppose," said Watson.

"Rats! That bell is outside."

Inspector Jameson and Constable Sparrow, near the house, were under no delusion regarding that point. The bell was certainly ringing outside. But what on earth could it be?

The two men were thoroughly startled. The bell buzzed away quite near to them, and at the first sound of it Sparrow had jumped about three feet.

"Oh, my goodness me!" he gasped. "What—what's that, sir?"

"How the deuce do I know?" snapped the inspector testily.

He walked forward towards the porch, and

found that the sound was proceeding from the ivy close against the low, overhanging roof. And as the inspector peered up the sound abruptly ceased.

"Bless my soul!" he muttered. "I can swear that was an alarm clock!"

He turned quickly.

"Come here, Sparrow," he ordered.

The constable approached somewhat nervously.

"Don't—don't go too near, sir," he muttered. "For all we know, that might be one o' them infernal machines, an' we'll all go sky-high in the next minute. I've heered they work like a clock!"

"Don't be such a fool, Sparrow," snapped the inspector. "Do you think an infernal machine would give us a warning first? Don't get such alarming ideas in your muddled head! Bend down—I want to get on your back!"

"Yes, sir!" said the constable hastily.

He obeyed the order, and Jameson somewhat clumsily mounted upon his back. Then the inspector commenced fumbling amongst the ivy. His efforts, at first, were unsuccessful. Then he suddenly gave vent to an ejaculation.

"Ah!" he jerked out. "I was right, Sparrow! A clock!"

He gave a tug, and there was a slight snap. The motion caused the constable to lose his balance slightly, with the result that Jameson partially overbalanced and almost collapsed.

"You clumsy lout!" he snapped.

"I'm real sorry, sir," gasped Sparrow nervously. "You ain't dropped that clock, 'ave you, sir? There's no tellin' but wot it might blow up——"

"Confound you, Sparrow, don't make such a fool of yourself," interrupted the inspector. "Hold this clock!"

"Yes, sir," said the constable huskily.

He took it, and Jameson struck a match, shading it carefully from the wind with his hands. As the shaft of flickering light fell upon the face of the clock the inspector swore beneath his breath.

For there, stuck on the glass, was a card, and it bore the words: "Not this time, thanks.—THE MYSTERIOUS X."

"Just what I thought all along!" exclaimed Jameson, his voice harsh with suppressed anger and chagrin. "It's a hoax, Sparrow—an infernal hoax!"

"Infernal, sir?" panted Sparrow. "I thought there was somethin' fishy——"

"Oh, be quiet!"

The inspector was thoroughly fed up—with Sparrow as much as anything else. He realised that he ought to have had one of his own men by his side, and not this rural booby. And, in the midst of it, a window was sharply opened above their heads.

"Who—who's that down there?" came a nervous voice.

Jameson swore again.

"It's all right, sir," he called up gruffly.

"You're Mr. Maple, I suppose?"

"Yes. I heard a bell, and some voices——"

"There's nothing to worry about, sir," interrupted the inspector. "I'm a police

officer. I thought there was some marauder hanging about your place, so I came in to have a look round, with one of my men."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Maple. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, quite all right, you needn't alarm yourself at all," said Jameson testily. "Good night, sir. Follow me, Sparrow."

The inspector marched away, and he and the constable arrived in the road opposite the front gate.

"Go and tell the others to collect here, Sparrow," said the inspector curtly. "This affair has turned out badly, and I advise you to say nothing about it to-morrow. We don't want the district laughing at us."

"I don't reckon they'd laugh at me, sir," said Sparrow, as he hurried away.

"Confounded impudence!" muttered the inspector.

He knew, however, that the constable was quite right. It was he—Jameson—who would receive the brunt of the chaffing if the story got about. And while the inspector was standing there he gave an abrupt start. For clearly upon the night air came the unmistakable sound of suppressed boyish laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good gracious!" muttered Jameson hoarsely. "Upon my soul!"

He peered up the road anxiously, and with increasing fury.

"Who's that?" he called.

He soon received a reply, for three figures emerged from the hedge and approached him. The inspector clenched his fists as he recognised the figures of Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and my humble self.

"Rather a stiff wind to-night, inspector," I said cheerily.

"What—what are you doing here, boys?" demanded Jameson, grabbing my arm fiercely. "Why are you out of your beds at this hour of the night?"

"Begad, sir, there's no need to get angry," remarked Sir Montie, in a mild voice. "We shall get into frightful trouble if you report us, you know—an' I'm quite sure that you're too sportin' to do anythin' like that."

Inspector Jameson stamped his feet impatiently.

"I was talking to you, Nipper," he exclaimed. "What are you doing here—what have you been doing here? Good heavens! Have you had the utter audacity to play a trick upon me—me?"

"Play a trick, inspector?" I said, in a shocked voice. "Surely you don't think that we would dare to offend the majesty of the law like that? We simply came here to see you capture the Mysterious X. I suppose you've got him tied up somewhere?"

The inspector nearly swore again—but remembered our youth.

"I want you to tell me the absolute truth, Nipper," he said harshly. "Have you played this trick on me? Did you send me that letter—and did you place this clock, set so that the alarm would go off at midnight, in the ivy of the porch?"

I chuckled.

"I don't blame you for suspecting us, sir,"

I said. "As a matter of fact, it does look a bit fishy, us being here. But we only came to see how things went. We don't know anything about the clock."

"You're not deceiving me?" asked Jameson suspiciously.

"Oh, really, sir!" protested Montie.

"We sin't flars!" growled Watson.

"You can take my word, inspector, that we're innocent," I said cheerfully. "But that clock dodge was rather neat, wasn't it? The Mysterious X bluffed you into coming here, made you wait, and then allowed you to know how beautifully you'd been dished. The chap's jolly ingenious, I must say."

"You'd better get off home," grunted Jameson. "You ought to be flogged for being out at this time of night, you young rascals. And I shall certainly mention the matter to Mr. Lee when I see him next time. And please understand that I have not been bluffed—I never expected to take the fellow!"

"I say, sir, you're not going to report us?" asked Watson indignantly.

The inspector nodded his head grimly.

"I shall certainly do so," he declared, with obvious satisfaction.

"Well, good-night, sir," I said, preparing to move off. "I had an idea that you wouldn't like this affair talked about in the district. But, of course, if you're going to talk about it yourself, it shows you don't mind us telling the other fellows in the morning."

"We'll tell the whole giddy neighbourhood!" grunted Watson.

We walked off, leaving Jameson fuming.

"Look here, boys!" he shouted. "I will reconsider—"

But we walked on, pretending not to hear. I thought it was decidedly mean of the pompous inspector to threaten to report us for being out—and it served him right to be told that we intended to talk.

It was too late now for him to make any bargain. We didn't mind being reported, for the simple reason that the gov'nor would know all about it in any case. And we certainly didn't see why we should keep such a rich joke to ourselves.

We went off, chuckling. But we did not realise that the night's adventures were by no means over.

For we were destined to encounter the Mysterious X after all!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MARK ON THE CHEEK!

THIS burglar fellow seems to be an original sort of merchant," I remarked, as we strode briskly through the silent village. "He's not without a sense of humour, either. But why did he play that trick, my sons?"

"A joke, I suppose," said Watson.

"Burglars don't play jokes for the mere fun of it," I said, shaking my head. "There was something behind it, Tommy. And the most obvious explanation is that some other

house is being plundered even at this minute."

"Begad! You don't really think so, old boy?"

"I do!" I replied. "Just remember what's been happening lately. There were two burglaries, and Inspector Jameson, at the beginning of this week, decided to put another policeman on this local beat, in addition to Sparrow. For the past two or three nights there have been two bobbies roaming about. Well, that's rather off-side for a man who wants to commit burglaries."

"But what's this got to do with the affair at the Pops?" asked Watson.

"My dear chap, you're rather dull to-night," I said patiently. "Didn't Jameson have all the available men with him at Mr. Maple's place? What was the result? Every other part of the district has been deserted, leaving a clear field for the thief."

"Well, I dare say there's something in it," admitted Watson. "Great pip! That's half-past twelve just gone. Let's run."

"Dear fellow, I positively refuse," said Montie. "Runnin' disarranges a fellow's clothes in the most shockin' manner. I don't mind it when it's necessary, but five or ten minutes won't make much difference now. I ain't particular about losin' a little beauty sleep. We'll take it quietly, old boy."

"Lazy beggar!" said Tommy shortly.

"Good gracious!" said Tregellis-West, in a mild voice. "Haven't you found that out before? I'm frightfully lazy—an' I don't mind admittin' it. I really suppose I'm the laziest fellow at St. Frank's, barrin' Teddy Long an' the Nuts. But what's the good of bein' energetic in this life? Work is a shockin' bore—it is, really."

"Finished?" I grinned. "What an old swindler you are, Montie!"

"Begad! That's an appallin' character to give me."

"You're a swindler!" I repeated. "You always try to make out that work is a bore, that you're a slacker; but when it gets down to hard fact, you're really one of the most active fellows in the whole Remove. On the footer-field you're as fast as the best—I say! Did you see—"

I broke off abruptly, sinking my voice as I spoke.

We happened to be passing the vicarage, and while speaking I had glanced carelessly through the gateway. The night was still gloomy, but it was possible to see in a dim kind of way for quite a little distance. And I was ready to swear that I had seen a figure stealing away from the vicar's house, across the lawn.

"Did you see what, you ass?" asked Watson.

"Shut up!" I whispered. "Hold still for a minute."

I ran to the bank, climbed it, and peered over the neatly trimmed hedge. And then I set my teeth grimly. I had not been mistaken. There, stealing across the open expanse of the lawn, was a crouching figure.

He was making towards the lower hedge, which bordered a large meadow. And I

dropped back into the road and stared at my chums.

"Somebody has just come away from the vicarage," I explained, in a low voice. "It's suspicious, and I mean to get busy. If that fellow isn't the Mysterious X, I'm a Dutchman. Who else would be prowling about at this hour?"

"Oh, you've been fancying----" began Watson.

"Rather not, old fellow," interrupted Montie. "Nipper ain't the chap to fancy things."

There was no time to waste, and I hurried down the lane, knowing that my chums would follow. They did so, but by the time I reached a spot two hundred yards down they were still some distance behind.

I was now facing a gap which gave upon the bordering meadow. Pushing my way through, I instantly saw the strange figure moving across the meadow in the direction of the river.

I made up my mind swiftly.

"Come on, you chaps!" I hissed.

Perhaps I spoke rather too loudly. At all events I saw the figure check, turn round, and stare in my direction. Then it went on again—but now it ran, and I clenched my teeth with vexation.

Without waiting for Montie and Tommy to arrive I dashed away, running with every ounce of speed of which I was capable. It was a chase, and the very fact that the unknown had fled proved that he had been up to no good. There was no shadow of doubt, in fact, that he was the Mysterious X himself.

I ran madly, a wild hope filling me that I might be able to capture the marauder. If I could only overtake him, and get him to fight, sufficient delay might be caused to enable my chums to arrive in time to effect the capture.

I should probably be knocked about considerably at first, but this point did not occur to me in the excitement of the moment. I simply wanted to overtake the fellow—to get to grips with him.

And my hopes ran higher and higher as I saw that I was gaining. Without the slightest doubt, I was gaining. And then came a stroke of luck. The fugitive, in his panic, tripped.

Over he went, sprawling. And while he was picking himself up I gained enormously. By the time he was fairly on the run once more the distance which separated us was not greater than fifty yards.

And from the rear I heard the thuds of my chums' footfalls upon the damp turf. The situation was full of possibilities. I had never hoped for such an opportunity as this, and I meant to make the best of it. Wouldn't the guv'nor look pleased when we announced that we had captured the daring crook?

The thief himself was probably under the impression that he was being chased by police officers. In that gloom he couldn't have known that we were mere schoolboys.

But, in any case, his only course was to flee. Although a good sprinter, he was not up to my form. His pace slackened, and I distinctly heard him panting laboriously as he ran. As for myself, I was still fresh, and capable of further spurts if necessary.

We were just at the other end of the meadow, and I clenched my teeth in desperation and raced on. Then, to my surprise, the fugitive turned at bay. I was on him almost before I knew it.

He was tall and lean, and attired in a black cloak and a close-fitting cap. His face was heavily bearded, but that's all I could see. And the beard, in all probability, was false.

"Rescue, Remove!" I shouted breathlessly.

The Mysterious X said nothing. He simply charged at me like a madman, punching, kicking, and gasping for breath.

I was not quite prepared for such vicious, whirlwind attacks. And almost before I could reach him I received a frightful kick on the left shin.

"Oh, you brute!" I gasped, in agony.

The blow infuriated me, and I lunged forward blindly. My clenched fist struck him squarely on the right cheek; I felt my knuckles jar against the bone. The man reeled back, recovered, and again attacked.

This time he meant business, and his gloved fist smashed into my face with stunning force. I had attempted to guard the blow, but was a moment too late. And I thudded to the ground, seeing stars by the hundred.

It was the finish.

By the time I sat up, dazed and bewildered, the Mysterious X had vanished, and Trezellis West and Watson were just arriving. My late opponent had evidently plunged through the hedge, and was now completely lost. There were thick trees beyond, and it would have been idle to search.

"Are you hurt?" panted Watson, in alarm.

"Not a bit!" I groaned painfully. "You might tell me if my nose is still in the middle of my face? It doesn't seem to be there somehow, and I'm quite sure that five or six inches of skin are missing from my left shin."

"It was amazin'ly plucky of you, Nipper boy!" gasped Sir Montie.

"Oh, rats!" I said, staggering to my feet. "What a beastly shame! If you chaps had only come up a minute ago, we should have got him. Why the dickens didn't you run harder?"

"We nearly burst a dozen blood-vessels, anyhow!" exclaimed Watson jerkily. "Oh, my hat! I haven't run like it for weeks! But you were a marvel, Nipper—we couldn't get anywhere near you."

"Yes, I did run," I admitted, tenderly feeling my nose. "I don't blame you for not coming up—you did your best, I know. Well, it was a near shave, and the Mysterious X was nearly collared. No good grumbling."

I examined my shin cautiously, and found that it was bleeding steadily, the skin having been torn for over two inches. That shin

would be tender for days, and I should limp on the morrow.

"My handkerchief is quite clean, dear boy!" said Montie, with concern. "Pray let me bind it round, an' then Tommy and I will assist you home. You've been marked frightfully, you know."

I started.

"Talking of being marked," I said, "the Mysterious X must be marked, too! I caught him a beautiful smack on the right cheek. If I didn't break the skin, there'll be a black bruise there."

"Well, suppose there is?" asked Watson.

"It may be important," I said. "We don't know who the man is, but that mark will serve as a clue, don't forget. If the ratter is somebody living in the district—somebody we know—that bruise will give him away."

"I expect he'll lie low for a bit," said Watson.

"If he can," I added. "Perhaps he won't be able to without creating suspicion. Anyhow, it's no good talking about it. Let's get back to our little cots. I shall want about a gallon of water to wash my honourable wounds."

I soon found that my leg was paining very badly even then, and I only walked with difficulty. So I was extremely glad when we arrived in the Triangle and entered the Ancient House by way of the window of Study C.

Creeping upstairs, we expected to get to the Remove dormitory without a hitch. It was nearly one o'clock, and the whole school, we presumed, was fast asleep. This, however, was not the case.

For, just as we turned into the upper landing we heard a door open.

"Hist!" whispered Watson hurriedly.

The next second the landing became flooded with light, and we found ourselves staring at Starke and Kenmore of the Sixth. They were both in pyjamas, but were very wide awake, and didn't look as though they had just got up from their beds. I strongly suspected, in fact, that they had been having a gay time with cards in some other senior's bedroom.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Starke, staring. He strode forward.

"Where have you juniors been to?" he demanded.

"Downstairs," I replied shortly. "No harm in that, is there?"

"I suppose you got all that mud on your clothes downstairs?"

"Well, I didn't get it upstairs," I replied.

"You cheeky young ruffian!" snapped Starke. "A fine state of things, I must say! What do you think of it, Kenmore? Three Remove kids just come in from the village! This'll probably mean the sack, you little blackguards!"

I looked at Starke steadily.

"You needn't be quite so free with your

abuse, Starke," I said. "We've broken bounds—it's no good denying that—and we're prepared to pay for it. The only thing you can do is to report us. Good-night!"

Sir Montie and Tommy smiled to themselves, and Starke snapped his teeth.

"No, you don't!" he exclaimed viciously. "Mr. Lee allows you three juniors to do pretty much as you like—he's altogether too soft. I'm not going to report you. I'm going to give you the punishment you deserve now."

"Oh, don't be silly——"

"Silence!" snapped Starke. "The three of you will write five hundred lines each, and you're gated for the rest of the week. You ought to consider yourselves lucky for getting off so lightly. Now get to your dormitories."

"Look here——" began Watson.

"Oh, come on!" I interrupted wearily.

"But I'm not going to take that punishment!" snorted Watson. "I want to be reported!"

"And you will be reported if you don't bring those lines to my study by tea-time to-morrow," said Starke. "That's enough—cut off!"

I seized Tommy's arm and forced him to walk along the passage. I was feeling achy and my head was throbbing in the most painful manner. There was really nothing to be gained by prolonging this scene.

As soon as we got into the Remove dormitory Watson started on me.

"You silly ass!" he hissed. "If we'd stuck out and forced Starke to report us to Mr. Lee, we should have been let off with fifty lines each——"

"No, we shouldn't!" I interrupted. "We might suspect that Starke and Kenmore have been gambling or something, but we can't prove it. They would have reported us, I'll admit—but what then? The gov'nor would have been compelled to punish us severely."

"But we've been out before——"

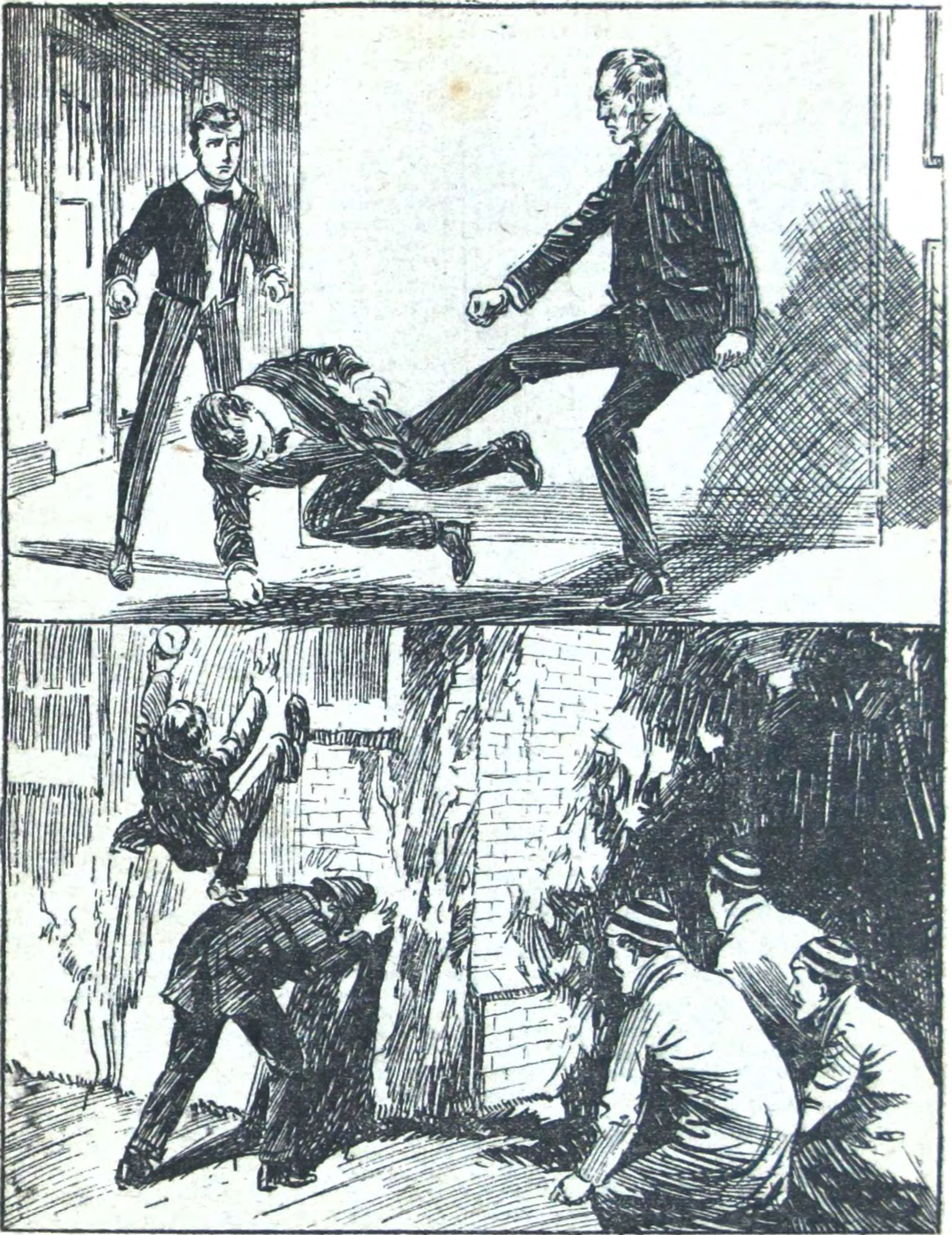
"Very likely; but only Mr. Lee has known about it," I explained. "Could he have given us just fifty lines for breaking bounds in the middle of the night—with Starke in the know? Why, the whole House would have been talking about it inside an hour. The chaps would call it favouritism, and a whole fuss would have been made. I dare say the Head would have flogged us—not because we deserve it, but because it's the usual punishment for breaking bounds."

"But Starke wouldn't have reported us, you fathead!"

"Oh, yes, he would—and he might even now!" I replied. "He and Kenmore were in pyjamas, and they might have jumped out of bed, for all we know. It's rough luck, but there's no getting out of it."

"You're quite right, old boy," said Sir Montie resignedly. "Five hundred lines, and a gatin' for the rest of the week. Begad! Ain't we havin' a rippin' night of it?"

And we, undressed and got into bed, fuming.



1. Nipper was just in time to see Starke kick the Third-Former, as the fag collapsed on the floor. (See page 4.)

2. Inspector Jameson gave a tug, and the motion caused the constable to lose his balance elightly, with the result that the inspector collapsed. (See page 9.)

CHAPTER V.

SCHEMERS OF THE SIXTH!

WALTER STARKE was in a very good humour the next morning.

Quite unexpectedly, he had been granted an opportunity of inflicting punishment upon the three fellows he disliked more than any others. And we, for our part, were not in a position to defy him.

Of course, I should tell the gov'nor that we had been spotted by the prefect, but Nelson Lee wouldn't be able to alter the situation. To inquire into it, indeed, would only be to make matters worse.

"We've got to do those lines, old scouts," I said, as we descended into the lobby. "If we don't, we shall be reported to the Head, instead of to the gov'nor. And you know what that means."

"I don't mind the lines so much," growled Watson. "It's the gating I kick against."

I grinned.

"We'll ignore the gating," I remarked. "If Starke likes to make a fuss, he can do it. I shall go along to the gov'nor's study soon, and tell him what happened last night. How does my face look?"

Sir Montie eyed me critically.

"Your nose, dear boy, is slightly larger than usual, but there's nothin' much to notice," he replied. "It's really a wonder you weren't marked more severely. But I'm afraid your shin is frightfully painful."

"I shall get over it," I said cheerfully. "As for the Mysterious——"

I broke off in the middle of my sentence. Frinton, of the Sixth, was just descending the stairs. Frinton was not a prefect, and the Remove rarely had anything to do with him. He was a frequent visitor in Starke's study, and was generally regarded as a rotter.

But what startled me was a distinct bruise upon Frinton's right cheek! It was no ordinary bruise, but the result of a violent blow. Frinton went past us without even looking in our direction, and passed out into the Triangle.

"Did you see it?" asked Watson breathlessly.

"Yes," I replied.

"But—but Frinton can't be——"

"Of course he can't," I interrupted. "Just a coincidence, that's all. I'll admit it took me by surprise for a moment, but it would be too mad to suppose that a St. Frank's fellow is a common burglar."

"Oh, preposterous, dear fellows!" said Montie flatly.

At the same time, we were all struck by the thing. And we passed out into the Triangle to discuss it in private. And then we received another shock.

Wilkins, one of the ostlers, attached to the College House, was passing at that very moment, whistling cheerfully. He was a tall young fellow, lean and wiry. And the very first thing we noticed was—a severe bruise on his right cheek!

"My only Aunt Jane!" exclaimed Watson blankly.

The bruise was different from Frinton's, being larger. But it was a bruise such as my blow might have caused. So, for that matter, was Frinton's. This was merely another coincidence, but it had the effect of dividing the suspicion equally between the Sixth-Former and the ostler.

And yet both suspicions were palpably absurd.

Of the two, Wilkins was far more likely to be the culprit. But I couldn't imagine him playing the part of the Mysterious X. And Frinton, as the culprit, was dismissed from my mind at once.

"It's simply amazin'," murmured Sir Montie, staring after the ostler's retreating figure. "It is really, dear fellows."

"Not half so amazing as you seem to imagine," I replied. "There are hundreds of fellows in this school, remember, and bruises are fairly common. There's nothing amazing in the fact that two chaps bear a mark which might have been caused by my fist. We shall probably be suspecting somebody else before long."

And, as a matter of fact, we were.

Directly after breakfast Tommy Watson ran down to the village on his bicycle. And when he returned he made the surprising announcement that a tall stranger was staying at the George Inn—and he possessed a beautiful bruise on his right cheek! The man was tall, and he professed to be—so Watson believed—a commercial traveller.

"He's the Mysterious X!" declared Tommy excitedly.

"Well, I'll admit he's a far more likely candidate than the other two," I said. "But we can't be certain, old chap. Three fellows with bruises! Dash it all, it's queer, whatever you say."

Without wasting any further time I went to Nelson Lee's study and told the gov'nor exactly what had happened. He listened gravely until I had finished, and then nodded his head approvingly.

"A very plucky attempt of yours, Nipper," he said. "It was hard luck the fellow getting away. And it was still harder luck to be seen by Starke and Kenmore on your return. I'm afraid I can't lighten that sentence—although you know I would if I could. But it wouldn't look well, Nipper."

"I quite understand that, sir," I replied.

"By the way, what were the prefects doing at that hour?"

"I don't know, gov'nor."

"How were they dressed?"

"In pyjamas," I replied.

"Then I'm afraid we cannot raise the matter," said Lee. "Whatever suspicions I may have, young 'un, it is impossible to prove anything. Starke and Kenmore might have been disturbed by your movements—on the other hand, they might have been very wide awake before your arrival. I am afraid those two seniors are inclined to bad habits."

"They're a couple of beasts, sir," I said, with feeling. "But we don't want to talk about Starke and Kenmore. What's your

opinion about those three bruised cheeks? Do you think one of—"

"You may as well count out Frinton and the ostler," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Obviously, they are not likely to be connected with the mysterious individual who has been so active of late. They are really above suspicion. With regard to the man in the village, I will make inquiries concerning him as soon as possible."

"I think it would be just as well, sir," I agreed. "But where were you last night? Sleeping peacefully in your little cot?"

The gov'nor shook his head, and smiled.

"No, Nipper," he replied. "I was prowling about somewhere, but I met with no luck. It was a wasted night, in a way, although that does not worry me. A detective cannot always meet with success. It seems that you had the only success—"

"Success!" I echoed. "A fine success—I don't think!"

"My dear lad, you met the Mysterious X, and you marked him," said Lee. "Well, that is something accomplished, at all events. There is a distinct hope that I may be able to follow up the matter successfully."

"And what about the vicar, sir?" I asked. "Have you heard anything?"

"About a burglary, you mean?"

"Yes, gov'nor."

"The Rev. Ethelbert Goodchild has made no report so far, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "But it is early yet, and we have every reason to believe that the Vicarage was plundered last night. Perhaps we shall hear something later."

"I reckon the vicar was, sir," I remarked.

"Was what?"

"A good child to be given a name like that," I grinned.

"Upon my soul, Nipper, you have a fine nerve to make your infernal puns in this study," said the gov'nor severely. "Take yourself off, unless you want to be kicked out!"

"That's a fine way for a Housemaster to talk to a helpless junior," I said reproachfully. "I shall have to— Whoa! Steady on with that dictionary!"

I fled, for the gov'nor looked dangerous. Sir Montie and Tommy listened to my report with interest, when I arrived in Study C.

"There's nothin' to do now, except wait for Mr. Lee's inquiries to develop," observed Tregellis-West languidly. "I have an idea that the fellow in the village is the culprit. But it is frightfully mysterious, old boys; it is, really."

It was only natural that we should be anxious to learn if any burglary had occurred at the Vicarage. For, if there had been, it would prove beyond question that the man I had struggled with was the Mysterious X himself.

After morning lessons, however, I learned that no word had been received of anything unusual. The vicar, as a matter of fact, had been seen by several fellows, but there had been no signs of agitation upon the reverend gentleman's mild countenance.

"Looks as though we made a bloomer last night," said Watson.

"That's not likely," I objected. "It's far more probable that the Mysterious X was about to burgle the house, and cleared off because he heard our footsteps. Still, it's no good conjecturing."

By this time, of course, the whole neighbourhood was chuckling over the fiasco at the Poplars during the night. Although we had threatened to Inspector Jameson to talk freely about the affair, we had actually said nothing.

It had leaked out by some other means. In all probability one of the rural constables had been expressing his views over a pot of beer. P.C. Sparrow was quite capable of such a thing, since gossiping was usually his pastime in Belton.

The St. Frank's fellows grinned with delight. Inspector Jameson was not popular, and to learn that he had been made a fool of by the unknown burglar was rather rich.

"Serves the old ass right," declared Handforth. "Perhaps he won't be so jolly overbearing in future."

"He deserves to be taken down a peg or two," agreed McClure.

"Oh, rather," said Church. "Just fancy the old inspector waiting for hours, and then arresting a giddy alarm-clock!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rich ain't the word for it," grinned McClure.

It was a half-holiday that day, and the Ancient House juniors were playing the College House juniors. Faces were somewhat gloomy after dinner, for the sky was overcast, and a slight drizzle had commenced falling.

"Just our luck," growled Watson, staring up at the sky from the Ancient House steps. "This rain looks like keeping on, too."

"If it doesn't get any worse than this we shall be all right," I remarked. "Hallo! Make way for the noble dukes!"

Tommy Watson snorted, and didn't budge.

Mills and Jesson, of the College House, were mounting the steps somewhat majestically. They were Sixth-Formers, and from their attitude one might have supposed that the Ancient House was their personal property.

"Qucer how some fellows are stuck up," said Watson, with a sniff.

Jesson scowled as he looked round.

"None of your confounded cheek!" he snapped.

"How did you know I was referring to you?" asked Watson bluntly. "If the cap fits you're at liberty to wear it; I don't mind!"

The two prefects glared, and entered the lobby. They were powerless to do anything but glare, for they had no authority in the Ancient House.

Two minutes later Handforth and Co. appeared, and Edward Oswald was shaking his head solemnly.

"I tell you there's something on!" he declared.

"Well, suppose there is?" asked Church.

"It's none of our business—"

"Rot!" snapped Handforth. "Of course, I don't expect you chaps to understand."

you're too jolly dull. It needs brains to understand things!"

"I suppose that's why you're always so dense. Handy?" I asked.

Handforth glared.

"If you're suggesting I haven't got any brains," he roared, "I'll jolly soon show you whether I have or not."

"How?" I asked. "Nobody's ever seen 'em!"

"Oh, don't rot!" growled Handforth. "I keep on telling those asses that there's something on, and they ignore it. I've never known such apathy in all my life! Just when the Remove ought to be wide awake—"

"But what's the trouble?" I asked.

"Didn't you see Mills and Jesson come in?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Those two rotters have just gone into Starke's study," said Handforth grimly. "Starke's study, mind you. And not five minutes ago Frinton, of the Sixth, went in, with Simms, of the Fifth. With Kenmore, that makes six of the worst outsiders in the school. What the dickens are they all doing in one study?"

"My dear chap, it's no good asking me," I replied. "I should say they're holding a smoking concert, or something of that kind. They believe in that sort of rot, you know."

"And three or four of 'em prefects!" snorted Handforth. "A fine set, I must say! They ain't fit to be prefects in a reformatory!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "Some more visitors, dear boys."

We looked round. Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth, were hurrying across the Triangle from the College House, to which they belonged.

"More of the same breed!" exclaimed Handforth gruffly. "I'll bet a quid they're making for Starke's study. Eight of the cads altogether. There's something on, I tell you—some rotten scheming or other."

Grayson and Shaw were renowned as the bullies of the Fifth, and they looked somewhat apprehensive as they mounted the steps. Being merely Fifth-Formers, they had no real power, and it was no uncommon event for them to be ragged by a crowd of sportive Ancient House Removites.

"Don't touch 'em!" I murmured. "We don't want a scrap now."

Grayson and Shaw walked in, trying to look unconcerned. And Handforth followed at a distance, to return a minute later.

"I told you so!" he said darkly. "Starke's study!"

I nodded thoughtfully.

"Looks suspiciously like a meeting," I said. "Starke could hardly have seven fellows at a card-party in his study. Too much of a crowd for that. I'll bet anything that those rotters are preparing something for us."

"Us?" said Handforth, staring.

"Exactly," I agreed. "Have you ever known an alliance like this before? There are equal numbers of Ancient House and College House seniors at that meeting. It's my opinion they mean to gain the upper

hand of us, if they can. It's up to us to squash the movement before it gains any strength."

"But how?" asked Watson pointedly.

"We can't decide a thing like that in a minute," I replied. "It wants careful handling, and I suggest that we hold a meeting this evening——"

"This evening!" interrupted Handforth. "Why not now? Why not get up a crowd at once, storm Starke's study, and kick——"

"What a chap you are for offensive measures!" I interrupted. "It's no good, Handy; we can't do things in that ram-headed way. Besides, there's the footer match for this afternoon."

"You fellows asleep?" came a hail through the rain.

Bob Christine and Co. were approaching, and I waved to them.

"We'll leave this discussion until later on," I said briskly. "Come on, my sons!"

And five minutes later we had dismissed Starke and his supporters and were lining up on Little Side for the House match. The drizzle had almost stopped, and there were some breaks in the clouds. We should probably have fine weather, after all.

Meanwhile, our surmises with regard to what was passing in Walter Starke's study were not far from the mark. The bullies, to tell the truth, were combining forces with a definite object in view.

It had been Starke's idea to begin with, and it was he who had called the meeting. When Mills and Jesson arrived they found Starke, Kenmore, Frinton, and Simms lounging before the fire, smoking.

"Haven't you brought the other two?" asked Starke, looking round.

"Grayson and Shaw are coming in a minute," said Jesson. "I don't quite agree with it myself, Starke——"

"Don't agree with what?"

"Well, I don't see why those Fifth-Formers should butt in," replied Jesson.

"Eh?" said Simms, glaring.

"Oh, you're a Fifth-Former, of course," grinned Jesson. "Sorry. No offence. But this was to be a Sixth-Form conclave, I thought."

Starke shook his head.

"Not exactly," he replied. "We're all in it, and you'll understand soon, when I outline the situation."

The visitors helped themselves to cigarettes from Starke's box, and seated themselves on the edge of the table.

"The juniors are getting a jolly sight too cheeky," remarked Mills. "Just now, when we came in, a beastly Remove kid insulted us in the most barefaced way. Pity you can't keep 'em in hand better, Starke."

"I'll have 'em in hand before long," said Starke, scowling. "Who was it—the chap who cheeked you, I mean?"

"Watson."

"I'll remember it," said Starke, as the door opened. "Oh, here you are," he added, as Grayson and Shaw entered. "Shut the door, and lock it. We don't want any interruptions during this meeting."

Grayson looked round somewhat nervously.

"The smoke's pretty thick, isn't it?" he suggested. "We could smell it outside, Starke. If a master happens to go along the passage——"

"Oh, don't worry," interrupted Starke. "Lee's out this afternoon, I believe, and it doesn't matter, anyhow. Masters know better than to poke their noses along this passage on a half-holiday. I don't know what old Stockdale does on your side, but we're safe here."

"Stockdale never interferes," remarked Jesson.

"He shoves his nose in the Fifth-Form passage sometimes," grunted Shaw. "That's just the difference; you fellows are in the Sixth, and can do as you like. Hand us a cigarette, somebody."

The party settled down, and Grayson suggested cards.

"Cards be hanged!" said Starke sharply. "This is a meeting, not a card-party. The subject under discussion is to be the growing independence of the juniors. It's got to stop; the little beggars are getting too cheeky."

"How can we stop it?" asked Jesson. "I suppose the kids of your House will always cheek us, and the kids of our House will always cheek you. There's no checking that sort of thing."

"It's going to be checked, anyhow," declared Starke grimly. "Last night Nipper had the infernal nerve to defy me to my face. Told me to go and eat coke—or practically the same thing."

"Didn't you smash him?" asked Mills.

Starke gritted his teeth.

"That kid's difficult to deal with," he said. "He'd come across me cuffing one of the fags, and if I had punished him he'd have sneaked. That's just the trouble. We ought to be able to cuff the kids just as we like, without being in fear of sneaking."

"I fancy you're wrong," put in Frinton, shaking his head. "I've watched Nipper a good bit, and I don't believe he's the kind of fellow to sneak, Starke. And he's a tough youngster to deal with, don't forget that. I should advise you to go easy with him."

"Yes, being a pal of Lee's——"

"That makes no difference," went on Frinton. "I've never known Nipper to run to Lee over a grievance. He deals with things himself. And, what's more, he generally gets home once he starts. We'd better go easy with him."

"So that's the idea, is it?" he exclaimed. "You're all scared of a Removite, just because he happens to be more independent than the rest. He's the one junior we're out to squash. And he's going to be squashed. And Christine must be dealt with on your side, Jesson. Christine is the leader of your juniors, and he generally takes his cue from Nipper. If we deal with those two youngsters the rest will knuckle under like putty."

"But how can we deal with them?" asked Jesson doubtfully.

"By combining forces," replied Starke. "The main thing is to get the juniors under our thumb. They'll have a rough time of it first, and we shall have some trouble. But

in the end we shall be masters. Meetings of juniors, for example, are to be forbidden——"

"Hang it all, we can't forbid meetings," interrupted Mills. "The juniors can collect together if they like."

"If we're going to stick to rules and regulations, we sha'n't do anything," said Starke grimly. "Our plan is to take matters into our own hands. There might be some sneaking at first, but we shall have to risk that. But sneaking won't go on for long, after we've dealt with the little brats who blab. If we only keep the game up without a pause, we shall have the juniors trembling within a fortnight."

"It seems to be a kind of league," remarked Jesson. "Well, I'm with you, right through. And I can speak for these other fellows, too. The juniors have been too independent altogether. Your idea, Starke, is to make a bid for complete power—eh?"

"That's it exactly," agreed Starke. "We can't do it all at once, but by pegging away without a pause—by being absolutely ruthless—we shall gain the day. We're scheming for full and complete authority. It's been done in other schools, and it can be done here. I'm sick to death of being checked by Third-Formers and Removites. It's going to stop, and the young cads are booked for the worst time they ever experienced."

"It doesn't seem worth it, to my mind," remarked Frinton. "What the deuce is the good of taking all this trouble, Starke? The juniors don't bother us much, and I'm hanged if I can see any advantage we should gain——"

"Are you against it, then?" demanded Starke.

"Not exactly——"

"Because, if you are, you can clear out," said Starke sourly.

"I'm not against it," declared Frinton. "My only objection is that the game doesn't seem worth the candle. But you can count me in with you; I'm willing to do my share. But you've only spoken in a general kind of way, Starke. You haven't outlined any definite programme."

"We haven't settled upon a definite programme yet," said Starke. "This is only a preliminary discussion, after all. I've got heaps of ideas in my head—some really stunning schemes for squashing the juniors. By the end of this term we'll be complete masters. That's my ideal."

And the meeting of bullies discussed ways and means at some length. Nothing positive was decided upon; but there was no doubt whatever that the seniors were determined to commence a reign of terror in both Houses at St. Frank's.

They overlooked the one important point that the juniors would not submit. Starke and Co. fondly believed that the juniors would knuckle under after the first two or three bouts.

But Starke and Co. were wrong.

The Remove would fight for its independence to the last breath. A big tussle was coming, and the juniors would suffer considerably to begin with. But bullying

never pays in the long run—and it wouldn't pay now.

A bitter struggle was inevitable, and it was destined to be a long one.

CHAPTER VI.

A FEW INQUIRIES.

NELSON LEE, contrary to Starke's belief, was not out that afternoon. The schoolmaster-detective reclined languidly before the fire in his own study, and his thoughts were the reverse of languid.

Lee, in fact, was thinking deeply. He was rather irritated by the continued problem of the Mysterious X. Affairs of a far more serious character had frequently been settled by Nelson Lee within a few days—sometimes within a few hours.

But somehow this audacious rascal was elusive. The Mysterious X was no desperate criminal; that much was obvious. His thefts, after all, were never considerable; he contented himself with minor burglaries.

So far he had gained precisely nothing, and he had proved himself to be a man with a certain sense of decency. In the first robbery Dr. Brett had been suspected, and the Mysterious X had returned the stolen goods solely in order to clear the doctor from suspicion. That was unquestionably a sporting action.

In the second robbery Nelson Lee had recovered the stuff promptly, although the burglar had eluded pursuit, and could not be traced. And then had come the absurd incident of the Poplars. The Mysterious X had threatened to burgle the place under the eyes of the police, but had done nothing of the sort.

Nelson Lee had never believed that he would. As Lee had told Inspector Jameson, this enterprising thief was not a second "Arsene Lupin." He was audacious, certainly, and he possessed a strong nerve. But he was not fool enough to run his head into a noose.

On the contrary, the Mysterious X had displayed remarkable caution in all his actions. Not once had he left a clue behind him, unless by accident. And his identity was hidden in mystery.

Nelson Lee thought nothing of the bruises I had mentioned. Frinton of the Sixth was out of the question; the ostler was a man of good character; and the stranger in the village was obviously innocent. The fact that the three possessed bruised cheeks was curious, but not particularly significant.

And it was fairly certain that the actual thief would remain in hiding until the bruise had vanished. Or possibly my fist had not marked him as severely as I supposed. All these points Nelson Lee dealt with, and yet he could come to no conclusion. There was no doubt about it the unknown marauder was an interesting character, and his identity could not even be guessed at.

With regard to the "suspected" three, I may as well state at once that Nelson Lee had already made all the inquiries he thought necessary. And he had found that

Frinton, Wilkins, and the commercial traveller all had solid alibis.

Who, then, was the man I had marked?

In the midst of Nelson Lee's cogitations a tap sounded on the door, and in answer to Lee's "Come in," Tubbs, the Ancient House page, entered.

"Letter for you, sir," said Tubbs.

"Put it on the desk, Tubbs," exclaimed Lee, turning his head. "When did it come?"

"Five minits ago, sir."

"But there is no post at this hour of the day."

"No, sir; the telegraph-boy from the village brought it," said Tubbs. "It's a express letter, or something."

"All right, Tubbs; you may go."

The page-boy went, and Nelson Lee rose to his feet, lit a cigarette, and picked up the letter. It was an ordinary Court-sized envelope, and bore a three-halfpenny stamp in the usual corner, and three penny stamps in the lower opposite corner. It was marked "Express" in heavy letters.

"H'm! Postmark 'Bannington,'" murmured Lee. "It was apparently dropped into a pillar-box early this morning, and would have been delivered, but for the express stamps, by the evening post. Why the urgency? Probably for effect."

The address was roughly printed, and Lee thoughtfully tore the flap open. He had already formed a guess as to the sender. The printed characters had given him a fairly obvious clue.

And before removing the letter from the envelope he pulled open a drawer and extracted a pair of delicate forceps. With these he removed the sheet of notepaper, and laid it tenderly on a clean sheet of paper. He could not have been more careful if the letter had been contaminated by disease.

"It is just as well to be cautious," he told himself. "Dear me! I suppose I ought to be quite startled—but I'm not."

For the notepaper contained the following brief message:

"To Mr. Nelson Lee.—Take my advice and refrain from pursuing your present inquiries. You will come to no harm if you will comply. Refuse, and the result will be serious. I am not disposed to put up with any interference from you. Take warning."

"THE MYSTERIOUS X."

Nelson Lee smiled amusedly.

"Quite a dramatic touch," he murmured. "But it misses fire—sadly. This genial warning is the very incentive I needed. My unknown friend will certainly be compelled to put up with my interference."

The words on the paper were printed—exactly similar to the note to Jameson. It was really impossible to draw any conclusions from that printing. But the paper itself was another matter.

Without touching it, Nelson Lee produced a small article—a powder-blower of his own invention. With this instrument he blew upon the letter a fine film of yellowy-grey powder.

This having settled evenly, he blew gently

upon the surface, and the powder was dispersed—except for one or two blotches here and there, near the edges. These were the marks caused by the fingers of the Mysterious X.

But Nelson Lee met with no success.

The fellow is confoundedly cautious," he muttered.

The blotches should have been finger-prints, but they were unrecognisable as such. Lee produced a powerful lens and examined the letter minutely, paying particular attention to the marks.

"Gloves!" he murmured. "That's rather a pity; I had half-hoped that the man had made a blunder. But this letter gives no clue whatever—the Mysterious X is decidedly astute."

Nelson Lee put the letter aside and resumed his seat in the easy-chair. The unknown criminal had worn gloves while writing that note; thus the marks were not finger-prints, but mere valueless patches.

Only a very careful crook would have thought of that possibility. Finger-prints are invisible on paper until subjected to treatment; but the Mysterious X had risked nothing. He knew the type of man he was dealing with, and took no chances whatever. He gave Nelson Lee no information.

This, in a way, rather increased the detective's interest. It proved, for one thing, that the unknown was no mere novice; he was an enemy well worthy of attention. His coups, true enough, were insignificant, but this aspect of the matter was really of no interest to Nelson Lee.

For the great criminologist simply regarded the case from its standpoint as a stubborn problem. It made no difference whether the thief's booty amounted to a shilling or a fortune. Lee was interested in the man—the cracksman himself. Who was he? That was the main question.

Another interruption came along at once, and it was again Tubbs, the page-boy. But this time he brought a card instead of a letter.

"It's the vicar, sir," said Tubbs.

Nelson Lee was not surprised.

"Oh, yes, Tubbs," he said. "Show Mr. Goodchild in at once."

"Yessir," grinned the page-boy.

He departed, and in a few minutes returned, escorting the Rev. Ethelbert Goodchild, the vicar of Belton. This gentleman was short, rather inclined to stoutness, and his face, according to Handforth, resembled a pudding. It was clean-shaven, and its expression was habitually mild and meek. The vicar, however, was a charming gentleman, well liked by everybody.

"You really must forgive me for disturbing you in this fashion, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed breezily, as he shook hands. "I trust I am not intruding upon your work—"

"Not at all," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I am slack this afternoon, Mr. Goodchild. Please take a seat, and try one of these cigarettes—or, if you would prefer it, I have some cigars—"

"A cigarette, please," said the vicar.

"Thank you—thank you. Now, Mr. Lee, please don't imagine that I have come here seeking cheap advice. I know well enough that you are very famous, and I suppose it is rather presumptuous on my part to approach you at all."

"Nonsense, sir," laughed Nelson Lee. "And what is the trouble?"

The vicar leaned forward in his chair.

"I understand that you are interested in the audacious rascal who calls himself the Mysterious X," he said. "Well, Mr. Lee, my house was visited by that man during the night, and he succeeded in getting away with some of my property."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"The information does not exactly come as news to me," he said. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Goodchild, I was half afraid that something of the kind had occurred. You have, of course, communicated with the police?"

"No, I have not done so yet."

"But, my dear sir, that is surely an oversight?" asked Lee, raising his eyebrows. "When did you make the discovery?"

"Early this morning."

"And you have taken no action whatever?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Lee, I really don't think it is worth bothering about," replied the vicar. "I don't like Inspector Jameson—it's no good saying I do. I suppose it is wrong of me, but there it is. We are all human, and Jameson irritates me exceedingly. I would rather lose the goods than have the inspector bothering about my premises."

Nelson Lee smilingly shook his head.

"I really cannot agree with you, Mr. Goodchild," he said. "Your house has been burgled, and it is only right that the police should be informed. Surely you are anxious to recover your property?"

"Well, naturally," agreed the vicar. "But you see, Mr. Lee, I preferred to approach you on the subject. If it is not too impertinent, I should like your advice. I don't want the police to have any excuse for turning my house upside down. My loss only amounts to a few pounds, I may add."

"Really?" said Lee. "So slight as that?"

"The stolen articles comprise a case of solid silver teaspoons, two antique ivory ornaments, representing Japanese characters, and a silver candlestick," said the vicar. "I should like to get the things back, I will admit, but, frankly, I don't think the police would be able to trace them. So why should I be put to the trouble of giving any information?"

"Were there any other valuables in the plundered apartment?"

"Oh, several," replied the Rev. Goodchild. "But I think the thief was disturbed by the barking of my terrier. At all events, I heard the dog in the night, and I assumed that the thief heard him also, and fled before his work was completed."

"That is quite possible," agreed Nelson Lee. "But how do you know that the thief was the Mysterious X?"

"Because of this, Mr. Lee."

And the vicar laid upon the table a neat slip of pasteboard, bearing the printed name of the unknown burglar. A similar card had been left behind in the two previous robberies.

"And you do not intend to inform the police?" asked Lee.

"If you advise me to do so I will communicate with Inspector Jameson at once," said the vicar. "But, really, I don't care for the idea. I don't want the police interfering in my house. I would rather sustain the loss."

"In that case, Mr. Goodchild, I would prefer not to offer any advice at all," said Nelson Lee quietly. "You must do as you think fit. Nevertheless, I shall be only too delighted to look into the matter privately, for I am greatly interested in the movements of this mysterious character."

The vicar beamed.

"Ah, nothing would please me better," he exclaimed. "Thank you, Mr. Lee—thank you exceedingly. If you take up the matter I can look for some result, but I certainly have no faith whatever in Inspector Jameson. It is most generous of you—most generous, indeed!"

Having given a more detailed description of the stolen articles, the reverend gentleman took his departure. Nelson Lee was rather pleased at the vicar's attitude. He was inclined to agree that the police would be more trouble than they were worth.

And there was now positive proof that the man I had tussled with during the night had been the Mysterious X himself. Before tea Nelson Lee paid a visit to the Vicarage, and had a look round. There was nothing to be seen of any value as a clue. The thief had obtained an entry by means of the French windows, and it was clear that he had worn gloves, and that he had been particularly cautious about footprints.

The vicar insisted upon Nelson Lee staying to tea, and when the meal was over the detective decided to ride over to Bannington on his bicycle. I don't exactly know the reason for his visit, but it had nothing to do with the burglary affair.

And in Bannington the gov'nor met with one of those strokes of luck which very seldom happen. It was pure chance, and Nelson Lee himself would be the last to claim any credit. In my own opinion, however, I think the gov'nor was jolly smart. If he had not been wide-awake the incident would have passed unnoticed.

It was nearly dark when Nelson Lee started off home, and the drizzle, having held up for several hours, was recommencing. There was a stiff wind, too, and Lee was pedalling against it when he passed the establishment of Mr. Donald MacLane.

This gentleman presided over a pawnshop, and his appearance did not quite agree with his name, although he was a genial old chap enough. However, if he liked to give himself a Scotch name, that was his business. But I had my own opinion.

Well, Nelson Lee was passing almost beneath the three golden balls which overhung

the roadway when a man emerged from the discreetly situated side-door. The man was fairly tall, was attired in a long overcoat and a bowler, and he possessed a thick beard.

All this was not in any way suspicious. But Lee's keen eyes detected something else. On the man's right cheek there was a bruise! Lee remembered the encounter he had once with the Mysterious X; he remembered grasping a beard.

And a pawnshop! The significance of the thing was obvious. Lee, however, could do nothing decisive. The suspicion he had was, after all, only vague. It was impossible to accost the man, for in all probability he was an innocent townsman. Nothing could be done, in fact, until Lee had made inquiries.

Without delay he dismounted from his machine and entered the side-door of the establishment. The place was empty, save for himself and the man behind the somewhat dingy counter—Mr. MacLane himself, probably.

"Well, sir?" he asked politely.

"A man just left this shop," said Lee. "I have reason to believe that he is a professional thief. Can you tell me what he pledged here? My name is Lee, and I am a master at St. Frank's College."

"I can tell you nothing, sir," replied Mr. MacLane shortly. "It would not be business. Good-morning!"

"Thank you," said Nelson Lee, with a nod.

He left the place, knowing well enough that argument was useless. And, after all, MacLane was within his rights. He was not obliged to divulge a customer's business to a stranger.

Lee remounted his bicycle, and rode straight to the police-station. Here he was fortunate enough to find Inspector Jameson. Under the circumstances it was necessary for Nelson Lee to explain that the Vicarage had been burgled.

"At the same time, Jameson, I want you to understand that the vicar is not at all keen upon the police making investigations," said Lee. "I am half-inclined to think, however, that we can lay hands on the stolen property at once."

"I don't understand you, sir," said the inspector.

"As I was riding down the street I happened to see a man emerge from MacLane's pawnshop," went on Nelson Lee. "I am inclined to believe, Jameson, that the man was the Mysterious X himself—although, mind you, it is only a suspicion. I want you to come with me to that shop now—in your official capacity you can compel MacLane to tell us the nature of the articles pawned."

"I don't know whether it's possible——" began Jameson doubtfully.

"Man alive, the sight of your uniform will be sufficient," broke in Lee. "We just want to make certain—that's all. The stolen articles consist of a case of silver teaspoons, two ivory ornaments, and a silver candlestick. If they have been pledged, we shall know that we are on the right track."

"Very well," said the Inspector. "We'll go at once."

They did so, and Mr. MacLane was quite eager to comply. He had no wish to have any unpleasantness with the police.

"If the things were stolen, Inspector Jameson, it is not my fault," he said, in an injured voice. "I was not obliged to tell this gentleman anything. How was I to know what his motives were? I advanced four pounds on some silver teaspoons, a silver candlestick, and some ivory ornaments—you can see them if you wish."

"By George!" said the Inspector, staring.

"I wasn't far wrong, was I?" smiled Nelson Lee. "It's a pity I didn't know for certain at the time, or the man would not have got away. However, we shall get him yet, although his identity still remains a mystery."

The Inspector took charge of the things, and promised to make matters right with Mr. MacLane after interviewing the vicar. And Jameson, without delay, accompanied Nelson Lee back to Bellton.

The affair was only a small one, and once again Nelson Lee had been successful. On this occasion, however, the Mysterious X had gained to the extent of four pounds in cash—not a large sum, certainly, but it was his first real success.

The name and address supplied to the pawnbroker was obviously false, and it meant nothing. As to who the man was, or where he operated from, remained as puzzling as ever. When would he be captured? And was there any possibility of a further burglary in the neighbourhood?

Personally, I had an idea that we should hear more of the Mysterious X.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE TERROR!

"GENTLEMEN——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Gentlemen of the Remove——"

"Go it, Nipper!"

"On the ball!"

"Gentlemen of the Remove, this meeting has been called——"

"Hurrah!"

"How the dickens can I make a speech if you keep interrupting?" I roared warmly.

"Can't you asses be quiet for once?"

"Order!" bawled Handforth. "Order for the chair!"

"This meeting has been called," I went on, "to discuss bullying——"

"Good!" said Handforth.

"I think you'd better call yourself to order, you duffer!" I snapped. "We shall never be able to decide anything if we can't obtain silence. In two ticks I'll chuck up the speech altogether!"

The Remove common-room in the Ancient House was packed. Not only Fossils were present, but a great many Monks as well. Christine and Co. had come over in force, in order to support the meeting.

The leaders of the College House juniors were as much interested in this matter as we were ourselves. The bullying was a mutual grievance, although the Monks had not suffered as severely as a great many juniors in the Ancient House.

"Go it, Nipper!" shouted Christine. "Order for the speaker!"

"We are here mainly to champion the fags of both Houses," I went on grimly. "The Remove, generally speaking, hasn't suffered particularly, but the Third has. And bullying is absolutely rotten in any school. Until this term we haven't had much of it here, but just recently Starke and Kenmore and Jesson and others have been gaining power every day. It's got to stop!"

"Hear, hear!"

"And, what's more, we're going to stop it," I declared. "You ask how?"

"I didn't hear anybody ask how," said Handforth, looking round.

"You silly ass, that was only a figure of speech," I retorted. "This meeting is to be something like a debate, and we've got to decide how the bullies can be squashed. It's a stiff problem, I'll admit, but we're not going to be browbeaten by cads like Starke and Jesson and Kenmore!"

"Rather not!"

"Down with bullying!"

"Only this afternoon Starke gathered all his supporters together," I went on. "For what reason? Obviously to plot and plan. Those rotters are determined to do away with the independence of the Third and the Remove. Are we going to stand it? Are we going to become slaves?"

"Never!" roared the Remove.

"Down with the tyrants!"

"Hurrah!"

The common-room rang with cheers and shouts, and in the midst of the hubbub the door burst open, and Starke, Kenmore, and Frinton appeared. They were all looking grim, and they carried canes.

"What's the meaning of this?" roared Starke furiously.

I stared steadily at him.

"Can't we hold a meeting now?" I demanded.

"No, you can't," shouted Starke. "You're making a noise like a pack of hooligans. Clear out, the lot of you, and go to your studies! If there's any insubordination, I'll report the ringleaders to Mr. Crowell."

"Hang it all, Starke, it's a bit thick!" snorted Handforth. "There's no reason why we can't hold a meeting——"

"Handforth, take two hundred lines!" shouted Kenmore.

"Rats!" roared Handforth.

Starke strode forward and grasped Handforth by the collar. Kenmore went, too, and the next moment Starke's cane was busy. The whole action was high-handed, and the Remove got excited and furious.

"Kick the cads out!" yelled somebody.

"Hear, hear!"

The juniors surged forward, and the three prefects were swept off their feet, alarmed

and enraged. Before they could be got to the door, however, a sudden hush fell. Mr. Crowell, the Remove Form-master, strode into the common-room.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed amazedly. "What—what is the meaning of this outrageous scene? Release Starke at once, you unruly young rascals!"

"It was their own fault, sir!" bawled Handforth.

"Silence, Handforth!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "There can be no excuse whatever for this behaviour. These senior boys are prefects, and there has been a grave breach of the rules. Every junior will take two hundred lines. Nipper, I am surprised that you should take a hand in this insubordinate outrage."

"I don't want to excuse myself, sir, but I did my best to keep the fellows in check," I replied quietly. "I don't blame them at all, though. Starke, Kenmore, and Frinton interfered without the slightest reason, and Handforth was being bullied when the other chaps interfered. I don't think anybody deserves punishment—except the prefects."

"Good for you, Nipper!"

"The young hooligans rushed at us without any reason, sir," snarled Starke.

"That is sufficient, Starke," put in Mr. Crowell coldly. "The matter will drop at once. I have already given the punishment I deem fit. I may add that no further junior meeting is to take place in this House to-night. I forbid it."

The juniors streamed out, furious. They didn't blame Mr. Crowell at all. He had only done what he considered to be his duty—and the scene in the common-room had certainly been outrageous.

But the bullies had won the day—there was no doubt about that. They had come there to break up the meeting, and had succeeded. Further, the juniors were not made happy by the prospect of two hundred lines.

"Are we going to stand it?" demanded Handforth furiously.

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "We can't help ourselves, old boy. We've no quarrel against Mr. Crowell, you know, an' we can't disobey his orders."

"But it's unfair," protested Watson. "Why should we be barred from holding a meeting? It's tyranny!"

We were all out in the Triangle by this time, and feeling ran high. The fellows didn't care a jot about the drizzle.

"Look here, we can't go on at this rate," I said grimly. "Why can't you chaps be sensible? Crowell only forbade the meeting because you handled the Sixth-Formers. You know well enough that it's against all authority to go for a prefect."

"What else could we do?" demanded Owen major hotly.

"The prefects can always stop any junior meeting if they like to make themselves nasty," I went on. "That's what prefects are for—to keep order amongst the juniors. We can't jib against that sort of thing. If we do, we place ourselves in the wrong at once. That's what happened just now."

"Then we can't hold a meeting at all?" shouted Pitt.

"Yes, we can; but we shall have to be quiet about it," I replied. "Crowell's forbidden a meeting in the Ancient House, but there's no reason why we shouldn't go over with Christine and his lot. We can finish the discussion there."

"Good!" said Christine heartily.

"We're not going to be diddled by those cads!"

"Rather not!"

The fellows surged across the Triangle in a crowd, and piled noisily into the College House. My efforts to keep them quiet were useless; they didn't seem to realise how necessary it was to exercise caution. The prefects had power. We hadn't. Therefore it was essential that we should be careful.

"This way!" said Christine briskly.

The Removites charged into the common-room, and I brought up the rear with Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West.

"It's no good!" I said. "There's too much noise going on."

"Well, suppose there is?" asked Watson.

"Dash it all, there's generally a noise in the common-room. Who'll notice it? And what does it matter if it is noticed? Even the prefects can't stop the fellows jawing!"

"You'll see!" I said grimly. "The fact is, the Remove doesn't realise how serious the position is; but they will realise it soon."

I closed the door after I had entered, and listened to Handforth's speech. Handforth was standing on the table, very excited, addressing the crowd. Needless to say, he shouted at the top of his voice.

"There's only one thing to do!" he declared. "We shall have to take the prefects in hand ourselves. They'll have to be ragged until they can't stand!"

"Hear, hear!"

"When they give orders, we shall ignore them——"

"Good!"

"We shall look upon them as though they don't exist——"

"That's the idea!"

"Within a week we shall be masters!" declared Handforth triumphantly.

"Within a week we shall be squashed!" I snapped. "Don't talk such rot, Handforth!"

"What?" bellowed Handforth.

"I didn't say 'what'—I said 'rot'!" I retorted. "We can't ignore the prefects, and you're an ass to suggest such a thing. We can't rag them."

"And why not?"

"Because we should have the masters up against us in a minute," I replied. "The Head himself would take a hand, and we should all be flogged and gated. Would that be a victory for us?"

"Nipper's right," said Christine. "We can't tell the prefects to go and eat cake, although we feel like it—— Oh, my hat!"

Mills and Jesson, of the Sixth, had appeared.

"There's a thundering row going on here," said Jesson severely. "Can't you kids keep quiet? What's this—a meeting?"

"Yes, it is!" roared Handforth.

"Well, it's got to stop," said Jesson grimly. "Clear the room—the whole crowd of you! As for you Ancient House juniors, you'd better get back to your own quarters. And be quick about it!"

Christine looked at me helplessly.

"It's no good!" I said. "We'd better chuck it up. Come on!"

Everybody was indignant and furious, but the common-room was emptied. We strode out into the damp Triangle once more. For a second time the meeting had been frustrated, and our feelings were acute.

"A fine leader, ain't you?" snorted Handforth. "You knuckled under——"

"I did nothing of the sort," I replied. "But there was no sense in having another scene, Handy. The best thing we can do is to finish the meeting in some place where we can't be interfered with."

"And where's that—Timbuctoo?" asked Owen major sarcastically.

"No; in the old vault beneath the monastery ruins," I replied. "It may be cold there, but we sha'n't be disturbed. Who's game?"

Everybody was, and in less than five minutes the whole meeting had gathered in the large underground chamber which was situated beneath the ruins of the monastery. A few candle-ends had been lit, and the scene was rather a strange one.

"We're out of their reach now, anyhow," said Christine comfortably.

"Yes, rather."

"Who's that coming down the stairs?" asked Watson suddenly.

The question was answered by the appearance of Starke, Kenmore, Mills, Jesson, and two other prefects. All were armed with canes, and all looked grim. The juniors were dismayed.

"You silly young fools!" said Starke sourly. "Clear out of this—and take a hundred lines each for disobeying orders."

"We've disobeyed no orders," I said hotly.

"Don't argue with me," shouted Starke. "Mr. Crowell distinctly told you not to hold another meeting—and if I report this to him you'll get into hot water. I don't want any more impertinence! Clear!"

On this occasion Starke was not attacked. His supporters were too numerous; moreover, it would have been an act of folly. There was nothing for it but to acknowledge defeat, much as we hated it.

The bullies had gained their own way. The meeting had been stopped on three different occasions, and it was a hopeless task to continue—for that night, at all events. The Remove was squashed.

The freedom of the juniors was being destroyed—their independence was being crushed. Very soon, at this rate, the bullies would have complete mastery. Of course, it couldn't go on; that much was certain.

Something would have to be done. And I may as well set it down without delay that I meant to do something!

The bullies were to find that the Remove was their master!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

Under the title of

THE BULLIES' LEAGUE,

will be Another Magnificent Account of
of the Adventures of the ST. FRANK'S
JUNIORS, introducing NELSON LEE,
NIPPER & CO., HANDFORTH & CO.,
and THE MYSTERIOUS X.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

PRICE THREE-HALFPENCE.

GRIPPING NEW SERIAL.

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. At nightfall they come up with the safari, and Alan makes the acquaintance of Dick Selby. To him Alan begins to tell his story.

(Now read on.)

THE VOICE FROM THE SWAMP.

PAUSING again, the English lad told briefly of his misfortune, and of his long journey into the wilds with his captors, and of the barbarous way in which Captain von Furst had vented his hatred on him, when he had learned of the end of the war from the Nairobi newspaper.

"And here I am," he concluded. "If Jan and I hadn't stumbled on the trail of your safari, we should have died of starvation, or been killed by wild beasts."

"Yes, that would sure have been your fate," Dick Selby assented. "I'm mighty glad you came after me. And now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Alan replied, in a dubious tone. "That's the question."

"You are thinking of your mother, of course. So should I be if I was in your place. There are two things you can do, my boy. I'll fit you and the Hottentot out with food and weapons, and you can push down country to Nairobi, where you can send a message to England. Or the two of you can come with me. I'll be more than pleased to have you, for I feel the need of a white chum. I get the worst kind of a grouch sometimes from loneliness. But you've got to look at my propositions both ways. On the one hand, if you strike south towards civilisation you may never get there. The chances are that you won't. On the other hand, if you come with me it may be a long time before you see Nairobi and can communicate with your mother."

"You are going far into the interior, then?"

"Yes, Carne, I am. I mean to trek on and on, perhaps for months, in search of my friend, John Hammond. I am determined to find him if he is alive, and I think he is. It's up to you to decide which you'll do."

"It isn't easy. As for our pushing down-country, you are quite right. I don't believe Jan and I could get through."

"Nor do I, to be candid. But you needn't decide in a hurry. Let us drop the matter until to-morrow. I'll spend the day here, and that will give you time to—"

Dick Selby stopped short and listened, gazing from the open doorway at the ebony figures stamped in relief against the farther camp fire.

"Say, look at that bunch!" he muttered. "What's hit them all of a sudden?"

"They have been startled by something," said Alan.

The chatter of voices was hushed. All of the natives had risen to their feet, and were standing rigid and alert, some with their hands to their ears. The two lads whipped out of the tent and over to the fire.

"What's wrong, Jan?" Alan exclaimed.

"It is a devil thing, baas," huskily replied the Hottentot, who was quaking like a leaf. "It has spoken to us with a threatening tongue."

"Ay, truly it is an evil thing!" declared Rembo, the Swahili headman, addressing his master. "It is a wicked spirit that is angry

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

with us! Hark, Bhagwan, and you will hear it!"

"Nonsense!" the young American said irritably. "What a superstitious lot of beggars you are!"

"Soon you will believe, Bhagwan," the headman told him.

All ears were strained intently. For fully a minute there were heard only the wonted sounds of the African night, carried on the still, sultry air—the yap of a jackal, the cackling laughter of a hyena, and the booming, muffled roar of a lion. And then, from the northward, floated a quavering, long-drawn wail, that rose to a high pitch and ebbed gradually low. It was weird, uncanny, blood-curdling. Rembo shuddered, and his teeth clicked together.

"It is yonder in the swamp, Bhagwan, whence we fetched the water," he said. "It is there the devil creature lives."

"Queer, Carne, isn't it?" Dick Selby murmured. "I've never heard the like of it before."

"Nor have I?" the English lad replied.

"It is some strange beast or reptile, of course."

"Yes, it can't be anything else."

Again and yet again the weird sound quivered on the air. The animals that had given tongue before were quiet, as if in fear. Terror gripped every native. Jan grovelled on the ground, and the Swahilis and Wakambas huddled together, their limbs trembling. One of them, rushing in panic to the shelter of a tree that was in the middle of the glade, knocked over a rifle that was leaning against it. The weapon was discharged, and as the heavy report died away in echoes there rang a sound that was different from the previous ones. It was a human voice, faint but distinct, calling for help.

"Good heavens, it is an Englishman!" cried Alan Carne. "A white man in distress!"

"I believe it is!" Dick Selby answered. "He called in English."

They looked at each other in bewilderment. Once more the earnest appeal was heard, and it roused the lads to action. Alan snatched a lantern from the heap of luggage and lighted it at the fire. And Dick Selby, darting to the tent, returned with a couple of rifles, and gave one of them to the English lad.

"Come along, Carne!" he bade. "You, too, Rembo! And some of the others!"

"No, no, Bhagwan, I am afraid!" whimpered the headman. "We will go to our death! We shall perish! Only a witch-doctor would have power over the devil thing!"

"It is nothing of the sort, you idiot! It is a man in need of help!"

"I tell you truly, Bhagwan, that it is——"

"Come on, and be quick about it! If you refuse I'll have you flogged in the morning!"

Rembo reluctantly assented, the threat proving stronger than his superstitious fears. Three of the Wakambas were willing to go, and so was Jan, who was no longer in terror. And without further delay the little group set off on their quest, Dick Selby and Alan Carne pushing ahead, with their rifles on their

shoulders, and the latter carrying the lantern. The natives followed at their heels, the headman with a flaming brand he had taken from the fire.

JOHN HAMMOND'S STORY.

TO the north of the camp, and not far from it, was the swamp that Rembo had spoken of. As the search-party reached the borders of it they heard again the faint voice calling in distress, and it rang at frequent intervals to their ears as they pressed on, holding to a narrow, winding path that kept to firm ground, and had been beaten by natives and animals.

They shouted as they went, and peered right and left into the thickets of dense brake and tangled vegetation, where slimy pools glistened, and hideous reptiles flopped and splashed and croaked, and rotting plants exhaled a fetid, noxious odour. When they had gone for two or three hundred yards they were startled by a rasping growl, and at the same instant the voice that had been guiding them was raised in terror.

"We are coming!" Dick Selby called, as he quickened his pace.

"It is the devil thing!" shrieked the headman. "Turn back, Bhagwan! Turn back!"

In his fright he dropped his torch and loitered behind his companions, who hastened on for a short distance, and came to a sudden stop within a dozen feet of a big leopard that was crouching for a spring. Dick Selby promptly levelled his rifle and fired, and with the sharp report the beast whirled round, biting at one of its forepaws. It made off, screeching with rage and pain, and vanished in the darkness.

It had been cheated of its intended victim, crippled as it was in the act of leaping upon a man who was sitting in a limp, languid attitude at one side of the path, with his back against the trunk of a tree. The bright glow of the lantern clearly revealed him. It was difficult to judge what his age was, for his bronzed, sunburnt features, mottled with grey patches, were so emaciated that the skin was drawn over the cheekbones like a drum parchment.

He was bareheaded, and there were no boots on his feet. His matted hair and bushy beard and moustache were of a tawny hue, streaked with silver. He wore a belted jacket, and short trousers of khaki-coloured cloth. His legs were bare from the knee down, and lacerated by briars; and on the calf of one of them was a cross-shaped gash, from which was trickling a thin stream, that was of too deep a purple tint to be blood. He appeared to be dying. His breath was laboured, and he lifted sunken, lustreless eyes to the young American, who closely scrutinised him for a few seconds.

"By heavens, Carne, it is my lost friend!" he cried in grief. "It is John Hammond!"

"And you have found him like this!" exclaimed Alan. "Poor fellow! What a pity!"

The man's face lit up with a wan smile

(Continued overleaf.)

He tried to hold out his hand, but he was so weak that it fell limply to his side.

"Dick!" he murmured. "Good old Dick! Is it really you? So you came after me, my boy, as you promised you would! It's too late! Yes, too late! I am near the end! Those thieving, merciless scoundrels! They've brought me to this, Dick! If I had met you only only a few days ago, I would have lived to—"

The quivering voice faltered. Dick Selby drew a flask of brandy from his pocket and pulled off the metal cup; and a drink of the potent spirit rallied the man's strength and flushed his hollow cheeks with a tinge of colour.

The natives gathered round the spot where the two lads had seated themselves on the ground in the flare of the lantern; and, with the black and white faces bent upon him, while with one shrunken hand he clasped Dick Selby's hand, John Hammond briefly told his story, sketching the events of the four years and more he had spent in the Dark Continent.

After a couple of years of wandering, which had led him into the far interior, he had fallen into the clutches of a tribe of hostile savages who were unknown to African explorers. They had slain his porters, and for two years he had been a prisoner amongst them, in constant expectation of being put to death. They had finally turned him adrift, letting him have his rifle and cartridges and a supply of food.

After further wandering, he had stumbled on another savage tribe, and had been pursued through the forest for several days, when he had eluded capture by embarking in a canoe which he had found moored to the bank of a river that was called the Bana by the natives.

"Meanwhile malaria had fastened on me," he continued, "and I got worse and worse, as I hadn't a grain of quinine or any other kind of medicine. For a couple of days I drifted down the stream, without a bite to eat. I had no energy. I couldn't dip the paddle or go ashore to shoot game. And on the third day—"

Having reached this point in his narrative of peril and adventure, the man paused for a moment.

"You'll hardly believe what I'm going to tell you now, Dick," he said. "It is almost incredible. You may think I'm romancing. And yet it's true. You can take my word for it, boy. You know I wouldn't lie to you. It was about the middle of the third day. I was burning with fever, and scorched by the glare of the sun, when I came to where the north bank of the river, which flowed from west to east, was skirted by sheer cliffs that towered to a height of hundreds of feet.

"At one place there was a triangular cleft

in them, twenty feet or so in width, with rocks jutting from each side of it. Inside it was dark and cool, and I thought I might as well die there. I was desperately ill, and hadn't any hope of recovery. So I drove the canoe into the cleft, and from curiosity, wondering where the subterranean channel would lead to, I paddled clean through it for fifty or sixty yards, and slid out into the open air on the inner side of the cliffs, into a deep pool that was fed by a swift-running brook. I landed on a margin of sand and gravel, where lay no less than half a dozen other canoes that were larger than mine.

"Supposing that there were hostile natives about, my first impulse was to beat a retreat. But I didn't. I staggered up a grassy slope, and the sight I saw from the crest of it—well, Dick, it took my breath away. I was in my sane senses, mind you. It wasn't feverish imagination.

"In front of me a green, fertile valley stretched for several miles, with clumps of trees and open spaces where herds of game were grazing. The valley was as wide as it was long, and was entirely surrounded by a rampart of lofty cliffs that looked red in the glow of the sun.

"To the left of it, peeping above the trees, was a modern sort of a building, that was half a fortress and half a castle. It was less than a mile distant from me. It was of rose-coloured stone, with battlements and towers and arched window-slits.

"As I stood there, gazing at it, I heard the pattering of hoofs. The sound drew nearer, and out from the wooded cover into the open, within a few yards of me, came a charming girl mounted on a zebra. She was a white girl, Dick, and a lovely one at that. She wore laced boots of brown leather, and a skirt and jacket that might have been bought in New York. She was seventeen or eighteen years of age, with blue eyes and golden hair that hung loose to her shoulders.

"When she saw me she gave a cry of surprise and drew rein and dismounted. And then, of a sudden, something seemed to snap within me. My brain reeled, all grew dark, and I dropped like a log."

John Hammond stopped again, exhausted by the strain of speaking. He breathed heavily, and his eyes were half shut. Dick Selby let some more of the brandy trickle down his throat, and glanced at the English lad, shaking his head and smiling.

"A castle in the wildest heart of Africa, and a lovely white girl!" he said. "It is a delusion due to illness."

"Yes, it must be," Alan Carne assented, in a puzzled tone. "Nothing could be more improbable. And yet—" He broke off abruptly, as John Hammond commenced once more to speak.

(Another long instalment next week.)