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THE BULLIES' LEAGUE!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Mysterious X!" "The College House Martyrs!" "Schemers of the Sixth!" etc.

March 22nd, 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

JACK GREY ISN'T HAVING ANY!

WALTER STARKE kicked the coal-scuttle savagely.

"I'm fed up!" he growled—"fed up to the neck!"

"Well, there's no need to batter the coal-scuttle about," said Kenmore. "And I don't see how you can be fed up, Starke, before you've touched your tea. Why don't you sit at the table?"

"And why don't you stop trying to be funny?" snapped Starke sourly. "If you think I'm going to put up with any more of that little brat's rot you're mistaken! Just look at this fireplace!"

"It's a bit untidy——"

"A bit untidy!" snorted Starke. "Didn't I tell Heath to clear it up?"

"Oh, don't make a fuss!" said Kenmore, helping himself to several slices of tongue and pouring himself out some tea. "I'm blessed if I can see why you should upset yourself about the kid, Starke. He's not worth it."

The two prefects were in their study in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. It was tea-time, but Starke did not seem inclined to partake of the excellent supplies which graced the board. Kenmore, on the other hand, was going ahead with a hearty appetite.

"Those beastly little Third-Formers are no good," went on Starke. "Heath is the third brat I've had this month—and they're all as bad as one another. Fagging has become an absolute farce in this rotten school!"

"I suppose it's the same in most schools," remarked Kenmore. "The kids naturally try to get out of all they can—not that you give 'em much chance of doing that. Heath isn't such a bad little nipper——"

"That's right; stick up for him!" shouted

Starke furiously. "Didn't I tell him to sweep this carpet while we were out?"

"He did sweep it."

"And then shoved all the sweepings under the confounded hearthrug!" said Starke. "I gave him a caning; but what's the good? The next time he'll go and do something just as bad. I tell you I'm fed up with those Third-Formers."

Kenmore shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you can try a Second-Former, if you like," he said. "I don't suppose you'd find him much better—a shade worse, if anything. Or, why not engage a man-servant, and done with it?"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Starke savagely.

He kicked the coal-scuttle again, got to his feet, and then sat down at the table. Kenmore grinned as his companion hacked away at the tongue, and almost succeeded in slicing a piece off his hand. After that Starke calmed down a bit, and got on with his tea in a sullen temper. This was one of Starke's usual moods when anything had upset him.

The bullies of the Sixth were generally in agreement on all points, but in this particular case Kenmore could not see the reason for Starke's anger. Fags were nearly all alike; they performed the work they were compelled to, and shirked everything else. It was only natural.

But for some little time past Starke had been doing his utmost to gain more power in the Ancient House. He had joined forces with other bullies, and had even plotted with Mills and Jenson, of the College House. To be quite truthful, the rotters of the Sixth had formed a kind of band, which was already known in the Lower School as "The Bullies' League." But Starke and Co. were not likely to have everything their own way.

The Third could be dealt with all right, and the Second was not worth considering.

The Remove was the great stumbling-block. As everybody knows, I'm skipper of the Ancient House Remove, and the bullies knew jolly well that they would have me to deal with if they went too far. And I was backed up by the whole Form.

But Starke was out for power this term, and he meant to have it. His ideas were somewhat ambitious and inflated—as Kenmore soon discovered. Kenmore was a first-class cad, but not quite so bad as Starke.

"Yes, I'm fed up!" growled Starke abruptly.

"I think you mentioned that before," said Kenmore. "Can't you think of anything more original to say? Besides, what about me? I'm getting fed up with your beastly temper. I don't like having tea with a bear!"

Starke banged the table.

"Look here, Kenmore, you'd better not quarrel with me," he roared.

"Oh, all right," said Kenmore, rather startled. "Don't break all the crockery, and you needn't mind about my trousers. Half this cup of tea has splashed over already. What's biting you this evening?"

"Oh, hang! We don't want to have a row!" said Starke. "But that little brat of a Heath fairly got on my nerves. I've kicked him out for good, and I'm going to get somebody else to fag for this study."

"He'll be just as bad," said Kenmore.

"Will he?" exclaimed Starke, bending over the table, his eyes gleaming. "Look here, Kenmy, I've been thinking——"

"I thought there was something wrong!"

"Shut up!" snapped Starke. "I've been thinking, I tell you. I'm not going to have another fag out of the Third, and I'm not going to choose one from the Second. Understand?"

"No, I don't," said Kenmore. "There's no First Form at St. Frank's, so I should just like to know where you're going to get your fag from?"

"From the Remove," replied Starke grimly.

"Eh?"

"You heard what I said."

"But, my dear chap, you don't know what you're talking about," said Kenmore, staring. "You can't get a Remove chap to fag for this study."

Starke rose to his feet, neglecting his tea, and paced up and down several times before answering. He was grimly determined, and Kenmore eyed him with more astonishment than ever.

"Calm down, and eat some more of this tongue," said Kenmore invitingly. "You've hardly tasted it yet, and it's ripping. As for that idea about a Remove kid, old man, it simply can't be done."

"Why can't it?" demanded Starke abruptly.

"Hang it all! It never has been done, for one thing," said Kenmore. "You're not really serious, are you? The Remove wouldn't stand it, and, besides, it's against the school rules. Don't be such an ass, Starke."

"Bring me the school rules, and show me where there's a word about fagging," ex-

claimed Starke. "Strictly speaking, all fagging is against the rules, but it's always been a custom to have fags."

"From the Third—yes."

"Well, why not from the Remove?" asked Starke. "It's only a custom—a rut. I don't see why we shouldn't alter the custom and get into a different rut. It's about time those Remove brats were given something to do."

Kenmore sipped his tea, and didn't seem impressed.

"If you like to try it on, there's no reason why you shouldn't," he said. "But I wouldn't mind betting a level half-quid that there'll be the biggest ructions of the whole term. Great Scott! You can't make the Remove into fags, you ass! They'd never stand it; they're too independent!"

"That's just it; they're too confoundedly independent," said Starke grimly. "By George! I mean to alter that spirit before long; I'll squash it completely. I'll make the Remove fairly squirm!"

"Nothing easier—until you start trying it on," said Kenmore, with a grin. "I know we're out to put the Remove in its place, but when it comes to fags, I'm against it. There'll be too much trouble. And, in any case, who would you choose as a fag?"

"I haven't thought of that yet," replied Starke slowly.

"Well, you'd better think of it, and you'd better think what the result's going to be. The kid might agree, but the rest of the Remove won't," said Kenmore. "I don't suppose they'll complain to the Housemaster, but there'll be the very dickens of a bust-up. We shan't be able to hold 'em."

Starke snorted.

"If you're afraid of the kids, I'm not," he said sourly.

"But they're not kids, and that's what you seem to forget," retorted Kenmore seriously. "The fellows in the Remove are next door to seniors, and it's ridiculous to suppose that they'll stand being fagged."

Starke glared at his companion furiously.

"I'm going to do it, and you can go and snivel somewhere else!" he shouted. "And I'll tell you who I'm going to choose. The kid who's going to fag in this study is Grey—Grey, of the Remove!"

Kenmore opened his eyes wider.

"All I can say is, you've made a queer choice," he remarked. "Grey is one of the most independent young beggars of the whole lot——"

"Rot!" interrupted Starke. "Not so very long ago Grey was a rotten street urchin in Bermondsey. That's when he was known here as Mason—last term, before he found out that Sir Crawford Grey was his pater. But that doesn't make much difference; the kid's been used to making himself humble, and he's quiet and orderly. The very chap we want to fag for us."

Kenmore shrugged his shoulders.

"You can do as you like," he said, "but if you take my advice you'll pick another kid from the Third, and settle it. But if you're looking for trouble, it won't take you long to find some!"

Starke made no reply. He sat down at the table again and continued his tea. For fully five minutes nothing was said by either senior, and Kenmore was confidently expecting that his leader would give way to second thoughts and abandon the whole project.

Kenmore had sense enough to realise that it would fail. But Starke, instead of remaining sullen, grew better-tempered as he went on with his tea. It may have been the influence of the food, or it may have been his thoughts which caused the change. At all events, Kenmore was rather glad.

"Given it up?" he ventured at last.

"I don't give things up," replied Starke shortly.

"But you can't—"

"I can!" interrupted the other. "I've just thought of something, and if there's any trouble about fagging the Remove, we'll soon settle it. I've got a spanking idea. No I won't tell you what it is now. But you can be certain that we're going to get the upper hand."

Starke rose to his feet and passed out of the study. And Kenmore poured himself out a last cup of tea and drank it slowly. He wondered where Starke had gone to, and he called Starke quite a few ungentlemanly names.

After five minutes his study mate returned—alone.

"Couldn't you manage it?" asked Kenmore, with a grin.

"I'll make you use a different tone before long," snapped Starke. "I've just told young Heath to send Grey here."

"Grey won't come," Kenmore prophesied.

But he was wrong, for less than two minutes later a tap sounded on the door, and Jack Grey, of the Remove, entered. He had been having tea with Reginald Pitt, in Study E, and he couldn't imagine why Starke wanted him.

But Grey was a very obliging fellow, and he had come cheerfully, knowing well enough that Starke was not in a position to find fault with him. Grey was not one of the juniors who got into scrapes.

"Heath told me you wanted me, Starke," he said politely.

"That's right," said Starke. "Shut the door."

Grey did so, and when he turned round Starke was lolling back in his chair with his thumbs inserted into the armholes of his waistcoat. The prefect was pretending to be important, and Grey was rather amused.

"Look here, kid, I've come to a decision," said Starke. "It's always been the custom at St. Frank's for seniors to choose fags from the Third or Second. That's altered now."

"Is it?" said Jack, in surprise. "Who altered it?"

"I did," exclaimed Starke.

"Oh!"

"You needn't give me any of your cheek!" went on the prefect. "In future, Grey, you're going to fag for this study, and you'll start your duties right away. To begin with, you can clear this table. Get busy!"

Grey was taken by surprise.

"I—I suppose you're joking?" he asked blankly.

"No, I'm not joking," snapped Starke. "Get on with clearing the table!"

Grey was forced to conclude that Starke was serious. He was amazed; he had never believed that even Starke would be such an idiot as to attempt such a game. And the Remove did not look at all submissive as he faced the two Sixth-Formers.

"Did you hear me?" rapped out Starke.

"Of course I did."

"Well, get busy; confound you!"

"You've made a mistake, Starke," said Jack quietly. "You can't choose a fag from the Remove. I think you must be dotty. Anyhow, I'm not going to clear your table. You're big enough to do it yourself!"

Starke jumped to his feet.

"You cheeky young rotter!" he shouted. "Are you going to obey my orders?"

"No, I'm not!" replied Grey firmly. "If you think I'm going to be made a fag, you're mistaken. If that's all you wanted me for, I'll go. There's no sense in keeping up—"

"Clear this table, you beastly little cub!" howled Starke.

Jack Grey eyed him contemptuously. Abuse had no effect upon the Remove, and he was certainly not afraid of a cad of Starke's calibre. He moved towards the door and grasped the handle.

"Hold on!" shouted Starke furiously. "I'll give you one more chance. Will you consent to fag for this study, or not?"

"You can go and eat coke!" said Grey, quite calmly.

"By George! You'll pay for this," snarled Starke. "I'll make you sit up, you young cur! Take two hundred lines for cheeking me!"

"I'll take no lines at all—"

"What!"

"You can't give me lines for refusing to become a fag," said Grey, opening the door. "That's all I've got to say, Starke. I'm not going to fag for you, and you won't get any other Remove fellow to do it, either!"

And Jack Grey stamped out of the study defiantly and closed the door after him with a firm bang.

It was not such an easy matter to choose a fag from the Remove!

CHAPTER II.

THE METHODS OF THE LEAGUE.

SIMON KENMORE chuckled.

"Well, didn't I warn you?" he asked blandly.

"I'll make that young rotter squirm until he can't stand!" exclaimed Starke, clenching his fists with fury. "The absolute cheek of the little beast! Refused to obey orders—defied me to my face!"

"Didn't you expect him to?" asked Kenmore. "I did!"

"Well, perhaps I did expect something of the sort, but I didn't think the kid would refuse to take lines," said Starke. "But I'm prepared—as I told you. Go and fetch Frinton and the others."

"What for?"

"We're going to hold a meeting—now," replied Starke grimly. "This thing has got to be settled, and I'll guarantee that before to-morrow evening we'll have four or five Remove kids fagging for us."

Kenmore looked at his leader curiously.

He knew that Starke had some scheme in his mind, and as he was anxious to hear what it was he lost no time in going out to call the other bullies together for the impromptu meeting.

Meanwhile, Grey had returned to Study E, in the Remove passage. When he entered Pitt was just helping himself to the last humble sardine, and he looked up cheerfully as his study-mate entered.

"Want this?" he asked generously. "It's the only one left—HaHo! What's ruffled the manly brow? Who's been rubbing you the wrong way, old son? Had a row with Starke?"

Jack Grey laughed, his sunny temper coming to the fore again.

"You'll never guess," he said, sitting down. "Starke actually told me that I was to fag for his study—he'd chosen me, if you please, as his new fag. And he told me to commence by clearing the table!"

Pitt whistled.

"So it's come to that, has it?" he said. "What did you do?"

"I refused, of course."

"And what did he do?"

"Gave me two hundred lines," said Jack.

"But you didn't take 'em?"

"Of course I didn't," replied Jack. "I simply told Starke that I wasn't going to fag for him, that no other fellow would fag for him, and that he could go and eat coke. I couldn't have spoken more plainly, could I?"

Reginald Pitt chuckled joyfully.

"Why wasn't I there?" he grinned. "Oh, my only hat! I'll bet Starke's face was worth a guinea a box! Look here, we ought to go along to Study C and tell Nipper about this. He's skipper, and he'll have to do something."

"It's my opinion that Starke's going to do something," said Grey quietly.

Pitt lost his grin.

"Yes, by Jove!" he said, becoming thoughtful. "I'd forgotten that. You'll go through the mill, old chap. You'll find heaps of trouble this week; those cads will persecute you at every turn. Still, you couldn't have done anything else but refuse."

They left the room and went to Study C. The door was open, and Church and McClure were in the doorway. Handforth was just in front of them, and he appeared to be testing his voice.

"You can say what you like," he bellowed; "but if the Remove doesn't look out those rotters in the Sixth will gain the upper hand! Don't forget what happened at the meeting the other day. Don't forget how it was messed up!"

"Regad! We're not likely to forget anything if you keep remindin' us in this way, deag fellow," said Sir Montie Tregellis West.

"Church, old boy, would you mind pullin' Handforth out into the passage?"

"Want all the room?" inquired Pitt, pushing through. "Now then, Handy, move your fat carcass!"

"My what?" roared Handforth, g'aring.

"Your elegant, beautifully proportioned, manly form," grinned Pitt. "I don't want to have my nose punched, so I suppose I'd better humour you. Are you there, Nipper?"

"Yes, when you can get in," I replied cheerfully.

Pitt and Grey edged their way past Handforth into the study. Handforth followed them, and Church and McClure followed Handforth.

"Quite a little party," I said smoothly. "Sorry we can't offer you any grub; we've just finished tea, and we've cleared the board. Anything wrong, Pitt? You're looking rather serious."

Reginald Pitt nodded.

"The climax has arrived," he said mysteriously.

"Eh?" said Tommy Watson. "What climax?"

"Tell them the awful truth," said Pitt, turning to Grey.

"It's nothing much," grinned Jack. "Starke sent for me not long ago, and when I got to his study he told me that I was to become his fag."

"His—his fag?" gasped Handforth.

"The limit, isn't it?" said Pitt, looking round.

Within a minute Grey had told us all there was to be told, and I nodded with hearty approval.

"Just what I should have done, old chap," I said. "The terrific nerve! If Starke tries any of those games on he'll find himself in the wrong box. I'm a bit sorry for you, Jack—you'll catch it hot."

"I can stand it," replied Grey. "They can't do much, anyhow."

"Isn't it just what I was saying?" demanded Handforth triumphantly. "Unless we act at once, Nipper, those cads will wipe us up. And simply because Grey has refused to become a fag, that doesn't say that other chaps will refuse."

I nodded.

"You do talk sense sometimes, Handy," I said grimly. "Now, a fellow like Kemp wouldn't have the pluck to defy Starke—he'd knuckle under. The only thing is to send the word round to every fellow in the Remove—make everybody promise that they won't cave in."

Although some of the others were inclined to treat the matter lightly, this was not my own view. I knew very well that Starke and Co. were intent upon forcing their will upon the Remove, and this was just the beginning.

If we knuckled under even in the slightest degree, the cads of the Sixth would have gained a victory. I knew very well that I could rely upon my own chums and such fellows as Handforth, Somerton, De Valerie, Farman, and a few other bold spirits to back me up along the whole line in defying the bullies.

But there were other juniors to consider—the weaker fry, so to say—Canham, Doyle, Merrell, Elmore, Kemp, and such-like fellows. They did not possess the necessary stamina to ignore Starke and Co., and we should have to “ginger” them up.

I had a pretty keen idea that Fullwood and Co. and their supporters would escape the attentions of the bullies. The Nuts of the Remove had a kind of understanding with Starke and his pals—they were birds of a feather. And it was fairly safe to assume that the Nuts would go scotchless.

“Starke made a bloomer,” said Reginald Pitt. “He ought to have chosen a fellow like Teddy Long, instead of Grey, here. Long is a little sneak, anyhow, and I don’t suppose he would mind fagging a bit if only for the sake of the grub he’d be able to pinch. He’s a servile little beast.”

“All the same, he’s a member of the Remove,” I replied. “And no Remove fellow is going to become a fag—not while I’m skipper, anyhow. Of course, there may be some extraordinary circumstance arise which will compel us to make a temporary concession, but I don’t exactly anticipate that.”

Handforth grunted.

“Why the dickens can’t you talk in plain English?” he demanded. “What do you mean about extraordinary concessions and anticipating circumstances?”

“You’re getting mixed, Handy,” I grinned. “But what I mean is, that we might not be able to openly defy Starke to begin with. It might be policy for us to cave in.”

“What?”

“Eh?”

“Begad! You ain’t serious, old boy?”

“To cave in—for a day or two,” I went on. “I believe in looking ahead and being prepared. The chances are that we sha’n’t have to do anything at all, but it’s just as well to be on the safe side. And we can be fairly sure that Starke won’t let things drop at the present stage.”

“He’ll choose another fag,” remarked Grey. “But why did he drop on me?”

Pitt grinned.

“Oh, I suppose he thought you’d be meek and mild,” he replied. “You’re a very obliging chap, Jack, and you’re always quiet and well behaved, like a good little boy should be. But Starke made a bloomer—he woke up the wrong passenger.”

“And poor old Jack will have to suffer,” declared Watson. “His life will be made unbearable for the next day or two; he’ll be dropped on at every turn, and he’ll spend every minute of his spare time writing lines!”

“Begad! What a frightful prospect,” observed Montie, in horror.

“Don’t take any notice of him,” smiled Grey. “Things won’t be so bad as that—Starke can’t drop on me unless I give him an opportunity. And I shall take good care not to do that.”

Without any further loss of time we broke ourselves up into three parties, and went round warning everybody that Starke was on the warpath. If any Removeite consented

to fag for Starke he would be barred by the whole Form—he would be sent to Coventry for the rest of the term.

Even Teddy Long would face Starke’s wrath rather than that prospect. I had no fear of the fellows knocking under; but it had been necessary to use the somewhat drastic threat.

Contrary to our expectations, however, Starke did nothing.

For the rest of that evening everything was peaceful. Grey came into contact with Starke several times, but the Sixth Former never even looked at him. And when the Remove retired to its dormitory there was general relief.

“I guess the fool guy has quit the hull idea,” remarked Farman cheerfully. “Say, we sure reckoned Starke was gon’ to raise blazes—not that we were skeered any. Guess we ain’t skeered of a blamed hobo-like Starke. He’s kind o’ petered out.”

“Of course he has,” said Watson.

“He knows jolly well that St. Frank’s would be too hot to hold him if he kept up those rotten games,” remarked Handforth. “We simply have to be firm, that’s all. Firmness was always my motto. I’m going to take a strong stand. Yaroooh!”

Handforth sat down with a crash, Pitt having tugged the other end of the mat upon which Handforth had been standing.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Who—who did that?” gasped Handforth.

“Is that what you call taking a strong stand, Handy?” asked Pitt blandly.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“You cackling asses!” roared Handforth, jumping up. “I’ll—I’ll—”

“I don’t know about a strong stand,” I remarked. “I should be rather inclined to call it a strong sit!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Edward Oswald Handforth sniffed contemptuously.

“Just the same as ever,” he said. “What’s the good of my trying to be a leader—”

“No good at all,” said Watson. “You couldn’t lead a donkey!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“With such a spirit of rank jealousy abroad I might as well keep my tongue still,” went on Handforth bitterly. “I’m not appreciated—that’s the trouble. Some day, perhaps, you fellows will realize my true value.”

And Handforth sat down heavily on his bed, having failed to observe that somebody had carelessly placed a hairbrush, bristles upwards, on the quilt. As Handforth was wearing next to nothing, the result was frightful.

For the next two minutes a cyclone raged in the Remove dormitory. It’s a wonder every prefect in the ancient house wasn’t brought to the spot, for they would have been justified in imagining that murder was being done.

The hairbrush was McClure’s, and McClure was sent flying, and Handforth succeeded in punching the unfortunate junior’s face about ten times before Burton was able to

explain that he had left the brush on Handy's bed.

It required the united efforts of six of us to prevent the instant slaughter of the Bo'sun; and Handforth was thrown into bed and half smothered with his own bed-clothes before he consented to spare Burton's life.

"You you rotters!" gasped Handforth. "You wait until——"

"Shurrup, you ass!"

The door had just opened, and Starke entered, swinging a cane. I wasn't at all surprised. We had been expecting somebody to appear—the din had been terrific.

"What's all this infernal noise in here?" demanded Starke harshly.

I sat up and listened.

"I can't hear any noise," I said mildly. "Can you, Montie?"

"Dear boy, it's frightfully quiet," murmured Tregellis-West. "But perhaps I have developed deafness, begad! If Starke says there is a noise, I suppose there must be one—there must, really!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a subdued chuckle, and Starke glared round ferociously.

"You'll take a hundred lines each, Tregellis West and Nipper, for cheek," he said. "There has been a disgraceful din in this dormitory, and every junior here will write fifty lines. And if there's any more noise——"

Handforth held up his hand.

"Hold on," he said. "I made that noise, Starke. I had an accident, if you want to know the truth. Nobody was to blame, but if you must give lines, I'll take 'em. The other chaps——"

"That's enough, Handforth," interrupted Starke. "The whole crowd is punished, and you'll take an extra fifty lines for interrupting me!"

"An—an extra fifty lines?" asked Handforth faintly.

"Yes."

"For interrupting you?"

"Yes, confound you!"

"Do you happen to be a king or a president, or something?" asked Handforth, with heavy sarcasm. "Or is it a new crime to interrupt a prefect?"

Starke turned to go.

"You'd better keep quiet after this," he said, ignoring Handforth's inquiry. "And I may as well tell you that you wouldn't have been punished at all if a certain junior in this room had obeyed my orders at tea-time. So you've got him to thank for those lines!"

And Starke strode out of the dormitory. He left nearly everybody staring at Jack Grey. The prefect's meaning had been quite clear. If Grey had knuckled under, this present disturbance would have been ignored. The whole Remove was suffering because of Grey's refusal.

"Oh," I said slowly, "so that's the game, is it?"

"Yes, and a pretty rotten game, too!" growled Armstrong. "I'm blessed if I'm

going to do lines because of Grey. He can do my fifty! Why didn't he obey Starke's orders, anyhow? Fagging isn't much of a job——"

"You beastly traitor!" roared Handforth, springing up. "Didn't you agree to back us all up in defying the rotten bullies? And now, just because Starke vents his rage on us all, you turn——"

"Don't make a fuss, Handy," interrupted Jack quietly. "I'll do Armstrong's lines."

"Oh, good!" said Armstrong, grinning.

"You needn't look pleased," I exclaimed grimly. "Grey isn't going to do your lines, Armstrong."

"He's just promised to!" shouted Armstrong.

"I don't care about that—Grey's too good-natured," I retorted. "I'm not going to let him write your lines, anyhow. It wasn't his fault that Starke played such a dirty trick, was it?"

"Of course it wasn't," said Somerton warmly. "Don't be a cad, Armstrong!"

"Well, I must say it's rotten," put in Hubbard, as Armstrong subsided into his pillow. "I don't see why we should be made to suffer just because Grey won't do what Starke tells him——"

"And nobody else sees it, either," I interrupted. "But it would be rottenly unjust to blame Grey. I thought Starke would get his revenge somehow, but I didn't expect anything of this sort—not that fifty lines is much to growl about. I'm skipper of the Remove in this House, and I absolutely uphold Grey in refusing to become Starke's fag."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good for you, Nipper!"

"Grey did the right thing!"

"Rather!"

There was quite a chorus of approval, and I nodded.

"Is there anybody here who doesn't uphold Grey?" I asked.

"That's not it, exactly," said Armstrong.

"I'll do these fifty lines, but if Starke tries any other games on—making the whole Remove suffer, I mean—I think Grey ought to give in. That's only fair to the rest of us."

"That's right enough."

"Hear, hear!"

Handforth glared round at the few fellows who approved Armstrong's statement.

"You—you beastly cads!" said Handforth hotly. "If Starke makes the Remove squirm for months—which he won't do—I'll back up Grey right through. Understand? I'll never agree to any knuckling under!"

"I can trust you, Handy, old man," I said quietly. "Some of these other chaps don't seem to realise that Grey's submission would mean more trouble immediately. It would be the thin end of the wedge. Starke and Co. would choose other fags, too. We should be an independent form no longer."

The subject was discussed until most of the fellows dropped off to sleep. But it was finally agreed that there could be no caving-in. The Bullies' League had decided to squash the Remove, and the Remove had

decided not to be squashed. There could be no half-and-half measures; it was either one way or the other.

But on the following morning we found that matters were worse than we had supposed. By dinner-time a dozen fellows were complaining of unjust punishments imposed by Starke, Kenmore, and others. In every case the bullies had given their victims to understand that the Remove would be persecuted until Jack Grey consented to become a fag.

It was quite clear that Starke had taken a firm stand; he would not choose another fellow to fag for him. He was determined to get Grey, and he meant to get him by making the other juniors suffer.

The result of these tactics was inevitable. A number of fellows—the victims—demanded that Grey should give in. This was the only manner in which peace could be restored. If Grey held out, the Remove, as a whole, would pay the penalty.

By tea-time the Remove was seething. Lines and canings had been distributed broadcast. The prefects had absolutely no authority to inflict the impositions in many cases; but to sneak was impossible. Moreover, sneaking would not improve matters. The masters did not welcome complaints from the juniors concerning the prefects; such a thing was considered petty and spiteful.

"It can't go on, of course," I said, addressing a group of fellows in the lobby after tea. "Half the Remove is doing lines—for nothing."

"But it will go on, you ass," growled Hubbard. "It'll go on until Grey——"

"Then it'll go on for ever!" interrupted Handforth. "Grey won't knuckle under! We sha'n't let him! It would be an absolute surrender!"

Jack Grey looked uncomfortable.

"I think I'd better agree, Nipper," he said quietly. "I'm—it—— Well, dash it all, I feel rotten about the whole business. It's beastly to know that all the fellows are going through the mill on account of me."

"Perhaps it is," I said slowly. "I'm not sure that it wouldn't be a good idea to acknowledge defeat——"

"Eh?" said Handforth, staring.

"And become Starke's fag," I went on. "I think you'd better do it, Grey. It'll save a fearful lot of trouble——"

"You—you babbling idiot!" roared Handforth. "We're not going to surrender to those crawling worms! I'll fight any fellow who suggests that Grey should throw up the sponge! I'm absolutely amazed that Nipper should stand here and say such a thing—Nipper, the skipper of the Remove! Ye gods and little haddocks! Ain't you all astounded?"

"I think it's a good idea," said Hubbard bluntly.

"And so do I!"

"Hear, hear!"

Several juniors approved in no uncertain terms.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "Of all the rotten cads——"

"Don't make a fuss, Handforth," interjected Grey. "Nipper's right. It isn't fair that all the chaps should be persecuted when I can put a stop to it. I don't suppose the fagging will be very hard, anyhow."

"But—but we're not going to surrender!" howled Handforth.

"Yes, we are," I said grimly. "We're going to eat humble pie and cave in. Just come to my study, Handforth, and we'll discuss this matter. You come, too, Grey. A decision of some sort must be reached this evening."

Five minutes later Study C was filled. Handforth was there, excited and angry; Grey had brought Pitt with him, and De Valerie, Burton, and some other leading lights of the Remove had squashed in.

The meeting was animated, and I did most of the speaking. At the end of fifteen minutes a final decision was arrived at. Jack Grey should express his willingness to fag for Starke. That was the verdict.

But even Handforth had calmed down by this time and was grinning; the others looked quite amiable and happy. The surrender did not seem to have caused very much trouble, after all, although we were fairly certain that the bullies would immediately choose other fags from the Remove ranks.

Grey lost no time after the meeting had broken up. He went straight to the Sixth Form passage and knocked at the door of Walter Starke's study. There was a scuffle within, then the door opened.

"Oh, it's you," said Starke sourly. "What the deuce do you want?"

"I want to speak to you."

Starke looked at the junior hard, and then jerked his head.

"Come in," he said pleasantly.

Jack entered, and found the atmosphere of the study heavy with cigarette smoke. Kenmore and Frinton were there, and Jenson of the College House. They regarded Grey with disfavour.

"What the thunder did you let the kid in for?" snapped Kenmore. "He'll only go blabbing about——"

"Shut up," said Starke politely. "What do you want, kid?"

"I've come to tell you that I am willing to fag for this study," replied Grey. "It isn't fair that the other fellows should suffer, so I'm giving in. When shall I start my duties—to-night or to-morrow?"

Starke looked almost amiable.

"I thought you'd get some sense before long," he remarked. "What did I tell you, Kenny? And what about that little bet you made at tea-time? You owe me five bob, I believe."

"Well, it's amazing," said Kenmore. "I don't believe the little beggar!"

But Grey was in earnest, and when he left the prefects' study he did so with orders to send Pitt and McClure along at once. The two juniors presented themselves with pleasing alacrity.

Reginald Pitt was ordered to fag for Wilson—who had been brought in during Grey's absence—and McClure was allotted to Frin-

ton. It was exactly as I had expected. There were three Removites in the service of the bullies already!

What would it lead to?

Starke and Co. probably believed that it would lead to complete and lasting victory for themselves. But I had quite another idea!

CHAPTER III.

OBEYING ORDERS!

SURPRISE was the chief emotion at St. Frank's the following morning.

The news that three members of the Ancient House Remove had consented to become fags for three of the worst seniors in the Sixth caused a bit of a sensation when it first got about.

A great many fellows wouldn't believe it, until I told them that it was the absolute truth. I was rather surprised that I had not been chosen for a fag; but Starke and Co. thought it wiser, perhaps, to progress by easy stages.

The Third was staggered. Chubby Heath, Owen minor, and the rest of the inky crew, went about in a state of dazed wonder until breakfast-time. They were highly pleased at the new order of things, because it would lessen their own labour; but, at the same time, it was beyond their understanding.

The Remove was divided in opinion. Quite a number of fellows were vastly indignant—particularly Christine and Co., of the College House—but I told these outraged juniors that there was no reason to worry. They simply had to trust their Uncle Nipper and all would be well.

As for the Fifth, it was a wonder they noticed it at all. The Fifth considered itself exclusive; it was a senior form, and was altogether too lofty to take any interest in such a rabble as the Remove. But the Fifth, on this occasion, took quite a large interest in the Remove.

And the lordly Fifth-Formers gazed at every Removite with silent contempt, as though wondering if such beings were fit to live on the earth at all. Phillips gazed at Handforth rather too contemptuously, for Handforth—who was no respecter of persons—punched his nose. After that Phillips hid himself away. For a Fifth Former to have his nose punched by a Removite was a far greater disgrace than for a Removite to fag for a prefect.

By dinner-time the sensation had died down. Pitt and Grey and McClure had not performed any duties yet; but they had been ordered to report themselves immediately after dinner. It was a half-holiday to-day, and the three juniors were not quite pleased with the prospect. They knew very well that they would be compelled to work throughout the afternoon.

McClure went to Frinton's study. Grey went to Starke's, and Pitt presented himself in Wilson's. I shall have something to say about Pitt and Grey later on; for the present I am concerned with McClure.

Frinton was not in the study when McClure

arrived, so the junior looked about, and made himself useful. He tidied up the fireplace; he arranged the books and ink-pots on the table; he dusted the mantelpiece. Then, as he was looking round for the next job, Frinton arrived.

"Hallo, you here already?" said the Sixth-Former. "H'm! I see you've been making yourself useful—without orders, too. Different from those dirty Third kids. Why, what the——"

Frinton paused, and stared at the table.

"Anything wrong?" asked McClure anxiously.

"Did you spill all that ink on the tablecloth?" demanded Frinton.

"Ink?" said McClure, gazing at the table. "Oh, that! How was I to know that the ink-pot was so full? It's only a drop, anyhow."

"Only a drop!" roared Frinton. "You careless young idiot! You've nearly emptied the ink-pot! If you interfere with this table again I'll half skin you!"

McClure looked injured.

"That's all the thanks I get for trying to tidy up," he growled.

"When I want you to tidy up I'll tell you," snapped Frinton. "Get out of this study, and don't come in again until I want you."

"Then I'm free for the afternoon?" asked the junior.

"Yes!" said Frinton. "I'm going out—Hold on, though! I was going on my bike, but it's too dirty. The mud the other day was frightful, and the bike is practically coated with the rotten stuff. You can clean it."

McClure stared.

"Clean your bicycle?" he asked warmly. "It'll take me hours, Frinton!"

"I don't care if it takes you days!" replied the Sixth-Former. "You've got your orders—obey them. You're my fag, and I'm going to see that you don't laze your time away. Scrape all the mud off my jigger—every speck of it."

McClure's eyes gleamed for a moment.

"Oh, all right," he said glumly. "You want me to scrape the bike thoroughly?"

"Yes, confound you!" said Frinton. "Scrape everything off, and if I'm not satisfied when I see the jigger, I'll box your ears. Now clear!"

McClure cleared, and the glum expression vanished from his face as he strode down the passage. In the doorway of Study D he met Handforth and Church. Handforth raised his eyebrows.

"Hallo, what are you doing here?" he asked. "I thought you were fagging for Frinton? Church and I are going to the village——"

"Hold on," interrupted McClure; "come inside a minute."

The three juniors entered the study, and McClure grinned.

"Frinton's going to box my ears at tea-time," he said calmly; "at least, he'll try to."

"How the dickens do you know he'll try to, you ass?" demanded Church.

"Because I've got orders to clean Frinton's bike this afternoon," explained McClure. "He told me that he'll box my ears if he's not satisfied with my work, and I'm jolly certain he won't be satisfied!"

And McClure chuckled with unholy joy.

"Very funny, isn't it?" said Handforth heavily. "Blessed if I can see anything to cackle about!"

"You will in a minute," grinned McClure. "I've got to obey orders, and if I obey them to the letter Frinton can't grumble, can he?"

"You just said he'll try to box your ears," said Church. "Don't you call that grumbling, you fathead? I expect your idea is to puncture the tyres, or something of that sort, and that's not obeying orders to the letter."

McClure shook his head.

"I'm going to do exactly as Frinton told me," he declared. "This is what Frinton said: 'Scrape everything off.' He said it clearly. Well, I'm going to scrape everything off—that's all."

"Mud, you mean?" asked Handforth.

"Frinton said everything," grinned McClure.

Both Handforth and Church looked at their chum rather hard for a few moments; then their faces broke into smiles, the smiles changed into broad grins, and the broad grins resolved themselves into yells.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Study D resounded.

De Valerie and the Duke of Somerton, who were passing along the passage at that moment, paused and opened the door.

"What's the joke?" asked De Valerie politely.

"There isn't a joke—yet," grinned Handforth.

"The joke's coming later on," chuckled McClure. "Frinton's bicycle is muddy, and he's ordered me to scrape it."

De Valerie and Somerton gazed at one another wonderingly.

"Pardon me," said the Duke, "but is that the joke?"

"Of course it is, you ass!"

"They're dotty," declared De Valerie—"clean off their rockers! There's a fat lot to laugh at in McClure scraping a Sixth Former's jigger, isn't there? I suppose it's one of his fagging duties—what?"

Handforth grasped De Valerie's arm.

"Do me a favour," he said. "Look into the bicycle-shed with a crowd of other chaps in about half-an-hour's time. You'll see the joke then, even if you're too dense to see it now. The only chap who'll fail to see the fun will be Frinton."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Church and McClure.

The visitors shook their heads sadly, and departed. De Valerie, however, promised to bring the fellows along as Handforth had suggested, although, as he added, he couldn't possibly see anything funny in scraping a bicycle.

Handforth and Co. went down the passage in high good humour. McClure was fagging for Frinton, but there was no reason why he should not get his chums to help him.

The Third-Formers often shared their fagging duties in that way.

The bicycle-shed was empty when Handforth and Co. arrived. They looked round with interest, and had no difficulty in spotting Frinton's jigger. It was in a shocking state—smothered with mud everywhere.

"Well, it needs scraping," said Church critically.

"If Frinton doesn't want it scraped, he shouldn't tell McClure to scrape it," remarked Handforth. "You'll only be carrying out orders, Clurey, and I don't see how Frinton can make a fuss about that."

The bicycle was propped just inside the doorway, and then the three juniors set to work. Frinton had chosen to have a Removite fagging for him, and he would have to put up with the consequences.

"This old piece of iron will do for me," said Handforth, picking up a heavy iron bar, with one jagged edge.

Church and McClure were soon armed with scraping implements also; and then they commenced the real task. The bicycle was not a new one, but it was quite decent, once the mud was off. It was doubtful, however, if the machine would look much by the time Frinton's fag had done with it.

Scrape! Scrape! Scrape!

The mud went flying in all directions; it was caked and hard, and fell in the form of dust and lumps. Handforth and Co. worked with a will, which was rather surprising, considering that bicycle-cleaning had always been regarded as a rotten job.

"Hallo! Who's working?"

Owen major looked in at the doorway, and behind him were Burton and Farman. All three juniors gazed at the workers in wonder.

"Gee whiz!" ejaculated Farman. "I guess you're doin' that old pusher a whole heap of good, pards! Say, who owns it, anyway?"

"Frinton of the Sixth," panted McClure. "Don't interrupt—we're busy!"

"Busy!" echoed Owen major. "You're ruining the thing!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "It'll be as good as ever, except for looks; and Frinton wants it done, anyhow. McClure is Frinton's fag, you ass, and we're just giving him a hand. Clear off, and don't bother!"

"This is something queer, shipmates," remarked Burton, shaking his head. "Souise my maindeck! That bike won't be much good—"

"Buzz off!" roared Handforth. "What do you know about bikes?"

"Well, I know that enamel was put on to stay there," said the Bo'sun. "That little craft will need to go into dry-dock when you've finished with her, messmates; she'll need refitting!"

Handforth and Co. continued their labour vigorously. The mud fell in showers, to say nothing of the enamel. Every tube of the machine's frame was being treated in the same way. The bright steel was showing in dozens of places.

"They're off their chumps," said Owen

major. "They're scraping all the giddy enamel off as well as the mud——"

"Frinton told me to," interjected McClure.

"He told you to scrape the enamel off?"

"Well, it came to the same thing," grinned McClure. "Frinton ordered me to clean his bike. 'Scrape it,' he said. 'Scrape everything off,' he said. And so we're scraping everything off!"

"Say, I guess you've got kind o' mussed up," exclaimed Farman. "Frinton wasn't speakin' literally, you galoots. He guessed that you'd scrape the mud off, not the enamel. Hully gee! There'll be heap big trouble over this. Yes, sir!"

McClure paused in his work.

"I can't help what Frinton meant," he panted. "He should speak plainly if he wants the job done properly. I'm scraping the bike, and these chaps are helping me. I don't suppose Frinton will like it, but that's his look out. He shouldn't choose a fag from the Remove!"

Owen major grinned.

"Oh, so that's the game?" he said. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Just seen the joke?" asked Handforth sarcastically. "We'll teach these rotten bullies to fag the Remove! I'll bet it won't last long! Remove fags are obedient; they obey orders literally. Do you think everything is scraped off this tube? Frinton said 'everything,' didn't he?"

"Of course he did," grinned McClure.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The onlookers chuckled with delight. They understood exactly. The bullies had got fags, and the fags were obeying orders. As Owen major remarked, Starke and Co. were not likely to get the better of the Remove.

The trio at the doorway were joined almost at once by De Valerie, Somerton, and the fellows they had brought, in accordance with Handforth's request. The Trotwood twins were there, Yakama, Hubbard, and some others.

"What's the trouble in here?" asked Hubbard.

"No trouble," grinned Owen major. "The trouble will come later on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "McClure's only doing as he was told, and we're helping him. That you, De Valerie? Didn't I tell you that we were going to scrape Frinton's fag? Well, we're doing it!"

The juniors stared at the bicycle wonderingly. It was looking cleaner, certainly, but its appearance was hardly improved. In fact the scraping process had progressed to such a degree that the machine looked just about fit for a new coat of enamel.

"My good friends," said Nicodemus Trotwood, pushing his way forward, "what can be the meaning of this wanton violence? The bicycle is ruined in appearance! Good gracious me! Frinton will be furious!"

Nicodemus bent down and examined the bicycle closely. His lean, lank figure was bent almost double, and his mop of hair was within a foot of Handforth's head. Edward Oswald grinned.

"Just what I wanted," he said. "This

wig will do nicely for rubbing up the bright parts! Keep your head where it is, Nicky!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I object strongly," said Nicodemus hastily. "My hair was never intended for such work, my good Handforth. Pray be sensible. And I must remark that this wilful behaviour is most——"

"Take this lunatic away, somebody!" said Handforth grimly.

"Is most appropriate," went on Trotwood. "I understand that Frinton gave orders to the effect that his bicycle was to be thoroughly scraped? Dear me! What do I see here, my friends? Surely there is some enamel left on this tube? Handforth, pray make further use of that formidable implement you are holding; there is some further scraping required here. Frinton must be obeyed, for are you not carrying out his precise instructions?"

Handforth nodded.

"You've got more sense than a chap would think, Nicky," he said approvingly. "Is this the place you mean? All right—leave it to me. Frinton ought to be pleased with the way McClure's obeying orders!"

"Somehow, I don't think he will be, my good Handforth," said Nicodemus, shaking his head. "I have quite a strong conviction that Frinton will be excessively furious—although, of course, that will be most unreasonable!"

And Nicodemus was not the only fellow who believed that Frinton would be furious. Still, what could the Sixth-Former say? A Third-Form fag would have "licked" the bicycle, and it would be quite impossible for Frinton to complain that McClure had not performed his work thoroughly!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS X AGAIN!

MEANWHILE, Reginald Pitt was receiving his own orders.

Pitt was Wilson's fag, and he duly presented himself in the prefect's study after dinner. Wilson was not such an outsider as Starke, but he had recently developed traits very similar to those of Starke and Kenmore. The lust for power had made him a firm supporter of the "Bullies' League."

"You'd better go along to Starke's study, Pitt," said Wilson. "I'm going out this afternoon with Starke and some other fellows. When we come back we're all going to have tea together—in Starke's quarters. You and Grey will have to get things ready. So cut along and help Grey."

"Right," said Pitt. "Rely on me, Wilson."

He went out, and discovered Jack Grey listening attentively to the instructions of Walter Starke. The prefect nodded as Pitt entered.

"Oh, you've come!" he said. "I told Wilson to send you here. You've got to help Grey this afternoon. Do you think you know everything, Grey?"

"Yes," said Jack.

"Well, tell me what you have to do."

"Go to the village with Pitt, and buy some eggs and butter and tea and bread," said Grey calmly. "If they've got some pastry at the confectioner's, buy some of that, too. Then we've got to bring all the stuff here, lay the table, and prepare tea for four. We've got to cut two platefuls of bread-and-butter and cook twelve eggs—three for each of you. And tea is to be ready at five o'clock to the minute."

Starke nodded.

"That's right, exactly," he said. "And if everything isn't done properly, you'll regret it. When I come here at five o'clock I shall expect to find the eggs hot on our plates and the tea ready to pour out. If you're late, I'll give the pair of you two hundred lines each."

"Oh, we sha'n't be late," said Pitt. "You'll find tea all ready, Starke. Leave it to us, and we won't fail. Five o'clock to the minute."

"I've given you all the money you need, went on Starke. "You'll have to account for every penny, mind. And if you try to swindle me your life won't be worth living. Do everything properly, and I'll give you sixpence each."

"Thanks awfully, Starke," said Pitt joyously. "Sixpence each, Grey! Why, we shall be able to lay in a terrific spread with all that wealth—and invite half the Remove to share it with us!"

Starke looked at Pitt sharply, but Pitt's eyes were sparkling with eagerness. He didn't look at all sarcastic. And Starke strode out of the study, and met Wilson in the passage. The two prefects went out together.

"The kids are as meek as lambs," said Starke comfortably. "I knew they would be, once they knuckled under. Firmness is what they require—firmness and rigid handling. The little cads know that we're their masters!"

Starke might not have said that had he been able to glance into his study once again. Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey were facing one another, and both were grinning. They didn't seem at all unhappy.

"Ye gods!" said Pitt. "A tanner each! What marvellous generosity! But I don't think we shall earn it, Jack—I'm sure we sha'n't! I don't see how it's possible for Starke to be satisfied with the tea we shall provide!"

"Yes, but I don't quite see how——"

"You leave it to me, my son," said Pitt cheerfully. "Our job is to carry out orders—and we're going to do it. I've got an idea—a number one, gilt-edged idea. Let's go and lay in those supplies."

"If your idea is to spoil good food——"

"I sha'n't spoil an ounce of good food," interrupted Pitt. "The tea is going to be prepared exactly as Starke ordered. But I wouldn't mind betting a level quid that Starke never wants us to prepare tea again—— Oh, but I forgot! You don't agree with betting, do you? Your morals are far above mine——"

"Oh, dry up!" grinned Jack.

The two juniors passed out of the study. Study-mates themselves, they understood one another perfectly, and were the greatest friends. It seemed ages ago since Pitt had been treading the downward path, since he had been Grey's enemy. They were inseparable chums now—and two of the very best.

Out in the Triangle they met no less a person than Sir Montie Tregellis-West. The elegant Removite was rather more elegant than usual, and he eyed the chums of Study B with interest.

"Goin' out, dear fellows?" he inquired.

"Yes—are you?" said Pitt.

"I am just waitin' for Nipper an' Watson," explained Sir Montie. "We are all goin' to the village, so we may as well walk together. The frightful asses were actually goin' out without puttin' clean collars on. I insisted upon their changin', begad! Ah, here they are."

Tommy Watson and I emerged from the Ancient House and joined the group. Sir Montie inspected us critically.

"Really, Nipper," he remarked, "that collar seems no better than the one you took off! I fail to understand——"

"Eb?" I interrupted. "Which collar? I haven't changed——"

"But you went indoors to change, you appallin' duffer!" protested Montie. "Begad! An' you haven't changed, either, Watson!"

"Changed!" said Tommy. "Why, you donkey, we went indoors to fetch Nipper's money—he forgot it! This collar is good enough for me, thank goodness! I'm not particular!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Pitt and Grey roared as they noticed Sir Montie's expression. And while our elegant chum was trying to think of something to say—something which would adequately express his feelings—Pitt told us about Starke's orders.

"So we're going to lay in the supplies," he concluded. "If you're coming to the village, my sons, you might as well lend a hand in the buying. There's quite a lot to be done—and there might be a few difficulties."

"We'll see it through," I said cheerfully. "Come on!"

Tommy Watson sniffed.

"Blessed if I can see why you should be so jolly obedient," he said. "If Starke had given me those orders I should have said 'Rats!' to his face."

"Of course you would, Tommy," I agreed. "That's you all over. Blunt and straight from the shoulder. But I think I've tumbled to Pitt's little wheeze—and it's the very thing I should have done. Starke has given certain orders, and those orders must be executed."

"Pity Starke isn't executed!" growled Watson.

"That'll come later on—he's too young yet," said Pitt cheerfully.

We passed out into the lane, Tommy Watson still inclined to be somewhat grumpy. He imagined that Pitt was going to buy

everything for Starke's tea as the Sixth-Former wanted it. But I knew Reginald Pitt better than that. Pitt was the last fellow in the world to knuckle under a cad like Starke.

Some little distance down the lane—near the Stowe bridge—we passed Mudford, the village postman. He was rather earlier than usual.

"Hallo, Muddy!" said Pitt. "Anything for me this afternoon?"

The postman paused, and shook his head.

"No, Master Pitt, not this afternoon," he replied. "There's a letter here for Master Watson, though—an' one for Master Nipper."

"Hand 'em over," I said cheerfully.

We took our letters, and Watson gave a whoop of delight as he extracted a pound note from his letter. I didn't read mine, for I saw at a glance that it was from Tinker—Sexton Blake's assistant. It was a bulky letter, too; so I concluded that my old chum had sent me particulars of one his gov'nor's cases—as he frequently did. But it was too long to read in the roadway.

We continued our way to the village in high good-humour, and Mudford plodded on towards the school. He met with a somewhat startling adventure, and it is my intention to describe the adventure at length.

Mudford led a quiet, uneventful life; he went his rounds day after day, and month after month. Excitement rarely found its way into his monotonous existence. But he came across excitement on this particular day—excitement such as he had never dreamed possible, not even in a nightmare!

His thoughts as he plodded along the lane were decidedly prosaic. He was wondering if a certain gentleman employed by Farmer Holt would pay a visit to the George Inn that evening. The said gentleman owed Mudford the sum of two shillings, and there was quite a chance that the debt would never be discharged. And Mudford was considering the prospect.

He looked round mechanically as he heard a twig snap in the hedge on his left side. Then he stood stock still, and his mouth opened. For what he saw caused him considerable agitation and alarm.

Emerging from a gap in the hedge was a stranger—a man dressed in a long, dark overcoat and a wide-brimmed felt hat. His face was heavily bearded, and the upper portion of it was concealed by a cloth mask.

"Good 'eavens!" gasped Mudford.

"No harm will befall you if you obey my instructions," exclaimed the stranger, in deep, low tones. "Come here—stand on this grass border.

The masked man looked up and down the road anxiously. There was not a soul in sight, but there was no guarantee that this state of seclusion would last for long. There was every reason to be brisk.

"Do you hear, confound you?" snapped the stranger.

Mudford started violently, and was on the point of breaking into a run. He was scared out of his wits, and hardly knew what he was doing.

"And let me advise you to attempt no tricks," went on the masked man rapidly. "Obey me, and you'll be untouched. But if you attempt to escape, or if you shout for help, I will not answer for the consequences. In any case, what I require is——"

"It—it ain't any good robbin' me," panted Mudford shakily. "I ain't got a shillin' on me, an' my watch is only nickel——"

"I have no intention of robbing you," interrupted the masked stranger. "Come here, and hand me all the letters in your bag addressed to Dr. Malcolm Stafford. That is all I require. Hurry, you infernal slow-coach!"

"I daren't do it!" gasped the postman. "I'll be sacked if I do! It's my duty to deliver letters——"

"Hang your duty!" snarled the man. "Give me those letters, or take the consequences!"

And Mudford's startled eyes gazed with horror and fascination upon a revolver which was suddenly revealed from the other's pocket. It was the last straw. Mudford, although not a coward, was quite fond of his own skin.

"I—I'll do it!" he muttered huskily.

With trembling fingers he fumbled in his bag, and finally handed over six letters, one of them in an official registered envelope.

"Is this the lot?" asked the masked robber, snatching them.

"Yes—there ain't another one," said the postman, with a gulp. "Can—can I go?"

"No!" snapped the other. "Wait!"

He examined all the letters in turn, but did not seem at all anxious to open any of them. In spite of his overbearing manner, the stranger seemed quite nervous, for he dropped three of the letters in the grass, picking them up again hastily.

"No—it's not here," he muttered. "Take them—take them all!"

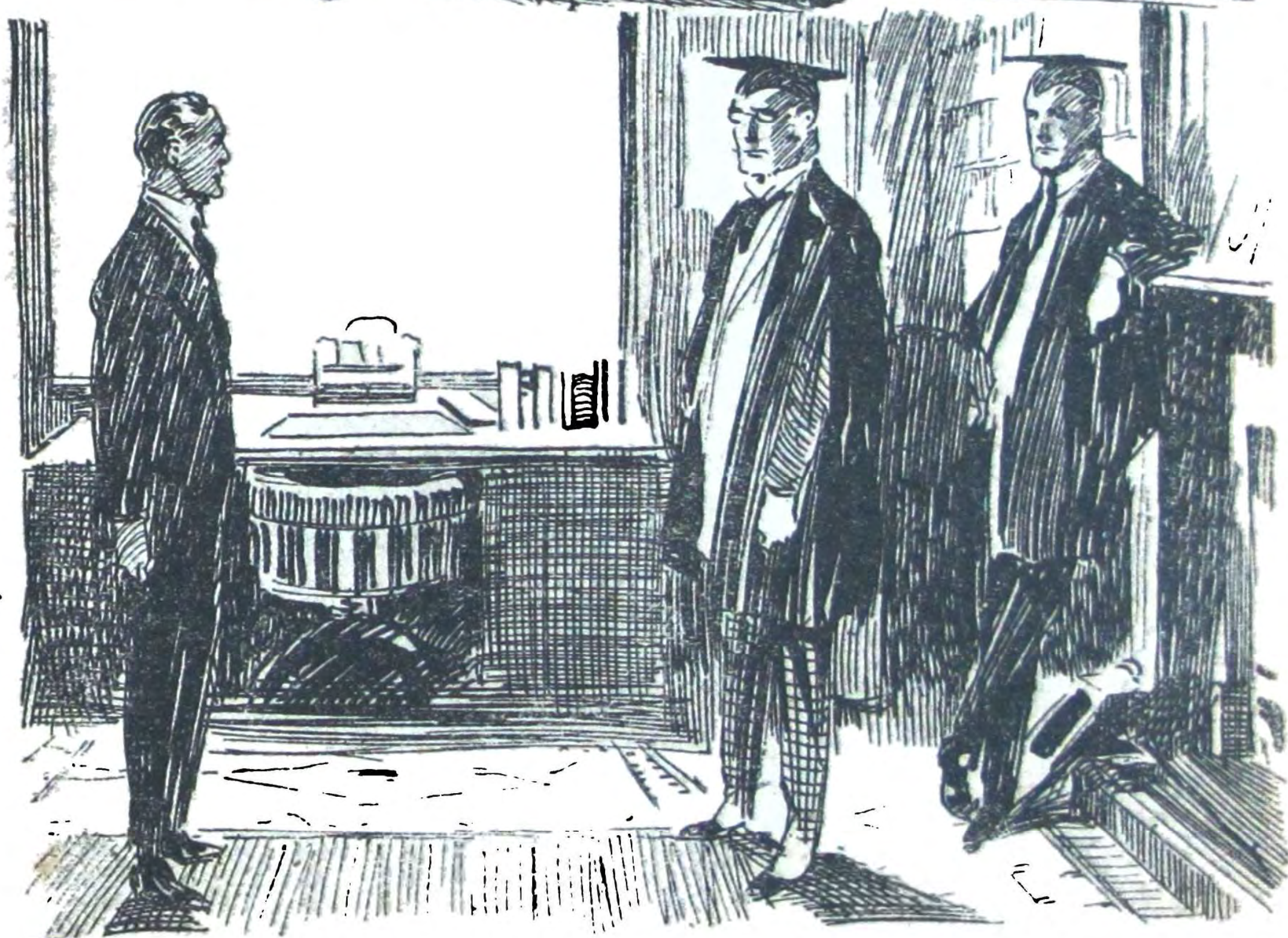
And, to Mudford's bewilderment, the thief surrendered his booty without having torn a single flap; even the registered letter was intact, so this was not the prize which had attracted him.

The next moment Mudford found himself alone; the masked man had vanished into the wood, and the postman wiped his perspiring brow with the back of a gnarled hand. He had the lane to himself, and everything was peaceful. Dr. Stafford's letters were clutched in his hand, and nothing had been stolen.

"My heye!" gasped Mudford faintly. "I never seed the like of it!"

He wondered if he had imagined it all, but that was impossible. It had happened—he had actually been stopped by an armed footpad! But for what reason? If Mudford had not been so agitated he would have suspected that the thief had been intent upon stealing an expected letter—which had not come by this post. And this, indeed, seemed to be the actual truth.

The postman hurried away from the spot, partially recovering his equilibrium of mind. By the time he reached the school-gates he was fairly composed; but there was still



1. "Hand me all the letters in your bag addressed to Dr. Stafford," ordered the masked figure; and the trembling postman was too terrified to argue.

2. Morrow presented himself in the Head's study, wondering at the grave look upon Dr. Stafford's face.

a scared expression in his eyes, and he gave a gasp of relief as he observed Nelson Lee striding towards the Ancient House.

"Beg pardon, sir!" shouted Mudford huskily.

Nelson Lee turned, and came to a halt.

"Well, Mudford?" he asked, with a smile.

"You have some letters for me?"

"Yes, sir; I think so, sir!" panted Mudford, hurrying up. "But that ain't what I was going to speak about. Not five minutes ago I was stopped down in the lane stopped by a reglar thief! It's fair shook me up, sir!"

Nelson Lee regarded the postman keenly.

"You seem rather upset, Mudford," he remarked. "What is the matter? What do you mean by that remarkable statement? Somebody has been playing a joke——"

"It wasn't no joke, sir," interrupted Mudford feelingly. "And it's fair amazed me—and that's a fact! This 'ere thief was a fellow with a beard and a mask, an' he made me give up all Dr. Stafford's letters!"

"Oh, indeed!" said Lee sharply. "Where were your wits, man? You ought not to have parted with——"

"But how could I help it, sir?" asked Mudford, in an injured voice. "The man pointed a gret old pistol at me! An' he took all the letters five ordinary ones an' a registered letter. But he give 'em all back!"

"The registered letter as well?"

"Yes, sir, why, they're in my hand, now!"

And Mudford displayed them. Nelson Lee took the letters, and examined each one. He saw that they had not been tampered with.

"Are you sure there were only these six, Mudford?" he asked.

"That's right, sir—only them six," said the postman. "He give 'em all back, an' then went into the wood. I never caught such a fright in all me life. I was walkin' along, thinkin' about the two shillings that ole Bob Summers owes me——"

"You needn't go into details about Bob Summers," interrupted Lee, with a smile.

"And you needn't look so nervous, Mudford. It seems to me that you've been the victim of a practical joke."

"A—a joke, sir?"

"What else?" laughed the schoolmaster-detective. "If the thief had been a real footpad he would have stuck to those letters—especially the registered one. It must have been a joke, Mudford. One of the boys, perhaps, dressed up for the part. I am afraid the young rascals are rather fond of teasing you."

Mudford took a deep breath.

"My heye!" he exclaimed. "Now that you come to say it, sir, it may have been one o' them young raskils dressed up. That there beard looked a bit funny. But I'll find out who the young varmint was afore I've done."

The postman had lost his nervousness, and was now inclined to be decidedly indignant. The sudden realization that he had been "japed" came to him as a shock. And what else was there to think?

"Let me advise you, Mudford, to say nothing more about it," exclaimed Lee quietly. "I will make inquiries myself—although I don't suppose they will be any good. You were the victim of a joke, and let it end at that. I will take these letters to the Headmaster, now that I have them. What have you for me?"

"Two, sir," said Mudford.

He handed over the two letters, and Nelson Lee took them and walked away with a nod. The postman, still hovering between agitation and indignation, continued his delivery. Lee went straight to Dr. Stafford's study.

"I have brought your letters, doctor," he said, as he entered. "Mudford seems to have had a bit of an adventure with them."

The Head looked up from his desk and adjusted his pince-nez.

"Indeed, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed. "An—adventure?"

"I met him in the Triangle, and he had a curious story to tell," replied Lee. "If there is any truth in it—and there is no reason to doubt the man—he was stopped in the lane by a masked stranger and forced to deliver up your letters."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the Head, starting up. "And I am expecting a registered package containing—— Ah, but you have it there, I see."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Mudford declares that the masked man took the letters, glanced at them, and handed them back. It seems a pointless affair altogether—on the face of it. I was inclined to believe that it was merely a practical joke; but there may be some other explanation. Will you examine these?"

"Certainly, Mr. Lee," said Dr. Stafford, taking the letters and laying five of them aside almost at once. He kept the registered packet, and was reassured as he felt its bulk and noted the intact condition of the seal.

"This letter contains fifty pounds in currency notes, Mr. Lee," he explained. "I sent to the bank for the money especially. Mudford's story of a masked footpad is really extraordinary—more particularly as this valuable letter is untouched. Do you think the man had been drinking? He is rather fond of liquor, I am afraid."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"He was perfectly sober when I saw him," he replied. "He told me that the stranger threatened him with a pistol—but perhaps that was the result of his imagination. If the affair was a joke——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the Head, in a startled voice. "What—what—Upon my soul! These—these papers are blank!"

Dr. Stafford had opened the registered letter and had withdrawn the contents. At first sight one would have imagined that he held a sheaf of currency notes in his hand—but they were blank slips of paper! And as the Head was turning them over a card fell out and dropped to the floor.

"Dear me!" said Dr. Stafford, glancing down.

Nelson Lee picked the card up, and his lips tightened as he read the words on it. For this is what he saw, in plain, printed characters:

"THE MYSTERIOUS X."

Lee passed the card to the Head, and his expression was grave.

"I am afraid you will never see your fifty pounds, doctor," he said quietly. "Mudford was tricked—and tricked rather neatly, too. This infernal thief is nothing if not audacious."

"The—the Mysterious X!" ejaculated the Head. "Good gracious me! I—I am bewildered, Mr. Lee! What can it mean? How did this card get into my letter? And how was it possible for the thief to substitute—"

"My dear sir, the fellow had this letter in readiness," interrupted Lee. "He was fully prepared for the coup. He knew, by some means, that you were expecting a registered packet, and he had provided himself with a substitute. I half suspected that something was wrong when I first examined that letter; it did not strike me as being genuine."

The Head stared at the card with a startled expression on his kindly old face. It was painfully obvious that he had been robbed of fifty pounds by The Mysterious X, the daring marauder who had been operating for some time in the neighbourhood of St. Frank's. True, the unknown thief had met with little success, owing to the counter-activities of Nelson Lee, but he had always eluded capture; and now, it seemed, he had scored a distinct success.

"This is a shocking affair, Mr. Lee," said the Head huskily. "But I am still puzzled as to what actually happened. Mudford declared that the letters were all handed back to him."

"That is what he thought," explained Nelson Lee. "Actually, the thief pocketed your registered packet and substituted this worthless article. Mudford did not see the change, and he believed that all the letters had been returned to him. It was a clever trick, for the rascal has had all this time to flee. Had he seized the letters in the ordinary way the hue and cry would have been after him within five minutes. By this time he will have vanished completely."

"Taking my fifty pounds with him," said the Head angrily. "'Pon my soul, Mr. Lee, this rogue is possessed of amazing nerve! What can we do in a case like this? Nothing—nothing whatever!"

"On the contrary, Dr. Stafford," said Nelson Lee, rising to his feet, "we can do quite a lot. And we must lose no time in making close inquiries. I will do my best to recover your money; and I am more determined than ever to run this original scoundrel to earth!"

CHAPTER V.

PREPARING STARKE'S TEA.

WHILE all this was taking place, Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey were in Belton, making purchases for Starke's tea. Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Watson, and I helped to the best of our ability, and gave advice when necessary.

"The first thing to get," I suggested, as we entered the village, "is the butter."

"Why the butter?" asked Watson.

"Because it's the easiest to carry," I explained. "The eggs ought to come last of all; these chaps don't want to carry eggs about longer than they can help. What about going into old Binks's for the butter?"

"Rats!" said Tommy. "Binks sells rotten stuff!"

"Exactly!" I agreed calmly. "That's what Pitt wants, isn't it?"

Reginald Pitt chuckled.

"Jack and I are going to buy Starke's tea," he said. "Starke didn't say where we were to buy the things, or how much we were to pay. My idea is to save Starke's tin. No need to chuck money about needlessly."

"The less we can pay the better," said Grey, nodding.

We entered Mr. Binks's establishment in a crowd. The place happened to be empty, and Mr. Binks came forward, rubbing his hands pleasantly.

"Well, young gentlemen?" he said, beaming on us.

"We want some butter," said Pitt. "We want the cheapest you've got, Binky. It doesn't matter what it tastes like, so long as it looks good. I suppose you haven't got any for greasing cart-wheels with?"

"You will have your little joke, sir," said Binks, grinning.

"I'm not joking," Pitt hastened to say. "Honour bright, Binky. We want some butter that's seen better days—it's not for us to eat. Anything'll do if it's yellow and greasy."

The shopkeeper scratched his chin.

"Well, young sir, if you're really serious," he said, "I do happen to have a bit of butter that's no good for sellin' in the ordinary way. But you can't eat it, mind you. It's rancid, and tastes a sight worse than it smells, although it looks all right."

"Begad! The very stuff!" murmured Sir Montie.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" whispered Watson.

"So that's the idea!"

"Dear fellow, it's a rippin' wheeze," said Tregellis-West. "Starke and Co. have given orders for tea to be prepared by five. Well, it'll be prepared; but those frightful cads ain't goin' to have everythin' their own way!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll be bound you young gentlemen are getting up to some of your tricks," said Binks, shaking his head. "This butter is only good for greasing cart-wheels with, as you said, young sir. It's a pound or two which got overlooked in the bottom of a tub. I'll bring you some to look at."

"A pound of it will be enough," said Pitt cheerfully.

Mr. Binks vanished through a rear doorway, and we grinned at one another. Starke was to find that his Remove fags were extremely careful about the expenditure of money. There would certainly be none wasted on this tea.

"Orders are orders," remarked Pitt. "We've got to buy butter--and that's what we're doing. If Starke doesn't like it, that's not our fault. We can't be responsible for people's butter!"

Mr. Binks returned, carrying a lump of delicious-looking butter on a piece of grease-proof paper. He laid it on the counter, and Pitt bent down and sniffed at it. Then he clutched at the counter for support.

"Smelling salts!" he gasped faintly. "Oh, my hat! It nearly talks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not sure that I ought to sell it to you, sir," said Mr. Binks doubtfully. "It isn't for sale, really, and I shouldn't like anybody to know—"

"Don't you worry," interrupted Pitt. "We shan't say where we got it, and it's the absolute stuff we want. How much for that lump?"

The shopkeeper shook his head.

"There'll be no charge, sir," he said. "This butter is unsaleable. You're welcome to it."

"Rats!" said Pitt. "You've got to make some charge, Binky. I'll give you sixpence for the pound. Wrap it up carefully, won't you? Oh, and have you got any eggs of a similar quality?"

"All my eggs are new laid, sir."

"Then they're no good for us," said Grey promptly. "You see, Mr. Binks, we're playing a joke on somebody, and the eggs must be bad--rotten, in fact."

Mr. Binks grinned, as he gingerly wrapped up the butter. We passed out of the shop and paused in the roadway.

"What's the next thing?" I inquired. "You're in charge of this trip, Pitt."

"We'll try the baker's," said Pitt promptly.

This establishment was only just across the road, and we all entered. An elderly woman came forward, smiling.

"Have you got any old bread, ma'am?" asked Pitt politely.

"No; it was all baked this morning," replied the dame. "Leastways, all of it except a loaf or two which was left over from last week. But that's almost uneatable, and I'm going to soak it for the chickens."

"That'll just suit us," interrupted Grey. "The older it is the better. It doesn't matter if it's as hard as a bullet. And we'd like some pastry of the same sort--pastry or cakes."

The good lady was rather astonished; but Pitt confidentially whispered that the stuff was not for our own use--we were playing a little joke. An understanding having been arrived at, the woman produced a loaf of bread which looked all right, but which was as hard as a ship's biscuit. She also brought to light some tarts and cakes, which had

been destined for the chickens also--or the pigs. The pastry had not been excellent even when new, but now it was uneatable.

"Good!" chuckled Pitt, as we emerged with our spoils. "If we can only find some really ripe eggs we shall be in luck's way."

"Starke won't!" grinned Watson. "Oh, my hat! What a lovely spread!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It'll look beautiful, too," went on Pitt. "We'll make the festive board look appetising; and, after all, we're only carrying out orders. If Starke doesn't like the food we prepare, he can dispense with our services!"

Our next visit was to a tiny grocer's shop near the end of the village, a place which mainly catered for the poor people of Beilton. And here we met with complete success.

The proprietor, it seemed, had laid in a small stock of "fresh" eggs some weeks before; half of them had come back to him, brought to his shop by indignant cottagers, who demanded their money back. The eggs, in short, were duds; those which were not absolutely rotten were, nevertheless, in a condition unfit for human consumption. And by now these were probably in the final stages of decay.

"I want a dozen, please," said Pitt briskly.

"But they can't be eaten, sir," protested the shopkeeper. "It ain't any good you thinkin' there'll be some good 'uns among the dozen. I can't sell ye them--it wouldn't be honest. It's a rare pity I bought the rubbish!"

"A pity?" I grinned. "My dear sir, those eggs are just what we require. Eggs aren't always used for eating, you know--they have other uses in this world. You ought to be glad to get rid of some."

"And I'll give you a shilling for the dozen," said Pitt generously.

The shopkeeper brightened up.

"I'll let ye have 'em," he said; "but mind, I don't give no guarantee. Them eggs ain't fit for pigs--and that I tell ye straight out."

"We wouldn't insult any self-respecting pig by offering him those eggs," said Pitt cheerfully. "They're to be given to creatures of a far lower order!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The eggs were produced. They looked all right; but, of course, eggs always do look all right. Judging them by their history, however, these particular specimens were just what we required.

"I don't think we need bother about anything else," I remarked, as we marched down the road. "So far, Pitt, you've stuck to Starke's instructions, and you don't want to give the rotter any loophole for complaining."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "Don't you think Starke will complain about the eggs an' the butter, dear old boy?"

I grinned.

"He'll complain all right," I replied; "but I didn't mean in that way. Pitt and Grey could shove soap in the butter and ink in

the tea, and all that kind of thing, but that would be against all orders. So far, Starke's instructions have been faithfully kept to, and he won't be able to inflict any punishment."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Pitt. "Of course, the beast didn't tell me what kind of eggs he wanted, or what kind of butter, and if Jack and I provide the cheapest on the market Starke can't very well blame us. But if he does give us lincs, we sha'n't do 'em. We're not going to be persecuted for obeying orders."

"Rather not!" said Grey grimly.

"Nearly four o'clock," went on Pitt, glancing at his watch. "Heaps of time—although there's a good lot to be done before five. When Starke and his visitors arrive they'll find the tea-table a picture. Everything will be perfect—to look at. The rotters will find out the awful truth when they start grubbing!"

"And we'll be outside the window!" I chuckled.

We accompanied the two obedient fags to St. Frank's, and parted with them in the Triangle. They hurried away to the Ancient House, and made their way to Starke's study. It was empty, and the field was clear, for Starke had gone out with his pals for the afternoon.

"Poke up the fire, my son," said Pitt briskly. "We're going to have everything in apple-pie order, and the tea must be ready to the minute. When Starke comes he'll see how his Remove fags can do things. No slipshod methods, like the Third-Form kids!"

The two juniors lost no time in getting to work. First of all they tidied up the study and placed everything in order. The floor was swept, and the hearth was cleared up, and the mantelpiece dusted.

The table having been cleared, a snowy-white cloth was laid upon it. Starke was always particular about his table linen, and he possessed a dainty silver cruet and an expensive tea-set. In the Remove, of course, almost anything was good enough, so long as it would hold liquid.

"My hat!" grinned Pitt. "The place'll be a picture, and when all this grub is set out on the table, it'll look a fit banquet for a giddy duke. But looks can't always be relied on—eh?"

"Not in this case, anyhow," chuckled Grey.

The cakes and pastry were placed in a glass dish, and then Grey brought forth the butter and the loaf of bread. He placed the bread on the table, and gazed at it somewhat dubiously.

"We shall want a saw for it, sha'n't we?" he asked.

"This bread knife will do all right; it has got a saw-edge, anyhow," replied Pitt. "And that bread can be cut into beautifully thin slices. It only needs a little patience and some muscular effort. You'd better hold it down while I get busy with the knife. It requires two of us for a job like this!"

They both grinned with delight, and then

commenced the difficult task of cutting the bread. Actually, of course, it wasn't much of a job. Grey was able to do it without assistance, and the slices were thin and even. They looked quite appetising, but they needed delicate handling; for, being dry and chippy, they were liable to fall to pieces when touched.

The juniors found it necessary to warm the butter slightly before it could be spread evenly. When the two platefuls of bread and butter were finished, however, they looked quite normal.

"Thank goodness that's done!" said Pitt fervently.

He had been spreading the butter, and it didn't smell at all nice. The time was now approaching five, and everything was ready except for the eggs. These were to be placed in the saucepan five minutes before the hour. It was not necessary to cook them thoroughly, because they couldn't be eaten, in any case; but they would be far more powerful when hot.

"The only thing I'm afraid of," said Pitt anxiously, "is that the blessed things will niff before they're cut open. I think we'd better let a little smoke puff into the room, just to be on the safe side."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," replied Grey. "The sooner the cads find out the truth, the better. We only need time to get clear away before the storm breaks, that's all."

And the two faithful fags watched the clock and prepared for the final task. They had obeyed orders—they had prepared tea for four in Walter Starke's study. Whether Starke would be pleased with their efforts was quite another matter.

Pitt and Grey were inclined to think he wouldn't!

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE IS BUSY.

DR. STAFFORD paced his study restlessly.

"It is not the loss of the fifty pounds which worries me so greatly, Mr. Lee, although that is serious enough," he exclaimed. "The point which seems to be of the utmost significance is that this Mysterious X was in possession of the information that a registered letter, containing money, was due to arrive this afternoon."

"Exactly," agreed Nelson Lee quietly. "That is what I pointed out, doctor. It is fairly obvious that the Mysterious X is connected with St. Frank's."

"Good heavens!" gasped the Head. "That cannot be possible."

"I can hardly believe so myself, but it is obvious," said Lee. "And when a thing is obvious, Dr. Stafford, it is not necessarily a fact. In very many cases, the obvious is totally opposed to the truth. It is unwise to accept an apparent fact; it is far more sensible to wait until the fact is proven."

"But how can we prove anything?"

"Well, as the matter now stands, we know

that this mysterious X was in possession of certain inside information concerning your correspondence," said Nelson Lee. "How the man obtained his knowledge remains to be discovered. I have examined the substituted letter, and it is valueless; there are no finger-prints, and the writing is devoid of the slightest clue. Our only course, now, is to make a close investigation by inquiry. And I mean to commence with you, Dr. Stafford."

"With—with me?" asked the Head blankly.

"Quite so."

"But I can tell you nothing—absolutely nothing!"

"That can hardly be the case," smiled Nelson Lee. "You think you can tell me nothing, doctor, but we will see what a little questioning can do. It is apparent, of course, that you have not given any information to an outsider concerning that registered letter. But did you ever discuss the matter with anybody?"

The Head thought for a moment.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "When Mr. Stockdale was talking to me on Monday I mentioned the fact that I was expecting fifty pounds in cash by registered letter."

"Did you say that you expected it by this afternoon's post?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then we have advanced already."

"But, my dear Mr. Lee, it is madness to suspect Mr. Stockdale!" protested the Head. "He would never dream of discussing my private affairs with a stranger—or with anybody, for that matter. Mr. Stockdale is always so reticent. I can trust him with any secret!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Precisely," he agreed. "But this was not a secret, Dr. Stafford. Please don't overlook that point. There was no reason why Mr. Stockdale should not mention the fact to another master, or even to a prefect—"

"Dear me!" ejaculated the Head abruptly.

He sat down in his chair, and polished his glasses.

"Another thought has struck you?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes—quite so," replied Dr. Stafford. "It was your mention of a prefect, Mr. Lee. Now that I am reminded of the fact, I distinctly remember that Morrow was in my study when I discussed the money with Mr. Stockdale. Morrow was waiting to speak to me, and I told him to take a seat by the window."

"Then we arrive at the interesting conclusion that at least two other people knew all about your expected registered letter," said Nelson Lee. "But Morrow is quite an excellent fellow, and not given to gossiping, that I am aware of. However, I think it would be as well to question him on the matter."

"Yes, I think you are right, Mr. Lee," said the Head, touching the bell.

Thus soon appeared, and the pageboy was sent off with orders to find Morrow of the Sixth. Morrow was one of the most popular

prefects in the Ancient House—a thoroughly decent fellow, and liked by everybody.

He presented himself in the Head's study without loss of time. His expression was one of mild inquiry as he entered. He could not understand the grave look upon Dr. Stafford's face.

"I want to ask you one or two questions, Morrow," said the Head. "You remember that you were here, in my study, on Monday—when I was chatting with Mr. Stockdale. I told you to sit down and wait."

"Yes, sir, I remember that," said Morrow.

"Can you tell me what we were discussing?"

Morrow looked surprised.

"I didn't take much notice, sir," he replied. "I don't think I can exactly say—Oh, yes! Weren't you talking about some money, sir? Weren't you saying that you were expecting fifty pounds by registered letter?"

"Yes, Morrow, I was," said the Head.

"That information has reached the ears of some outsider—I do not intend to go into details, but I may as well tell you that the money has been stolen—although I do not want you to spread the story."

"I won't say a word, sir," promised Morrow. "But you don't suspect me of—"

"My dear lad, what put such a wild idea into your head?" smiled the Head. "Mr. Lee is inquiring into the matter, and he thought perhaps that you might have discussed the matter with some outsider."

Morrow turned to Nelson Lee.

"But I haven't, sir," he said earnestly.

"Have you not referred to the money at all?" asked Lee.

"Well, sir, I might have done that to some of the other fellows," said Morrow, looking uncomfortable. "But I didn't think it mattered—I didn't know it was private. I'm awfully sorry, sir—"

"There's no need for you to be sorry, Morrow," interrupted Lee. "We're not blaming you in the slightest degree. I merely wish to find out the truth—that's all. You may be able to help us. If you referred to the Headmaster's expected registered letter, you did so in all innocence. I am quite certain of that."

Morrow looked very relieved.

"It was down in the post-office, sir," he explained. "I was there last night, with two or three other seniors. I don't know exactly how it started, but we were talking about currency notes."

"I understand," said Nelson Lee. "And you mentioned this particular money?"

"One of the fellows was saying that it wasn't safe to send notes through the post, sir," went on Morrow. "And I believe I told him that Dr. Stafford was expecting to receive fifty pounds in Treasury notes through the post this afternoon. But I only spoke casually, sir."

"Nevertheless, Morrow, you have put quite a different complexion on the affair," said Nelson Lee. "I have no doubt that there were others in the post-office at the time—in addition to your friends?"

"There might have been one or two people, sir," replied Morrow awkwardly. "I believe there were, now I come to think of it. I'm awfully sorry, sir," he went on, turning to the Head. "I hope you won't think I'm a silly gossip!"

Dr. Stafford smiled.

"You can go away feeling quite comfortable, Morrow," he said reassuringly. "I do not blame you in the least. You simply took part in a commonplace discussion, and I cannot blame you for that. But I am glad we have discovered how the leakage took place. Some rascal in the post-office heard your words, evidently."

"Yes, I suppose so, sir," said Morrow.

He left the study looking rather downcast, for he was anxious that both the Head and Nelson Lee should retain their high opinion of him. Morrow felt like a guilty junior as he walked away, and he resolved to be more careful in future.

"I'm afraid we cannot pursue our inquiries any further," remarked Nelson Lee slowly. "Even if Morrow were able to remember each individual who was in the post-office, we should not be advanced. There is no definite proof against anybody, for it is quite apparent that one of the people who overheard Morrow's words might have talked to others. There would be no end to our investigation at that rate, and it could never be narrowed down."

"You are right, Mr. Lee," agreed the Head. "But this Mysterious X, whoever he is, was undoubtedly smart. Having heard about the registered letter, he prepared a substitute, and then lay in wait for the postman."

"Mudford was tricked," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "He believed—and believes now—that all the letters were handed back to him intact. I really think I must go in search of Mudford at once."

"But for what reason, Mr. Lee?" asked Dr. Stafford. "The man can give you no further information, surely?"

"He can, at least, point out the exact spot where the hold-up took place," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I do not hope to gain any particular success, but I shall not be satisfied until I have made a thorough examination of the ground, behind the hedge, and in the wood."

And ten minutes later Nelson Lee was striding briskly towards the village. There were several likely places where the Mysterious X might have forced his way through the hedge; but Lee saw no reason why he should examine them all. It was far better to obtain definite information from the postman.

The schoolmaster-detective did not entertain many hopes of recovering the money. The amount was not large, but it was certainly a rich haul for the unknown thief—who had hitherto contented himself with very minor coups. And this haul was in solid cash—or its equivalent.

Those notes, no doubt, would be changed into silver as quickly as possible, and all efforts to trace the thief would be futile.

It seemed that the only possible chance was to get on the trail direct.

Nelson Lee ran across the postman in the High Street. Mudford was looking almost himself again, having imbibed several glasses of beer at the George Inn. He readily consented to go with Lee up the lane. But the detective did not tell him that the registered letter had been changed.

Dr. Stafford had no intention of informing the police of his loss; the Head preferred to leave the matter in Nelson Lee's capable hands. It would only cause unwelcome attention to have the police meandering about St. Frank's.

"This 'ere's the place, sir," said Mudford, after they had proceeded up the lane some distance. "The feller came through that gap there. Fair startled me out o' my wits, he did. An' I ain't so sure about him bein' one o' the boys, neither. But I've took your advice, sir—I haven't spoke about the thing to a soul."

"That's right, Mudford," said Nelson Lee. "Keep to that resolve; if you do speak about the affair, you will be only laughed at."

"That's what I was a-thinkin', sir," said the postman, wagging his head. "There's folks allus willin' to think badly o' people. Like as not I'd be suspected o' bein' the wuss for drink!"

"You are sure this is the place?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Quite sure."

A moment later Mudford found himself the richer by half-a-crown, and he was dismissed. He went off down the road highly pleased with himself, and considered that he had received ample compensation for his scare.

Left alone, Nelson Lee carefully picked his way through the small gap in the hedge, and closely examined the soft ground on the other side. He spent a full half-hour behind the hedge, and was not satisfied even then.

In the gloom of the wood, he set off through the trees, and was absent for another half-hour. When he finally returned it was practically tea-time, and he was looking very thoughtful and absent-minded.

I came across him in the Triangle, and he marched past me without even giving a nod. So I prodded him in the back.

"Penny for 'em, guv'nor," I said cheerfully.

"Oh, it's you, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, halting. "Allow me to inform you that I have strong objections to receiving your thumb in the centre of my back."

"Wrong, sir," I grinned. "It was my forefinger! But what's the trouble? What's the meaning of the worried frown?"

"It was my intention to postpone telling you of the incident until after tea, but since you are so curious, I will tell you now," replied the guv'nor. "To be brief, Nipper, the Mysterious X has been active again—"

"Another burglary?" I ejaculated, staring.

"Not exactly a burglary this time, young 'un," replied Lee. "Listen."

He told me exactly what had happened to

Mudford, and I listened with great interest and considerable astonishment. I had known for some time that the Mysterious X was a daring individual; but this affair was startling.

"Why, it's highway robbery, sir," I said. "And I passed Mudford with some fellows in the lane—we couldn't have parted with him above five minutes before that incident happened."

"It was, after all, a chance business," said the gov'nor. "If there had been other people in sight our mysterious friend would not have dared to show himself. He had to leave it to luck—and luck was in his favour."

"But what are you going to do about it, sir?" I asked.

"Nothing—at present."

"Hasn't the Head phoned to the police?"

"Why should he?" said Nelson Lee. "What could the police do, Nipper? They have attempted to trap the Mysterious X several times—and they have failed. I have failed, but I do not think my efforts have been quite so devoid of result as those of the police."

I scratched my head.

"Yes; it seems a pretty tough job, gov'nor," I remarked. "There's nothing to get hold of, is there? By this time the fellow is miles away——"

"Or he may be within a mile of us," put in Lee. "That beard of his is false, and he always wears a dark overcoat and a slouch hat—to say nothing of his mask. I am quite confident that we have seen the Mysterious X many times."

"Why, do you think he's one of us, sir—one of the men in this district?" I asked, with interest. "Is he a resident of Bellton?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I cannot say that," he replied. "But you may be quite sure, Nipper, that the man is a well-known individual about here. Otherwise he would not be so extremely careful about his disguise. However, I have been busy this afternoon. I have paid a visit to the wood, and I have discovered quite a number of interesting details."

"Do you think you'll collar the fellow, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"No, I don't think so, Nipper——"

"Eh?"

"I am quite sure that I shall 'collar' him," went on Lee calmly. "I do not say when that interesting event will take place, however. I am determined to lay my plans carefully, so that there will be no hitch. And there is no immediate hurry. I mean to give our plundering friend his length of rope—then pull it tight."

"But you don't know who he is, sir," I protested.

Nelson Lee nodded rather absently.

"No; I don't know who he is, young 'un," he replied. "But I suspect—— Well, it doesn't matter at present."

"Here, hold on, sir!" I exclaimed. "You suspect whom?"

"I don't think I shall tell you just now," said Nelson Lee, with one of his exasperat-

ing smiles. "Have patience, Nipper, and you will learn the truth. I do not know anything for certain—and until I am certain it would not be exactly fair to share my suspicion with you."

And with that the gov'nor walked off, leaving me glaring after him with wrath. But that was one of his favourite tricks. He'd get me on tenterhooks, then leave me stranded, so to speak.

But I was certain of one thing—and that was that Nelson Lee would ultimately discover who the Mysterious X actually was, and expose him in his true colours. And before many days had passed an opportunity came——

I can't go into that affair now, however. It doesn't belong to this episode at all. In due course I will set down all the facts, and I will only mention at this moment that some further excitement was in store.

For the present I intend to shift the scene to Walter Starke's study—because some rather interesting events were about to take place in that notorious apartment!

CHAPTER VII.

NOT GOOD ENOUGH!

"GREAT Scott!"

I murmured the words as I glanced at the clock. The time was just five minutes to five, and I had almost forgotten the entertainment which was due to commence in five minutes. I hurried into the Ancient House, and met Tregellis-West and Watson in the lobby.

"Where the dickens have you been, you ass?" demanded Watson gruffly. "We've been looking for you everywhere!"

"I didn't know you'd suddenly become blind," I replied. "I've been standing in the middle of the Triangle for ten minutes past—and I'm not transparent. Isn't the Triangle included in 'everywhere'?"

"Oh, rats!" said Tommy. "What about Starke?"

"You fellows stay here," I went on. "I'll just buzz along to the Sixth-Form passage and see if those bounders have got everything ready."

I didn't wait for them to reply, but hurried away. Outside the door of Starke's study I heard faint chuckles from within, and I opened the door. Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey were there, as grave as judges.

"I thought it was Starke," said Pitt. "You'd better not be seen——"

"Terrific!" I grinned, eyeing the table. "It looks fit for a lord!"

"Eggs just coming out of the saucepan," said Pitt. "It's two minutes to five, and Starke'll be here in a couple of ticks. Buzz off, you ass!"

I buzzed off, chuckling, and found my chums still in the lobby. They had been joined by Handforth and Co. and several other juniors. Handforth was grinning from ear to ear.

"We'll teach the ends to lag the Remove,"

he was saying. "Frinton will have a fit when he sees his silly bicycle! But if he didn't want it scraped he shouldn't have given the orders!"

"Of course not," said McClure. "It's been a lot of trouble, scraping that jigger, but we've done the job well—we've scraped every speck of mud off."

"And every speck of everything else, I reckon!" grinned Owen major.

"Frinton will rave——"

"Sh-sh!"

The warning was necessary, for at that moment Starke entered the lobby from outside. He was accompanied by Kenmore, Wilson, and Jesson—all Sixth-Formers and prefects.

"Now then, you kids," said Starke, with a lordly air, "clear out of the way."

The seniors stalked through the lobby and disappeared. Several wrathful glares followed them.

"Might think they owned the place!" snorted Handforth.

"Never mind that now," I said quickly. "Come with me out into the Triangle—near Starke's study-window. We shall hear something funny in a minute or two. There's going to be a regular concert!"

"I fail to comprehend, my good Nipper," said Nicodemus Trotwood mildly.

"You'll comprehend in a minute," I grinned. "Pitt and Grey have been preparing tea in Starke's study—they're both fags, you know. But I don't think they'll be fags after this evening. Starke won't want another tea like this one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Watson.

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle about," said Handforth. "Now, if you go and squint at Frinton's bicycle you'll roar——"

"Blow Frinton's bicycle," I interrupted. "Who's coming?"

All the crowd followed me, for they suspected that something was "on." It had been known from the start that the Remove had not accepted humble pie—that we had not lamely given in to the bullies. Several fags had been chosen from the ranks of the Remove; but there was a trick about it somewhere. And the fellows who weren't in the know were curious and eager.

Meanwhile, Starke and Kenmore and their two guests arrived at the former's study. They entered in a crowd, and Starke stared at the beautifully-laid table with surprise and pleasure.

"By gad!" he said. "That's not so dusty, is it?"

"Ripping!" exclaimed Wilson.

"Queer smell in the room," remarked Kenmore, sniffing the air. "There's some smoke, too. Have you kids been letting the fire——"

"Oh, don't grumble over nothing, Kenny," interrupted Starke. "The kids have done well—jolly well. They knew better than to shirk their duties. They'd have been tanned if they had. This shows the wisdom of choosing fags from the Remove. Those

Third-Formers are more trouble than they're worth."

Pitt smiled blushing.

"I'm glad you like it, Starke," he said meekly. "Grey and I carried out your orders to the letter. We bought everything you mentioned, and it's only just struck five. The eggs have just come out of the saucepan. They're all hot, and they ought to be full of flavour!"

Grey nearly choked, but he kept a straight face.

"You can account to me for the money afterwards," said Starke. "Clear off now. I'll get you to prepare tea for me every day. You'll have to come here after lessons every afternoon—understand? You're my fag, Grey, and you've got to obey my orders."

"Yes, Starke, thank you," said Grey humbly.

"Don't stand there staring," snapped Starke. "Clear out, you little blighters! And be back here by six, to clear the things away and tidy up. If you're a minute late you'll be canned!"

Pitt and Grey retired. If they had had any qualms about the trick they had played—which they hadn't—those qualms would have vanished. Starke's overbearing manner was almost more than Pitt could stand. He shook his fist at the study door as he stood in the passage.

"The awful rotter!" he murmured. "You might think we were galley-slaves!"

"Never mind," chuckled Jack. "We shall have our revenge in a tick!"

"Yes, that's some consolation, thank goodness!"

The two Removes hurried away, en route for the Triangle, to join us near Starke's window. In the meantime, Starke and Co. were preparing to partake of the appetising-looking meal which was ready for them.

"Jolly good, this," said Jesson, as he sat down. "I shall have to get a Remove kid to fag for me, Starke. I didn't think the little beggars would be so easy to deal with. I was expecting trouble with those kids."

Starke grinned.

"I know how to handle the young brats," he said. "They're scared of me; they'll do anything I order without question. There's only one way to rule a fag, and that is to treat him firmly."

The four prefects sat down at the table. Everything was perfectly prepared. The bread-and-butter looked delicious; thin rounds of bread liberally spread with butter. The eggs were hot on their plates, three for each senior.

"Seems to be a curious smell about the place," remarked Kenmore, sniffing again. "I can't quite make out——"

"Oh, get on with your tea," said Starke. "Help yourselves, you chaps."

"Thanks," said Jesson. "I'm hungry."

He took a slice of bread-and-butter, conveyed it to his mouth, and took a liberal bite. His teeth found some difficulty in getting through the slice, and before he had actually succeeded he gave a stifled roar, and almost fell out of his chair.

The bread-and-butter went flying, and

Jesson hastily ejected the small portion which had entered his mouth. His expression was sickly, and he staggered to the fireplace dizzily.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Starke. "What's wrong, Jesson?"

"He's ill!" said Kenmore, jumping up.

"That—that butter!" spluttered Jesson faintly. "Oh, my goodness! Don't touch it! don't even smell it! I'm poisoned! It's horrible—awful—ghastly! My mouth tastes like the smell of a candle-factory!"

"Rot!" said Starke. "The bread and butter's all right!"

He picked up a piece, and it broke in half in his fingers. The piece which fell upon the plate sounded as hard as biscuit. Starke, with an expression of surprise on his face, sniffed hard at the butter. The next second he gave a roar.

"Oh, my grandfather!" he gasped. "It smells like rotten tallow!"

"And I've got some in my mouth!" said Jesson faintly. "Gimme one of those cakes, for goodness' sake!"

He grabbed one himself, and jammed it to his mouth. But he couldn't bite through it, and he hurled it down furiously.

"They're as stale as Adam!" he shouted. "There's something queer——"

"Oh!" gasped Kenmore suddenly. "Ooo-oh!"

He fell back in his chair, and crashed over against the wall. In front of him was an egg, with the top removed. Steam was issuing from the awful-looking brownish-yellow interior of the shell.

"Great goodness!" panted Wilson, holding his nose. "Whad a frightful shell!"

It was truly awful, and the whole study reeked of it. To make matters worse, Wilson had just opened one of his eggs, and it was even worse than Kenmore's. The utmost confusion reigned in the study.

"Open the window, somebody!" roared Starke.

Wilson jerked up the window and hung limply outside. He was joined by Kenmore and Jesson. They all looked pale and sickly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a roar of merriment, and it went up from a score of throats. The seniors gasped afresh as they saw a crowd of Removeites near by. I was among that crowd, and I waved my hand cheerfully.

"How do you like tea prepared by Remove fags?" I asked sweetly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Were the eggs nice?" shouted Pitt.

"What price the dairy butter?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kenmore turned back into the study unsteadily.

"We've been tricked, Starke!" he panted. "We've—— Oh, my hat!"

The atmosphere of the study was shocking, and Kenmore turned to the window again for more fresh air. Starke, his teeth set, glared at the table. He knew now that Pitt and Grey had played a trick.

To make absolutely sure, Starke smashed two more eggs. They were as rotten as the others. Everything on the table was un-

eatable. Not a single crumb was fit for human consumption!

"The—the little demons!" snarled Starke violently.

He was about to make a dive for the door, when it opened, and Fenton and Morrow and two or three other seniors entered. They just came inside, and then stampeded out again.

"Good heavens!" gasped Fenton. "What's happened?"

He held his handkerchief to his nose, for the awful smell was coming out into the passage in waves. Fenton was the head-prefect of the Ancient House and Captain of St. Frank's. He and Morrow were the two most popular prefects in the school.

For some moments there was much coughing and spluttering. Starke and his pals managed to escape from that awful apartment, and they leaned against the passageways, looking positively sick.

"What the deuce have you been doing in there?" asked Morrow huskily.

Starke nearly choked.

"You—you silly fool!" he roared. "Do you think we did it? Those rotten eggs were cooked for our tea——"

"Oh!" said Fenton. "Rotten eggs! They must be years old!"

"I didn't buy 'em!" shouted Starke furiously. "I told Grey—my fag—to get tea ready, and Pitt helped him. This is the result! The little hounds have deliberately mucked everything up! They must have bought all the rotten stuff they could lay hands on—eggs, butter, bread——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fenton and Morrow yelled, and their yells were echoed by a crowd of other seniors. The sixth-form passage resounded.

"You—you idiot!" bellowed Starke. "Do you call it funny——"

"Rather!" gasped Fenton. "Ha, ha, ha!"

And faintly, from the Triangle, came another roar:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Starke and Co. gazed at one another almost homicidally.

"Are we going to stand this?" hissed Starke. "Those fags will be sore for weeks when I've done with them! I'll swish them till they can't stand! I'll make their lives a misery——"

"Hold on!" said Fenton, suddenly becoming serious.

"Mind your own business!" bellowed Starke furiously.

"That's what I am doing; this is my business," said the captain of the school. "I haven't an ounce of sympathy for you, Starke——"

"I didn't ask for any, confound you!"

"That's just as well," went on Fenton. "It was a mad idea to choose fags out of the Remove. I guessed what would happen, but I didn't say anything. You've only got yourself to blame for this!"

"What do you mean?" roared Starke, glaring.

"I mean that the Remove fellows won't be fagged!" retorted Fenton grimly. "I should think this affair ought to be a lesson

to you. You fellows made yourselves the taskmasters of the Remove kids, and they've turned the tables on you. It is just what you deserve!"

"Rather!" said Morrow. "It's all your own fault, Starke. It was a mad idea to fag the Remove, as Fenton just said. This'll be the joke of the term! And you thought what a triumph it was! Ha, ha, ha!"

Starke shook with rage.

"I'll make the little brats pay for it!" he snarled.

"You'd better go easy, that's all," said Fenton quietly. "I shouldn't advise you to go too far, Starke. Haven't you got sense enough to realise that the Remove is independent? It's not going to be browbeaten by you!"

"I've finished with the little beasts!" growled Kenmore. "No more Remove fags for me, I can tell you!"

"Or for me, either!" snapped Wilson. "Pitt will be playing some trick——"

"My bicycle's ruined!" shouted Frinton, rushing along the passage at that moment. "Those kids have scraped all the enamel off—every atom of it! The machine isn't fit to—— Oh, my goodness! What's this frightful stink?"

Frinton backed away, and McClure came sauntering along the passage. McClure was quite bold with Fenton so near at hand.

"Seen your bike, Frinton?" he asked innocently. "I've finished it."

Frinton whirled round.

"You—you little rotter!" he shouted. "I'll skin you——"

"Eh?" said McClure. "I've only obeyed orders, Frinton! I'm your fag, you know, and you told me to scrape your bike clean."

I said, 'Shall I scrape everything off?' and you said, 'Yes, everything.' So I did it: I obeyed instructions!"

"You've taken all the enamel off, you young fool!" howled Frinton.

"Well, the enamel's included in 'everything,' isn't it?" asked McClure mildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fenton and the others roared afresh.

"My dear chaps, you can't do anything," said Fenton. "These kids have simply carried out instructions, that's all. You can't punish 'em for that. If you've got a grain of sense among the lot of you you'll let the thing drop."

"And chuck up fagging the Remove," added Morrow. "The Remove's one too many for you, my sons. This is only a beginning, don't forget. You'll be chipped to death, as it is!"

Starke and Co. were chipped unmercifully.

And the bullies had sense enough to realise that the game was not worth the candle. Fagging the Remove was too strenuous a pastime! Pitt, Grey, and McClure were left severely alone by the bullies.

But our fight with Starke and Co. was by no means at an end.

This affair had been a victory for us; but the "Bullies' League" was as powerful as ever. I was quite convinced that the league would take some kind of revenge at the first opportunity.

There was every chance that things would become extremely hot in the near future. The battle between the Remove and the bullies of St. Frank's was only just commencing!

And it was to be a fight to a finish.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY,

UNDER THE TITLE OF

THE BREAKING POINT!

will be Another Magnificent Long, Complete Account of School Life and Detective Work at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER & CO., HANDFORTH & CO., STARKE, KENMORE, and THE MYSTERIOUS X.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

PRICE THREE-HALFPENCE

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, with which they eventually come up, and Alan makes the acquaintance of Dick Selby. They swap yarns, when they are suddenly interrupted by a voice coming from a swamp. On investigating, they find a man on the point of dying. He is able, however, to begin telling his story. His name is John Hammond, the man whom, by a strange coincidence, Dick is seeking.

(Now read on.)

JOHN HAMMOND'S STORY.

"**T**HE rest is even stranger," Hammond resumed. "What I am going to tell you next was all like a dream to me, and yet it wasn't a dream. I was taken to that red castle, and was critically ill, and for most of the time I was delirious, quite out of my head. But I had short, lucid intervals now and again, and I can remember a lot of things I observed then.

"I was in a clean, white bed, in a room with a carpet, and pictures on the walls, and a shelf of books, and English magazines and papers. People came in to see me sometimes. There were black Somali servants in white robes, and the pretty girl with the golden hair, and a big, tall Englishman, with a yellow beard and moustache. And once there was a huge Masai warrior, with a spear and shield and a waistcloth of leopard-skin. None of them ever uttered a word to me, and I was too weak to talk to them. And there was another man that I can recall. He was lean and dark, with a black moustache, and a handsome, rakish kind of a face that I didn't like.

"When I began to get better they gave me champagne and nourishing food. I awoke one morning with the fever gone and my mind as clear as a bell. And as I was lying there, wondering where I was, and how there could be such a place in the unexplored wilds of Africa, the big, bearded Englishman entered the room, and when I started to question him he made me drink a tumblerful of

wine. It tasted like champagne, though it had a bitter tang. I had hardly more than tossed it off when I lost consciousness, and I had no recollection of anything more until I came to my senses in a canoe that was adrift on the Bana River.

"There was a small quantity of luggage in it, and three of the Somali servants were paddling. 'Where are you taking me?' I inquired. 'You are to go back to your own country, white man,' one of the Somalis answered, 'and you must never return. The English lord doesn't want strangers at his home in the Red Valley.'

"That was all I could get out of them. They wouldn't give me any information about the Englishman and the lovely girl. I had been nursed through my illness, and packed off under the influence of a drug as an unwelcome guest.

"You must understand, Dick, that this was only a fortnight ago, when I had recovered from the fever and was as sane as you are. And so I was when I first put foot in that valley, and what I saw during my illness, in my lucid moments, was no dream. You believe me, don't you?"

The two lads nodded. Their doubts had been dispelled. They were satisfied now that it was a true tale they had been listening to, amazing though it was.

"Did you learn what the girl's name was, Mr. Hammond?" asked Alan Carne. "I mean her Christian name."

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"I heard it spoken once," was the reply. "It was rather an uncommon name."
 "Can you remember what it was?"
 "I think I can. Yes, it has just come to my mind. The Englishman called the girl Lorna."

Alan gave a quick start. The colour ebbed from his cheeks, and flowed back to them again. His features were in shadow, and the brief agitation he had betrayed had not been noticed by Dick Selby, who was nestled by the side of his dying friend, with an arm around his shoulders. From John Hammond's glazing eyes and his extreme weakness, it was obvious that he had not long to live.

"I must tell you the rest, my boy," he said, when he had swallowed a little more of the brandy and was able to continue. "For a week we travelled eastward down the Bana River in the canoe, by day and night, for a distance of hundreds of miles. One morning the Somalis put me ashore on the south bank, and gave me a rifle and ammunition and a big bag of food. And, when they had pointed to a narrow trail, and told me that it would lead to where white people lived, they set off on their return journey."

"I didn't worry much, for I had got strong again, and was in fit condition for the march. For three days I trekked south, holding to the trail from dawn till darkness and sleeping by a fire. And it was on the fourth day that queer things began to happen. I heard stealthy footsteps behind me sometimes, and was sure that I was being followed. It was no delusion, either. For I saw dark faces peering at me from the thickets, and once, I could swear, I had a glimpse of the man with the black moustache I had seen at the red castle in the valley."

"I was so tired that night I dropped to the ground and fell asleep without a fire, and when I awoke in the morning I had been robbed. My rifle and cartridges were gone, and every scrap of food, and my boots as well. I knew what that meant. There wasn't an earthly chance for me. I kept on for four more days, though, suffering from hunger, and getting weaker and thinner. I wonder I wasn't killed by wild beasts, for I was at their mercy."

"At the close of to-day I had to give up. Night was falling, and I couldn't go a step farther. I sank down by this tree, and a snake that was coiled here bit me in the leg. I cut the spot open with a knife, and rubbed into it some permanganate of potash which I happened to have. That did some good, but it didn't check the effect of the poison entirely. It got into my veins, and made me light-headed. I lay here for hours in a sort of a stupor, crying out now and again when a spasm of pain took me. I was roused by the report of a gun, and I shouted for help, and heard answering shouts. Then the leopard crept near, and—and you—"

John Hammond's voice choked, and he leaned heavily against the young American, who held the cup of brandy to his lips.

"Drink it!" he bade. "Be quick!"

"It's no use!" gasped the sinking man. "I can't swallow! I—I'm dying!"

"No, no, John, you're not! We'll pull you through!"

"You can't, my boy! It's too late! Tell them at home, in New York! Give my love to my brother! And heed my advice, Dick! Don't go any farther north! Travel south as fast as you can. There's danger in these parts. Deadly peril! Wickedness and treachery and murder! Beware of the man with the black moustache! Get out of his reach, or you'll be sorry! That's all. Good-bye, my boy! Good-bye!"

"Speak to me, John! Speak to me!"

But John Hammond would never speak again. His eyes were closed, and his head was sunk on his breast. He remained unconscious for a few minutes, and then, with a sigh, he peacefully breathed his last, with the two lads and the natives grouped around him.

"Poor fellow!" Alan Carne said sadly.

"I've lost a good friend," Dick Selby replied, brushing a tear from his cheek. "One of the best, John was. If only we had found him a couple of hours ago! We might have saved his life."

"Yes, that's the tragedy of it," Alan assented.

ON THE MARCH.

THEY buried John Hammond by the light of the fire that night at the edge of the camp, heaping a mound of stones on the grave to protect it from the ghoulish hyenas and erecting over it a simple wooden cross. The tragic affair had cast a gloom on the whole of the safari, and had caused apprehensions as well, for one of the Wakambas who had accompanied the search-party, and had a sufficient knowledge of English to get a grasp of the story told by the dead man, had repeated what he had learned to all the rest of the natives.

Several of them were put on guard, and the others, having replenished their fire with wood, squatted around it, and talked in low tones of what had happened. The two lads withdrew to the tent, where for a little time they sat in silence, neither in the mood for conversation.

"It's the tallest kind of a fairy tale, one might think," said Dick Selby, rousing from his abstraction. "An Englishman living in modern luxury in a castle in the heart of Africa, a golden-haired girl that rides a zebra, and a villain with a black moustache. Gee-whizz! It takes the tinsel off old Munchausen! Yet it's true, every word of it. Poor old John was giving us the straight goods. And I guess his warning isn't to be laughed at."

"He was hounded to his death by black scoundrels, who wanted him to die of starvation. I'll have to change my plans now. I'll strike westward and shoot big game. Not for long, though. If you come with me, my

(Continued overleaf.)

boy, you'll see Nairobi in two or three months. But I'll tell you what I would rather do. John's tale of that mysterious valley has fired me with a desire to—" He broke off and yawned. "I'm for bed, Carne. Better turn in yourself."

Stretching themselves on the portable cots, they presently fell asleep, and did not awake until the early dawn. The American made no further mention of his plans at breakfast, nor did Alan refer to the subject. At the bidding of Rembo tent and cots were folded, the porters picked up their loads, and the gun-bearers shouldered their weapons. Dick Selby lit his pipe, and took a coin from his pocket.

"Shall I toss for it?" he said. "Which is it to be? North or west?"

"I was just about to speak of that," Alan replied. "I don't want you to do anything you're not keen on doing, but whatever your decision may be I'm going north with Jan if he is willing. I had meant to ask you for rifles and cartridges and a supply of food."

Dick's eyes sparkled.

"So that's your intention," he said. "Meaning, of course, that you're bent on seeing the red castle and the mysterious Englishman and the pretty girl?"

"Yes, Selby, that's right. I want to see them badly."

"You wouldn't be a welcome visitor. They chucked old John out, and he was told not to return."

"They wouldn't throw me out, I am quite sure. They would be as glad to see me as I would be to see them. At least, I think so. I've got it into my head, after hearing your friend's story, that—that—"

The English lad paused, and Dick stared at him curiously, observing his flushed and eager face.

"You know something about those people, Carne," he declared.

"I'm not certain that I do," said Alan. "It is only a suspicion."

"You have a reason of your own, then, for wishing to visit the place?"

"Yes, Selby, I have. But I won't tell you now what it is. I'll wait until we get there, if we ever do."

"It will be a long journey, and a perilous one," Dick reminded him. "And it is doubtful if we could find the entrance to the valley."

"We'd find it easily enough," Alan answered. "We couldn't miss the split in the cliff, with the jutting rocks to right and left of it."

"And what of the danger, Carne? It's no joke. It's as plain as daylight, from what old John said, that he was followed along the trail by that white man and some natives who had come down the Bana River in other

canoes behind ~~him~~ and his party. - They were too cowardly to murder John, so they robbed him of everything he had while he was asleep, and left him to starve. They may still be lurking somewhere in this neighbourhood. And, what's more, it was the bearded Englishman who sent the ruffians to do my poor friend in. He must have concluded to get rid of him for good after the departure of John and the Somalis."

"That's not true!" Alan cried hotly, his eyes flashing. "I can't believe it! I'll swear the Englishman had no knowledge of it!"

"I beg your pardon," said Dick, sorry for the outburst of indignation he had provoked. "You ought to know best. So you are not afraid of the risks?"

"I'm not a bit afraid. I would face any peril to see that Englishman and the girl."

"And so would I, Carne. I've been in the same mind myself since last night, only I hesitated to put the proposition to you. I didn't care to make the venture without a chum. I'll gladly come with you. We'll go together in search of the mysterious valley, my boy, and we'll find it, too! So that's settled. Shake on it!"

The hands of the two lads met in a hearty clasp. And the headman, called forward by Dick Selby, was informed that the journey would still be to the north.

"There will be danger," said Rembo, a dusky pallor creeping into his cheeks. "Be wise, Bhagwan, and turn back."

"Danger be hanged!" Dick exclaimed. "I hired you and the rest for the trip, and you've got to obey my orders."

The headman sullenly acquiesced. The Wakambas heard the news calmly, and Jan Swart did not care where he went as long as he was with Alan, to whom he was devoted. The word for the safari to start was given, and they all bore northward into the swamp, Dick looking back, his eyes dim with tears, for a last glimpse of John Hammond's grave.

"Poor old John!" he said. "If only he was with us! But I sha'n't be lonely, Carne. You and I are going to be the best of chums, I am sure."

Alan nodded absently, and smiled. His thoughts were far away, groping in the past of his early years, dwelling on such things as the young American did not dream of.

"I may be wrong," he reflected. "It will be a bitter disappointment to me if I am."

All of that day the party traversed the vast, evil-smelling swamp, holding to the narrow path by which John Hammond had come. A premonition of danger weighed on the lads, and it was shared by their black companions. And yet it was not likely, they felt, that the enemies of the dead explorer were anywhere in the vicinity.

(Another grand, long instalment of this enthralling serial next week.)