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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

GETTING UNBEARABLE!

"THERE'S no sense in beating about the bush," I said grimly. "Starke and his crowd have got the upper hand."

"Oh, rot!" objected Tommy Watson. "What about that fagging affair the other day? Starke and the other bullies tried to fag the Remove, and they were completely dished in the end. Do you call that having the upper hand?"

"Hardly," I replied. "But that's not the point, Tommy. Starke and Kenmore and the rest have avoided this study, and also fellows like Handforth, or Pitt, or De Valerio. The rotters know that we're too strong for 'em. So they're persecuting the weaker chaps, and the position is impossible."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "That's queer, dear old boy. How can the position be impossible if it's actually existin'?"

"You know what I mean, you ass!" I said. "The position can't last—something will have to be done. We simply can't allow these bullies to have everything their own way. And the conditions in the Remove at present are rotten."

"Dear fellow, you're right—you are, really," said Sir Montie, nodding.

It was tea-time, and I was sitting with my two chums in Study C, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. The subject under discussion was a serious one; a subject which affected the welfare of the whole Remove.

For some weeks past Walter Starke, of the Sixth, had been organising a campaign against the juniors—a bullying campaign, to be exact. Starke had collected a number of other seniors about him, and they had formed a kind of league. Among the juniors themselves this band was known as "The Bullies' League."

And the seniors possessed the advantage of authority. Several of them were prefects—Starke, Kenmore, Wilson, and others. These Sixth-Formers were able to inflict punishment for minor offences; and it is almost unnecessary for me to add that the cads used their power to the utmost extent. Indeed, they exceeded their authority constantly, but it was impossible to sneak

If the bullying was to be dealt with, we should have to act on our own initiative. And it seemed that the time had come when action was absolutely necessary. For many fellows in the Remove were bending to the bullies' will.

There were only a comparatively small number of these weaklings; but they were Removites, and as skipper of the Remove it was up to me to defend them. Fellows like Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell—the "Nuts" of the Ancient House—were left severely alone by Starke and Co. For they were birds of a feather, and understood one another perfectly.

Others were left severely alone, too. The strong section of the Remove did not suffer much. Even Starke had more sense than to try any of his tricks with me, or with my chums. And Study E, occupied by Pitt and Grey, was exempt now. Pitt and Grey had been chosen as fags only recently, but they had fagged so thoroughly that Starke was only too glad to be rid of them. On that occasion, in fact, the Remove had scored heavily.

But the bullies had been worse than ever since then. They had vented their spite upon juniors who hadn't the pluck to stand up for themselves. And Starke and Co. were extending their operations every day.

"Yes, they've got the upper hand," I said absently. "It's no good saying they haven't, Tommy. The rotters are trying to break the spirit of the Remove so that they can 'lord' it over the whole Junior School."

"But they'll never do that," said Watson. "A few silly asses like Armstrong or Elmore might knuckle under, but we never shall."

"Begad! I hope not!" said Sir Montie.

"Whatever happens, this study will maintain its independence," I declared. "There are quite a number of other studies that are just as firm. But all this doesn't alter the fact that Starke and his pals are getting more power every week. They chucked up the fagging game—openly. But, as a matter of fact, several Remove fellows are being fagged at this very moment. But the bullies are doing it in a roundabout way now."

"I'm afraid you're right, old boy," said

Sir Montie, shaking his head. "I was noticin' it only this mornin'. Kenmore came out into the Triangle an' ordered Doyle to do somethin' or other."

"Yes, I heard him," I said. "Doyle's a quiet chap, and he's scared of the prefects. He went off without a word, although Kenmore had simply barked at him. That's just an example of what's going on every day. My dear chaps, you can't get over the fact that the bullies are gaining the upper hand."

Watson shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what can we do?" he asked.

"I don't know just yet," I said thoughtfully. "But we've got to do something. We can't allow this scandal to go on much longer. About a third of the Remove is in mortal dread of the bullies, and that's about the worst disgrace we could have. We're not kids, and I'm not going to allow the prefects to treat us as kids. When I say 'us,' I mean the Remove as a whole."

"It's all very well talking," growled Watson, stirring his tea. "You say you're not going to allow it? How in the name of goodness are you going to put Starke in his place? It can't be done, Nipper!"

I lay back in my chair.

"It can't be done on the spur of the moment," I agreed. "Before we can fight the bullies with any prospect of success we must organise—just the same as they have done. And even then we shall have lots of difficulties. But you can be quite sure that this state of things can't go on much longer."

And I was not the only fellow who held that view. The bullying tactics of Starke and Co. was the principal subject of conversation in several junior studies that evening. And quite a number of fellows were labouring under the delusion that I was sitting still meekly with the intention of doing nothing. Edward Oswald Handforth was one of these hasty youths—and he ought to have known better.

In Study D an animated discussion took place some little time after our own talk in Study C. Handforth and Co. were rather late with their tea, and did not sit down to it until my chums and I had practically finished.

Church and McClure knew well enough that something was brewing. The expression upon their great leader's face was familiar to them; it portended that Handforth was about to deliver himself in his customary emphatic manner.

"Disgraceful—that's what it is!" exclaimed Handforth at last.

"Well, it's not my fault," said McClure, noticing that Handforth was glaring at his plate. "It's the only tin of sardines we had, and you've got more than your share, anyhow. I'll admit there's only three each."

"Sardines!" snorted Handforth. "Who's talking about sardines?"

"I thought you were grumbling about——"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Handforth. "It seems to me that you chaps can't think of

anything else except your giddy tummies! I've got more important things to consider. You seem to forget the responsible position I hold in the Remove."

"We could never forget that!" remarked Church casually. "It ain't possible for a chap to forget something that doesn't exist!"

Handforth laughed bitterly.

"Oh, I don't expect to get any encouragement from you," he sneered. "It's a fine thing when a study leader is jeered at by his chums. I'm not skipper of the Remove, I'll admit, but I've got responsibility all the same. You seem to forget that I've taken it upon myself to look after the interests of everybody in general."

"But why?" asked McClure innocently. "Nobody wants you to."

"I don't suppose you want a punch on the nose," roared Handforth, "but you'll jolly soon get one if you ain't careful!"

McClure shrugged his shoulders and made no reply. He was wise, for he had no wish to have his tea spoiled. Handforth was quite capable of carrying out his threat at a second's notice; if words failed him, Edward Oswald always resorted to violence. It was his safety valve, as it were.

"It's disgraceful!" declared Handforth firmly.

"You said that two minutes ago," murmured Church.

"And I'll say it again, too," went on Handforth. "Mind you, I've got nothing against the chap personally, but he's not fit for the position. I don't like saying it, but it's the truth."

"Oh, of course," said McClure promptly.

He hadn't the faintest idea of what Handforth was talking about, but it was always the safest thing to agree. This was the invariable principle of Church and McClure when Handforth commenced arguing.

"He ought to be kicked out," said Church warmly.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as that," went on Handforth. "He's all right in the main, but he needs bucking up. Now, I suppose you'll both agree that I'm the right chap to do the bucking up business?"

"Nobody better!" remarked Church enthusiastically.

"The question is—how shall we start?" asked Handforth, stirring his tea absently, and overlooking the fact that there was no sugar. "The best way, in my opinion, will be to face him boldly and to tell him the truth straight out."

"That's the best way, of course," said McClure. "But how are you going to do it. Handy? I'll be a bit of a job to see him, won't it?"

Handforth stared.

"A job to see him?" he repeated.

"Well, you'd want a decent nerve," said McClure confusedly.

"A nerve!" roared Handforth. "A nerve to tell Nipper what I think of him! Why, you silly asses——"

"Nipper!" shouted Church. "Have you been talking about Nipper?"

"Have I——" Handforth paused, breathing hard. "Do you mean to tell me that you've been agreeing with all I've said without knowing who I was talking about?" he demanded. "Why, I'll—I'll——"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted McClure, with a show of spirit. "What the dickens is the matter with Nipper? What do you mean by saying he is not fit for the position? He's the best Form skipper we've ever had!"

Handforth became deadly calm.

"You don't think I expected you to say anything else, do you?" he asked sourly. "You'd naturally back up that chap—and forget all about me. Where do I come in? Is there anybody at St. Frank's who'd make a better Form-skipper than me?"

"Hundreds of chaps—I mean, not one!" gasped Church.

"My dear idiots, you can't hurt my feelings," said Handforth witheringly. "I've grown accustomed to all this jealousy. That's what it amounts to—rank jealousy. Everybody knows my value at St. Frank's."

"From the Head downwards," agreed McClure heartily.

"That's why I'm pushed aside," went on Handforth. "I'm like a cork on the waves—tossed about all over the place, and I never find a harbour. But I'm like that cork in another respect, too—I always keep at the top. You'll never find me sinking."

"Are you hinting that Nipper is sinking?" asked Church.

"I'm not the chap to give hints," said Handforth grimly. "I'm a straightforward fellow—I'm plain——"

"Hear, hear!" murmured McClure. "About the plainest chap in the Remove!"

"I wasn't talking about my face!" belated Handforth, jumping up.

"Eh?" gasped Church. "Your face, Handy? Fancy getting an idea like that into your head? You're plain—of course you're plain. Everybody knows it, but that's no reason why you should go shouting it about."

"And I don't believe in hints," went on Edward Oswald. "Nipper is sinking—do you understand? He's sinking rapidly, and before long he'll be submerged by the tide—the tide of popular opinion."

"But corks can't sink," protested Church.

"Who's talking about corks?" howled Handforth. "I'm a cork—I—I mean——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's right—cackle away!" sneered Handforth fiercely. "That's about all you're good for! What have I done to deserve a couple of idiots like you in my study? Whenever I start talking seriously, you simply go off like a couple of Cheshire cats!"

"Well, you shouldn't talk about corks, and all that rot!" growled McClure. "How can we keep serious when you compare yourself to a cork and say that Nipper's sinking?"

"Nipper has been a fairly good skipper up till now," said Handforth. "I'm bound to admit that—I believe in giving a fellow his

due. But why doesn't he put a stop to all this bullying?"

"Give the chap a chance," protested Church.

"A chance? Hasn't he had heaps of chances? If I had been in control, Starke and Co. would have been beaten to the wide by this time," said Handforth. "Mind you, I'm not boasting—I don't believe in boasting."

"It's foreign to your nature," said Church diplomatically.

"At the same time, it's only just to say that I could have dealt with this situation promptly," declared Handforth. "But it's not my job, and I don't believe in butting in. What would have happened if I had been skipper?"

"Goodness knows!" said McClure.

"I'll tell you what would have happened," went on Handforth. "As soon as Starke and Co. started their rotten games I should have gone straight to Starke's study. I should have told him what I thought of him, and——"

"Been hurled out on your neck?" suggested Church.

"No, I shouldn't have been hurled out on my neck!" shouted his leader. "It would take more than Starke to interfere with my neck, I can tell you. My neck hasn't been touched by anybody for weeks!"

"That explains it, then," said McClure.

"Explains what—you fath——"

"Well, your neck looks a bit grubby," said McClure. "If nobody's touched it for weeks, I suppose you haven't touched it yourself?"

"That's right—begin all over again!" roared Handforth. "Any more of those insults and I'll kick the pair of you out of the study! What was I saying? Oh, I know! About going to Starke, wasn't it? Well, I should have told the cad that all bullying was to stop and the thing would have been done."

"But what if Starke took no notice of you?"

"In that case I should have used force," said Handforth calmly.

"But you can't scrap with a perfect——"

"I can scrap with anybody," interrupted Handforth. "Rules? Do you think I take any notice of rules? In an emergency I'd even fight a master! Rules and regulations are only made to be broken!"

McClure shook his head.

"You're all right, Handy, but you're too jolly impulsive," he said. "No, don't glare at me! You're too impatient. You want things done in a minute—and that's impossible. Just leave this business to Nipper and he'll see that everything is O.K. I've got plenty of trust in him, anyhow."

"And so have I," said Church. "I'm surprised at you, Handy."

"Eh?"

"I'm shocked!" went on Church severely. "After all Nipper's done for the Remove you sit there and abuse him. It's not like you."

old man—it's something new for you to slang a chap behind his back."

Handforth rose to his feet slowly and deliberately.

"Behind his back, ah!" he exclaimed. "We'll see about that. I'm going to tell Nipper to his face everything I've just said. Mind you, I think the chap's one of the best personally. But in these vital matters all personal interests ought to be cast aside. There's the honour of the Form to consider."

"That's what I was considering," observed Church. "I don't see any reason why you should go and mess things up!"

"Mess things up!" roared Handforth. "I'm going to put the thing straight to Nipper, and if Nipper doesn't give me any satisfaction—Well, there'll be only one thing left."

"And what's that?"

"Nipper will have to go!" declared Handforth firmly.

"Go?" asked McClure vaguely. "Go where?"

"You—you—ly ass! That's always the way of saying it," snorted Handforth.

"Nipper will have to go—he'll have to resign! And I shall be elected in his place. If that happens, the Remove will do things!"

"My hat! I can quite believe it!" grinned Church. "If you ever became skipper, Handy, the Remove would want he doing things for you. McClure and I have to stand your rot—we're used to it; but the other fellows would never have the patience. Besides, how the dickens could you get elected? You wouldn't get ten votes."

Handforth waved his hand.

"We needn't go into the subject," he exclaimed. "I don't suppose Nipper will resign because I shall compel him to set in this matter. I'm determined, and when I'm in that state I make things hum!"

And Handforth, forgetting to finish his tea, rose to his feet and marched towards the door. He reached it, and was just about to pass into the passage, when he became aware of the fact that his faithful admirers were still sitting at the table.

"Come on!" he exclaimed impatiently.

"Oh, go away, Handy," protested Church. "There's no need to see Nipper until we've finished our tea."

"Tea is an unimportant matter," said Handforth. "We're going now—at once."

"But there's no need for us all to see him."

"We're going now," repeated Handforth. "All of us! There might be a bit of trouble, and although I'm capable of dealing with it myself, you fellows might as well be backing me up."

And Handforth commenced rolling up his sleeves in preparation.

Church and McClure, who regarded that action in quite another light, rose hastily from the table and joined their leader. They were not actually afraid of him, but it was always their policy to avoid blows if possible. Handforth's hat was like a sledge-hammer.

And the redoubtable trio of Study D set out on their mission without further argument.

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE BREWING!

THE common-room was not exactly crowded, but the attendance was exclusive. In short the junior football committee of St. Frank's was holding a meeting. Bob Christine and several other Monks had come over from the College House especially for the occasion.

The subject under discussion was the momentous football match with Holmsford College Juniors, which was due to be played on the next half holiday. The away match with Holmsford was one of the really big fixtures of the season.

When the Holmsford team had visited St. Frank's they had whacked us, and now we were determined to have our revenge. Every member of the committee had the one set idea of selecting a team which would go forth to victory.

"They're a hot lot," declared Christine. "There's no sense in denying that. At the same time, I think we're a better team, taking us altogether."

"But they whacked us," said De Valerie.

"The weather was in their favour," declared Christine. "During the first half of the game the sun was shining in our eyes, although we had the wind. But there was no rain until the second half. And then we had to face the driving rain and things got a bit muddled. I'm not trying to make out that the Holmsford chaps didn't play a good game, because they did. But luck was with them."

"Well, let's hope we have better weather this time," I remarked. "What we've got to do now is to select the eleven. I think we'll have Handforth in goal. He's been showing good form lately."

Christine nodded.

"Handforth's an ass," he said, "but he's the best goalie we've got. Tatnadge is first class, but he's not up to Handforth's form. What about that fellow Pitt? He was playing jolly well in the House match the other day."

"When we beat you?" I asked pleasantly. "Yes, Pitt's all right, and I think we'll include him. Next season he'll probably be put in the forward line, but I don't think he's one of our best forwards yet, and this eleven has got to be made up without any favouritism. We're going to pick the best men for the best places."

"That's the idea," agreed Christine. "I was thinking of Yorke for inside-left."

"No, I've got somebody better than Yorke," I interrupted.

"Oh, have you?" exclaimed Yorke, glaring. "Who is he?"

"Grey, of our House," I replied. "He's a wonder, as you've seen. With all respects to you, Yorkey, I think Grey is the best man for inside-left. Your place is in the half-back line. You're top-hole there."

"Oh, all right," grunted Yorke. "That'll do for me, I suppose."

"It's really a toss-up whether you play centre-forward, Christine, or whether I fill that place," I went on. "I think we're about equal——"

"Rats!" interrupted Bob Christine. "You're the better player of the two of us, Nipper; I should be an idiot not to admit it. Besides, you're going to skipper the team. I think I can do better at outside-left."

"Good man," put in Watson warmly. "We all know that Nipper is about our best player, but I wasn't sure whether you'd admit it, Christine."

"I know what I can do, and I know what Nipper can do," replied Christine, with a nod. "Now, with regard to the other fellows—— What the dickens——"

"It's only Handforth," said De Valerie, grinning. "Handforth on the warpath—— what? I think I know that gleam in his eagle eye!"

Handforth had just burst into the common-room, and he stood eyeing everybody with great care, as though we were all strangers to him. Church and McClure stood behind, looking rather fed-up.

"Don't come bothering here, Handy, there's a good chap," I said persuasively.

"Buzz off, you ass!" exclaimed Watson, with characteristic bluntness. "We're busy on footer matters."

"Footer is important, I admit it," said Handforth. "But just now I want to talk about something else. I want to tell Nipper what I think of him!"

"Don't!" I said, in alarm. "Spare my blushes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't think I shall make you blush," said Handforth tartly. "First of all, I haven't got a word to say against you personally——"

"Thank goodness!" I breathed.

"I think you're a jolly fine chap," went on Handforth. "One of the best in the school. You've done a lot for the Ancient House; you've improved the tone of the place altogether——"

"Is this a vote of thanks, or something?" I asked politely.

"No, it isn't!" roared Handforth. "As I was saying, I've got nothing against you personally, and I like you very much; you're a regular ripper. You're as good as two other chaps put together."

"Hold on," I said. "I thought you said I wasn't going to blush? I'm red all over with vanity, Handy. This eulogy is overwhelming; but I wish you'd choose a better time for singing my praises."

Handforth glared.

"I'm not singing you silly praises!" he snorted. "I only want to make it clear that I don't want to quarrel with you. But, speaking as one of the leading members of the Remove——"

"Half a minute," interjected De Valerie. "You can't speak like that."

"Like what?"

"As one of the leading members of the Remove."

"Why can't I?" demanded Handforth.

"Because, my dear chap, you ain't one of the leading members," explained De Valerie calmly. "You're one of the common-or-garden members."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Speaking as one of the leading members of the Remove," went on Handforth deliberately, "I consider that you have failed miserably as captain. And, unless you can make a big alteration, I call upon you to resign."

"Is that all?" I asked smoothly.

Handforth stared.

"Isn't it enough?" he exclaimed.

"Too much——altogether too much," I said.

"But I was just wondering if you had finished, old man? Thanks for the advice. I'll store it carefully away, well wrapped up, and when I want it I'll dig it out. You don't mind closing the door after you, do you?"

Handforth took a deep breath as the crowd chuckled.

"I'm not going to be choked off like that!" he shouted. "I want everybody here to witness that I call upon Nipper to resign the captaincy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And I call upon everybody here to witness the sudden ejection of one, Edward Oswald Handforth from the common-room," I said smoothly. "Which way do prefer, Handy, on your feet or on your neck?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth stood his ground.

"Of course, I was expecting this," he said grimly. "But I'm used to this jealousy; it's nothing new to me. I consider that you have failed completely during this last fortnight. I don't suppose it's your fault—I'm not blaming you—but the fact remains that the bullying hasn't been stopped."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "You've called about the bullying?"

"Called!" roared Handforth. "I'm not a visitor, am I? The cads of the Sixth—Starke, Kenmore, and the rest—have been bullying the juniors for weeks. Nothing has been done except that fagging affair, and that's finished with. Starke and his gang have been worse since then. They've been fagging some of our fellows under our very noses, and we've done nothing!"

"Awful!" I said sadly.

"Nothing at all!" roared Handforth.

"And why? I ask you—why?"

"Because nothing has been done, I suppose," I said vaguely. "Is that the answer? Or is it one of those riddles where you have to think of a number first?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why have we done nothing?" bellowed Handforth, ignoring the yells. "Because we haven't been led! Because our leader—our so-called leader—has been twiddling his thumbs! Because he has been fiddling while Rome was on fire——"

"But I can't fiddle," I interrupted.

"And you can ask Montie and Tommy

whether I'm in the habit of twiddling my thumbs. I'm not going to be insulted!"

"It was only a figure of speech, you ass!" howled Handforth. "You've been idling while all this mischief has been brewing. It only needs a firm hand, that's all. Starke is a funk, really. If we only stand up to him and defy him, we can gain the day. I've always been down on bullying, and it's perfectly sickening the way these Sixth-Form rotters have been persecuting the Remove!"

I nodded.

"You're quite right, Handy," I said. "It is sickening. But we can't alter it in a minute, and we can't stop anything before it starts. My policy is to give the cads a fair length of rope, then get busy."

"And while you're giving 'em that length of rope the chaps have got to knuckle under?" demanded Handforth, with a sniff. "That's a fine plan, isn't it? It won't do for me, my son. I want something better. I want action—now—at once! I want action without a moment's delay!"

"You really want action at once?" I asked.

"Yes, I do!"

"Good!" I said. "You shall have it. Now, I want half a dozen fellows by my side," I went on briskly. "Who'll volunteer? Action is required, and I can see that Handforth won't stand any nonsense."

"Not likely," said Handforth. "When I say a thing I mean it."

De Valerie, Watson, Christine, and several others came to my side. I winked at them and then faced Handforth.

"Now, Handy," I said, "I'm an obliging chap, and I'm going to satisfy your demand. What you want is action—and you shall have it. I don't think you'll have to wait more than five seconds."

"I thought I'd wake you up," said Handforth, nodding. "What's the idea? Are you going to raid Starke's study?"

I stared.

"Raid Starke's study?" I repeated. "My dear ass, I'm going to order these faithful lieutenants of mine to chuck you out of the common-room. You didn't specify any particular kind of action."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you silly fathead!" roared Handforth backing away. "I'll—I'll——"

"Out with him!" I said crisply. "Action required!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't you touch—— Yow!" bellowed Handforth. "Yaroooh! Lemme go!"

Crash!

Handforth thudded against the door and it flew open. The next moment he got all the action he required—and a lot more. He was hurled into the passage like a sack of coke. He slithered along the floor and came to rest against the wall with a thud.

And when he looked up, dazed and furious, the common-room door was closed. Yells of laughter floated out to him.

"My only grandmother!" gasped Handforth, scrambling up.

He charged at the door, which, unfortunately, opened at that moment. Handforth

narrowly missed going headlong into the edge of it, which would have been serious. As it was, he blundered into Church and McClure, who were just emerging.

"Yooooop!" gasped McClure inarticulately.

All three juniors went over in a heap. They lay in a tangled mass in the doorway. Watson and De Valerie and several other obliging fellows assisted them in getting clear of the door, which was closed.

"Lock it, for goodness sake," I said. "We don't want the ass in here again."

Watson turned the key in the lock. We half expected to hear a terrific hammering, but none came. Groans and gasps sounded, however, and then complete silence. Handforth and Co. had crawled away. The great Handforth had been squashed.

"Now we can get on with the washing," I said cheerfully. "The fathead asks for it, you know. He does have these fits sometimes, and he never seems to learn by experience. How far had we got in making up the eleven?"

"Blessed if I know," said Christine. "We'd better begin again."

Not two minutes after we had recommenced the "footer jaw" there came a heavy hammering upon the locked door. The handle was shaken violently.

"Go away, you silly ass!" shouted Watson.

"Open this door, confound you!" roared a voice.

"Starke!" gasped Watson.

The harsh voice was unmistakably that of Walter Starke, the prefect.

"Oh, we'd better open it, I suppose," I growled. "It's against the rules to lock ourselves in the common-room."

"No it's not," said De Valerie; "but it's against the rules to lock a prefect out. Starke can't do anything if the door's opened at once."

It was opened, and Starke strode in, glaring.

"Like your infernal cheek!" he exclaimed angrily. "What the deuce do you mean by locking that door?"

"Oh, rats!" I said. "There was no harm done, Starke. We're busy just now."

"Oh, you're busy!" snapped Starke. "You'll all clear out of here at once!"

"I don't think so," I said quietly. "This is a meeting of the junior football committee, and we're picking the eleven for the Helmford match next half."

"I suppose you were picking the eleven just now?" demanded Starke. "I heard a terrific din down here, and I came to see what it was about. I don't allow junior meetings of this sort. Clear out—all of you!"

I didn't move an inch.

"You don't allow meetings—eh?" I asked. "How long is it since you were invested with powers to put a stop to meetings of the footer committee? You've got a certain amount of authority, Starke, but you're on the wrong rails now. You don't mind withdrawing, do you?"

"Hear, hear!"

"He's got no right to order us out!"

"Rather not!"

Starke glared round furiously.

"You cheeky young brats!" he roared. "Get out of this room! I've given an order, and I'll see that it's obeyed! You're the ringleader, Nipper, and I order you to take every junior out of this room within thirty seconds!"

I laughed.

"You can order all you like," I said coolly. "You've got no authority to give such an order, Starke. We've done nothing wrong and we're not going to budge. If you don't like it, you can go for Mr. Crowell. We don't mind abiding by his decision; but we're not going to be forced out of our own common-room by you!"

Starke nearly went black in the face.

"You insubordinate little hounds!" he shouted. "I'll give you just ten seconds to shift. If you still refuse, I'll give every boy in this room five hundred lines! Now what do you say?"

"Rats!" exclaimed Watson promptly.

"No need to get wild, Tommy," I said. "Starke can't do anything; he knows that. We sha'n't do any lines."

"What!" raved Starke.

"You can't treat us harshly always," I said grimly, looking straight at him. "This time, Starke, we can snap our fingers at you. You seem to have got the idea that you've suddenly become a master, and that you can give what orders you please. Well, I'm not scared at all."

"You—you insolent young dog!" shouted Starke thickly. "I'll—I'll—"

Just for a moment I thought he was going to fly at me; but I was ready for him, and he knew it. He also knew that my defiance was justified, and that matters would only become worse if he reported me.

With a great effort Starke managed to regain some of his self-control. Then he turned on his heel and strode out of the common-room. He slammed the door violently, and I grinned at the other fellows.

"What a sweet temper," I chuckled.

"My only hat!" breathed Christine. "You did it rippingly, Nipper! But the cad will make things warm for you later on, I'll bet; he won't forget this affair in a hurry!"

I was inclined to agree with Christine, but the matter did not worry me. Starke could do me no real harm. He was in a shocking temper, and when he calmed down he would probably let the matter drop.

As it was, he strode savagely to his own study and found Kenmore in that apartment study and found Kenmore in that apartment his study-mate with great interest as he flung himself into a chair.

"Anything the matter, Starke?" he inquired curiously.

"By George," said Starke between his teeth, "I'm going to make the little beast pay! He'll wish he was never born!"

"Who the dence are you talking about?" asked Kenmore.

"Nipper, the little worm!" snarled Starke, his eyes glittering. "Five minutes ago he defied me to my face before a crowd of other juniors. I'll get even— Ah!" Starke paused, and he smiled cunningly. "Yes, and

I know how I'll get even, too!" he added, with vicious relish.

Kenmore shrugged his shoulders.

"You're not a kid, Starke," he remarked. "How can you get even, as you call it? Why didn't you give the little beggar lines, or a caning?"

"Because they defied me," snapped Starke savagely. "Nipper was the ringleader—as usual. That young brute always makes me feel that I'd like to smash him to bits!"

"There's no sense in feeling like that," said Kenmore. "I should think you've learnt by this time that Nipper can't be treated in the same way as the other kids. He's hot stuff, and I generally give him a wide berth."

Starke laughed harshly.

"Well, I'm going to make him pay for this affair," he declared. "I shan't try to hit him, or give him lines, or anything like that. But I'll ruin the junior football match next half-holiday!"

"Oh, don't talk rot——" began Kenmore.

"I mean it!" interjected Starke fiercely. "Nipper is going to take his eleven to Helmsford—he thinks! But Nipper won't do anything of the sort, because I'm going to spoil the whole thing. By gad! That'll get even with him!"

And Walter Starke was in grim earnest.

CHAPTER III.

TEDDY LONG IN HIS ELEMENT!

"O H, crumbs!"

That exclamation was uttered by no less a person than Teddy Long, of the Remove. It was uttered in a tone of mournful sorrow.

"Hallo! What's the matter with you?" asked Tommy Watson cheerfully, as he and I emerged from the Ancient House, with Sir Montie just behind us. Long was leaning against the doorway, with a face as long as his surname.

"Oh, don't bother me!" he said irritably.

"I expect he's stony," I remarked. "He always looks miserable when he hasn't got any money to blue in the tuck-shop——"

"Rats!" growled Long. "Tain't that at all."

He stared across the Triangle unseeing. The morning sunlight of the late March day was warm and brilliant. Everything was looking fresh and bright, but Teddy Long paid no heed.

"I expect I know what it is, dear fellows," observed Tregellis-West. "Starke, or one of those other frightful rotters, has been bullyin'——"

"Rats!" said Long again. "Tain't that, either."

He turned to us appealingly.

"What have I done?" he asked. "What have I done within the last day or two which could have been reported?"

"I shouldn't like to guess," I replied. "I expect your sins have been so many that you can't remember half of 'em? But you generally manage to slip out of punishment."

you've got an eel-like facility for avoiding trouble."

Teddy Long grinned faintly.

"Well, I generally manage to steer clear of it," he said. "There ain't many chaps as clever as me in that respect."

"Clever!" growled Watson. "Cunning would be a better word!"

"And now I've got to go and report myself to the Housemaster," went on Long, in a tone of indignation and misery. "I've got to go to Mr. Lee at a quarter to two, just before lessons! He's going to whop me, I expect."

"Well, I daresay you deserve a whopping," I remarked. "One of your sins has come home to roost, my son, and you'll have to answer for it. That's all. It's nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about!" howled Long. "Do you think I like being whopped?"

I wagged a finger at him.

"You can't always have what you like in this world," I said severely.

"I sha'n't eat any dinner to-day—I know I sha'n't," moaned Teddy. "All my appetite's gone. This worry is awful."

He walked down the steps heavily, and went across the Triangle with his hands deep in his pockets. We grinned as we watched him. And five minutes later, when the dinner-bell sounded, we observed Teddy Long scuttling indoors with all speed, which did not seem to indicate that his appetite was entirely gone.

At the dinner-table he stuffed himself—as usual. His worry was cast aside for the occasion, and he gave all his attention to the matter in hand. When the Remove trooped out of the dining-hall, however, Long was as gloomy as ever.

"I thought your appetite had gone?" grinned Tommy Watson.

"It has now, begad!" murmured Montie.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Watson," protested Long. "You don't think I enjoyed my dinner, do you? I simply had to eat; I've got to keep my strength up, I suppose? What's the good of ruining my health by worry? Besides, I didn't eat hardly anything!"

I nodded.

"Quite right," I agreed.

"Why, you fathead, he gorged himself!" snorted Watson.

"Of course he did," I said. "He didn't eat hardly anything. He didn't! He ate a thundering lot. But if the greedy ass doesn't want to be misunderstood he should use better grammar."

"Why, you—you—"

Teddy Long paused indignantly as we walked off. Then he shivered as he realised the nearness of his visit to the Housemaster's study. I wondered a little, and guessed that Nelson Lee wanted Long for the purpose of caning him. The gov'nor had a pretty good reason, anyhow.

The school clock chimed the three-quarters, and Teddy Long sneaked along the passage and came to a halt outside Nelson Lee's door. Just for a moment he had an idea

of bolting; but the after-consequences would be too serious, and he pulled himself together and tapped upon the door. The sneak of the Remove was in a very shivery state at that moment.

"Come in!"

Long entered, and found Nelson Lee sitting back in his desk-chair. Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster of the College House, was standing before the fireplace, in an obvious state of agitation and excitement. He looked across the room as Long entered, and frowned.

"Pu-lease, sir, I've—I've come!" gasped Teddy nervously.

"Ah, yes, Long," said Nelson Lee, glancing at the clock. "I think I ordered you to report to me? I noticed this morning—"

"This matter is terribly worrying, Mr. Lee," interrupted Mr. Stockdale. "I really don't know what to do. I am in a very unsettled state."

Nelson Lee nodded, and looked at the junior.

"I will attend to you in a moment, Long," he said. "Wait by the door."

"Y-yes, sir," said Teddy.

His nervousness increased for his suspense was now more acute than ever. He gazed furtively towards Nelson Lee, and was somewhat reassured when he saw no sign of a cane lying handy. Teddy Long had a mortal fear of canes.

"Yes, I am very unsettled," went on Mr. Stockdale anxiously. "I feel the responsibility very keenly. I can safely tell you, Mr. Lee, that I would not have had this thing happen for worlds. What do you advise?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, I can really see no cause for alarm, my dear Stockdale," he replied. "I think you are worrying yourself needlessly."

"Needlessly?" echoed the other Housemaster. "Why, good gracious me! What can I do with such a sum? One hundred and fifty pounds—in golden sovereigns! How on earth can I keep that money safely in my own study? My brother was most foolish to act as he did. I have no desire to be the guardian of the money. I have no safe—nothing except an ordinary mahogany desk."

"It is somewhat awkward, I agree," said Nelson Lee, stroking his chin.

"It is decidedly so," growled Mr. Stockdale. "I suppose I shall have to place the money in my desk and trust that no harm will befall it. But what a haul for a burglar! What a rich haul, indeed!"

Teddy Long was beginning to lose his nervousness. He listened to the conversation eagerly and intently, although he outwardly preserved an appearance of complete indifference. He had cultivated this habit for years. Long was the most inquisitive junior in the Ancient House, and he loved nothing better than to get hold of a piece of information which would prove of interest to the other fellows.

It was Teddy's favourite pastime to spread tales round the school which would create a sensation. Long's tongue was always busy.

And here, it seemed, was an opportunity for him to cause quite a lot of excitement.

"Well, I'm afraid the risk will have to be taken, Stockdale," said Nelson Lee. "It will only be for a short time——"

Nelson Lee paused, his glance having suddenly rested upon the waiting junior. He gave Mr. Stockdale a quick look, and rapped upon his desk.

Teddy Long started, and turned pale.

"Ye-es, sir!" he gasped.

"I noticed at breakfast-time this morning that you were wearing a dirty collar," said Nelson Lee severely. "Don't you know, Long, that——"

"I—I couldn't find a clean one, sir," interrupted the junior.

"Very well; I cannot allow you to appear at the breakfast-table in that condition, and do not let it occur again," said Lee. "You will take fifty lines. That is all. You may go."

"Thank you, sir," gasped Teddy.

He could hardly believe his good fortune. Fifty lines! He had only been called into the Housemaster's study because of a dirty collar! And he had been expecting nothing less than a caning.

The junior grinned cheerfully as he went down the passage. Why, what he had heard in Nelson Lee's study was worth a couple of hundred lines, let alone fifty! He chuckled with glee as he came upon a crowd of fellows in the lobby.

"I say, you chaps, heard the latest?" shouted Long.

He was bubbling over with his news, and his face was flushed.

"No; what is it?" asked Pitt gravely. "Have you washed your neck?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, I say, don't be an ass!" protested Long. "I've just heard it in Mr. Lee's study——"

"At Mr. Lee's keyhole, you mean?" interrupted De Valerie.

Teddy Long looked indignant.

"I hope I'm a bit above listening at keyholes!" he said loftily.

"You wouldn't dream of such a thing, would you?" asked Handforth. "Listening at a keyhole would shock you tremendously—eh? Why, you little rotter, I'll punch your nose if you come here with any of your silly tales."

"'Tain't a tale!" roared Long. "I was in Mr. Lee's study—right inside!"

"Under the table?" queried Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, I wasn't under the table," shouted Long. "Mr. Lee told me to go in to report, and I heard it while I was waiting. Mr. Lee was talking to old Stocky, and you'll never believe what I'm going to tell you!"

"No, I don't suppose we shall," remarked Grey.

"I—I mean it's jolly hard to believe!" shouted Long. "Old Stocky's got hundreds of quids in his study—real sovereigns! He's got to keep 'em for his brother, or something. And all that money is in an ordinary desk."

De Valerie touched his brow significantly.

"Dotty!" he remarked. "That's the only explanation—what? We all know that golden quids are jolly scarce, and that currency notes are in general circulation. You'd better go and tell that yarn to the marines, Long."

The sneak of the Remove danced with impatience.

"But it's true!" he howled. "I know jolly well gold's a bit scarce; but that makes it all the more rummy. Mr. Stockdale was talking as plainly as I'm talking to you. I've got ears, I suppose?"

Handforth eyed Long critically.

"Well, they look a bit like ears, I'll admit," he said. "A chap would be excused if he mistook 'em for fans——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Teddy Long. "If you don't like to believe me, you needn't; I'm not asking you to. Lots of chaps know I was booked to go into Mr. Lee's study before afternoon lessons, and I can prove that I was there, if you like. A hundred and fifty quid—that's the exact figure. And old Stocky is nearly off his clump with worry because he's got to look after it. He was saying what a terrific haul it would be for a burglar, because he can only keep it in a giddy desk."

Some of the juniors began to realise that this story of Long's was not quite so vague as his usual yarns. And, after much questioning and cross-questioning, it was found that Teddy stuck to the same tale all through.

This, in itself, was unusual. As a general rule his yarns varied with each telling. Therefore, when he repeated this one again and again, it was safely assumed that there was a certain amount of truth in it.

And by the time afternoon lessons commenced half the junior school at St. Frank's knew that Mr. Stockdale was the unwilling custodian of a big sum of money in gold, and that he was much exercised in mind as to its safety.

Before tea every junior in the school knew about it; the story spread to the seniors, and all St. Frank's was talking of it during tea. Even the servants knew about it. And this state of affairs had come to pass merely because Mr. Stockdale had been incautious enough to speak on the subject in the hearing of Teddy Long.

It was soon taken for granted that the story was true, for lots of fellows noticed that "old Stocky" was going about in a very anxious, thoughtful way. He appeared to be absent-minded, and after tea in the College House several curious juniors hovered near the Housemaster's study.

When three of these Monks distinctly heard the jingle of money from behind Mr. Stockdale's closed door there was no longer any doubt that Teddy Long had told the truth for once.

It was not a matter of very general interest, however, and it did not create the sensation which Long had hoped for. If Mr. Stockdale was foolish enough to keep such a sum in his own study, well, it would be

entirely his own fault if anything happened to it. That was the general opinion.

Over in Study C, in the Ancient House, I discussed the subject with Tregellis-West and Watson after we had finished our tea.

"I can't believe it," I said firmly. "It's a ten-to-one chance that Long has got hold of the thing wrong. We know jolly well that people can't get hold of gold like that, and Mr. Stockdale isn't a millionaire."

"It's his brother's money," remarked Watson.

"Never knew he had a brother," I replied. "What do you think, Montie?"

"Dear fellow, pray do not appeal to me," said Tregellis-West languidly. "Really, I am not at all interested, an' I can't be bothered—I can't really. It wouldn't alarm me if Mr. Stockdale had a thousand pounds in his study."

"Well, I'm going to pop along to the guv'nor," I said. "I don't see why I shouldn't know the absolute facts."

"Curious boulder," grinned Watson.

"My dear chap, I'm not a bit curious," I replied. "I'm just going to ask so that I can tell the fellows that the yarn is a faked one. It's not nice for that story to be circulating through the school; it might tempt somebody to imitate Raffles. Chaps like Starke or Fullwood aren't particularly honest."

"Begad! I can't quite agree with you there, old boy," said Sir Montie. "Fullwood an' Starke are frightful rotters, I'll admit, but I don't think they'd sink to the depths of pinchin' money."

"I said they might be tempted," I explained. "Besides, all the servants know about it, and some servants are not models of honesty, are they? Long's yarn ought to be denied, but it can't be denied until the real truth is known. Anyhow, I'm going to the guv'nor."

And I went straight away, finding Nelson Lee in his study, reclining in an easy chair, smoking and reading.

"Well, Nipper?" he said smilingly.

"What's this talk about some money of Mr. Stockdale's, sir?" I asked, getting straight to the point. "Everybody's saying that Stocky has got over a hundred quid—in gold—locked in his desk."

Nelson Lee frowned.

"Yes, I was afraid that Long would talk," he said, with a touch of irritation. "It was rather unfortunate, perhaps, that the boy was in my study at the time."

"The yarn's true, then?" I asked in surprise.

"My dear Nipper, it appears to be public property," said Nelson Lee. "Mr. Stockdale was somewhat unguarded, but there is really no need for alarm. The risk—if any risk exists—would only be for to-night, for it will be easily possible to bank the money to-morrow. No harm has been done by that talkative boy's tongue."

I shook my head.

"Well, I'm not so sure about it, guv'nor," I replied. "It's not as though everybody discredited the story. It's believed every-

where—even amongst the servants. And a bait like that is jolly tempting."

"You are undoubtedly correct, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, nodding.

"Especially when it's only locked in a flimsy desk," I went on. "Isn't Mr. Stockdale going to give the money into your charge, sir?"

"No, my boy."

"And isn't he going to take extra precautions with his study?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, he's jolly careless, that's all I can say," I replied. "I was going to deny the story, guv'nor, and spread the denial all over the school. But I can't now, of course. If it's true, there's nothing to be done."

A minute later I took my departure. The fact is, an idea had come into my head, and I went back to Study C in a very thoughtful mood. I remembered the depredations of the Mysterious X.

This unknown criminal had been preying upon the district for some weeks, but he had never been captured. The police had tried to get hold of him, and Nelson Lee had had one or two bouts with the mysterious marauder. But he was as slippery as an eel, and always managed to evade capture.

Who he was, where he came from, and where he lived, remained a mystery. He had only been seen once or twice, and had always been masked and bearded. His latest exploit had been to try his hand at highway robbery. And in this he had been highly successful.

The audacious rascal had actually held up the postman with a revolver, and had forced the frightened man to hand over a registered letter containing fifty pounds. The money had vanished, and so had the Mysterious X.

On that occasion Nelson Lee had done a bit of detective work on his own, and when I questioned him he told me practically nothing. I was almost sure, in fact, that the guv'nor knew more about the Mysterious X than anybody else. If he hadn't exactly got on the trail he had some pretty strong suspicions.

And I couldn't help thinking about the Mysterious X now. Owing to Teddy Long, this story of Mr. Stockdale's money had got about. By this time it was probably being talked of in the village.

Wasn't it likely that the daring crook would hear of the practically unguarded money? And wasn't it likely that he would make an attempt to get his fingers on it?

Personally, I thought it was very likely indeed, and by the time I reached Study C I had already come to a momentous decision.

CHAPTER IV.

STARKE'S LITTLE TRICK!

"JUST one moment, Starke!"

Starke, of the Sixth, paused as he was crossing the lobby, and he turned as Mr. Pagett's somewhat sour voice broke upon his ears. Mr. Pagett was the master of the Fifth Form, and what the Fifth Form thought of Mr. Pagett had better not be mentioned.

"I'm rather in a hurry, sir," said Starke pointedly.

"It matters not to me what hurry you are in, young man," exclaimed Mr. Pagett tartly. "It is my intention to give a lecture to the Remove Form this evening at eight o'clock. The subject will be geometry. You will please instruct all Remove boys to attend the lecture hall at eight o'clock sharp—that is to say, all Remove boys boarding in the Ancient House. And you will also advise Jesson that he is to give similar orders in the College House. That is all, Starke. You may go."

Starke went, without a word. He didn't care for the prospect at all, and he knew very well that Jesson, of the College House, would growl exceedingly. As a matter of fact, Starke was even then on his way to Jesson's study. A little party was to be held there, in which cigarettes and cards would be included. And this extra duty imposed by Mr. Pagett was not at all welcome.

"Confound the old idiot!" snapped Starke savagely.

He paused as he was about to emerge into the Triangle. He might as well get it over at once, he decided. Why on earth couldn't Mr. Pagett give his own instructions? Why couldn't he stick up a notice on the board?

But Starke knew well enough that Mr. Pagett was different from the other masters. He was, on the whole, very unpopular, being habitually sour, and extremely fond of acts of petty spite. The Fifth-Formers had about a hundred different names for him—and each one was more insulting than the last.

To give a lecture on a most unpopular subject was just one of Mr. Pagett's little ways. His lectures were always detested by the juniors, and they were never given any warning. Other masters always placed a notice on the board, and left it to the fellows to attend if they wished.

This was not Mr. Pagett's way. The master of the Fifth took a fancy into his head to deliver a lecture to any one Form, and he would compel every boy to attend—whether he wanted to or not. It was scarcely any wonder that his lectures were hated by everybody in the school.

But, as Starke was about to commence his unwelcome task, he gave a little start. An idea had suddenly occurred to him, and his eyes glittered as that idea took definite shape.

The next minute Starke was striding across the Triangle, and shortly afterwards he was in earnest conversation with Jesson, of the College House. The two prefects, far from disliking the task ahead of them, seemed to revel in the prospect. They chuckled heartily.

"Old Pagett can't grumble if we carry out his orders," grinned Jesson. "And the juniors won't know a thing until it's too late. By gad! It's a ripping idea, Starke! The kids will catch it beautifully!"

"Rather!" said Starke viciously. "And perhaps I shall be given a chance of getting my own back on Nipper for what occurred yesterday—I told you how he cheeked me to my face. We're going to get these little brats under our thumb, Jesson. Half of 'em

are there already, but the others are stubborn."

"Well, let's go and carry out Pagett's orders," said Jesson shortly.

They went their different ways. Starke crossed over to the Ancient House, and met a group of juniors in the lobby. He scowled at them.

"All you kids will collect in the lecture hall at eight o'clock," he ordered. "Is that plain? Everybody belongin' to the Remove will attend in the lecture hall at eight o'clock sharp. Understand?"

"Well, you said it twice, so I think we ought to," remarked Reginald Pitt cheerfully. "But you surely don't expect us to be there, do you?"

"There's no harm in him expecting it," said Grey.

Starke glared.

"I've given you the order, and if you're not there you'll be punished," he snapped. "Eight o'clock sharp—don't say I haven't made it plain."

And Starke went off. He met some more juniors up the passage, and gave them similar instructions. These fellows were of the weaker variety, and promised to be there. The fact was, they were rather afraid of ignoring the order.

The prefect went round diligently. He gave his orders to everybody in the Remove, but only a few fellows took any notice. I happened to be in the common-room when Starke put in an appearance there. I had gone to that apartment to look for Tregellis-West and Watson—for I had not found them in Study C after my little chat with the guv'nor.

My chums were in the common-room, however, and I could not possibly discuss the very private subject I had in my mind before all the other juniors. So, for the time being, we were jawing about the forthcoming football match with Helmford.

And then Starke appeared. The common-room was fairly crowded, and Starke looked round him grimly as he stood in the doorway.

"Now, then, all you juniors, attend to me," he said sharply.

Several fellows remained silent, but Handforth, who was having an argument with Church and McClure, raised his voice even louder than usual, and it was scarcely possible to hear anything else.

"Did you hear, me, Handforth?" roared Starke.

"If you chaps think you're going to dictate to me, you're jolly well mistaken," bawled Handforth, with his back to Starke. "We get too much dictation in this House, if you ask me—and I'm blessed if I'm going to have you fellows jawing at me when you like!"

"Shut up, you ass!" hissed McClure.

"I sha'n't shut up!" bellowed Handforth. "I'm not going to be dictated to! Starke and his crowd try that game on with me, but it won't work! Starke may be a prefect, but he's a cad—he's a rotter—"

"Shurrup, you blithering idiot!" said Church hoarsely.

"Starke's a cad!" repeated Handforth

mercely. "I appeal to the whole common-room," he went on, turning round, and seeing Starke for the first time. "Oh, my hat!" he added, taken aback. "Well, I stick to it—Starke's a cad!"

The prefect nearly choked.

"You—you impudent little puppy!" he shouted furiously. "You knew I was in the room all the time—you were deliberately checking me!"

"Was I?" said Handforth sweetly. "How sad!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And you'll take two hundred lines!" roared Starke.

"Where to?" asked Handforth vaguely.

"You—you—"

Starke paused, and took a deep breath; he probably realised the futility of arguing with Handforth. The leader of Study D feared nobody, and he never counted the odds, whatever they were. For two pins he would have pushed back his cuffs and gone for Starke half-headed—never troubling about the consequences.

"I'll deal with you later!" snarled Starke. "I came here to give every Remove fellow in this room the order to attend in the lecture hall at eight o'clock to the minute. Don't say I haven't told you. If you're not there, I'll give you lines!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie mildly. "That's rather queer, Starke, old boy. How can you give us lines if we ain't there?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"At eight o'clock sharp, in the lecture hall," repeated Starke, ignoring Sir Montie's remark. "Look out for yourselves if you fail."

And the prefect turned on his heel and passed out of the common-room, slamming the door violently behind him. Handforth grinned all over his face as he looked round the apartment.

"That's the way to do it," he observed. "Starke knows better than to argue with me! I get the best of him every time."

"Arguing with you, Handy, is a long job," I remarked. "Starke didn't want to stop here all the evening, I suppose? And what about those two hundred lines?"

"Rats to 'em!" said Handforth. "And if you find me in the lecture hall at eight o'clock you can punch my nose!"

"Well, if it comes to that, anybody can punch mine, too," remarked De Valerie. "In plain language, that means that we sha'n't be there. If Starke thinks we're going to attend in the lecture hall just to please him, he's jolly well mistaken!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Rats to him!" growled Watson. "Like his giddy cheek!"

Meanwhile, Starke was striding along the passage, smiling grimly to himself. His little trick was working exactly as he had surmised. He had given everybody in the Remove Mr. Pagett's instructions—except for the fact that he had not mentioned that those instructions came from the Fifth-Form master.

As a consequence, everybody believed that the order was Starke's—that the prefect was attempting to get the Remove to obey him blindly. It was only natural, therefore, that a mere handful of fellows turned up in the lecture hall at eight o'clock.

Nearly everybody ignored the command altogether. Those who attended were the weak fellows who were under the influence of the bullies. Altogether, there were about ten College House chaps and twelve Ancient House juniors. And Starke and Jesson were there also.

If we had only known the actual state of affairs—if Starke had given his instructions fairly—the Remove would have been there to a man. For we knew better than to ignore Mr. Pagett. Mr. Pagett was not a man to be ignored. It was rather a costly business to do so.

Trouble, therefore, was brewing.

At one minute past eight the master of the Fifth sailed into the lecture hall imposingly. There was a genial smile on his face—a smile which he always used for these occasions, and which was meant to be pleasant.

But Mr. Pagett came to a sudden halt, and his smile vanished, as he observed the bare and deserted condition of the hall. He gazed with amazement over the tops of his glasses at the handful of juniors who occupied the front seats. Then he turned angrily to the two prefects.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" he demanded icily.

"What, sir?" asked Starke.

"You know what, you foolish boy!" shouted Mr. Pagett. "What have you to say, Starke? And you, sir—what have you to say, Jesson? Why are not the boys here, as I ordered? This is most outrageous!"

Starke nodded.

"Yes, sir, it is," he agreed. "But both Jesson and I gave your orders to everybody in the Remove. We made sure of that, sir. There's not a single junior who wasn't told that he had to be in the lecture hall at eight o'clock. We gave very precise instructions, sir."

"Very precise, indeed, sir," agreed Jesson meekly.

Mr. Pagett took a deep breath.

"Is it possible—is it conceivable—that the juniors have had the astounding audacity to ignore me?" he asked faintly.

"I think they've ignored us, sir," said Jesson.

"That amounts to the same thing—precisely the same thing," declared Mr. Pagett.

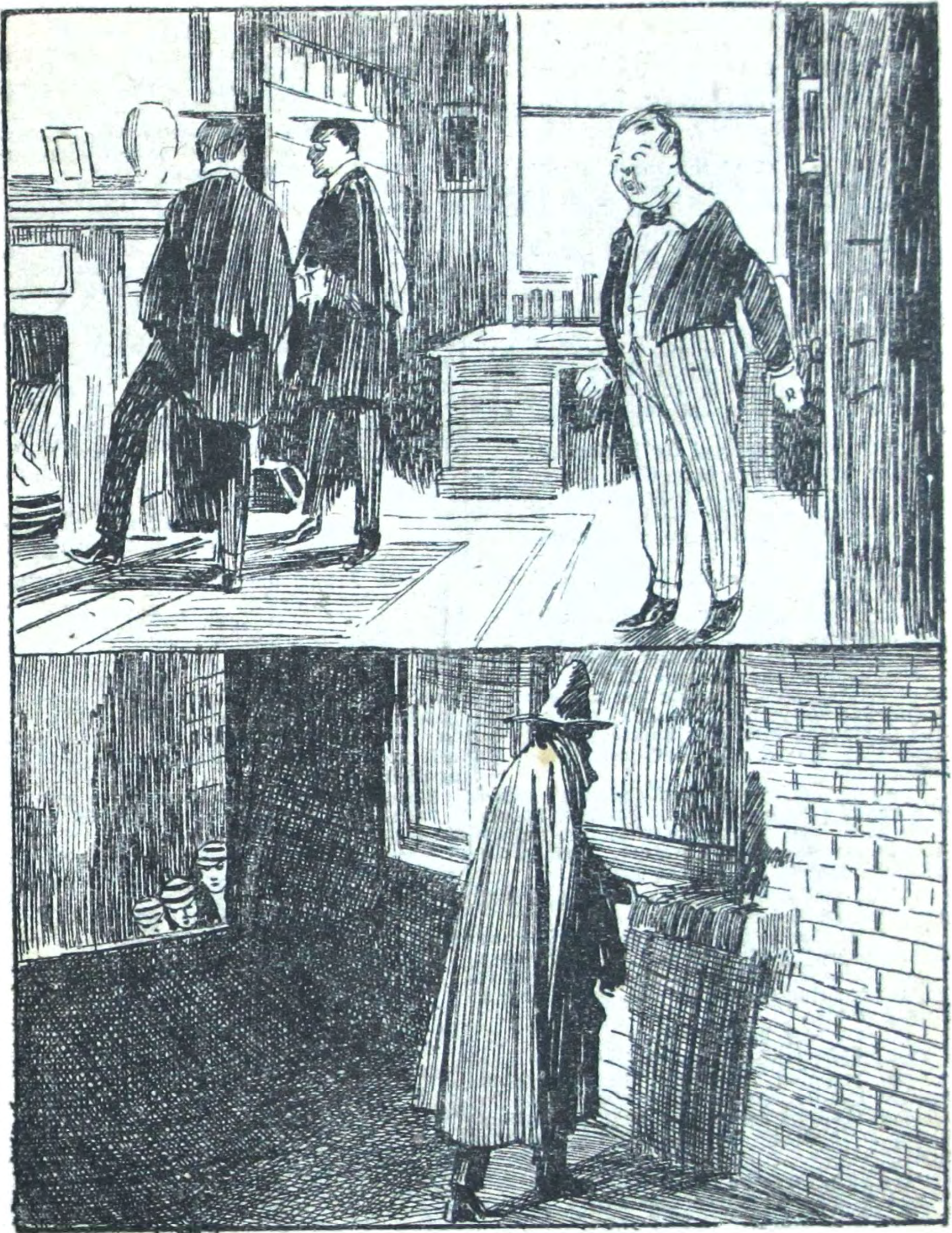
"You are both prefects, and the juniors know well enough that it is their duty to accept orders from you without question. The young rascals shall pay dearly for this act of rank insubordination."

Mr. Pagett removed his glasses and wiped them vigorously.

"Starke, you will bring Morrow, Frinton, and Wilson here at once," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," said Starke.

Within five minutes the other three pre-



1. Teddy Long listened to the conversation of the two masters with growing eagerness. He would have a fine tale to spread about the school when he left the study!

2. The Mysterious X had turned to the window with no thought of the three Juniors, who watched him breathlessly.

fects were on the scene, and Mr. Pagett told them what had occurred.

"You will now go round and collect all the absentees," he said curtly. "I mean to have every boy here, and they shall be punished severely."

Starke hesitated, as though about to speak.

"Well?" snapped Mr. Pagett. "What is it?"

"I was only about to suggest, sir, that as the juniors ignored my orders—and Jesson's orders—it would be only right if we inflicted the punishment, sir," said Starke. "Of course, we leave it entirely to you, sir, but we feel rather angry about it."

"And quite right, too, Starke," said Mr. Pagett, nodding. "But it all depends. The punishment you have in mind may not be severe enough to my thinking. What is it?"

"That every boy who ignored the order should be detained in the Form-room to-morrow afternoon—a half-holiday, sir," said Starke.

Mr. Pagett considered for a moment.

"Yes, an excellent suggestion, Starke," he said. "It will do the boys good to realise the enormity of their offence. But I shall be out to-morrow afternoon, and cannot spare the time to—"

"We'll look after the juniors, sir," said Starke eagerly.

"Very well—that will do excellently."

Mr. Pagett rubbed his hands as the prefects went off to collect the absentees. Inflicting punishment was one of Mr. Pagett's most beloved pastimes. He was not cruel or harsh, but his temper was of a sour variety, and he had an idea that boys could only be dealt with by stringent methods. Hence his unpopularity.

The four prefects divided and went round the junior quarters briskly. But now Starke took good care to explain that Mr. Pagett was about to deliver a lecture. This put a different complexion on the matter.

"Why, you didn't tell us that at first!" protested De Valerie.

"I told you to be in the lecture hall at eight o'clock," said Starke. "Every Remove fellow knew it, and you're going to catch it hot for ignoring the order. Mr. Pagett's in a flaring temper."

"Oh, my only hat!"

The juniors were dismayed; Handforth was almost prepared to ignore the Fifth-Form master, but he was prevailed upon not to be an ass. As soon as I heard what was taking place, I whistled. Morrow had brought the news.

"My sons, there's a bit of trickery in this," I said grimly. "Starke didn't give us any inkling that Pagett was to deliver a lecture, did he? And why not? Because he wanted us to ignore the order."

"But what the thunder for?" asked Watson.

"So that we should get it in the neck from old Pagett," I replied. "That's just Starke's sweet little way. He'll be chuckling like the dickens over this affair. We can't ignore

Pagett—and this'll mean a gating, or something just as bad."

"Begad! What a frightful rotter!"

I wasn't sure whether Sir Montie was referring to Starke or Mr. Pagett, but his remark was applicable to both. And five minutes later we were all in the lecture hall, eyeing the Fifth-Form master very unfavourably. Starke and Jesson were looking very pleased with themselves.

Christine and Co. were there, of course—the whole Remove, in fact. And Christine was glaring at Jesson as though he'd like to bite him. It was evident, therefore, that Jesson had played the same trick over in the College House. The whole thing had been arranged between the two bullies.

"This affair is a positive disgrace," declared Mr. Pagett acidly. "What have you to say, you impudent rascals, to this bare-faced disobedience? I have been given to understand that everybody in this hall received the precise order to attend here at the hour of eight. Is there any boy who was not duly notified?"

I stood up.

"We were all told, sir," I replied; "but Starke did not explain that the order was yours, and that you were going to lecture on geometry."

"And Jesson didn't explain that either, sir," put in Christine.

"It would have been better, perhaps, if the prefects had done so; but it really makes very little difference," said Mr. Pagett. "The order was given, and it was your duty to obey it. All those who failed to make an appearance here at the appointed hour will be detained in the Form-room to-morrow afternoon. Starke and Jesson will also attend and keep order."

There was a subdued uproar in a moment.

"But—but there's the match with Helmsford, sir!" gasped Christine.

"You should have thought of that earlier," said Mr. Pagett, with obvious pleasure. "In any case, a junior football match is of small importance. You must understand that my orders are not to be ignored."

I stood up again.

"May I ask a question, sir?" I asked.

"What is it, Nipper?"

"Did Starke suggest to you that we should be detained to-morrow afternoon, sir?"

"Well, yes—the form of punishment was suggested by Starke," replied Mr. Pagett. "And I may say that it met with my instant approval."

I sat down, feeling very furious. Now I understood the whole thing—now I understood the cunning nature of Starke's trick. Having made us disobey Mr. Pagett by giving only half the order, Starke had capped the matter by ruining our match with Helmsford on the morrow. It was one of the meanest tricks that he could have devised.

How we survived that lecture I can't quite explain. It was as dry as dust, and we were obliged to sit quiet and listen to it. But when it was all over, and when we crowded out, our indignation expressed itself in words.

"The cad—the awful rotter!" exclaimed

Christine bitterly. "Did you notice the way Starke was grinning? And Jesson, too—they planned the whole rotten game. Our match with Helmford is absolutely messed up."

"Of course it is!" snorted Watson. "Why, the whole eleven is detained!"

"Except about two," I corrected. "There are twenty other fellows, I know, but it'll be a fearful job to choose an eleven—if we can do it at all. In any case, they'll only go to Helmford to be whacked."

"Oh, it's too awful for words," groaned Pitt.

And his opinion was the one which was generally echoed in the Remove. Starke could not have delivered a more bitter blow. Handforth and several others got up a deputation and rushed off to Mr. Pagett—vainly hoping that he would listen to them now that the lecture was over.

But Mr. Pagett was cold; he upheld the decision of the prefects.

And, needless to say, there was much weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Not that this did any good. Nothing could be done; the situation could not be improved in any way.

The bullies, in short, had gained a complete victory.

CHAPTER V.

NOT ACCORDING TO PLAN.

STUDY C was gloomy.

I don't mean the walls and the floor—I mean the occupants of Study C. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson lounged in the chairs, and I sat on a corner of the table.

"Dear fellows, it's frightful!" observed Montie heavily.

"Well, there's nothing that we can do," I said. "Pagett's a beast, and it's no good appealing to him. The match is properly messed up. All the best men are detained, and if we send an eleven at all, it won't be fit to take the field—at all events, not as a representative St. Frank's junior team."

"We can't call the match off, you ass!" grunted Watson. "Helmford whacked us last time, and they'd only think that we were calling off as an excuse. An eleven of some sort will have to go—to be whacked again."

"I don't know who'll skipper the team," I said thoughtfully. "Hubbard isn't detained, and he's a decent player. It's just possible that we'll choose him. But I shall write to the Helmford skipper and explain matters. We shall have to let him know that there's something wrong, anyhow."

"It's the injustice of the whole thing that I'm furious about, old boy," remarked Sir Montie. "Starke knew this would happen—he planned it, begad! An' if Mr. Pagett had any sense he'd realise it. But he's a shockin' beast—he is, really!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, it's no good growling," I said. "In any case, we'll postpone the discussion until Christine comes along. I want to talk to

you fellows about something else. There's no reason why this footer business should alter it."

"Alter what?" asked Watson.

"Well, look here," I said. "You know that story Teddy Long was circulating—about old Stocky's money?"

"Well, what about it?"

"I've been thinking over things," I explained. "If Stockdale's got a big sum like that in his study, it'll be a fine bait for a thief. Everybody's talking about it, and Stocky doesn't seem to have taken any precautions. Isn't it jolly likely that the Mysterious X will get busy?"

"Begad! I hadn't thought of that, dear fellow," said Sir Montie.

"Well, I had," I replied. "This money is in gold—solid cash—the finest of all loot. The Mysterious X is still operating in the district; at all events, he hasn't been captured, and the chances are that he's still about here. Don't you think it's more than likely that he'll break into the College House to-night?"

Tommy Watson looked rather scared.

"It does seem a bit likely," he agreed.

"But hasn't Mr. Lee thought of that?"

"He might have done," I replied. "But that's nothing to do with us—and Mr. Stockdale seems to be quite satisfied that the money will be safe. The gov'nor wouldn't butt in unless he was asked to. Now, I think it's up to us to put our own spoke in."

"Begad! How?" asked Montie.

"Mind you, we may be wasting our time, but there's a distinct chance that we shall meet with success," I said. "My idea is for us to slip out of bed after lights-out, and to watch the window of Stockdale's study. If this Mysterious X chap comes along—well, we'll collar him red-handed. Think what a feather it'll be in our cap!"

"By jingo!" exclaimed Watson. "If we could only collar the rotter it would be simply ripping! Why, old Pagett might even consent to cancel our punishment if we distinguished ourselves like that. He's a rotter, but he's got his good points. And then we should be able to play, anyhow—and that might just pull the fat out of the fire."

"I shouldn't rely on that," I grinned. "There's no harm in hoping, of course. I wasn't thinking about the football at all. But it's really up to us to do something—and it's a mild night, and it won't be any hardship to watch Stocky's window. If nothing happens by one o'clock we'll buzz back to bed."

My chums were in full agreement, and this plan really served a good purpose, for it made us temporarily forget the dismal outlook for the morrow. When we went up to bed with the rest of the Remove we had formulated our simple little scheme.

There was much discussion amongst the fellows, and all manner of wild ideas were suggested. Handforth was strongly in favour of getting up a petition to the Head. But I

shook my head firmly as I slipped between the sheets.

"Go to sleep, Handy," I interrupted.

"Why isn't it any good?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Because the Head wouldn't take any notice of it," I replied. "Pagett was ignored; and detention for an afternoon isn't anything unusual. It happens to come jolly awkward this time, though, because of the Helmford match. But the Head doesn't regard the Helmford match as we do. We think it's important, but the Head doesn't. He wouldn't listen to us for a minute."

"Nipper's right," said Pitt. "The Head doesn't understand these things—neither does Pagett. The whole thing is Starke's doing. Starke made us all think that the lecture hall order was his, and we ignored it. Starke suggested the form of punishment to Pagett—"

"The awful cad!" snorted Handforth. "He planned everything—on purpose to muck up the match to-morrow. By George! We'll take it out of him in the Form-room! We'll rag him until he can't see straight!"

"No, we'd better not do that, Handy," I put in.

Handforth stared at me.

"Afraid?" he demanded fiercely.

"No, I'm not afraid—and you know I'm not," I replied. "But a rag would be a mistake; we should only put ourselves further into the wrong. You leave this to little me. I dare say something will turn up."

"Turn up?" repeated Pitt. "What do you mean?"

I grinned.

"I'll talk about it in the morning," I said, yawning. "But if you think I'm going to be whacked by Starke—well, you're sadly mistaken. That's all. The Remove is fighting the Bullies' League—"

"Now then, into bed, you little slackers!"

Starke strode into the dormitory, his face expressing keen satisfaction and pleasure. His voice was as harsh as ever, however, and he enjoyed our discomfiture. He knew that he had hit us hard.

"Hissas!"

It was a prolonged series of hisses, and they came from all quarters of the dormitory. Starke glared round him furiously, his smile vanishing.

"Who did that?" he roared.

"Rotter!"

"Cad!"

"Beast!"

The voices were unrecognisable, and Starke was unable to find the culprits. And the hissing continued.

"You infernal little sweeps!" shouted Starke. "I'll fetch the Housemaster in here if you're not careful! But I dare say you're a bit sore. You'll have time to think over things to-morrow afternoon!"

And the prefect switched off the lights, and passed out of the dormitory, chuckling audibly. He was followed by a perfect storm of abuse and hisses, but he did not turn back.

"What's that you were saying, Nipper?" came Handforth's voice, after a moment.

"How can we whack the bullies—"

"Go to sleep, Handy," I interrupted.

"You—you silly ass!" hissed Handforth, out of the darkness. "I'm not going to sleep until you tell me that idea of your's! Understand? Now then—out with it. I'm waiting to hear you!"

Snore!

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "We can hear him all right, old boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do you hear me, Nipper?" shouted Handforth.

Snore!

"You babbling fathead!" snorted Handforth. "I'll soon show you— Yaroooh!"

There was a moment of confusion, and then a few chuckles.

"Who—who threw that boot?" demanded Handforth fiercely.

Snore!

The whole dormitory followed my example, and the room echoed with the simulated snores. Handforth raved in vain. And, at last, finding that threats were useless, he tried persuasion. This failing, too, Handforth grunted and went to sleep.

Half an hour later everybody else was asleep, including Tommy and Montie. We had been out on night expeditions before, and my chums never troubled to keep awake. They knew that they could rely upon me to arouse them at the proper time. As a rule, I dozed off with the others, for I possess the knack of awakening just when I please. The gov'nor trained me well in that respect.

But on this occasion I remained awake. I was thinking. I was trying to devise some scheme for the morrow. Starke and Co. had gained a victory, but I was anxious to turn that victory into defeat. If I could only take my eleven to Helmford I should beat Starke completely. But how could it be done? That was the all-important problem.

When the school clock struck eleven I had practically made up my mind. And now there was other work to attend to. I slipped out of bed, and bent over Tommy Watson.

"Time to get up, old son," I whispered softly.

"Shurrup!" he murmured. "'Tain't risin' bell yet, you ass! Go 'way!"

"The Mysterious X!" I breathed.

Watson came to himself, and sat up.

"Oh, yes; I'd forgotten!" he yawned. "What's the time?"

"Just after eleven."

"He won't come to-night," said Watson firmly. "There's no need for us to mess about in the giddy Triangle, Nipper. Simply a waste of time. Get back into bed, and we'll go to sleep— Hi! Leggo my bed-clothes, you ass!"

"Well, get up, then," I said grimly.

Watson sighed and slipped out of bed; there was nothing else for it. Sir Montie was already dressing himself, I found. He

had been disturbed, and had preferred to get out unaided. The kind of aid I was liable to offer was not always gentle.

"As I told you before, we may be wasting our time," I said softly. "But there's no telling. And if the Mysterious X comes we shall be able to collar him beautifully. He'll walk right into the ambush."

"I hope so, old boy—I do, really," breathed Montie. "But it's frightfully doubtful. However, I am willin' to follow your lead in everythin'. The loss of a few hours' sleep won't spoil my beauty, begad! These things are necessary evils. Nipper, dear fellow. You're such a fearfully energetic fellow that there's no holdin' you back. I believe you'd like to be out huntin' burglars every night, begad!"

I chuckled, and assured Montie that burglar-hunting was a first-class sport. And within five minutes we were ready for departure. We made our exit by the usual route; downstairs, into our study, and out of the window.

The Triangle was quiet and deserted. Nelson Lee's study window, I noticed, was dark; but a light gleamed from his bedroom. The gov'nor had retired. The College House was dark everywhere.

"That's Stockdale's window—his study window, I mean," I whispered, pointing. "We'd better go across to the gym., make a detour, and take up our position behind one of the buttresses. We sha'n't be seen there—although we can keep our eyes on the window all the time."

"Just as you like, old boy," said Montie. "Pray lead the way."

It was very dark, for there was no moon, and the sky was clouded. The air, however, was quite mild, and only a gentle breeze was stirring the new leaves of the elms and chestnuts.

We succeeded in reaching the cover of the buttress without incident. Our own movements were secret, and even if somebody had been watching I don't think we should have been observed.

The clock struck the quarter-hour just as we reached our vantage-point. It was, in a manner of speaking, still comparatively early. I was rather surprised that the gov'nor had gone off to bed; he didn't generally retire until midnight, at the earliest.

Ten minutes passed, and the position was exactly the same.

"What's the good of this?" muttered Tommy Watson, shifting his position. "We've been waiting ages, and nothing's happened."

"It isn't half-past yet, you ass," I breathed. "Patience, my son—that's what you need. If you had to keep a vigil all through the night, when it's raining and icy cold—as I've done many a time—you'd know what patience was. This affair is a birthday compared with—"

"Begad!" whispered Montie. "Isn't there somethin' movin', dear boys?"

I became alert in a second. Yes, a figure

was stealing softly round the angle of the Ancient House!

"Not a word!" I hissed. "Watch—and hold yourselves ready!"

The figure came on stealthily, and I felt my heart throbbing. Montie and Tommy were equally excited—perhaps more excited. Apparently my guess had been correct. The Mysterious X had heard of the gold in Mr. Stockdale's study, and was bent upon "lifting" it! And he was here—within twenty yards of us.

I attempted to pierce the darkness. To make a bloomer would be a frightful catastrophe. Until we positively knew that this man was the Mysterious X it would be a mistake to act.

There was just a chance that he was a police-officer, stationed in the Triangle by Mr. Stockdale. Or he might be Stockdale himself—or even Nelson Lee. The gov'nor had possibly put the light in his bedroom as a blind, and was prowling about on the watch.

But all these possibilities were remote. The chances were that the dim figure belonged to the mysterious night marauder; the daring thief whose identity remained a secret. And we should soon know for certain.

For the man was coming nearer and nearer, edging towards the window of Mr. Stockdale's study. His very movements were suspicious. The gov'nor would never have walked in that furtive fashion.

At last the fellow was within ten feet of us. My head was just projecting over the edge of the buttress. Montie and Tommy remained crouched down. By this time I had grown accustomed to the gloom, and I could just make out the face and figure of the stranger.

And my heart thumped quickly. The man was masked! I could see the black mask distinctly against the pallor of his cheeks. And he wore a coarse, straggly beard. He was the Mysterious X! There was no longer any doubt. He paused, and looked round, turning his back to me. His long cloak almost reached the ground.

I touched both my chums.

"Now's our chance!" I breathed. "On him!"

Even as I was speaking the man turned to the window. The next second I was out, and rushing at him. The fellow turned, gasping with alarm and fright. And as he attempted to bolt my fingers clutched his shoulders.

"No, you don't!" I gasped. "I want you, Mr. Mysterious X!"

He fought madly, and I wasn't able to stand up to him. And, for some reason or other, my chums hadn't yet arrived. Only about two seconds had elapsed, of course; but seconds were of the utmost value in a time like that.

As a matter of fact, a mishap had occurred—and that mishap spoilt everything. Watson, in his eagerness to rush after me, failed to clear the buttress, and he sprawled headlong. And Sir Montie, in his immediate

rear, tumbled over Tommy's prostrate form. There was quite a mix-up.

Meanwhile, I fought with all my strength. The Mysterious X, however, knew that defeat was near at hand, and his one idea was to flee. He swung his fist round and drove it at my face with all his strength.

I dodged, and the blow struck my shoulder. I wasn't hurt much, but the sudden lunge upset my balance, and I staggered. And just at that moment, as my chums were rushing up, the Mysterious X fled.

He raced across the Triangle madly.

"Oh, my hat!" I gasped. "After him! Why didn't you come, you asses?"

"It was my fault!" panted Watson. "I tripped—"

"After him, dear fellows! Begad! He'll escape!"

The man was already scrambling over the wall, and by the time we reached it we just caught a glimpse of our quarry disappearing into the dense mass of Bellton Wood, opposite. I uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"It's no good!" I panted. "We shall never find him now!"

It was absolutely rotten, but there was nothing to be done. In such darkness, and in the recesses of the wood, the Mysterious X would have no difficulty in evading us. We had lost him!

"If you'd only backed me up——" I began.

"It was frightfully unfortunate, Nipper boy," said Montie. "You see, Tommy fell over, an' I tumbled—— Begad! Who's that?"

A man was crossing the Triangle from the direction of the College House; and now I saw, with a shock of surprise, that a faint light gleamed in Mr. Stockdale's study! What could be the meaning of it?

"Have you got him?" came an anxious inquiry.

"Mr. Lee!" muttered Watson, aghast.

"Is that you, guv'nor?" I asked, running forward. "I didn't know——"

"Have you got him, Nipper?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"No, sir; he managed to slip into the wood——"

"Confound your interference!" snapped the guv'nor furiously. "How dare you, Nipper? You have ruined everything, you young idiot!"

I gasped.

"But—but I don't understand, sir!" I said faintly.

"Of course you don't understand!" exclaimed Lee, standing before us. "You have succeeded in ruining all my plans—and perhaps you are satisfied. I feel inclined to thrash you on the spot—and these other impudent boys, too! You shall pay dearly for this affair!"

"Oh, begad!" said Montie weakly.

"But where were you, sir?" I asked, bewildered. "We didn't see you."

"It is a great pity you took it upon yourself to interfere in this business," said Nelson

Lee angrily. "I was in Mr. Stockdale's study——"

"Oh!" said Watson. "Guarding the money, sir?"

The guv'nor laughed grimly.

"Are you all so dense?" he asked. "There never was any money! It was a trap—a carefully devised trap to capture the Mysterious X. I set it deliberately, and but for your handiwork the thief would have been a prisoner by now."

"A—a trap!" I ejaculated. "Then it was a yarn about that money?"

"A yarn?" snapped Nelson Lee. "Of course it was a yarn, Nipper. I knew well enough that Long would spread the story broadcast—that is why Mr. Stockdale spoke before the boy. Do you think we should have discussed such a subject with Long in the room if we had desired privacy? I sent for the junior especially, and my object was achieved splendidly. The story of the money was being talked of everywhere, and the Mysterious X sprang at the tempting bait. If you had only allowed him to enter the study it would have been satisfactory."

"But we didn't know, sir," I protested.

"Well, you know now," said Nelson Lee tartly. "You know that you have broken bounds, that you have utterly wrecked my plans, and that you will be punished severely. I had no suspicion that you would interfere——"

"Hang it all, guv'nor, draw it mild!" I said warmly. "That's about the third time you've accused us of interfering. We didn't know the whole game was a trap, and we acted for the best. We thought we should be helping you—not hindering you. In any case, it's all your fault!"

"My fault?" repeated the guv'nor grimly.

"Yes, of course it is!" I said, getting rather wild.

"I say, ease up, you know!" muttered Watson.

Nelson Lee regarded us steadily.

"You may well advise Nipper to 'ease up,' Watson," he exclaimed. "I require an explanation at once."

"That's easy enough, sir," I said promptly. "I say this mess-up was mainly your own fault—because you didn't take me into your confidence. I went to your study about Long's yarn, and you calmly pretended that it was true. It would only have been fair and square if you had given me the tip, instead of bluffing me. Then I shouldn't have arranged this affair at all. How was I to know? You didn't give me a hint even."

"Is there anything else, Nipper?" asked Lee grimly, as I paused.

"Yes, guv'nor, there is," I replied. "I'm your assistant, and I feel a bit hurt because you left me out in the cold. As for this muddle, I'm not a bit sorry. I'm not to blame in the slightest. You should have taken me into the secret—and then everything would have been all right."

I looked at Nelson Lee defiantly, and Tommy Watson and Sir Montie eyed me with pale faces. They were expecting the storm

to burst. For me to "jaw" at the guv'nor in that way was rather steep.

To their astonishment Nelson Lee broke into a chuckle.

"Perhaps you are right, Nipper," he said softly. "I am to blame for not taking you into my confidence. You acted for the best, and it would not be fair to punish you for that. Well, never mind. We must start all over again, on some other occasion. The Mysterious X is frightened off now."

"I say, that's jolly decent of you, sir," I exclaimed. "I'm awfully sorry this has happened. But we should have collared the rotter if Tommy hadn't acted the goat."

"Why, you silly ass——" began Watson indignantly.

"Dear fellow, it wasn't Watson's fault," put in Montie. "The frightful ass—— I—I mean, the dear chap tripped over that buttress, and by the time we had sorted ourselves out the Mysterious X had gone!"

"Well, talking will not improve matters," said Nelson Lee. "You had better get back to bed, boys. The incident is regrettable, but I blame myself—now that Nipper has pointed out the truth in his little lecture——"

"Oh, I say, guv'nor!" I protested.

"And we must lay another trap for the mysterious gentleman," went on Lee. "It will be difficult, but I intend to capture the fellow, sooner or later. Good-night, boys, and don't worry yourselves."

We went off back to bed, very disappointed, but highly delighted with the attitude which the guv'nor had adopted. He was a brick, and I was quite confident that he would lay the Mysterious X by the heels before many days had passed.

CHAPTER VI.

KICKING OVER THE TRACES.

THE Remove was miserable.

Morning lessons were a terrible hardship, and everybody seemed to be in a bad temper. I had forgotten all about the adventure of the night, and how we had spoilt Nelson Lee's plans for the capture of the Mysterious X.

There were other matters to think about—more important matters, from our point of view.

Two-thirds of the Remove was detained for the afternoon, and the eleven which was booked to go to Helmsford was not a very promising one. Bob Christine and I had spent much thought and time on the selection of the team.

It was made up as follows: Goal, Armstrong; backs, Doyle, Simmons; halves, Clifton, Canham, Keep; forwards, Griffith, Conroy minor, Hubbard, Young, Owen major. Several of these juniors were in the reserves, but others were practically untried. The result would probably be overwhelming. It was more than likely that the eleven would return from Helmsford after having received the biggest hiding a St. Frank's junior team had ever sustained.

The match could be postponed, of course;

but we didn't like to do this. The Helmsford College fellows were rather uppish, and they would assume that we were afraid to meet them. So the eleven would have to go.

But something had to be done. Everybody was agreed upon that point. Scores of suggestions were made, and the favourite idea seemed to be an appeal to the Head. But this, I knew, would be useless.

I was asked to put the matter before Nelson Lee, for the juniors knew that my relations with the guv'nor were intimate. At first I was rather inclined to follow this advice. Nelson Lee, I was sure, would do his best.

But Mr. Pagett had administered the punishment—not Starke. And if the guv'nor overrode the Fifth-Form master's detention order there would be ructions. Mr. Pagett was a terrible man to get on with. And it wouldn't be fair to place Nelson Lee in such an uncomfortable position.

"No," I said firmly, "if we're going to do anything at all, we'll do it ourselves—and chance the consequences."

"If you're thinking of breaking out of the Form-room, it can't be done," said Reginald Pitt. "Starke and Jesson will be there, and they're going to lock the door. We shall be bottled up."

"Leave it to me," I remarked calmly.

The juniors were not very optimistic, and when dinner-time came the faces at the Remove table were gloomy. Starke and Co. were openly jubilant, and they grinned over at us triumphantly.

We could do nothing except boil with inward rage. And after dinner we became as cheerful as possible under the circumstances, and gave the team a good send-off. Hubbard was skipper, and he didn't care very much for his task. Hubbard knew well enough that he was going to play a losing game, and he didn't like the job at all.

But I had had a quiet talk with him some little time before, and he was looking almost serene as he led his team to the station, in order to take the afternoon train for Helmsford. It was the only train possible, for there was no other until past four.

"What's the good of us trying to break out of the Form-room?" asked Handforth bitterly. "Even if we do, we shall have lost the train—and we can't walk to Helmsford. Some of us have got bikes, but even then we couldn't arrive in time."

And it was generally accepted that once the train had gone, all hope had gone with it. The gloom had settled worse than ever when the Remove trooped somewhat sullenly into the Form-room for detention.

Two-thirds of us were there, pretty nearly, including Christine and Co. and a good few other College House fellows. Mr. Pagett himself was presiding, so there was no hope of any demonstration against the punishment.

Starke and Jesson were with the Fifth-Form master, and both the prefects were prepared to spend the whole afternoon in the Remove Form-room. They hated us so much that they were quite willing to forgo their

half-holiday if only they could make us suffer humiliation.

"I regret that it was necessary to detain such a large number of boys this afternoon," said Mr. Pagett sourly. "But you have only yourselves to blame, and I do not sympathise with you in the slightest. You chose to ignore my orders—"

"We didn't know they were your orders, sir," burst out Handforth. "Starke didn't tell us that, the rotter!"

Mr. Pagett frowned.

"Handforth, you will take your seat, and you will write me a hundred lines this evening for using such language in reference to a prefect," he said severely. "Starke obeyed my instructions; there was no reason why he should go into details. You failed to attend in the lecture hall—and so you are attending here," added Mr. Pagett, with an acid smile. "I hope this will be a lesson to you, my boys."

He turned to Starke as the Remove remained stupidly silent.

"I will now leave the boys in your care, Starke," he went on. "You must see after them, and keep them fully employed. And remember—I shall hold you responsible. That is all."

And Mr. Pagett stalked out of the Form-room. As he closed the door there were several groans uttered in a minor key.

Starke glared around.

"None of that!" he exclaimed harshly. "Get your books out and start work. I'm going to keep you hard at it all the afternoon!"

"Rats!" said Handforth under his breath.

When Handforth spoke under his breath his voice could be heard yards away, although he was in blissful ignorance of the fact at the time. On this occasion he didn't remain in ignorance for long, because Starke promptly gave Handforth two hundred lines for impertinence.

Handforth looked rebellious, but he held himself in check. In all probability he had resolved to ignore the punishment altogether. But the incident served to show the other fellows that it was safer to take things quietly.

As captain of the Remove I set the example, and was soon busily at work, as though work was the only thought in my mind. I appeared to be resigned, and settled myself for the afternoon calmly.

Sir Montie and Tommy were doing exactly the same, and those fellows who were inclined to slack soon changed their minds. Both Starke and Jesson were fully determined to keep their victims on the go.

After twenty minutes, therefore, everything was quiet and orderly in the Form-room. Starke was rather surprised, I believe. He had expected trouble, and this tame behaviour was very pleasing. In fact Starke began to tell himself that he had subdued the whole Remove, myself included.

"Very good indeed," he said pleasantly. "If you keep on like this I might let you out five minutes before your time."

"Oh, thank you, Starke!" said De Valerie, with heavy sarcasm.

"It's too good of you, Starke!" murmured Pitt.

"We're overwhelmed, begad!" observed Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez.

Starke scowled.

"You'll all stay in here five minutes over your time now!" he exclaimed harshly. "I'll teach you to cheek me, you little brats! Get on with your work, Tregellis-West! Leave those glasses alone!"

"Anythin' to oblige, old boy," said Sir Montie serenely.

"Oh, leave 'em alone!" put in Jesson.

Starke went over to the desk and sat down. The two prefects talked together in low tones, and Jesson produced a pink paper from his pocket, and certain subjects were discussed with much earnestness. I gathered that the subjects were not entirely unconnected with racing.

The door had been locked, and the lower windows were fastened, so there was no prospect of a sudden awkward entry. Quite abruptly, however, Jesson turned in his chair and stared at the door.

"What the dickens was that?" he asked in a low voice.

"What?" asked Starke. "I didn't hear anything."

But in the moment of silence which followed his words there came a very distinct sound from beyond the locked door. It was a groan—an unmistakable groan! It sounded weird and awful.

"My goodness!" muttered De Valerie. "Somebody's dying out there!"

Nearly all the fellows had ceased work, and were looking towards the door with scared expressions on their faces. Starke and Jesson had both risen to their feet, but they paused uncertainly.

"Only one of the kids, I suppose," said Starke. "I expect—"

Again the sound came, but this time it was stronger, and heartrending. It came from low down, and there could be no doubt that the sufferer was crouching on the floor in the passage.

"Hang it all, we'd better look," said Jesson uneasily.

He crossed the room, and Starke followed him. As they were unlocking the door the mysterious sound was repeated, but now it didn't seem quite so near. Jesson turned the key in the lock and flung open the door.

"Well, I'm dashed!" he exclaimed. "There's nobody here."

But, as though in answer to his remark, the awful groaning was recommenced round the angle of the passage. This time it was really alarming, and was accompanied by gasps and wails.

"Great Scott!" said Starke nervously. "It must be somebody in a fit!"

Both he and Jesson hurried forward, really concerned. And the next instant Nicodemus Trotwood rose from his place nearest the door and smiled amiably. He closed the door softly, and turned the key.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BREAKING-POINT!

"RIPPING!"

That was the general verdict. The juniors were excited and reckless, and were quite prepared to face the consequences later on.

"But how the dickens did you manage it?" asked Grey wonderingly.

We were whizzing along, and were already well past Bellton and on the road to Bannington.

"I never meant to submit tamely, my sons," I replied grimly. "So I arranged things beforehand—no need to go into details now. Starke and Jesson were got out of the Form-room, and that left the way clear for us."

"But what about this giddy car?" asked Yorke, of the College House.

"Oh, this was Montie's idea," I replied, grinning. "He's paying the expense—insists upon it. He 'phoned up for the thing before dinner, and arranged for it to be waiting outside the gates all ready for us. Bryant, of the Fifth, got our boots and clobber—I asked him to do it as a personal favour."

"Well, it's jolly rich," said Pitt genially. "We shall get to Helmford just before the start, if we keep up this speed. But Hubbard and those chaps will be a bit disappointed, won't they?"

"Hubbard knows all about it," I replied calmly. "And if we're not there on time, he's going to cause a delay. I can tell you, my sons, we're not going to let Helmford whack us this afternoon."

"Rather not!" declared De Valerig. "We'll play as we've never played before!"

"And blow Starke and Pagett, and everybody else!" said Watson.

"Hear, hear!"

"Rats to 'em!"

"Don't forget that we shall have to face the music afterwards," I said. "Well, I don't suppose it'll be very stiff. Old Pagett will report us to Mr. Lee, and we might get a caning all round, and detention on the next half. Well, I'm quite agreeable to that programme."

"Rather!" agreed everybody.

And so we sped on towards Helmford, feeling elated and joyful. The afternoon was a beautiful one, and the prospect of playing the match, after all, was exhilarating. We had spoilt Starke's little game!

Most of the fellows considered that this joy-ride alone was worth any extra punishment; but, with the football match at the end of it, not one of us gave a thought to the possible consequences.

And we arrived in Helmford just in time for the start. Hubbard had delayed as much as possible, and had been rather pessimistic as to our turning up. And he was tremendously glad when we arrived in style.

"This is ripping!" he exclaimed, as I jumped off the car. "How the dickens did you manage it, Nipper?"

"Never mind that now," I replied briskly.

"Now, my good friends, you must hurry!" he exclaimed mildly.

"What the dickens——" began Handforth.

"Look here, open the windows—sharply!" I exclaimed, leaping up. "It's a trick—everybody in the eleven must follow me. There's nobody dying out in the passage—I arranged all this beforehand. Buck up!"

There was an immediate uproar. As yet Starke and Jesson had not returned. They were probably making investigations down the passage—not that they would meet with any success! For the voice had been Trotwood's; he had made good use of his ventriloquial powers—at my suggestion. Starke and Jesson had been enticed out of the Form-room, and the time for action had arrived.

Several fellows were in the secret with me, and these at once made a dash for the windows. We had decided to ignore everything and to go to Helmford. Once the match was over—and won—we wouldn't mind facing the punishment.

And, as I had expected, every fellow in the Remove eleven backed me up. Within a minute the whole crowd of us were in the Triangle. By a very simple trick we had got the better of the prefects. When they attempted to re-enter the Form-room they would find the door locked, and it would be some few minutes before they guessed that we had escaped by means of the windows. The rest of the fellows, of course, would finish the detention.

Nicodemus had eagerly consented to do his part, and I admired his powers tremendously; he had performed those groans with astonishing realism, while pretending to get on with his work. Only a few of us knew that Nicodemus was a ventriloquist, so a lot of the fellows were puzzled.

I looked at my men keenly as we paused for a moment in the Triangle.

"Well, we're all here—the eleven of us," I exclaimed. "Follow me—and you'll find things out!"

We hadn't got half way across the Triangle before a series of shouts sounded behind us, and we saw Starke and Jesson rushing down the Ancient House steps. The truth had been discovered, and we were being chased.

"It's no good!" gasped Handforth. "We can't get away!"

"Can't we?" I said grimly. "Look at this!"

We had just arrived at the gates, and there, just in the lane, stood a large touring motor-car. The chauffeur was on the alert, and he grinned good-naturedly as I rushed up and tumbled headlong into the front seat.

"Pile in—all of you!" I roared. "We've got everything here—our footer clobber and boots and everything else! Buck up!"

In less than twenty seconds the whole eleven was clinging to the car in some way or other. And as Starke and Jesson rushed out of the gateway the driver slipped in the clutch and we glided off.

The St. Frank's Junior Eleven was bound for Helmford!

"What about these fellows here? Have you explained matters to the Helmford skipper?"

"Yes; and the whole eleven is chuckling over it," replied Hubbard. "But I'll bet they won't chuckle now; they thought you weren't coming, and that they'd simply wipe us up. You've got to whack Helmford, you chaps."

"Leave it to us, Hubbard," said Christine confidently.

Only one or two members of the substitute team were disappointed; but these made no fuss whatever; they readily agreed to make way for the eleven proper. And when we took the field the Helmford juniors were rather more serious. They could see that we had come with the intention of doing something.

Helmford College was a big place, and football was taken seriously. The junior eleven was of first-class quality, and every match we had played had always been a close game.

And this match was no exception.

Our opponents were firmly determined to beat us on their own ground. And we, on the other hand, were firmly determined to beat them. Five minutes after the start I knew that we should be lucky if we succeeded.

They were hot stuff, and we were rather dismayed when they succeeded in scoring a goal seven minutes after the commencement. The roar which went up could have been heard miles away. But they were not allowed to keep the lead for long.

My own eleven was of great strength, and was made up in the following manner: goal, Handforth; backs, Clapson, Nation; halves, Pitt, Yorke, Watson; forwards, Tregellis-West, Jack Grey, myself, De Valerie, and Christine.

And we were all at the top of our form, and worked together like one machine. If we couldn't go home victorious on this occasion we could never hope to win on another. As for Hubbard's eleven—well, they would have been simply annihilated if they had been compelled to play.

Our defiance of Mr. Pagett was fully justified, in my opinion. We had come here to uphold the honour of St. Frank's. And if we didn't succeed we should be more humiliated than ever.

And so we worked like niggers. Tregellis-West scored the first goal for us, kicking the ball squarely into the net from a neat pass of Grey's. And that goal gave us heart.

Barely eight minutes later I trapped the leather and sped down the field grimly. Tricking two of the opposing halves, I shot directly over to Christine, for there was no other opening. It was a long kick, and I hardly expected it to succeed.

But Christine got the ball beautifully, and gave a quick glance round him.

"Shoot!" roared the Saints.

There was not a second to be lost—and Christine shot. It was a low kick, the ball shooting through the air only a foot or two from the ground. It went straight for the goal, and looked an easy save for the custodian.

But he was too confident.

Instead of saving carefully, as he could have done, he lifted his foot and kicked at the ball, intending to send it far back into the field. But it slid off his toe, hit the post, and the next second reposed in the net.

"Goal!"

It was a delighted roar from every St. Frank's fellow, and Christine himself was more surprised than anybody else. We had got the lead now, and we were all determined to keep it. And the score remained the same until half-time.

When the whistle blew everybody on the field was pretty well done up. It had been a gruelling game, and a rest was highly welcome. Christine came over to me, grinning all over his face.

"That was a fine pass of yours, old man," he remarked breathlessly.

"And that was a fine kick of yours," I retorted. "We've done well, Christy—but we shall have to do better. The home team will play up like the very dickens to get the lead back as soon as we start again. We shall need all our best efforts to go home victorious."

"Oh, we shall do it," declared Christine confidently.

"They're jolly keen," remarked Handforth. "I've been kept on the go ever since the start, dodging about between the sticks all the time."

Handforth was not exaggerating. The Helmford forwards had pressed several attacks, and our goalie had been kept extremely busy. Twice Handforth had saved with all his usual adroitness. The leader of Study D was undoubtedly an ass, but he was certainly a first-class goalkeeper.

And he was obliged to show his mettle again when the game restarted. For the first ten minutes the Helmford fellows pressed vigorously. Again and again Handforth saved, and then the ball passed into mid-field and the game swayed towards the other end.

For some little time, however, nothing was accomplished—nothing definite, that is. And then, in a sudden rush, Jack Grey exhibited his true value. He scored a goal when the position seemed hopeless.

It was one of the neatest pieces of work I had ever seen on the football field. Grey managed to trick three fellows one after the other, and then shot for goal when there seemed no possible hope of success. But it was a wonderful kick, and just scraped in beneath the cross-bar by a hair's breadth, the goalie vainly attempting to stop it.

"Oh, well played!"

"Three to one!" I grinned. "Why, we're safe now, my sons. They'll never succeed in catching up—"

"Great Scott!" gasped Pitt suddenly.

He stared over towards the pavilion, and, as he did so, I heard several other fellows shouting, too. I turned my attention to the point of interest—and then received a bit of a shock.

For my gaze rested upon—Mr. Pagett! With him were Starke, Jesson and Kenmore!

I had never dreamed that anything of this nature would occur. The master of the Fifth had actually come to Helmford after us!

"What's his game, I wonder?" said Christine curiously. "He can't stop the match now, the silly old juggins! I expect he's going to march us off home at the end of the game. Well, I'm blessed if he isn't coming on to the field!"

Mr. Pagett was, indeed, striding forward. The Helmford fellows stared at him in astonishment, for he was a stranger to them.

"Hold on, sir!" called out the skipper. "You can't come on here——"

"Hold your tongue, boy!" roared Mr. Pagett.

"I sha'n't do anything of the sort!" snapped the Helmford captain. "You don't seem to realise that we're in the middle of a match. I say, Bland, order this man off the field, will you?"

Bland was the referee, and a Sixth-Former.

"You'll have to go off, sir," he said grimly.

"We can't allow——"

"You will allow what I choose—not what you choose!" bellowed Mr. Pagett furiously. "These boys—these impudent young rebels—broke out of detention, and I intend to take them back to St. Frank's at once!"

"Hang it all, you can wait until the match is over, can't you?" asked the skipper.

"No, I cannot!" snapped Mr. Pagett. "Christine—Watson—every one of you! All fall into line, and follow me off the field! If you dare to disobey my orders, I will see that you are all publicly flogged!"

We stared at one another in dismay. Inwardly we were furious, and I could hardly believe that Mr. Pagett was in earnest.

"We're quite ready to take our punishment afterwards, sir," I said quietly. "But you'll let us finish the game, I suppose?"

"Then you suppose wrong!" retorted the Fifth Form-master sourly. "I intend this to be a lesson to you—and you will follow me off the field immediately. Come! I will not wait a second longer!"

There was nothing else for it—we were compelled to troop off the field. The Helmford fellows were as furious as we were, but they could do nothing. And we had to leave the match unfinished! Undoubtedly we had won

—but now it wouldn't count. After all our efforts, this was the result!

"I'll bet it was Starke's idea," exclaimed Handforth fiercely.

Mr. Pagett turned round, having heard the words.

"If it will give you any pleasure, Handforth, I may as well tell you that it was Starke who put the idea into my head," he exclaimed harshly. "Starke pointed out to me that it would be an excellent lesson if I came here and put a stop to the match. Starke has a full knowledge of his responsibility, and he has proved himself to be well fitted for his position as a prefect."

"Oh, the cad!" muttered Pitt. "I don't blame Pagett so much—he's an ill-tempered old beast, and as weak as a rat. He simply carried out Starke's idea because it appealed to him."

We were all on the point of raving. Starke was the cause of this—just the same as Starke was the cause of nearly all our troubles. The bullies had gained their victory, after all.

But it was a greater victory than they had even hoped for.

After arriving home, sullen and bitter, the culprits—myself included—were severely caned. And we were all gated for the rest of the week, and were ordered to suffer detention on the next half-holiday.

We were nearly speechless with helpless fury. And it was the bullies who had "worked" this humiliation. Starke was the chief culprit, and I had never seen him looking so contented before.

But the breaking-point had arrived.

Until now the Bullies' League had been successful all along the line. Their power had increased day by day, week by week. But Starke and Co. had reached the zenith of their glory. It was now the turn of the juniors to take matters in hand.

For it was my intention—as I solemnly assured my chums—to deal with Starke and Co. drastically. And I meant to do so—at once! All my energies were to be used in fighting the bullies, and some exciting times were in store.

The Remove had reached the limit of its endurance, and there was very grave trouble brewing—for the Bullies' League!

THE END.

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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. 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 tell his story. His name is John Hammond, the man whom, by a strange coincidence, Dick is seeking. He tells them of a mysterious valley, and they set out to seek it.

(Now read on.)

ON THE MARCH.

AT the close of the afternoon the morass of rotting vegetation merged on to higher ground, and that night, and on succeeding nights, extra sentries were posted, and were instructed to be constantly on the alert. On no occasion was there any alarm, however. The only visitors were leopards and hyenas, and they were frightened off by the fires.

Dick's compass served for guidance, and so did the trail—a beaten track, dimly visible, which kept steadily to the north, and was presumably the same that the Somalis had indicated to John Hammond. It was most improbable that it was they who had subsequently and treacherously dogged his steps; they would have robbed him before he had gone far from the river, instead of following him for so long a distance.

For three more days—four in all—the safari pressed on, by tangled jungle and rugged valleys, scrub and tall grass, seeing no signs of human beings.

At the end of the fourth day the camp was pitched in an open glade in a dense forest, at the verge of which flowed a crystal stream. The tent was erected. Fires were built, and the evening meal was prepared. And when the lads had finished their supper they lit their pipes and discussed the situation, seated on campstools under the canvas.

They were in cheerful spirits. They had travelled for the better part of a week without being molested, and they no longer felt any apprehensions.

"It took poor old John eight days to get from the Bana River to where he was bitten by the snake," said Dick. "We've been four days on the march in the opposite direction, so at a rough calculation we ought to reach the river in four more days."

"Yes, I should think so," Alan assented. "And from there we'll have a stiff journey before us."

"Some hundreds of miles, I guess. John was on the stream for a week in the canoe, and drifting with the current at that."

"Well, we'll have to cross over, and follow the north bank to the west."

"Unless the water is too deep, Carne. If it should be we'll hold to the south bank, watching the other side until we come to the cleft that leads to the——"

Dick stopped abruptly, started by a shout from one of the natives. Both lads jumped up, and Alan, rushing first from the tent, was dealt a blow on the jaw that stretched him flat on his back. He scrambled quickly to his feet, dazed and dizzy, and as he looked around him in bewilderment he saw the figure of a man dart across the camp and vanish in the black shadow of the trees.

THE BAJANGA MESSENGER.

THE dusky figure was still visible at the edge of the cover when Dick Selby, who had delayed only long enough to snatch his rifle, hurried out of the tent. Throwing the weapon to his shoulder,

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)

he aimed and fired. He was a trifle too late. As the sharp report rang out the man disappeared, and the next instant, from the edge of the trees, there was a jet of flame and the crack of a revolver, the bullet narrowly missing Dick.

The two lads ran fearlessly to the spot, and when they had listened for a few seconds, and heard the rapid tread of the fugitive fade to silence, they returned to the middle of the camp, and were surrounded by the excited and clamorous natives.

"It was I who first saw him!" exclaimed Rembo. "He was crawling in the grass, where he had been lying like a snake close to the tent. And when I shouted he jumped up, Bhagwan."

"I saw him, too!" declared Jan Swart to Alan. "His face was turned from me, baas, but he must have been a white man, for he wore such clothes as you and the other baas wear."

Dick knit his brows.

"I wonder if he was that?" he said anxiously. "Did you see him distinctly, Carne?"

"No, I had only a glimpse of him running," Alan replied. "But I believe myself that he was no native. He struck me from behind and knocked me down," he added, rubbing his bruised chin. "And he was a dozen yards away by the time I had got to my feet."

Rembo, appealed to for his opinion, confirmed what the Hottentot had stated. He had not observed the intruder's features, but he was certain that he was clothed in a jacket and trousers. It was an ominous affair.

The man, whoever he was, must have stolen into the camp as a spy. He had been lying flat in the grass just outside the tent, so he must have overheard the conversation between Dick and Alan. What had been his object? The lads looked at each other in grave apprehension, thinking of the solemn warning John Hammond had given them with his last breath.

"I guess old John was right," said Dick. "There couldn't be any white man in this part of the country except the one he saw when he was ill at the dwelling in the hidden valley. That chap followed John up, and had him done to death so he couldn't get down country and tell people what he had discovered."

"If it was the same man who was lurking by the tent he has learned that we are trekking north to find the valley. He bolted in that direction. He isn't alone, of course. He has natives with him, and I dare say he has been encamped in this neighbourhood for some days. It must have been hereabouts that poor John was robbed."

"I should think it was the same man," Alan assented. "He must have seen the light of our fires to-night. Or else one of the party hung on to John Hammond's trail until he dropped, and heard him tell his story to us, and went back to the others with the news. And they have been waiting for us to come along."

"I don't suppose you have any idea who the fellow can be, Carne. I am asking you because you admitted that you had some knowledge of the English people who are living in the valley."

"No, Dick, I didn't admit it. I have a sort of a theory. That's all."

"Well, it strikes me we are up against trouble. But we ought to be sure that our suspicions are right."

"Yes, so we can be prepared for attack. You and I had better push forward, and——"

"Baas, let me go," interrupted Jan Swart, who had been listening. "I will follow the trail of the white man."

"How can you?" said Alan. "You won't be able to see it in the dark. And you can't take a lantern, for it would betray you."

"The camp of the bad man will be close to the path, baas, so I will keep to that. Also there will be a fire, and I shall smell the smoke of it."

"You might be killed by a wild beast, Jan."

"You will give me a gun, baas. I can shoot. I will not be afraid if you will let me go."

The little Hottentot was no coward. It was only the supernatural that he was in fear of. For the sake of the English lad he was willing to risk the perils of darkness, and after a brief consultation he was allowed to depart, as it was necessary that information should be had.

He set off to the north, armed with a rifle; and after he had gone fresh wood was heaped on the fires and sentries were posted. All the members of the safari remained awake and vigilant, apprehensive of danger.

The night wore on, hour by hour; and at the first flush of daylight, when the wild animals were slinking to their lairs and hope of Jan's return had been abandoned, he slipped quietly into the camp. His companions gathered around him, and in a few words he told his story.

For a long way he had held to the trail, and finally, having been guided to one side of it by the smell of smoke, he had stumbled on a camp that was in a sheltered place.

"And there, baas, I saw a white man with a black moustache," he continued. "He was sitting by a fire with a pipe in his mouth, and truly he was evil to look at."

The two lads exchanged glances. There could be no doubt now that this was the man of whom John Hammond had spoken, and that he was to be regarded as a dangerous enemy.

"There were many natives with the white man, such as I have never seen before," the Hottentot resumed. "Some of them were lying asleep by their shields and spears, baas, and some of them were awake. They were big men, with ugly faces, and woolly hair that stood out from their heads, and teeth that were filed to sharp points. For a time I watched from the bushes, and then I crept away and came back as quickly as I could. It was a long distance."

(Continued overleaf.)

"How many of these savages were there?" asked Alan.

"More than I could count," Jan replied. "A lot more. Twice as many as all who are in this camp."

"But they were armed only with spears, were they?"

"No, baas, some of them had guns too. And I saw pistols in the belt of the white man."

The conversation had been intelligible to the Swahilis, and to several of the Wakambas. One of the latter spoke earnestly to Rembo, who turned an ashen countenance to the lad and translated the words of the Wakamba into English.

"Bhagwan," he said, "Malulu has knowledge of these savages who are with the white man. He has heard tales of them from some of his people who wandered far in past days, and returned to their kfaals to tell of the strange places they had been to. And it would seem that these big savages are of the Bajangas, a fierce and bloodthirsty tribe, whose villages are in the forests to the south of the Bana River."

"You can say to Malulu from me," Dick Selby replied, "that I don't care how fierce they are."

"But he tells me also that they are terrible warriors," the headman went on, "and that they are cannibals. They sometimes eat human flesh."

"Well, Rembo, they're not going to eat any of us."

"We are few in number, Bhagwan. And of the Bajangas there are as many as are leaves on the trees."

"It doesn't matter to us how many there are, Rembo. Does it, Carne?"

Alan shook his head.

"I'm not thinking of trekking south, if that's what you mean," he answered firmly. "I'm for the north."

"And so am I," vowed Dick. "If the Bajangas are spoiling for a fight they can have it."

"Baas, it may be that the savages will go back to their own country, and the white man with them," said the Hottentot, addressing the English lad. "Let us stay here for the day, and I will go again along the path, and see if—"

He broke off abruptly as a crackling, rustling tread was heard. There was a murmur of startled voices, and then a sudden hush as the thickets at the northern edge of the camp were parted and a tall figure emerged from them.

The grey light of the dawn shone on a stalwart, half-naked warrior of a negro type, with broad cheekbones, and brutal, copper-coloured features. He was armed with a short stabbing spear and an oval shield of rhinoceros-hide. He wore wrist-bangles of

blue beads and a waist-cloth of cotton, and from his shoulder hung a kaross made from the skin of a lion. A circlet of ostrich feathers decorated his frizzly black hair, and his teeth, filed to points, showed between his thick lips. In one hand was a cleft stick, in which was thrust what looked like a letter.

"Bhagwan, it is a Bajanga!" gasped Rembo.

Having stood motionless for a few seconds, as if carved from bronze, the savage strode forward with a dignified, haughty bearing, and paused in front of the two lads, his gaze resting on them. He scanned each in turn, a malevolent glitter in his dark eyes; and after brief hesitation he offered the cleft stick to Alan, who took from it a folded slip of paper that had a perforated edge, and had obviously been torn from a notebook. And on this was written in English, with a pencil:

"March to the south at once, or you will all perish. The Bajangas will not allow strangers to pass through their territory. If you are wise you will heed this warning, which is meant for your good. Lose no time. Delay will be fatal."

Alan read the words aloud to his companions, and, handing the message to Dick, he demanded curtly of the warrior:

"Who sent you with this?"

The savage made a fierce reply, and in a strange tongue. He could not speak English, and none of the porters or gun-bearers could understand his language.

"It's that white scoundrel!" exclaimed Dick Selby, his face flushed with anger. "The coward! The sneaking, treacherous hound! He is bent on preventing us from going any farther, but he don't want to fight if he can help it! So he has sent us this insolent message! If he thinks we'll turn back he is jolly well mistaken! By George, Carne, it makes my blood boil! I wish the fellow had come himself! I'd have—"

With a gesture of contempt he tore the slip of paper to shreds, and ground them under his heel, then shook his fist at the Bajanga.

"There's nothing doing!" he cried. "You can tell the white man to go to blazes! That's my answer, you black lump of ugliness! And now clear out of this! Make tracks! Scoot!"

The warrior disdainfully regarded the young American, whose meaning was unmistakable to him. His hand tightened on his spear, and he displayed his teeth in a sinister, mocking grin. He spoke no word. After a moment of silence he swung round and was gone, his nodding ostrich plumes vanishing amidst the green cover.

(Another Long Instalment of this Popular Serial next week.)