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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

HANDFORTH MEANS BUSINESS!

INDIGNATION was high in the Remove. In both Houses at St. Frank's—the Ancient House and the College House—the juniors were in a state of exasperation bordering upon rank rebellion. And the cause of all the trouble was the outrageous bullying, which had been increasing and increasing since the commencement of the term. Starke and Co., of the Sixth, were the culprits. They had formed themselves into a kind of gang, and they schemed together against the juniors—particularly against the Remove. For weeks past these seniors had been termed "The Bullies' League" among the fags and Removites.

And matters had reached a head at last.

In fact the breaking-point had come. I was quite settled upon that question. The other fellows in the Remove were not quite sure about it; but I had solemnly assured my two chums—Sir Montic Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson—that Starke and Co. had reached the zenith of their power.

The affair of the Helmford football match had been the climax.

Walter Starke, by deliberate plotting, had managed to get the whole junior eleven—to say nothing of many other juniors—detained on the afternoon of the match. Well, this wasn't to be stood tamely; and I had broken detention with the rest of the team, and we had gone to Helmford, after all.

This was all very well—as far as it went. But Starke had enlisted the aid of Mr. Pagett, the sour-tempered master of the Fifth. And Mr. Pagett had journeyed to Helmford, and had stopped the match in the middle of the second half!

Not only this, but he had taken us all back to St. Frank's, and we had been severely punished. And Starke was the actual culprit; Starke was the prime mover in the whole business.

In short, it had been a planned scheme of the Bullies' League.

There was little wonder that the Remove was boiling. The fellows were haunted by the rotters of the Sixth. Starke and Co. were doing their utmost to gain complete power, and their methods were methods of violence and tyranny.

The College House had suffered as much as the Ancient House. Jesson, of the Sixth—one of the principal College House prefects—was Starke's close associate, and he plotted thickly with the "gang" continually. Life was becoming unbearable in the junior school.

Little indignation meetings were being held in every corner of St. Frank's. In Study D, in the Ancient House, one might have reasonably supposed that an earthquake was taking place.

But it was only Handforth, of the Remove. When Handforth got excited he usually knocked things about. Sometimes it was the furniture; sometimes it was the crockery; and frequently it was his own chums, Church and McClure. On the average, these long-suffering youths got knocked about more than anything else.

When matters reached a really acute stage Church and McClure knocked Handforth about. And then the inhabitants of Study D would go about for a week with black eyes and thick ears.

But even these fistic encounters never ended in a quarrel. Handforth and Co. had been faithful to one another for ages. They were inseparable, and an occasional "mill" only cemented them together more securely.

Afternoon lessons were only just over, and tea was being prepared in most junior studies. Church and McClure were trying to prepare tea in Study D, but their task was a somewhat difficult one, for Handforth seemed to have a set idea that the table was provided for the especial purpose of banging.

And Handforth had banged it, in the course

of months, so many times, that it was inclined to be rickety. And there were serious doubts as to whether the inoffensive article was capable of standing much more.

"Bold measures!" declared Handforth, bringing down his fist heavily. "That's what we've got to take!"

"Of course we have," agreed McClure diplomatically. "But I wish you'd thump one of the chairs, Handy. I've put these plates on the table four times, and you've nearly knocked 'em off——"

"Do you think I care about plates?" roared Handforth, glaring

"But we've got to have tea, old man——"

"Tea!" shouted Handforth. "I hope I'm capable of thinking of something more elevating than sordid food!"

"Why, you ass, all this food is fresh!" snorted McClure. "I don't see why you should start saying nasty things about it."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"I suppose it's no good trying to talk intellectually to gluttons like you chaps," he said bitterly. "I've tried it before; but all you seem to think about is your insides. Bold measures have got to be taken, and unless we take them at once we might be overwhelmed."

"If this is your intellectual talk, I don't wonder at it being a bit above our heads," observed Church. "Why can't you use plain English, you duffer?"

"Are you calling me a duffer?" roared Handforth.

"Not at all!" said Church. "I was speaking to the armchair!"

Handforth glared.

"And I don't want any sarcasm!" he shouted. "I'm going to make you chaps attend to me—do you hear?"

Thump! Crash!

"There you are!" yelled Church. "I knew what you'd do, you silly ass! Three plates broken—and they ain't ours, either! I borrowed them from De Valerie last night. You'll have to buy some new ones now, Handy."

"I don't care if I have to buy two dozen!" snorted Handforth, banging the table again.

"Things have reached a pass!"

"By jingo!" breathed McClure. "I should think they have!"

"Very well, then," went on Edward Oswald. "Starke and his gang have become altogether too powerful. In my opinion, they ought to be taken down a peg. In fact there's no reason why they shouldn't be taken down three or four pegs! And I'm the chap to do it!"

"You?" asked Church and McClure, staring.

"Yes, me!" said Handforth, grimly. "I think a number of us—five or six—ought to go to Starke's study and tell the cad that the bullying has got to stop. Will you two fellows come with me?"

"Pass the butter, Church," said McClure hastily.

"Here you are," said Church. "I don't think it's quite so fresh as it might be. Mrs. Hake's butter is rather——"

"Didn't you hear me speak to you?" roared Handforth.

"Eh?"

"Will you come with me to Starke's study, you rotters?"

"Oh, I suppose we shall have to agree," said Church, with a sigh. "But what's the good, old chap? You're not fond of black eyes, are you? I can't say that I'm anxious to be chucked out——"

"Oh!" sneered Handforth. "So you're afraid? I thought that's what it was! Well, look here, my sons, if you don't agree to come with me—of your own free will—I'll punch both your noses until you can't see!"

"We don't see out of our noses, you ass!" growled McClure. "And is that what you call coming of our own free will? But why don't you leave all this until after tea-time, Hardy? Let's get the grub on the table, for goodness' sake!"

"Grub!" snapped Handforth. "I couldn't eat a mouthful now. I'm too full of—of emotion! This affair has moved me tremendously."

"I wish we could move you!" mumbled Church.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," said Church crossly.

"Why can't you insult me openly, instead of muttering it?" asked Handforth. "Do you think I don't know what you said? But I don't care—it doesn't make any difference to me what you think of me. I'm boss of this study, and I'm going to see that you two chaps pay me due respect!"

"But I thought you didn't care what we thought of you——"

"I didn't ask you to argue!" snorted Handforth. "That's the worst of you, McClure. Never can leave a thing alone. And you always get away from the subject and start jawing about a side issue."

McClure made no reply; he couldn't think of a fitting one.

"You know well enough that the Remove is boiling," went on Handforth. "The fellows are dangerous—do you hear? Dangerous!"

"Some of 'em are!" said Church vaguely.

"I suppose you mean me?" asked Handforth. "Well, you're right. I am dangerous—I admit it! I wouldn't give much for Starke's chances if he walked into this study at this moment! And I won't give anything for his chances when I go along and speak to him in a minute or two."

"Before tea?"

"Before anything!" roared Handforth. "Of course, it's absolutely wrong that I should be compelled to do anything. It's not my duty—I'm aware of that. To tell you the plain truth, I shall be taking somebody else's work on my own shoulders. But I'm willing enough; it's all for the good of the cause."

"The fact is, Handy, you're too good," said Church. "I don't see why you should concern yourself so much. If it isn't your duty——"

"The right fellow is doing nothing—nothing whatever," interrupted Handforth. "Nipper is the chap I'm talking about. I'll admit he

acted well over that football business, but he's done nothing since; he's done nothing, when something was crying aloud to be done. And is Nipper any good?"

"Yes!" said Church and McClure.

"No!" bawled Handforth. "Nipper's no good at all! Mind you, I don't want to say a word against him, but he's used up—he's absolutely finished as regards any leadership. Nipper is no better than a sucked orange!"

McClure grinned.

"And you don't want to say a word against him?" he inquired politely.

"Not a word. Nipper's a first-class chap——"

"Well, if I was Nipper, and if I heard you call me a sucked orange, I'd feel inclined to do things," said Church. "But why are you always running Nipper down? He's our skipper, and the best skipper we've ever had. If you'll only leave things to him, he'll——"

"I don't intend to leave things to him," interrupted Handforth. "Nipper's not bold enough. Would he have thought of beating Starke in his own den? I ask you—would he have thought of that?"

"No fear!" said Church.

"There you are, then," said Handforth triumphantly. "There's just an example. My motto is 'Do it now!' My motto is 'Action!' My motto is 'Never let the grass grow under your feet!'"

"That's three mottoes you've got," observed McClure.

"And I've got a dozen more," declared Handforth. "My idea is to go to Starke's study now—not in an hour's time!—not to-morrow!—not next week!—but now! Now! I believe in doing things at once!"

"Well, you make yourself clear, anyhow," said Church. "But, my dear chap, if you want to go and see Starke now, why don't you go and see him? He's on view—you haven't got to pay to see the gorilla! And McClure and I might be able to get tea ready while you're gone—although I don't suppose you'll eat much after you've interviewed Starke!"

"You won't have any teeth left!" said McClure comfortingly. "And your eyes will be so bunged up that you won't be able to see. But, still, if you want to go and find trouble, that's your look-out!"

Handforth banged the table again.

"I'm going with you fellows," he exclaimed deliberately. "What's more, I'm going to take five or six others as well. Come along the passage, and we'll collect a crowd. It's the only way to get things done. As soon as Starke sees that we're determined he'll crumple up like—like a house of cards!"

And Handforth stalked to the door and passed outside. His faithful chums did not feel very faithful at that moment. In fact they felt very revolutionary. Church was inclined to decidedly Bolshevik ideas at the moment; he had a somewhat murderous desire to smother Handforth on the spot.

"Oh, it's no good," growled McClure.

"We shall have to go."

They followed Handforth out into the

passage. Their famous leader was waiting for them, and he was thoughtfully rolling up his sleeves. Whether this was a preparation for the interview with Starke, or whether Handforth had designs upon his own chums, was not quite certain. At all events, he unrolled his sleeves as soon as Church and McClure joined him.

"Now we're going to collect the other chaps," he said grimly. "I say, Pitt!"

"Hallo!" said Reginald Pitt, who was just about to turn into Study E with Jack Grey. "What's wrong with you, Handy? Have you been eating beetroots or something? Your face looks ——"

"Never mind my face," interrupted Handforth. "I've come to a decision."

"Go hon!"

"A decision," repeated Handforth. "Starke and Co. have asked for trouble and they're going to find it. I'm going to lead a crowd of fellows to Starke's study, and then I'm going to tell Starke exactly what I think of him——"

"One moment!" said Pitt. "I don't think I quite caught what you said. Is it Starke who's looking for trouble, or you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Starke, of course!" snapped Handforth.

"Oh, my mistake," said Pitt calmly. "I thought you were anxious to find some. But what do you want to waste time with me for?"

"Are you willing to come with me?" asked Handforth. "Are you willing to prove your mettle?"

"I haven't got any mettle," said Pitt. "I'm stony!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't mean that kind of metal, you silly donkey!" roared Handforth. "I believe you're deliberately chipping me. Are you willing, I ask, to come with me to Starke's study?"

"Yes!" said Pitt promptly. "I'll come with pleasure."

"Why, you ass!" exclaimed Grey. "Starke will only give you lines, or kick you out, neck and crop——"

"Handforth has asked me to go, and I wouldn't dream of refusing," said Pitt, winking quickly. "Why don't you come too, Jack? We'll all go to Starke's study. The more of us the merrier."

Handforth beamed.

"Well, I'm surprised—I'm pleasantly surprised," he declared. "I didn't think you'd show so much sense, Pitt. But here's De Valerie and Somerton. I say, you fellows, are you willing to come to Starke's study with me?"

"No, thanks," said De Valerie promptly.

"Oh, but we must go," said Pitt. "Grey and I are going. Handforth means to give Starke a piece of his mind, and he wants a lot of us to support him. Why don't you come along as well? It'll be quite entertaining."

"Oh, I'm agreeable," said De Valerie.

Somerton expressed his willingness also. They had observed a slight flicker of Pitt's left eyelid, and they assumed that Pitt was

In possession of secret information. Probably Starke wasn't in his study just now. De Valerie couldn't possibly picture Pitt going there otherwise.

Not that Pitt was afraid of the Sixth-Form bullies. Starke and Co., however, could not be dealt with openly; it wasn't possible to beard them in their den, as Handforth desired. At least, it couldn't be done without serious consequences. And that kind of thing, far from improving matters, only made them worse. But to point this out to Handforth would be a hopeless task.

"We're going, then?" said Handforth genially. "Good! There's plenty of us here; it doesn't matter if Starke's got two of his pals with him. We can handle the three with ease. Follow me, my sons!"

Handforth strode down the passage, and the other juniors followed solemnly. They made their way to the Sixth-Form passage, and at length came to a halt outside the door of Walter Starke's study.

Handforth was feeling quite important.

He had succeeded in obtaining strong support—and even he himself had not hoped for such an event. If it came to a scrap, he felt that everything would go smoothly. And Handforth tapped boldly upon the door.

"Who's that?" came a sharp voice. "Come in!"

Handforth strode into the study. Unfortunately he failed to observe the somewhat strange behaviour of his following. These faithless youths faded away like shadows; they stole down the passage and disappeared from view.

But Handforth was unaware of this. He was under the impression that the juniors were close behind him—backing him up. The other fellows could hardly be blamed for seeking safety, however. If Handforth had only been on the alert, he would have noticed that the juniors had only agreed to accompany him to Starke's study. They had said nothing about entering Starke's study!

"What do you want here?"

Handforth looked round the room loftily. Kenmore had asked him the question, and Kenmore was sitting at the table pouring out tea. Starke was lounging in the easy-chair, reading a paper.

"We've come to speak to Starke," said Handforth firmly.

"Oh, have you?" exclaimed Starke, looking round. "And what do you want to speak to me about?"

"We feel it our duty, as representative members of the Remove, to point out to you, Walter Starke, that you are a cad and a bully," said Handforth recklessly. "We consider that you are unfit——"

"You—you cheeky young dog!" roared Starke, jumping up.

"Oh, let him go on!" grinned Kenmore. "It's quite amusing. I was just wondering if Handforth imagined himself to be a group! It's the first time I've heard a fellow using the plural——"

"You'll hear him using a few yells in a minute," growled Starke. "What the thunder do you think your game is, Handforth? What

do you mean by coming here and insulting me in this fashion?"

"We couldn't insult you, Starke!"

"We—we!" shouted Starke. "Are you dotty, you little idiot?"

"I said we—all of us," declared Handforth.

"All of you!" yelled Kenmore. "Why, you're alone, you silly donkey!"

Handforth smiled in a superior fashion.

"If you think you can scare me, you're mistaken," he said. "I'm doing all the speaking, I'll admit; but these other chaps are ready to back me up if you start any of your rot! I suppose you know that I don't stand any rot? I've come here to tell you that the bullying has got to stop——"

"Pitch him out!" exclaimed Starke harshly.

He didn't wait for Kenmore to act, but he walked round the table and grabbed Handforth firmly by the shoulder.

"Now, you chaps!" roared Handforth. "Go for 'em!"

Handforth was whirled round, and his eyes goggled as he saw that he was completely alone. He gasped, and while he was gasping Starke used his fists to advantage.

Bang! Smack! Crash!

Handforth was knocked about brutally. Starke's fists descended upon his head and face and neck. The next moment Handforth was shot through the doorway into the passage with terrific force. Starke was strong, and he used all his strength now.

"Yaroooh!" roared Handforth. "Yow! Oh, you cad—— 'Ow!"

Crash!

Handforth hit the opposite wall with great violence—with his head. He fell to the floor, dazed and sore. And the door of Starke's study closed with a slam.

The expedition had hardly been a success!

CHAPTER II.

TWO SOLEMN PROMISES.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was bent upon revenge.

Five minutes had passed, and he was still sore and furious. Somehow or other he had crawled out of the Sixth-Form passage, but when he reached Study D Church and McClure were not there.

Those cautious juniors had realised that Study D would be somewhat unhealthy after Handforth had visited Starke. And so Church and McClure had accepted a pressing invitation from Pitt and Grey.

"It was his own fault," said Pitt comfortably. "Some chaps might think that we deserted him in his hour of need; but he was simply asking for a lesson. And we didn't promise to go in with him, did we?"

Jack Grey grinned.

"Well, hardly," he agreed. "Still, it was rather off-side, Pitt. I don't feel exactly comfortable about it."

"I do," put in McClure. "Handy was just in the right mood to find trouble. When he gets in that state a few hard knocks do him good. And I'm blessed if I can see why

we should have stopped to be punished by those beastly cads."

Meanwhile, Handforth was on the warpath. He wanted revenge badly, but after he had been searching for about ten minutes his fury vanished. This was always the case with Handy, and Church and McClure knew it. By taking the precaution to keep out of his way for a short time they saved themselves many hard blows. Handforth's anger never lasted long.

He was one of the best-natured fellows in the Remove, but he was certainly one of the hardest to get on with. And when his anger subsided it usually left him cold and somewhat bitter.

"Oh, so there you are!" he exclaimed sourly, as he ran into De Valerie in the Remove passage. "Where are the other rotters?"

De Valerie grinned.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "You're looking a bit war-worn, Handy. But if you will go charging into a prefect's study, you can't expect anything else. We carried out our promise, didn't we—what?"

"You deserted me—you deserted me like—like rats desert a sinking ship," said Handforth bitterly. "After promising to back me up—"

"My dear ass, we promised to go with you to Starke's study—and that's all you asked," explained De Valerie calmly. "How were we to know that you wanted us to go in? I suppose you met with a bit of trouble?"

Handforth stared at the other junior freezingly, and then passed on. An unnecessary question of that sort was rather too much for him. The very condition of his face proved that he had met with trouble—and more than a bit, too!

Handforth was about to enter his own study, when the next door opened and I emerged, accompanied by Tregellis-West and Watson. We all stared at Handforth wonderingly. He wasn't looking himself at all.

"Has it got to that, then?" I asked feelingly. "I heard noises in your study, Handy, but I didn't think that Church and McClure were knocking you about. I suppose they're both in hospital?"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montic. "I sincerely hope not, old boy."

Handforth smiled sneeringly.

"They're both hiding away," he replied. "I won't go into any details—I'm feeling rather sick of the thing. But what do you think of two chums who desert a fellow in a moment of need? I went to Starke's study with a deputation, and as soon as I got there the deputation backed out of it!"

"Very sensible, too," I remarked.

"Eh?"

"There was no reason why they should all get into your state, Handforth," I replied. "But I thought you weren't going to give me any details? And what was the idea of going to Starke, anyhow?"

Handforth pointed to his honourable wounds.

"You see these?" he asked grimly.

"We're not quite blind!" growled Watson.

"Well, it may be some comfort to you to know that all these bruises are Nipper's fault," said Handforth. "He's the cause of all the trouble. I don't want to say a word against him—"

"But I don't know anything about it, you ass!" I interrupted.

"They're all your fault," declared Handforth. "I went to Starke's study because you have failed in your duty. Is that clear? Instead of taking a serious interest in life—instead of doing your best to put down bullying—you sit in your study, indifferent and apathetic. And I get these wounds meanwhile."

I chuckled.

"Same old trouble," I said. "But you needn't have put yourself out, Handy. If it'll give you any satisfaction, I'll tell you that something is going to be done now—at once. I'm at the end of my patience, and the Remove is going to show the bullies that we've got power, too."

Handforth brightened up.

"Why, are you going to Starke's study?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "That's your way of doing things. I may not be quite so drastic, Handforth, but I prefer my own methods, thanks. As Remove skipper, I solemnly promise you that the Bullies' League will be defeated and squashed before the end of a month."

"A—a month!" snorted Handforth.

"Exactly!" I agreed. "You'd like it done in two hours, wouldn't you? Well, old son, it can't be done. The League is a powerful combination, and we can't fight it on equal terms. The prefects have authority behind them—we haven't. So it's up to us to go to work cautiously. And you've got to realise that the job is a big one to handle; your face looks as if you realise it, anyhow."

Handforth rubbed his left ear tenderly.

"Perhaps you're right!" he agreed. "You'll never find me refusing to admit my own faults. And I do admit—quite frankly—that I'm too impulsive. I haven't got a cold, calculating brain like yours. I know a thing wants to be done—and my idea is to do it."

"Well, that's all very well; but it doesn't work," I said. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to lead a crowd of chaps to Starke's study and to give those cads the hiding they deserve. But, my dear Handy, what good would it do? We should all get into hot water, and Starke and his pals would be more vicious and vindictive than ever."

"By George!" said Handforth. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Yes; but you must think of these things," I declared. "Action of that kind is worse than useless. It simply satisfies us for the moment, but the bullies are as powerful as ever. The only way to get the better of them is to use secret methods. My plan is an elaborate one."

"What the dickens do you mean?"

"You'll find out before long," I replied grimly. "You think I've been neglecting things, Handy. I haven't. For days past I've been turning over all sorts of ideas in my

mind. And at last I've thought of a scheme that will bring us victory, sooner or later. And I can tell you that there were dozens of details to be thought out—dozens of difficulties to be overcome. I can safely say that the Combine will defeat the League within a month."

"The Combine?" repeated Handforth.

"Exactly."

"And what's the Combine?"

"Ah! That's what you'll find out," I replied mysteriously. "Have just a little more patience, old son, and you won't think I'm such a duffer, after all! Starke and Co. have had their turn—and now we're going to have ours."

We passed on, leaving Handforth staring after us thoughtfully. And when he found his chums a few minutes later he had forgotten all about his desire for revenge. He was impressed by what I had told him.

"I say, Handy, we're awfully sorry," said Church nervously.

"Don't talk to me about that affair," exclaimed Handforth. "I was wrong. I deserved what I got, anyhow."

"Wha-at?" gasped McClure. "You—you admit it?"

"I admit it," said Handforth, to his chums' amazement. "I've just had a few words with Nipper, and he's been making me think. As I've always said, Nipper's the best skipper we ever had—he's the chap we can rely on."

"But you said that he was no good——"

"Rats!" snapped Handforth. "Nipper's hot stuff. He's got a new wheeze—a secret combine, or something. It looks to me like a society for suppressing the bullies, and Nipper's been thinking of it for weeks. Things are going to move before long! Just you wait!"

As a matter of fact, things were moving already.

My solemn promise was given to the whole Remove—Fossils and Monks. I assured all the fellows that Starke and Co. would be begging for mercy before a month had elapsed. I went into no details, but just gave the promise for what it was worth. And I was rather pleased to find that the majority of the juniors had faith in me.

Quite a crowd had collected in the common-room immediately after tea. Everybody was talking about my promise, and everybody was wondering what my plans could be. But I gave no hint—and had no intention of doing so.

"It would be a bad mistake to spread the scheme abroad," I declared. "The majority of you fellows must have patience, and trust in me. What I mean to do is to form a council of war. And I want seven fellows, making eight of us altogether."

"What for?" asked Hubbard curiously.

"We shall be known as the Council of Eight," I replied—"the Council of the Combine. As president, it is my privilege to choose my own councillors, and I intend to do so at once. Tregellis-West and Watson are already members, so I want five others."

"I'm willing!" shouted a dozen voices.

I shook my head.

"No, I only want three from this House," I said. "Christine and Clapson are representatives of the College House. I choose Pitt, De Valerie, and Nicodemus Trotwood. No others can possibly be included."

"Dash it all, you don't want an ass like Nicodemus," protested Church.

"He's one of the most valuable fellows in the Remove," I said quietly.

Nicodemus Trotwood, the elder of the Trotwood twins, beamed good-naturedly; but he shook his head.

"My good Nipper, you are entirely wrong in your statement," he said. "It is preposterous to say that I am valuable. Nothing of the kind. I have no inflated idea of my own importance, and I deem it a great honour to be included in this wonderful council. I really cannot understand why you have so favoured me."

"You'll understand when the time comes, Nick," I replied. "I don't intend to waste any time, and the first meeting of the Council of Eight will take place in Study C at seven o'clock to the minute. I want every member to be there."

They all promised. And the Remove ceased to seethe with indignation. A new interest had been created by my attitude. Everybody could see that I was in grim earnest—that I had come to a firm decision, and that something was to be done—at last.

There was any amount of guesswork, but nobody knew anything for certain. Only the Council of Eight would be told the great secret. And these fellows would be pledged to strict confidence.

"But, look here," said Handforth bluntly. "Where do I come in?"

"At present, Handy, you don't come in at all," I said.

"Why, you silly ass——"

"Now, don't be offended," I interrupted grimly. "This is a serious matter, and we're all going to work for the honour of the Remove. I may as well tell you now that the Council of Eight may change its members occasionally, and your turn will come, Handy. I shall make use of your valuable abilities before long."

"Oh, good!" said Handforth, mollified.

I had satisfied him for the moment. But I didn't want to tell Handforth that I was afraid to let him into the secret at present. In certain ways Handforth was a first-class man, but he was too liable to act on the impulse of the moment. And it wouldn't be safe to include him in the Council just yet.

At seven o'clock to the minute the five juniors presented themselves in Study C. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and I were already there. The others were Pitt, De Valerie, Nicodemus Trotwood, Christine, and Clapson. Quite a crowd of other fellows were outside, eager and curious.

But the door closed, and the secret meeting commenced.

"Now, what's it all about?" asked Reginald Pitt.

"I dare say I've been a bit mysterious," I began. "Well, I have—and I've been mys-

terious for a purpose. I want the fellows to realise that this isn't simply an ordinary jape. It's something far greater—something really big. In a word, why shouldn't we form an anti-bullies' league?"

"Fight the rotters with combined forces?" asked Christine.

"Yes—that's the idea."

"But I don't see how it can be done," objected Christine. "Starke and his crowd have got power behind them—they're prefects, and they've got authority. We've got no power—and no authority."

"I'll agree that we have no authority," I said; "but I don't agree that we're powerless. Because we're going to exert far more power than Starke and Co. can ever dream of. And, to begin with— Oh, who the dickens is that?"

A tap had sounded on the door.

"Clear off, you ass!" shouted Watson. "We're busy!"

"Beggin' your pardon, Master Watson, but I've got a message for Master Nipper," came the voice of Tubbs, the page; and the door-handle shook.

"Unlock it," I said.

Pitt, who was nearest, turned the key, and Tubbs entered, looking rather surprised and bewildered.

"What message have you got, Tubby?" I asked briskly.

"Mr. Lee has sent me to tell you that he wants a word with you as soon as possible, Master Nipper," said the page-boy.

"Oh, all right," I replied. "I'll go now."

There was no help for it; it was a most inopportune time; but summonses of that sort generally do come at awkward moments.

"I don't suppose I shall be long," I said.

"You fellows can amuse yourselves until I get back. But don't shift from this study—there's a lot more to be discussed this evening."

I hurried out, and made my way to the Housemaster's study. That, of course, was occupied by Mr. Nelson Lee, the world-famous detective and my respected guv'nor. I found him standing before the fireplace, looking very thoughtful.

"You have come promptly, Nipper," he said, smiling.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I'm just holding a meeting in my study, and I want to get back to the chaps as soon as possible. Is it anything important, guv'nor?"

"Well, Nipper, I think it is quite important," he said quietly. "Since you are in a hurry, I will get to the point without delay. I have been noticing of late that Starke and several other prefects have been exceeding their authority in very many ways. In short they have been bullying generally."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I ejaculated.

"You didn't think that my eyes were open to the fact, eh?" asked the guv'nor. "But they are, Nipper—fully open. And it is my intention to take a hand in the matter without any further delay. It may have struck you that I have been somewhat lax; but that is not the case. I have been watching the

course of events, and I consider the time is now ripe——"

"Hold on, guv'nor!" I interrupted in alarm.

Nelson Lee looked at me curiously, and I reddened.

"Well, what is wrong, young 'un?" asked Lee quietly. "Out with it! I can see that you are ill at ease. Have you any complaint in particular to make against Starke——"

"It's—it's not that, sir," I broke in. "But— Well, this affair is really the business of the Remove. Starke and Co. have been paying us more attention than anybody else, and—and——"

"And what?" asked the guv'nor.

"We want to deal with the bullying ourselves—that's all," I replied. "As a matter of fact, this meeting in my study is about Starke and the other rotters. We mean to get busy straight away."

"Indeed!" said Lee drily. "And how, may I ask, are you——"

"No, you mayn't ask, sir," I interrupted. "That wouldn't be fair. If you'll only trust me, I'll undertake to put a stop to the bullying within a month? Is it a go, guv'nor? Leave everything to me—go on just as you are now—and trust in me. For goodness sake don't spoil our little game!"

Nelson Lee stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, you know, Nipper, this is rather a startling proposal," he said. "It is not your duty to suppress bullying, but it is mine. And I cannot see how you will accomplish——"

"Of course you don't see, sir," I exclaimed eagerly. "But you will—before long. Look here, give me a chance, and see how things are going at the end of next week. If there's no improvement, I'll chuck up the job."

The guv'nor's eyes twinkled.

"It is an unheard-of plan, you young rascal; but I suppose I shall have to agree," he said, patting my shoulder. "Very well. Go ahead—but be careful. Don't get yourself into any trouble."

I grinned delightedly.

"Leave it to me, sir—and ask no questions," I said. "Thanks awfully—you're a brick! And, unless I'm a Dutchman, you will see a big improvement before the end of this week."

"I shall not even attempt to guess what your plans are, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee smilingly. "You have asked me to trust you, and I will. But look out for squalls if you fail."

I assured the guv'nor that there was not even a remote possibility of any squall coming my way, and after that I took my departure, feeling well satisfied with the result of the interview.

It was good to learn that Nelson Lee had not been blind to the activities of Starke and Co., and that he had been preparing for action on his own account. But it was far better that we should deal with the cads.

Because, in my private opinion, the scheme which was about to be put into operation would knock spots off anything which had hitherto been accomplished at St. Frank's!

CHAPTER III.

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE DARK!

WELL, what was the trouble about?" Tommy Watson asked that question as I briskly entered Study C. The meeting had been at a standstill since my departure, and the juniors were naturally curious to know why Nelson Lee had wanted me.

"No trouble at all, my son," I replied. "In fact, quite the reverse. Pitt, don't forget that this is a serious meeting, and it doesn't look well for you to have your feet on the table."

Reginald Pitt withdrew his feet gracefully.

"Sorry," he said calmly. "You seem to be pleased about something, judging from the glint in your eagle eye."

I nodded.

"Well, the fact is Mr. Lee had decided to put a stop to the bullying," I said. "In other words, his plan was to make Starke and Co. shiver in their shoes——"

"Was to?" repeated Watson.

"Exactly," I said. "But after I had jawed the guv'nor for a few minutes he decided to leave everything in my hands. Instead of attending to the matter personally, as he originally intended, he means to give me a chance—or, rather, to give us a chance."

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Begad!" he exclaimed. "That's frightfully good of him, you know—it is, really. It's something of a novelty for a House-master to leave such a matter to juniors. Just fancy the Remove bein' given permission to put down bullyin'. It's most surprisin', dear old boys!"

"I can't quite believe it," said Christine bluntly.

I sat on a corner of the table.

"You mustn't forget that Mr. Lee is different from other masters," I observed. "And, in a way, I'm different from other Removes. The guv'nor knows that I'm anxious to settle this bullying question without appealing to any of the masters. And he's going to give me a chance."

"Rippin' of him!" declared Pitt.

"We've got to make good—don't forget that," I went on grimly. "If we fail—well, we shall look thundering silly. But we're not going to fail. Starke and Co. are going to taste their own medicine—and that'll put a stop to their rotten games sooner than anything."

"But, my dear fellow, how can it be done?" asked De Valerie. "If we collar Starke and rag him, there'll be the very dickens to pay—what? Even Mr. Lee couldn't possibly blink at a thing of that sort."

I smiled.

"If you think my idea is anything like that, you think wrong," I said calmly. "But I propose that this meeting adjourns——"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "Why, we don't know what your idea is yet!"

"That this meeting adjourns to a more suitable apartment," I continued. "There are several fellows out in the passage bubbling with curiosity, so I vote we make our

exit by means of the window. Follow your uncle, and don't make a noise."

The fellows were mystified, and several questions were asked, but I took no notice of them. I went to the window, and a moment later I was out in the Triangle. The others followed, and then we quietly walked over in the direction of the Monastery buildings.

I couldn't help recalling the stirring times we had spent amongst those ruins months before, when we had defied a brutal master. Beneath the ruins, and reached by an old stone circular stairway, there was a vault of considerable size.

My companions knew well enough where we were bound for—but this only puzzled them all the more. Having commenced the descent, I switched on my electric torch, and at last we stood in the old vault.

"My hat!" said Watson, shivering. "It's jolly cold down here!"

"I quite forgot to light the gas-heaters," I said sarcastically. "Did you expect to find it hot down here, you silly ass? You'll find half a dozen candles on that ledge over there. Light 'em up, and it'll look more cheerful."

Watson grunted, and lighted the candles. He was generally the first to grumble, but his grumbles never meant anything. And with the candles alight the vault certainly did look warmer.

"I think we've been very patient," said Pitt deliberately. "But I call upon all you chaps to assist me in forcing Nipper's back against the wall, and to knock him about until he chokes up the wheeze."

"No need for that," I said, grinning. "The wheeze, my children, is just this. We're a secret society——"

"Begad!"

"A—a which?"

"A secret society," I repeated. "Officially we are known as the Council of Eight, and the sole aim and object of the society is to stamp out bullying in both Houses at St. Frank's. You ask why the society is secret?"

"I didn't hear anybody ask," said Watson innocently.

"The society is secret," I went on, ignoring the interruption, "because we couldn't work the wheeze in any other way. The only way to defeat Starke and Co. is to get at the rotters secretly—mysteriously. They mustn't have any clue regarding the identity of their persecutors. They can guess what they like—they are bound to guess, anyway; but as long as there's no proof, we're safe."

"Pardon me askin', old boy," said Tregellis-West, "but are we goin' to—er—persecute Starke and Co.?"

"We are!" I replied grimly. "We're going to make them sit up as they've never sat up before. As I informed you earlier, I've been thinking out this thing for days, and it's going to be a success. First of all, we've got to have a Punishment Chamber!"

"That sounds good, anyhow," remarked Christine heartily. "A Punishment Chamber! It reminds me of the Spanish Inquisition——"

"Then don't let it," I interrupted. "This won't be an Inquisition, but a Tribunal of Justice. Any punishment which is meted out

will be thoroughly deserved. You see the idea?"

"Not quite," said Pitt. "How are the bullies to be taken to the Punishment Chamber without letting 'em know where it is situated? And where can you find a suitable place, anyhow? Down here?"

"Not a bit of good," put in Watson. "Anybody blindfolded would know this place; they'd recognise the steps, and the earthy niff. This vault wouldn't be any good, Nipper. Besides it's too near——"

"Am I going to be allowed to explain?" I asked patiently. "The Punishment Chamber of the Secret Combine——"

"What's the Secret Combine?" asked Clapson.

"The name of the society, of course," I snapped.

"But I thought it was called the Council of Eight?"

"That's the name I've told all the other chaps," I explained. "Actually, we're the Secret Combine, and we're going to make things hum. I haven't brought you down here to let off hot air, as Farman would put it—we've got to act. This affair is to be the biggest 'stunt' we've ever attempted."

And, without ado, I explained the full details of my plan to the wondering juniors. As they listened they lost their expressions of doubt and scepticism and became excited and enthusiastic. And by the time I had quite finished my fellow-councillors were flushed and their eyes were sparkling.

"Well, that's the main idea," I concluded. "Of course, I shall be glad of any suggestions from you chaps—everything is capable of being improved, and eight heads are better than one."

"Begad!" exclaimed Montie warmly. "I really don't see that any improvement is possible, old boy. It's simply a stunning wheeze—a spankin' idea, you know. You must be a frightfully brainy fellow—you must, really."

"First class," declared Pitt heartily.

"And won't the bullies catch it beautifully!" grinned Christine. "But do you think we shall be able to find a place in these old quarry workings?"

"The place is already found, my sons," I replied calmly. "Perhaps Tommy and Montie have noticed lately that I've been away now and again—well, I've been on the look-out, and my time hasn't been wasted."

"And when do you reckon we can start?" asked Watson. "To-morrow?"

"My good friend, such a suggestion is utterly out of the question," put in Nicodemus, shaking his shock head. "I can foresee that there is much preparation to be done; a vast amount of work to be accomplished. And the salient fact must not be overlooked that our labours must necessarily be of a secret character."

I nodded.

"Nick's right," I said. "We can't possibly get everything ready in a minute. There's a lot to be done, and it'll be necessary, too, to lay out a good bit of money. The more we can rake up the better. We want to do the whole thing in style."

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear fellow, may I be allowed to place my available resources at your disposal?" he suggested gracefully. "I am always willing to spend money in a good cause, and I am rather flush at present. If ten pounds will be any good——"

"Hang it all, we can't allow Montie to pay everything," put in Christine. "I'm not a millionaire like he is, but I'll do my best. I've got fifteen bob, and I think I can collect a decent bit amongst the other fellows——"

"No, we mustn't do that," I interrupted. "No collections, Christy. We couldn't explain what the money was for without telling our plans, and the fellows don't like contributing to something that's kept secret. We'll make up the money amongst ourselves. I can spring a fiver anyhow, and we sha'n't want a giddy fortune. We can manage everything easily."

I glanced at my watch.

"There's really nothing further to be done to-night," I went on. "Put those candles out, and we'll emerge into the outer world once more. Of course, the other chaps will be impatient for a day or two, but that can't be helped."

The candles were extinguished, but we were not left in the dark, because my torch was switched on. Just for a moment there was a short silence; nobody seemed to be speaking.

And just in that brief space I distinctly heard the sound of footsteps on the stone stairs leading from above. I glanced rapidly at the others, and saw that Pitt and Christine at least had heard the sounds, too.

"Somebody coming!" whispered Pitt.

"Eh?" gasped Watson. "I can't hear——"

"Shurrup!" muttered Christine. "Listen! Perhaps it's Starke!"

"Oh, my only topper!"

"If he finds us down here he'll guess things," breathed Watson.

"It doesn't matter what he guesses," I said grimly. "And I don't suppose it is Starke, either—Starke would have no reason for coming here. Stand quiet, all of you! I'm going to switch this light out, and turn it on again suddenly—when the chap puts his nose into the vault."

I switched off the light as I spoke, and we all stood in a semicircle and in pitchy darkness, listening to the now distinct sound of the newcomer's footfalls as he descended the stone stairs.

We all wondered who the fellow could be. I tried to recognise the sound of the footsteps, but this was scarcely possible; he was descending in the darkness, feeling his way, and he walked unevenly.

At last the moment for action arrived.

The unknown, whoever he was, had paused just a few feet from us, and a moment later came the sound of a match scratching on the stonework. This decided me at once! I didn't want the fellow to produce his light first.

"Now then, who are you?" I exclaimed briskly.

At the same second I had pushed on the torch. I'm quite ready to acknowledge that

the newcomer was considerably startled; but it is just as truthful to say we were startled too.

For, instead of beholding one of our own seniors, as we had half expected, our gaze fell upon a curious, unfamiliar figure in the glare of the electric light. At least, the figure was unfamiliar to many of us; but I recognised it on the instant.

The man stood there for about ten seconds, seemingly rooted to the ground with fright. He wore a long, dark overcoat and a slouch hat. The upper portion of his face was masked, and the lower portion was adorned with a coarse, scraggly beard.

"Begad!" breathed Sir Montie. "The Mysterious X!"

Tregellis-West's utterance seemed to break the spell. Christine and Pitt and one or two of the others shouted and moved forward excitedly. I did the same, for I knew that Montie was quite right—this stranger was none other than the Mysterious X—the daring marauder who had been operating so successfully in the district of late.

He had walked right into our arms!

"Grab him!" I roared.

But the Mysterious X recovered his wits just in time. Even as we were all throwing ourselves at him, so to speak, he turned on his heels and dashed up the stairs like a madman. Owing to the narrowness of the space, it was only possible for us to follow in single file.

I led the way, but, try as I would, I could not overtake the fleeing man. The light from my torch served him almost as much as it served me. I thought about extinguishing it, but decided not to. The stairs were old and broken, and there were many nasty pitfalls.

And so, at last, I emerged into the open air and heard hurried footsteps dashing away in the direction of the playing-fields. I could see nothing in the gloom, and everything seemed to be quiet in every other direction.

"Got him?" came a gasp from behind me.

Pitt and Tommy Watson were the first out, with Sir Montie close behind them.

"He's running off over here," I panted hurriedly.

Without explaining further I pelted away, with the others hard at my heels. But there was little prospect of catching the Mysterious X now. It was a pity, as he had been so near to us, and had almost walked into our arms.

I couldn't help admiring the fellow's nerve, for he had recovered himself with amazing rapidity, and had got out of a seemingly hopeless position with comparative ease. Why he should have come down to the old vaults was a mystery, and guesswork on our part would not have improved matters.

And then came another unexpected incident.

Just as I was entering the gateway which led into Little Side I heard a shout, and saw a figure on the ground some distance ahead, evidently trying to rise. I hurried up curiously and breathlessly.

"You—you little brutes!" gasped a voice painfully.

"Hallo! It's Frinton, of the Sixth!" exclaimed Pitt. "What's up? That grass is a bit damp, isn't it? And what's the idea of calling us——"

"Some more of your tricks, I suppose," snapped the Sixth-Former, rubbing his left knee tenderly. "Who was that idiot who came dashing across here a minute ago? One of you juniors, dressed up, I expect!"

"Rats!" I replied. "That chap was the Mysterious X, and we were chasing him. Which way did he go, Frinton?"

"How the thunder do I know?" growled Frinton crossly. "He howled me over before I knew what was happening, and dashed away into the darkness. I believe it's some more of your infernal tricks!"

"Oh, show some sense!" I replied tartly. "Do you think a junior could bowl you over like that, Frinton? And it's jolly queer that you didn't see which way the chap went!"

Frinton pointed across Little Side.

"He went towards the river, I think," he growled. "Clear off, the lot of you!"

The Sixth-Former limped away, and we held a short consultation. There was no hope of capturing the Mysterious X now; the fellow had managed to make a clean "get-away," and further effort on our part would be useless.

"Rotten!" I exclaimed grumpily. "Just when he might have captured the chap red-handed, too! Well, we'd better——"

"I say!" hissed Christine suddenly. "There's somebody moving over there—by the river!"

We all stared across the playing-fields.

"Begad!" murmured Montie. "Dear fellow, you are quite right!"

"And that's the direction the Mysterious X took!" put in Pitt. "I think we'd better investigate, don't you?"

"Hold on!" I said, straining my eyes in the gloom. "This isn't the Mysterious X. I can recognise—— Why, yes, it's the guv'nor!"

"Great pip!" gasped Watson. "You don't mean to say that we were chasing your guv'nor—Mr. Lee—in disguise?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" I retorted.

Nelson Lee had been approaching us while we were speaking, and now he came up, probably wondering what on earth we were all doing on the deserted playing-fields. He eyed us curiously.

"Is anything the matter, Nipper?" he asked.

"Not exactly, sir," I replied. "I'll tell you all about it after you've answered one or two questions."

"That's very condescending of you, young 'un," said Nelson Lee drily.

"Yes, isn't it?" I grinned. "The fact is, guv'nor, we've just been chasing somebody—somebody who came into this field and bowled Frinton over. Frinton declares that the rotter went towards the river. If so, you must have seen something of him. Did you?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I saw nobody, my boy," he replied. "I certainly heard a shout, and I was hurrying

over in order to discover the cause. Furthermore, I think I can safely say that nobody ran across the playing-fields—otherwise I should have seen him."

"But he must have run somewhere, sir," put in Pitt. "It only happened three minutes ago, and Frinton was knocked over violently, according to what he says. It's a pity, too, because we badly wanted to catch the Mysterious X."

"The Mysterious X!" repeated Lee sharply.

"That's right, sir," I said. "I'll tell you what happened."

It didn't take me long to tell the gov'nor precisely what had happened, and he listened with interest. When I had finished my explanation he stroked his chin very thoughtfully.

"Rather a curious incident, Nipper," he observed. "H'm! Where could the fellow have run to? I saw nothing of him, and yet I had a clear view of this field almost from the moment of Frinton's shout. There is something rather mysterious about this, and I will question Frinton as soon as I get in."

The gov'nor's efforts, however, were fruitless.

Frinton had nothing more to tell him—nothing more than he had told us, at least. I was rather puzzled, although the other fellows dismissed the matter without any particular thought.

But I couldn't help wondering. Had Frinton, of the Sixth, told us the truth? He was one of Starke's allies—a bully, and he had no particular regard for the truth. Had he been lying to us?

My thoughts rather startled me, for I found myself wondering if Frinton was associated with the Mysterious X. The very idea seemed preposterous, on the face of it. But where had the man run to? And how could it be possible that Frinton knew nothing?

I had other matters to occupy my attention, but I had time to observe that Nelson Lee was looking very grim on the following day. I also noted that the gov'nor paid particular attention to the ground in the playing-fields.

In fact I became quite convinced that Nelson Lee was not so much in the dark concerning the affair as I was. But for the present the Mysterious X didn't enter into my thoughts.

I had far more important work on hand.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAPTURE.

WALTER STARKE rested his feet elegantly upon the table.

Tea was over, and he and Kenmore were enjoying a cigarette—or, to be more correct, two cigarettes. The golden rays of the setting sun were streaming through the window, and sundry shouts from the Triangle, in various keys, intimated that the fags of the Third were enjoying the mild spring evening.

Starke turned his head and looked out of the open window.

"Dence of a noise those kids are kicking up!" he remarked, with a frown.

"Better go out and stop 'em!" suggested Kenmore lazily.

"Oh, let 'em yell for once," said Starke. "I don't want the trouble of going out there now—although I only need to show my face outside to scare the whole crowd."

"I don't wonder at it," remarked Kenmore absentmindedly.

"Eh?"

"Your face is enough to scare—" Kenmore brought himself up with a jerk. "I mean, the kids are naturally scared when you go out, old man," he added hastily. "We seem to have got 'em frightened out of their lives now, eh?"

Starke nodded.

"The Third's quelled completely," he said. "As for the Remove, we can't expect to get all the chaps under our thumbs just yet—although we've done the trick with the majority of them. Before long we'll have Nipper and his crowd crawling at our feet. It's just the result of combination."

"It's the result of bullying!" said Kenmore candidly.

Starke frowned.

"No need to put it like that!" he exclaimed. "We've combined together—the prefects of the Ancient House and the College House. When I suggested the idea my object was to gain complete control over the Third and the Remove. Well, I've succeeded; I've practically squashed all the independence the little rotters ever had. This term has been a victory for us—all along the line."

Kenmore tossed his cigarette end away, and nodded.

"Why, at this rate, we shall be absolute masters next term," he said with relish. "Of course, fellows like Morrow and Fenton won't have anything to do with it, although they're prefects like ourselves."

"Fenton's wishy-washy," said Starke contemptuously. "As soon as I've finished with the juniors—and that won't be long now—I mean to get Fenton kicked out of the captaincy. Why should a chap like that be captain of St. Frank's? I'm the man for the job!"

Kenmore shook his head.

"Better not interfere with Fenton," he said firmly.

"And why not?"

"Because you couldn't manage it—that's all," replied Kenmore. "Bullying juniors is one thing, but trying to upset Fenton is another. He's too strongly entrenched to be toppled over easily. Besides, you couldn't fill the bill!"

"Oh, couldn't I?" said Starke, glaring.

"My dear chap, be content with what you've done," went on Kenmore, rising to his feet. "Fenton is the best fellow for the captaincy—everybody knows it. He's awfully keen on games, and is the best footballer and cricketer in the senior school. You couldn't possibly take his place."

Starke was thoughtfully silent for a minute or two.

"Well, we won't discuss it now," he said at last. "We'll wait until we've completely squashed the Remove. By the way, I'm going over to see Jesson, of the College House, at about eight o'clock. I suppose you'll come?"

"I don't think so," said Kenmore. "I'm going down to the village with Wilson, and I sha'n't be back in time. What are you going for, anyway?"

Starke grinned.

"Oh, Jesson's got some new idea to spring on the Remove," he replied. "We're going to talk it over together and get it clear. I'll tell you all about it afterwards. Chuck over another of those cigarettes."

The two chief bullies were in high good humour. Everything had been going well with them—with their campaign. During the last day or two, particularly, the Remove fellows had been surprisingly meek.

Starke and Kenmore were somewhat obtuse, however, for they failed to read the signs correctly. The Remove's meekness was not a sign of submission, as they fondly imagined. The fellows were simply waiting—waiting for things to happen.

The bullies knew nothing of the formation of the Council of Eight, and the meeting which had taken place in the old vault towards the end of the previous week—for several days had elapsed since the incident of the Mysterious X.

Needless to say, I had not been exactly idle. To tell the honest truth, I had been working harder during those few days than I had worked for weeks. And my faithful councillors had been backing me up loyally.

A few minutes before eight Starke emerged into the Triangle, bound for Jesson's study in the College House. It was dark now—extremely dark, for there was no moon, and the night sky was clouded. Lights gleamed out from many windows, but the centre of the Triangle—particularly under the old chestnuts—was black.

Starke strode across briskly. His thoughts were pleasant, for he was calculating how long it would be before he secured that all-powerful influence he so desired. Force was the only argument with the juniors, he decided—brute force.

Then, quite unexpectedly, he encountered a exhibition of force—only it was used against him! This, of course, was quite wrong. It didn't fit in with Starke's plan at all. But it fitted in with somebody else's!

As Starke walked under the chestnuts he dimly saw several shadowy forms flitting towards him. Just for a moment he thought that his eyes deceived him; but no. The forms were there—unrecognisable, ghostly.

Starke came to an abrupt halt.

"Now then," he said unsteadily, "don't you dare to touch me—"

He broke off with a gasp. The forms not only dared to touch him, but they dared a great deal more. At least half a dozen figures threw themselves at Starke, and the prefect went to the ground with a smothered yell.

Not a word was spoken, and the whole

thing happened so quickly that Starke was completely bewildered. The night was gloomy, certainly, but why should the mysterious figures all look so unearthly? Starke was willing to swear that the forms had no human shape. They were unrecognisable—and silent.

To make matters worse, a heavy cloth was drawn sharply round the victim's mouth and pulled tight. He couldn't shout, and struggling was useless. In the confusion the darkness seemed to become more intense, and then Starke realised something—probably a sack—had been drawn over his head and shoulders. He was unable to move, and was considerably scared.

The prefect was in no danger of suffocation, however. Drastic as the treatment had been, he found that he could breathe quite easily—although with a certain amount of discomfort—and that he was unhurt.

And as the realisation of his position dawned upon him his alarm changed to fury. The juniors were responsible for this—of course. Who else? And Starke mentally swore that the culprits should be half skinned.

He concluded that the whole affair was a rather elaborate "rag"—that he was about to be frog-marched round the Triangle or ducked in the fountain. But nothing of this nature took place.

And his captors remained uncannily silent. Starke was carried about for what seemed ages; occasionally he heard, faintly, the wind in the trees. So he was being carried into Belton Wood! His fury increased.

But then came another surprise.

After being carried a considerable distance Starke was set down. He found himself lying on something hard—and, worst of all, he was strapped down! And then he found he was strapped to some vehicle.

Starke became alarmed again. This was altogether more than he had bargained for. The vehicle, whatever it was, jolted along monotonously. By the time the journey was over Starke reckoned that he had travelled miles.

Then again came a period of being carried. For fully ten minutes the prefect was conveyed along by many hands. Then he was set down, and his persecutors seemed to be giving great attention to his feet.

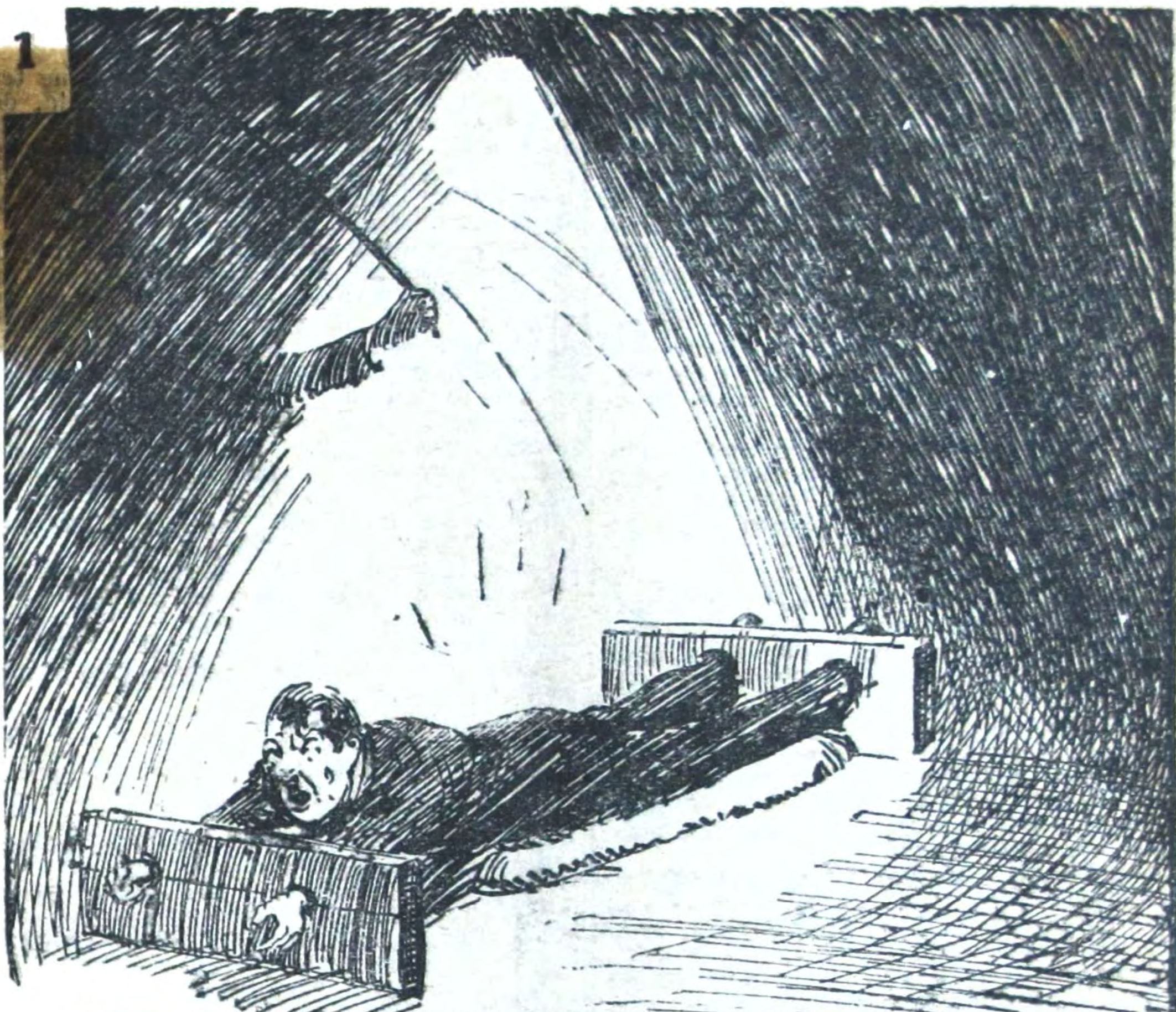
But after that everything was utterly still.

Starke waited, uneasy and hot and aching. And he discovered, when he moved an arm, that the sack was now quite loose. Feverishly he tore at it, hoping to drag it off. And he was quite astonished when he found that it slipped off quite easily.

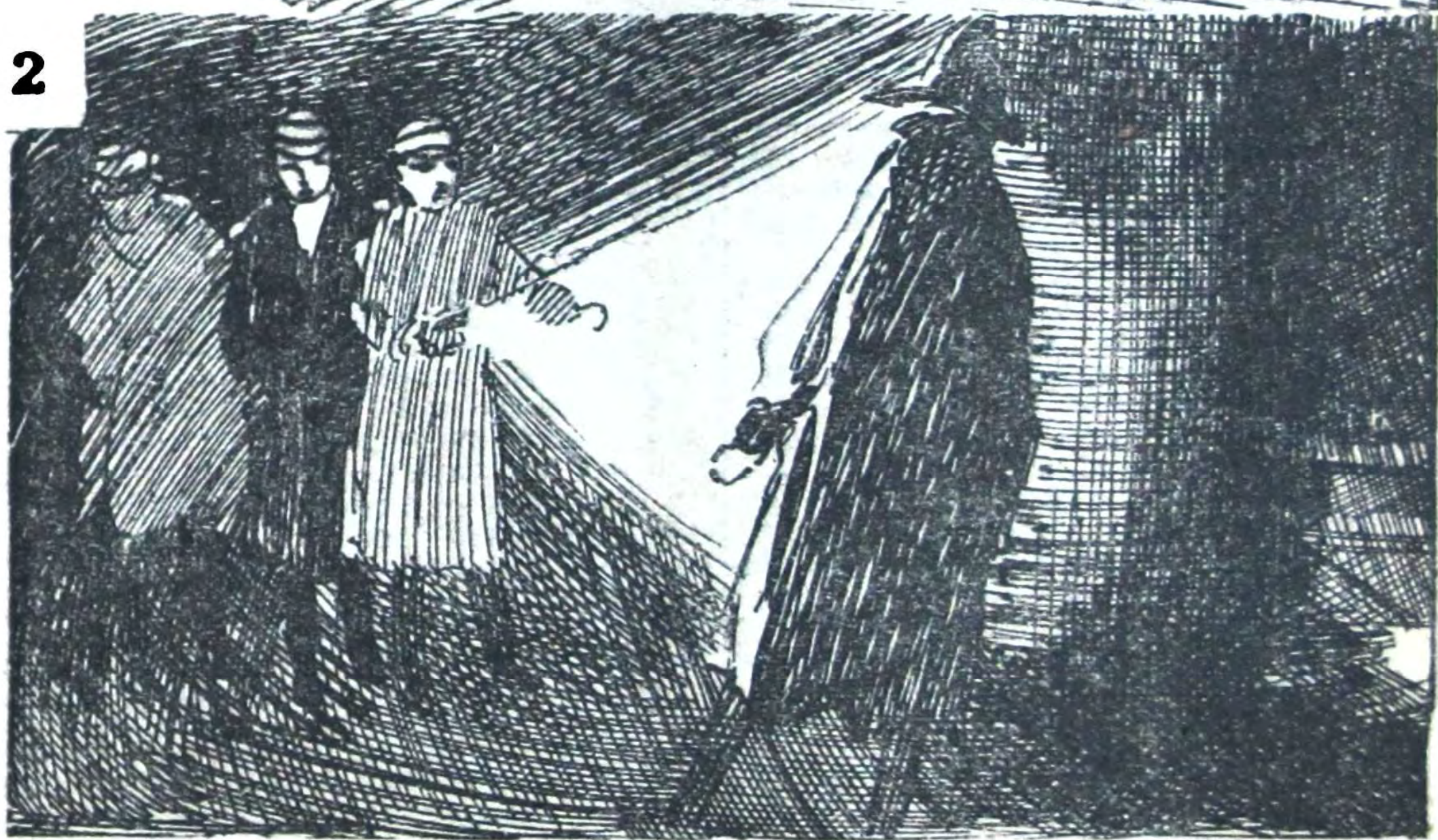
His hands were not bound, and in a moment he had cast aside the muffler. Pitchy darkness surrounded him—intense darkness which seemed almost solid. And the silence was positively uncanny.

"By George!" exclaimed Starke huskily. "I'll make the little brutes pay for this outrage!"

Even as he muttered the words, however, he realised that it would be very difficult to make anybody pay. For it was quite impossible to name the culprits. He hadn't the faintest idea of their identity.



2



1. Kenmore, securely fastened down in the stocks, was unable to see the switch, but he was able to feel it! (See page 22.)

2. Nipper's torch flashed out suddenly, and there, caught in its blinding gleam, stood—the Mysterious X. (See page 9.)

But he was free, and he took a stride forward.

At least he attempted to do so. But for some unearthly reason his foot wouldn't move, and he toppled over awkwardly. Both his feet, in fact, seemed to be screwed to the floor!

Starke felt down with his hands, and then gave a gasp. As far as he could judge, his feet were encased in a wooden contrivance—something like the stocks of old. And it was so well made that there was no "give" in it whatever. Somehow or other Starke managed to regain the perpendicular—and now he was becoming thoroughly frightened.

The affair was developing in a most alarming way.

And the thing which upset the prefect more than anything else was the deathly, uncanny silence. If only he had heard the whisper of junior voices he would have been quite relieved.

But he seemed to be alone.

Not only this, but there were no sounds such as one usually heard: no rattling of a window, no rustling of trees, no distant whistle of a railway train. The silence was like that of a tomb.

And the darkness—

But just then the darkness was no more, for an electric light suddenly glowed out right above his head. It was a small light, actually, but seemed dazzling after the inky blackness of a moment before.

"Well, I'm hanged!" gasped Starke nervously.

He gazed about him with fearful eyes, wondering what was about to occur next. The very place he was in was strange—it resembled nothing he had ever seen before. Beneath his feet a dull carpet was spread. There was no pattern upon it by which he could afterwards identify it.

And all round him were heavy plush curtains, of a similar drab hue. Even the space above his head was covered with the same plush—with the single electric light glowing in the centre.

Starke allowed his attention to become fixed upon his feet. Yes, he had been right. Securely fixed to the floor was a wooden arrangement—drab in colour, like everything else in this uncanny place.

The thick wooden plank in which his ankles were encased was hinged at one end and padlocked at the other. There was absolutely no possibility of Starke breaking away. He was not bound by ropes, but he was a prisoner.

It was the most extraordinary adventure Starke had ever encountered. He began to wonder, in a vague kind of way, whether the juniors were responsible for the affair, after all.

Could the Remora have organised this remarkable capture?

And another point—where was he? Starke attempted to figure out how far he had been carried, and how far the vehicle had taken him. But it was a hopeless task. He might be one mile from St. Frank's, or he might be

five. There was absolutely no telling, no means of forming even a hazy guess.

And once again he was struck by the terrible silence. Could he be in some old, deserted house, on the edge of the moor? This seemed the most likely explanation, and then Starke found himself thinking of all the houses—the isolated houses—which stood on Bannington Moor.

There was one old place, reputed to be haunted, which had stood deserted for years. But this was four miles from St. Frank's. And, in any case, Starke didn't much care for the idea of thinking about haunted houses. This adventure was uncanny enough as it was!

The light went out, but glowed again almost immediately. Starke looked round him, feeling that something else was about to occur.

"So! You are afraid?" came a voice, right in Starke's ear. "It is well!"

Starke twirled round, knowing that somebody must be immediately behind him. But then he uttered a hoarse cry.

He was still alone!

There wasn't another soul in the apartment!

CHAPTER V.

THE VOICE FROM NOWHERE.

"GOOD heavens!" panted Starke hoarsely.

A hollow, unearthly laugh sounded.

"You may well be afraid, O base one!" came the mysterious voice. "Search with your eyes—search where you will! I am not visible to you, Walter Starke. You are in the power of your Masters!"

Starke was ready to cry out with fear. The voice, so clear, so distinct, sounded practically in his ear. But there was no human being with him—no other occupant of that uncanny apartment.

"Let me go—let me go!" shouted Starke feverishly.

"Nay! You will remain here——"

"Help!" shrieked Starke. "Help!"

For a moment he fought madly with his feet, but only succeeded in hurting himself. And his panic grew. He was at the mercy of this—this ghost-voice! He was at the mercy of his unknown captors!

"Pah! You are even as the crawling worm, O cowardly one!" came the invisible voice, in tones of deep contempt. "Crying will not avail you. Listen! Take heed of my words, and naught will harm you."

Starke stared round him wildly, and managed to regain control of himself. He fiercely told himself that there was a trick somewhere. The voice was really behind the curtain, but it seemed to be near him. Perhaps it was because of the curtains themselves—a kind of echo.

"Heed my words, Walter Starke!" said the voice grimly.

"Hang you!" snarled Starke. "I don't believe——"

"You are here to listen—not to talk," went on the voice. "Keep silent, or trouble will follow. You stand there, O Starke, guilty of base and cowardly bullying. For weeks past you, with the assistance of other rotters—er—of other brutes, you have been waging war against the Remove Form at the famous seat of learning known as St. Francis' College. This bullying must cease. Do you understand? It must cease—at once!"

Starke took a deep breath, and laughed harshly.

"I knew it!" he panted. "This is a trick! You're one of the infernal juniors! By gad! You'll pay for this——"

"It is you who must pay," interrupted the voice sternly.

"Do you think I'm deceived by all this tomfoolery?" roared the prefect. "Just wait until to-morrow! I'll expose you, you little hound! This'll mean a public flogging—or perhaps the sack! Assaulting a prefect——"

"There has been no assault," said the unknown. "On this occasion there will be no assault. If this warning is unheeded, however, the consequences—for you—will be grave. Heed my words, Walter Starke! You are hereby warned, solemnly and seriously, that all bullying at St. Frank's must come to an end. This is no idle threat—it is no attempt to scare you——"

"You little fool!" raved Starke. "Do you think I'm scared?"

"Did you not call for help?"

"I've guessed the truth now," shouted the Sixth-Former. "You're Nipper, I expect. And, even though Mr. Lee is a pal of yours, he can't help you in this! You'll be expelled to-morrow—when I get the proof——"

"You talk lightly, my prisoner," interjected the voice. "Be not so sure. This display of arrogance is not unexpected, and it will avail you nothing. You are in the power of your Masters, and you will be wise to heed my words."

"You—you young dog!" snarled Starke helplessly.

"In plain language I give you a warning," went on the unknown. "Listen to me! If there is any more bullying—by you or your supporters—the most drastic reprisals will be taken. He who is guilty of unwarrantable violence will receive such punishment as will fit the case. There will be no escape from vengeance!"

Starke gritted his teeth.

"Go on!" he snapped. "You've got me powerless now, and I can't stop you. But, by thunder, you'll soon find out who's master. You've been able to do this once, because you took me by surprise; but you'll never do it again!"

"That remains to be seen," said the voice from nowhere. "Let me assure you, however, that you have formed a totally wrong idea of this incident. It is not a joke of mere schoolboys, as you seem to imagine—it is not a joke at all. You have been watched for many moons—that is to say, for many weeks—and your habits have been despicable, cowardly, and disgusting!"

"By gad, I'll——"

"Silence! Allow me to finish," interrupted the voice sternly. "During this present term you have adopted bullying as a means to secure power over the junior boys of St. Frank's. In a measure, you have succeeded. You have incited other seniors to assist you in your nefarious work. Well, it is ended. Your days of power are passing—rapidly. And be wise now, and heed the warning. Refrain from further bullying, and you will go untouched—although you deserve many thrashings. Ignore this warning, and terrible events will happen. Beware, O brutal one! BEWARE!"

The voice ceased, and the electric light snapped out.

Starke was in total darkness again. But his terror had gone. He was sure that his captors had been Removites, and that he was now standing in one of the lonely houses which were dotted about the district. Which house it was impossible to say—but probably an empty one. And, by careful inquiry, Starke believed that he would soon locate it.

But he was still a prisoner, and everything was now silent and solemn. Once he fancied he heard a rustle, but he couldn't be sure. As for the warning, he took no notice of it whatever. Once he regained his freedom he would make things hum—with a vengeance! He would show these confounded imps!

But he became rather sober when he remembered that his feet were still padlocked to the floor, and that he was still at the mercy of his captors. It would be time to think of revenge when he regained his freedom.

Starke gave a yelp as something cold suddenly touched the back of his neck. But it was only a hand, and other hands came out of the darkness and the prisoner was held tight.

His arms were pulled behind him, and the muffler was once more tied round his face. Then the sack was drawn down and secured at the waist. He felt his ankles being bound, and when he was lifted bodily away he knew that the "stocks" had been unlocked. But he was as much a prisoner as ever.

And not a word was spoken by a soul. The only voice he had heard was unknown to him, and he couldn't identify it. Apparently he was taken out of the curtained chamber, for he felt himself being carried along exactly as before.

And now he distinctly felt that he was being conveyed down some stairs—at least, so it appeared—and this only strengthened his conviction that the incident had taken place in some old house—undoubtedly in an upper room.

The procedure on the return journey was precisely the same. Starke, after being carried for some distance, was placed upon the badly sprung cart, and this time he faintly heard somebody mutter an order to "Gee up!" Owing to his muffled condition he heard nothing else, but he had another clue.

He had been taken to the house in a vehicle drawn by a horse. It would be fairly easy to obtain information in the morning. A period

of jolting and bumping set in once more, but this was over at last.

Starke was lifted out and carried along for fully ten minutes, and then he was set down. He heard nothing, but he soon found that the sack was loose about his waist, although his ankles were still bound.

But, although the sack was loose, he had a regular fight with it, and it was only after a considerable effort that he succeeded in freeing himself from the enveloping folds. The cold night air blew upon him sharply, and he tore the muffer away.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Starke, panting.

He knew where he was in a moment—sitting on an isolated boulder on the wide expanse of Bannington Moor! He was at least two miles from the school; there was not a house in sight, and he was utterly alone.

Starke was too relieved, just at that moment, to be really angry. He had gained his freedom once more, and he breathed with husky enjoyment. But after he had released his ankles and had stamped about for a bit, his brow clouded and he set his jaw grimly.

Of course, he had been right all along, he told himself. He had been taken to some house on the moor—hidden, perhaps, in some hollow. There was no sense in searching for it now, in the darkness. His best plan would be to rush back to the school and make instant investigations.

"If I am sharp, I shall get there almost as soon as those young hounds!" he muttered. "If I find that several of them have been out for an hour I'll be able to corner them!"

For, although the adventure had seemed to extend over a long period, the time was only just after nine, and the juniors wouldn't go to their dormitories until nine-thirty. By running hard he could arrive in time.

Starke set off at the double, his anger increasing as he ran. And when he at last arrived at the school he found that his watch was fast, and that the time was only just twenty minutes past the hour.

Everything seemed quiet in the Ancient House.

Starke strode straight to Study C, and opened the door with a crash.

"I thought as much!" he snapped grimly.

The apartment was empty, and had evidently been empty for some time. The prefect turned as he heard voices, and he saw Owen major and McClure, of the Remove.

"Where's Nipper?" demanded Starke.

"Eh?" said Owen major. "Talking to us?"

"Yes, I am talking to you," roared Starke. "Where's Nipper? Where are his chums—eh? Sharp, now!"

"It's no good asking me," said Owen major deliberately. "You don't think I'm Nipper's keeper, do you?"

And Owen major walked away, accompanied by McClure.

Starke rushed after them, and arrived in the lobby just as they were about to shoot outside into the Triangle.

"Come here, you little rotters!" yelled

Starke. "If you don't tell me where Nipper is I'll—"

"Nipper?" exclaimed Fullwood, appearing at that moment. "Why, he's over in the College House, I think, with the rest of his precious pals. They're with Christine—an' there seems to be somethin' doin' over there."

Starke's eyes glittered.

"Something doing—what do you mean?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Fullwood, grinning. "They've been hobnobbin' together pretty thickly, that's all. I expect they're brewin' some trouble for somebody. You, perhaps!"

Starke scowled, but he was on good terms with Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the leader of the Ancient House "nuts." The prefect stalked out into the Triangle and passed rapidly across to the College House.

A minute later he burst open the door of Study Q, in the Remove passage. He found that famous apartment pretty well filled. In addition to Bob Christine, Yorke, and Talmadge—its rightful owners—there were visitors in the persons of Reginald Pitt, Clapson, Tregellis-West, Watson, and my respected self. We were just on the point of leaving for our own quarters.

"Hallo!" said Christine politely. "What's the matter with your knuckles, Starke?"

"Eh?" exclaimed Starke, examining his hand.

"Fellows usually use their knuckles to knock on a door," explained Christine.

The prefect scowled.

"You cheeky young scamp—" he began.

"Steady!" interrupted Christine. "This is the College House, remember."

"I didn't come here to talk to you," snapped Starke. "I want Nipper."

"Well, I'm here—as large as life, but not at your service," I said cheerfully. "I'm afraid you're developing a cold, Starke. Your eyes look a bit feverish, and your face is suffering from a hectic flush—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you infernal young ruffian!" roared Starke. "I suppose you think I didn't know you?"

I looked surprised.

"Why should I think that?" I asked.

"Everybody knows me—"

"Your voice, I mean!" shouted Starke.

"Nothing wrong with my voice that I know of—"

"If you think this nonsense will deceive me, you're mistaken!" raved Starke. "You were the chief instigator of the whole outrage, and these other Ancient House boys were with you. You can't deceive me!"

We gazed at one another in astonishment.

"What's he talking about?" asked Talmadge. "Outrage? Have you been having a nightmare, Starke? You might be lucid, anyhow."

Starke took a deep breath.

"Where were you an hour ago?" he demanded, glaring at me.

"An hour ago?" I said thoughtfully.

"Why, lemme see. I've been having a jaw

with these Monks about the footer. I was with Christine an hour ago——"

"Don't tell lies to me," interrupted Starke.

"He's not telling lies," said Christine tartly. "Nipper has been with me practically all the evening; but I didn't know we had to ask your permission. Is there any reason why a few Fossils shouldn't pay us a visit over here?"

"Of course Nipper was with us," put in Clapson.

"Yes; but I want to know where you were!" exclaimed Starke fiercely.

"You can't have all you want in this world," said Christine. "Do you think we keep in our minds where we were at any particular time of the evening? But if it'll give you any pleasure, I can tell you that Nipper and I were less than a hundred miles from this spot at half-past eight—a good deal less, as a matter of fact."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you——" Starke paused. "Were you breaking bounds?" he demanded.

"What's the idea of all this questioning?" put in Pitt calmly. "If you've got any accusation to make, Starke, make it! We can't prevent you doing that. But I don't see the idea of this cross-examination."

"And it's bedtime," added Bob Christine briskly. "You fellows had better get over to your House, or you'll be late for the dormy. Perhaps Starke is keeping you here on purpose—so that he can give you lines for being behind!"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "We must be leavin', dear fellows."

And, without giving Starke any further attention, we crowded out of the study and raced off to the Ancient House. Starke followed more slowly. He had discovered nothing; his questions had been of no avail. All he had learned was that I had been with Christine all the evening—and he knew very well that we would not lie to him. What we had said was the strict truth.

And Walter Starke, having learned absolutely nothing, but still very suspicious, went off to his own study.

He was in a shocking temper. It wasn't bedtime for the Sixth yet, and he meant to call a meeting of his supporters at once. The whole matter needed prompt investigation, and something drastic had to be done.

CHAPTER VI.

WORSE THAN EVER.

SIMON KENMORE yawned.

"What's the trouble?" he asked languidly. "Jolly queer time to call a meeting, isn't it? I'm going off to bed——"

"Wait until I've told you what happened this evening," interrupted Starke, his voice grim and fierce. "Do you remember what I told you about going over to see Jesson at eight o'clock?"

"Of course I do," said Kenmore. "Didn't you go? You've just come over from the College House, haven't you?"

"Yes; but listen to the rest," said Starke.

The other seniors in the study were rather interested. There was evidently something very wrong, for Starke was looking particularly black. Kenmore lounged in the easy-chair; Frinton and Wilson sat at the table, and Starke stood in front of the fireplace. All were smoking.

"When I went out at eight o'clock, to go over to the College House," said Starke, "I didn't get any further than the centre of the Triangle. About six forms sprang upon me there, bowled me over, and pulled a sack over my head—after gagging me. And those six forms belonged to Nipper and his set."

"How do you know?" asked Wilson.

"I don't know for certain; but I'm sure of it all the same," replied Starke. "I was dragged across the Triangle and carried away——"

"Quite a lively adventure!" said Wilson, grinning unfeelingly. "I always told you the Remove fellows wouldn't stand it, Starke. Well, a rag like that isn't much to make a fuss about; you don't seem harmed in any way. And if you can't say for certain who the chaps were, you can't take any action."

"Wait until I've finished," growled Starke. "I was put on a cart of some sort and taken two or three miles away. Then I was carried into a house, and left in a room surrounded with black curtains——"

"Oh, come off it!" interrupted Kenmore. "You don't expect us to believe that, do you?"

"It's the truth!" roared Starke.

"But the juniors haven't got a house of their own, I suppose?" inquired Wilson sarcastically.

"I don't know what they've got, but they're capable of anything," snarled Starke. "I suppose it was an empty house on the moor; or it might only have been a cottage. Or it might have been in another direction——"

"You seem to know a fat lot about it," interrupted Kenmore. "It might have been this, and it might have been the other. Don't you know anything for certain? Where were your eyes?"

"Didn't I tell you a sack was pulled over my head?" snorted Starke fiercely. "I saw nothing, and I could only guess things. This house will have to be searched for. I'm going to get at the truth to-morrow, by gad! I was taken into this curtained room, and when the sack was removed I was in absolute darkness."

"Sounds pretty mysterious," said Frinton thoughtfully.

"It was all worked up on purpose," went on Starke. "It's the most outrageous affair I've ever heard of. My feet were padlocked into a kind of wooden arrangement, like a pair of old-fashioned stocks——"

"Stocks!" echoed Kenmore, staring. "Have you been reading some historical adventure stories, or something? There aren't such things as stocks nowadays, you ass! You must have been dreaming!"

"I tell you it all happened," exclaimed Starke harshly. "I was held there, right

in the middle of those curtains, and I didn't see a soul the whole time."

"Nothing very surprising in that," remarked Wilson. "I understood you to say that you were in absolute darkness?"

"So I was—at first," continued Starke. "But after that an electric light was switched on—"

"Here, I say, go easy!" interrupted Kenmore. "That one won't do, old man."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, electric light isn't supplied in this district," said Kenmore. "We've got it at St. Frank's—but that's because we generate our own. There's not even gas in the village—nothing but oil lamps and candles."

"I suppose you've never heard of an electric torch?" demanded Starke sarcastically. "This was one of those lights—just a little, tiny bulb, connected to a pocket battery, I expect. Anyhow, it was there. And a voice came to me; it spoke right in my ear, although there wasn't a soul near me."

Starke's companions looked at one another. "By the way," said Wilson casually, "I suppose you didn't call in at the White Harp this evening?"

"No, I didn't!" snapped Starke. "Why can't you stick to the point?"

"I thought it might be connected," explained Wilson.

Starke glared.

"If you suggest that I've been drinking, you're a fool!" he exclaimed harshly.

"Well, you sound like it, that's all," said Wilson. "You tell us that a voice spoke right in your ear, and that a soul wasn't near you. How in thunder could a thing like that happen?"

"I don't know how it happened, but it did."

"Well, we can't believe it!"

"I don't care whether you believe it or not," growled Starke. "I'm just telling you what happened. It sounds wild—I know that well enough. Those kids managed the trick somehow—and I mean to find out the way it was worked. This voice started talking about the bullying, and warned me to chuck it up. Warned me! Did you ever hear of such infernal cheek?"

"As a matter of fact, it has been getting a bit thick," said Wilson. "I've told you to ease off a bit, Starkey. Didn't you recognise the voice?"

"No, I didn't," replied Starke. "The fellow affected a ridiculous method of speech and kept his voice deep all the time. I tried all I could to recognise it, but it was no good. I'm pretty sure that Nipper is the culprit, but I mean to have proof. I was warned, I tell you, and was told to warn you fellows as well."

"What kind of a warning was it?" asked Frinton.

"Oh, only vague—that some terrible reprisals would be taken if any further bullying took place," said Starke. "But that's nothing—I don't take any notice of that rot. But for those kids to get up an elaborate affair like that is altogether beyond the limit."

"I'm sorry, Starke, but I'm blessed if I

can quite believe it," said Frinton. "It seems so jolly impossible. After all this had happened, where did you find yourself? I suppose you were left somewhere?"

"Yes—on the moor."

"Near any houses?"

"No; right away in one of the most deserted spots, a couple of miles from here," replied Starke. "And there wasn't a sign of the young ruffians, either. Of course, they made out they weren't juniors at all; they tried to make me believe that they were just looking after the interests of the Remove. But I should be pretty dull to be hoodwinked by that rot. Nipper and his crowd are responsible, and I'm going to make them pay for it."

Kenmore shook his head.

"It's all very well to say that," he observed. "I'm inclined to agree with you—it's just the kind of thing Nipper would do. But where's your proof, old man? How can you discover the identity of the juniors? You've told us that you didn't see anybody, and that you only heard a voice—"

"Which he didn't recognise," put in Wilson.

"Exactly," said Kenmore. "And what about the house?"

"I don't know," exclaimed Starke fiercely. "But it must be on the moor."

"Hang it all, the moor's a big place, and there's no evidence of any sort," went on Kenmore. "It strikes me, Starke, that you won't be able to do anything. You weren't hurt, so why not let it drop?"

"That's the only thing you can do," added Frinton.

"And take heed of that warning?" demanded Starke angrily.

"Rather not!" said Kenmore. "Why, there's no need to worry yourself about that piffle. How can the kids do anything, anyhow? It strikes me they simply tried to scare you, Starke."

"And pretty nearly succeeded, too!" grinned Wilson.

"You—you silly idiot!" roared Starke. "Do you think I'm scared? Why, to-morrow I'll show the juniors how much notice I'm going to take of the warning!"

"Same here!" said Kenmore. "I'm going to make things hot for the little rotters to-morrow—just to show my contempt. They were able to collar you, Starke, but they can never do anything like it again. Why, if we took any notice of this we should acknowledge ourselves beaten."

"Chuck it up, old man, and go to bed," yawned Wilson. "Good-night!"

He passed out of the study, and Frinton followed him. As a matter of fact, the other seniors did not exactly take Starke's story without a pinch of salt. They were quite sure that he had greatly exaggerated the actual occurrence.

In vain Starke tried to convince Kenmore of the uncanny reality of the whole adventure. He had told the strict truth; but the truth was so remarkable that it could hardly be credited.

It was taken for granted, by Starke's faith-

ful followers, that he had imagined about half of the adventure. In any case, none of the bullies had the slightest idea of taking the warning seriously.

As a result, there was more bullying on the following day than there had been during all the week. Kenmore was more violent than the others, and he was seen to torture Third-Formers on more than one occasion.

Possibly Starke, in spite of his declarations to the contrary, was a trifle impressed by what he had passed through. At all events, it was noticed that he was decidedly mild in his treatment of the fags.

"The rotter seems a bit scared, anyhow," I remarked to my chums, after morning lessons. "He pretends to ignore it all, but it's my opinion he's letting the other bullies go the pace—just to see what'll happen."

"Begad! He'll see all right, dear old boys!" remarked Montie.

"Rather!"

For we were fully determined. The campaign of the Secret Combine had commenced, and, once commenced, it would go on relentlessly. The warning had been issued, and the warning had been unheeded.

The result would soon make itself evident.

I was rather glad that Starke's bark was worse than his bite. The Council of Eight would much prefer to give one of the other bullies a lesson. And by dinner-time it was taken for granted by the whole Council that Kenmore would be the next victim.

Kenmore did most of his bullying that day in a spirit of bravado—for the main purpose of showing Starke how little he cared for the warning. In all probability Kenmore had an idea that Starke had imagined almost the whole adventure.

Needless to say, Kenmore was watched. Secret agents of the Combine—in other words, Pitt and myself—kept our eyes wide open, and by tea-time we knew exactly the nature of the charge which would be brought against Kenmore.

Tea in Study C was a serious meal that day.

There were visitors—Pitt, De Valerie, and Nicodemus Trotwood. The other two members of the Council were College House fellows, and were not present. Nobody could guess, from that little tea-party, that grim plans were being made.

"Yes, Kenmore is the next victim," said Pitt decidedly. "Frinton's been a bit rough with some of the Third-Formers, but nothing like Kenmore. The evidence against Kenmore is simply overwhelming."

I nodded.

"In the interval between morning lessons and dinner-time he twisted the arms of three fags until they shrieked with agony," I said. "Now, Kenmore doesn't play that kind of game as a rule—so it proves that he did it just for the sake of defiance. After dinner he caught two Remove fellows kicking a football in the lobby, and he gave 'em three hundred lines each!"

"Disgraceful!" said Watson indignantly.

"Yes. You were one of the fellows—what?" grinned De Valerie.

"Well, so it was disgraceful!" declared Tommy Watson. "Why, if Fenton—or even Mr. Lee himself—had seen us kicking a football in the lobby no punishment would have been given at all. But we couldn't jib, because playing footer in the House is forbidden, strictly speaking."

"And there are half a dozen other charges, too," I said. "I've got 'em all down—a regular list. Kenmore's been at it all day. And this evening he'll realise his little mistake!"

"The Council decides, then, to take action?" asked Pitt.

"It does!" I said grimly—"prompt action."

"Passed unanimously!" exclaimed Watson. "Christine and Clapson don't count in this case, because it's an Ancient House affair."

"Still, they're members of the Council, and they have equal voices in all decisions," I said. "But the majority of votes rules. The only difficulty that I can see is how we shall be able to get Kenmore out into the Triangle—alone. It's a point that'll need thinking out."

Nicodemus Trotwood beamed.

"If I may presume to venture a remark, my good friends, I should suggest that the point is already thought out," he observed mildly. "I have been exercising my mind considerably, and the result, I fancy, is not altogether unworthy."

"Nick's been thinkin'," said De Valerie, helping himself to the cake. "He's been exercisin' that marvellous brain of his—and it seems to have withstood the strain, too! Well, trot out the idea, Trotty!"

And Nicodemus modestly explained his plan for luring Kenmore out to his doom—or, rather, out into the Triangle. The scheme was approved, Nicodemus blushed under the compliments showered upon him, and tea proceeded in Study C in great good humour.

The Council of Eight was ready to deal with its next victim!

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST REPRISAL

NICODEMUS TROTWOOD leaned against the stonework just outside the Ancient House doorway; he looked quite contented, and was apparently studying the stars. The night was fine, although a breeze was blowing rather strongly.

It was not quite eight o'clock, and Nicodemus seemed to have the Triangle to himself. But comparatively nearly him a number of figures were lurking in the gloom. They were waiting—waiting for the moment of action.

I was one of those figures, and I will admit it that I was beginning to feel rather anxious. Should we be able to inflict punishment upon Kenmore this evening? Or would luck go against us?

But just then I observed a form hurrying through the lobby. It belonged to Reginald Pitt. For this special occasion Pitt was not

included in the active party; he was a secret agent of the Council.

He grinned as he spotted Nicodemus.

"O.K., my son," he said briskly. "Get busy as soon as you like. Starke's just left the study, and he's gone to the prefects' room. Kenmore's left all alone, reading. You'd better buck up."

"I will hasten," said Nicodemus softly.

He vanished into the gloom, and a moment later was tapping sharply on the window of Starke's study. Kenmore was in that apartment quite alone, and everything now depended upon Trotwood's efforts—and Nicodemus was undoubtedly clever in his own particular line.

A shadow crossed the blind, and the window opened a trifle. Kenmore peered out, but could see nothing.

"Who's that?" he asked sharply.

"That you, Kenny?" came the unmistakable voice of Jesson, of the College House Sixth. "Come out here—quick!"

"What the thunder for?" asked Kenmore, quite deceived.

"Never mind what for," said Jesson's voice.

"Buck up, old son!" came the voice of Mills, another College House prefect. "We want you urgently—slip out of the window."

"For goodness' sake, hurry!" added Jesson.

Considering that Nicodemus was responsible for the two voices, and that he altered them almost in the same breath, there was little wonder that Kenmore was hoodwinked. I was standing comparatively near, and I heard everything. I could scarcely believe that Jesson and Mills were not there.

"Oh, all right!" said Kenmore. "Half a tick!"

He vanished for a moment, and the electric light was extinguished. This was all to the good, for the ground immediately outside the study window was now in total darkness. Kenmore, even if he had remembered Starke's fate of the previous evening, considered himself safe. How could there be any danger when Jesson and Mills were out there?

Kenmore slipped out of the window and dropped to the ground.

As he did so he was grasped by many hands. Before he could even shout, a thick muffer was pulled over his face. Too late he realised that he had been tricked; and for one horrible moment he believed that the College House prefects were in the plot.

Faintly he saw some shapeless forms—black and mysterious. It was not possible for him to recognise any one of them. This was not very surprising, for all his attackers were wearing specially prepared attire—black, loose-fitting robes, which even covered their heads.

Those suits had been specially made by the fellows themselves under my supervision. They were rough, of course, and hurriedly put together—but they served. Even our hands were concealed, and the only openings were tiny slits for our eyes.

Tommy Watson and I pulled the muffer tight, and then the sack was pulled over Kenmore's head and his ankles were strapped. Everything had been prepared beforehand,

and we worked to a set plan—and so there was no hitch.

Kenmore struggled at first, but realised the futility of resistance. There were too many against him. And he also realised that Jesson and Mills were not concerned in this business.

And—yes!—he heard voices! Unlike Starke's adventure, this one positively provided the victim with a clue.

"Of course—" came the distinct voice of Handforth.

"If you ask me—" said Jack Grey.

"Guess it's an all-fired cinch!" came Farman's voice distinctly.

"Well old chap—"

Kenmore was quite certain that the Duke of Somerton was there, too. In spite of his fury, the prefect felt some slight satisfaction. He would be able to bring most of the culprits to book! Farman, Grey, Somerton, and Handforth! All those voices he had recognised beyond a shadow of doubt.

And, as a matter of fact, Kenmore had. It was not another example of Trotwood's curious ability—the fellows were there, personally. It seemed rather alarming that Kenmore had heard them—I repeat, it seemed so.

The whole incident, so far as the Triangle was concerned, was over within four minutes. Kenmore was lifted bodily and carried away. The juniors involved were Nicodemus, Watson, Tregellis-West, De Valerie, Christine, Clapson, and myself. Pitt, as I mentioned before, had been doing other work.

We swiftly conveyed the prisoner to the old monastery ruins. And here we proceeded to carry him through the hedge into the playing-fields. Right to the extreme end we went—and then back again.

Not a sound was uttered by any of us.

The procedure this evening was exactly the same as it had been in the case of Starke. Kenmore no doubt imagined that he was being carried to some distant spot. He certainly could not guess that he was brought back to the starting-point again. And then the next phase commenced.

Kenmore was placed upon a hand-cart—it belonged to Warren, the porter, but we had borrowed it for the occasion. There was no horse attached to it, as Starke had mistakenly supposed.

In this vehicle Kenmore was wheeled about aimlessly for some time—in order to further confuse him. After that he was removed, carried about for a few minutes longer, and then conveyed into the old vault beneath the ruins.

We were very careful over this part of the business, for it was most important that Kenmore should receive no proof regarding his whereabouts. From the vault he was taken along the wide tunnel which led into the heart of the old quarry workings.

Owing to Kenmore's muffled condition he had no means whatever of learning the nature of this part of the journey. If he thought about the matter at all, he assumed that he was still above ground.

The quarry workings had been deserted for

years, and were somewhat extensive. I had frequently explored them, accompanied by my chums, and we knew all the tunnels and turnings by heart.

The best secret of all, however, was a hidden cavern, which I had come across a few weeks earlier. It had probably been constructed at the time when the workings had been occupied by a criminal gang, for it was provided with a secret door; and I had only discovered it by sheer accident.

Another fellow, perhaps, would have talked about the cavern. But Nelson Lee had taught me the value of silence, and I said nothing. As a result, when we mooted this Secret Combine idea, I knew of a punishment chamber practically ready for occupation. And this cavern was only known to the Council of Eight.

It had been necessary to do a lot of preparation work. The place itself was fairly large, and we had hung heavy curtains in the centre portion of it, even providing a curtain to form a kind of false ceiling. And, with the floor carpeted, there was no means of knowing, or guessing, where the room was situated.

For the impression one received, within the curtained portion, was that the apartment was situated in an ordinary building. It was really impossible to imagine that one was over a hundred feet underground.

Kenmore was taken into this place and set down. There was a short interval—a necessary one, while we regained our breath. And then the prisoner was placed in the stocks.

This arrangement was one of my own invention, and I was rather pleased with it. To be more exact, there were two sets of the "stocks." The ones which had held Starke were removed, and others were in readiness.

In short, the place had been converted into a punishment chamber proper. Kenmore's bonds were untied, and his feet were secured to the floor by the wooden contrivance. But in Kenmore's case he was lying face downwards.

A large cushion lay under his body, and then the sack was removed and his wrists were snapped into another pair of stocks. The prisoner was now in a most convenient position for the infliction of corporal punishment.

Face downwards, with his body bent, he couldn't move an inch. His feet were held and his wrists were held. Not that he was hurt in any way—yet. He was simply placed in position. The hurting part of the business was to follow.

Everything had been done in silence. Kenmore found himself left entirely alone. The muffer had been removed from his face, and the remarks he made were by no means gentle. But he was becoming convinced that Starke had not exaggerated his experience in the slightest detail.

Kenmore, to be exact, was in a funk.

Starke had received a warning, but Kenmore had a most uncomfortable idea that he would receive something of a very different nature. And he was impressed by the deadly silence and the grim determination of his unseen, unheard captors.

But he knew who they were—or, at least, he thought he did—and the thought of seeing them publicly flogged for this outrage provided him with some measure of satisfaction.

"I suppose you think you're safe, you little fools?" he panted harshly.

Silence.

"All this nonsense doesn't impress me at all!" went on Kenmore untruthfully. "And if you think I'm scared, you're mistaken."

Dead silence.

"Why the thunder don't you speak?" roared Kenmore. "And don't you dare to touch me, or you'll be sacked! I'll have the whole crowd of you kicked out of the school, neck and crop!"

This time there was a reply.

"Prepare for your punishment, O brutal bully!" said a voice.

At the same time I pressed the switch of the little electric light, and it glowed out in the centre of the curtains. We were all concealed—on the other side of the hanging material.

Here and there quite invisible tiny eye-holes had been cut, so that we could observe all that was going on within. At first we had thought of appearing before the bullies in our curious robes. But it was decided that the victims would be far more impressed if they saw nobody whatever. Moreover, we were safer. There was no fear of our being recognized if we were not seen!

Kenmore twisted his head round as the light gleamed out.

Even in his unfortunate position he was able to take stock of his surroundings quite easily. And he was considerably astonished to discover that Starke's narrative was perfectly true. The curtained room was a reality, after all!

But Kenmore was far more struck by the reality of his extremely significant posture. He could not help thinking that there was some sinister motive for his back being arched so invitingly.

And he was feeling so completely helpless that he was ready to grind his teeth with fury. While he remained still he was unhurt; but struggling would only strain his ankles and wrists.

"You—you little demons!" he snarled huskily. "I suppose you think you can do just as you like with me? But there'll be a frightful row over this—"

"Undoubtedly," exclaimed a voice, apparently near his ear. "But we are prepared for it—never fear. It matters not what frightful row you cause when the punishment begins—"

"I don't mean that kind of row, confound you!" gasped Kenmore. "There'll be a flogging for every one of you! In fact you might get the sack!"

There was a soft chuckle.

"Has it not struck you, O foolish Kenmore, that you have been troubled with the sack?" asked the voice. "And it may interest you to learn that the flogging is almost due to commence. But it is you who will be flogged—"

"Look here, don't be so idiotic!" panted

Kenmore hoarsely. "If you let me go I won't say a thing! I won't report you——"

"Idle words!" said the voice. "We fear not your venom. We cannot be touched or harmed. The instrument of justice will soon be getting busy, wielded by a strong and mighty hand. Your chief and leader, Walter Starke, was given a fair warning; that warning, doubtless, was conveyed to you. Very well. In defiance of our solemn words, you have been bullying to a far greater extent than usual. Prepare to receive the punishment you deserve. It will be severe."

Kenmore was startled more than he would like to admit. The whole experience was uncanny. Exactly as Starke had said, the mysterious voice appeared to come from nowhere.

It was speaking with him in the apartment; but no human form was visible!

It was just as well, perhaps, that only a few juniors were aware of the fact that Nicodemus Trotwood was a remarkably clever ventriloquist. If that knowledge had been general Starke and Kenmore might have guessed things.

For, of course, Nicodemus was responsible. He was proving himself to be a very useful fellow indeed. His own father would not have recognised the voice which he "threw" beyond the curtains.

And, by arranging the thing in this way, the mystification of the victims was all the greater. They saw nobody at all, and the only evidence of human presence was that uncanny, invisible voice.

"Let me go, hang you!" exclaimed Kenmore helplessly. "If you don't, I'll skin you all alive——"

"Silence, O cowardly one!"

"Look here, I'll give you five bob each!" panted Kenmore, altering his tactics. "I'll give you five bob each, and I won't say a word——"

"Bribery is even more futile than threats!" exclaimed Nicodemus contemptuously. "We are your Masters—although you see nothing of us. You know nothing, and can discover nothing. We are safe—perfectly safe—from your petty efforts. I am the Voice which pronounces all sentences. It is well that you should understand the nature of this undertaking. So long as bullying exists at St. Frank's, so long will these punishments be inflicted. You, Simon Kenmore, have the honour to be selected for the first swishing—that is to say, the first reprisal."

"If you dare to touch me——"

"There is no question of daring," interrupted the voice. "It is a matter of duty, and it is essential that you should regard it as such. One visit to this grim punishment chamber will doubtless be sufficient to satisfy the most hardy individual. The sentence of your Masters is that you shall receive thirty hefty swishes with the birch!"

Kenmore nearly fainted.

"You young idiot!" he gasped. "You can't birch me——"

"Furthermore, when you receive your liberty you will be wise to grasp the fact that other punishments will follow—if this lesson is unheeded," went on the voice.

"When you appear here again you will receive not thirty swishes, but fifty. Safety will only lie in complete and absolute submission. You must cease bullying, in every form and manner, from this hour onwards."

Kenmore was too furious to say anything further. And he had a horrible feeling that the affair was not yet over. The threat would be carried out. He, a prefect, would be swished!

It was monstrous.

He vaguely hoped that he would be able to recognise the fellow who wielded the birch. But here, again, Kenmore was foiled. Nobody appeared! A gloved hand came into sight through an opening in the curtain, and then the punishment commenced.

That gloved hand, by the way, belonged to me. The other members of the Council had their eyes glued to the little peepholes, and they gazed with unholy joy at Kenmore as he squirmed and struggled.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

The birch came down again and again. I used a fair amount of force, but not all that I could have applied, by any means. This was the first lesson, and I did not intend to be too severe.

But Kenmore apparently considered it quite severe enough. There was no getting out of it—secured as he was, he couldn't shift his position. And every stroke told. Kenmore would find great difficulty in sitting down for some days!

"Stop!" he shrieked madly. "I—I'll promise not to bully again! Lemme go, you little rotters! Yow! Yaroooh! Oh, I'll skin you——"

It struck us that Kenmore was being skinned, and he was proving himself to be a contemptible coward. In spite of his threats and promises and gasps, I delivered the whole thirty strokes.

And then the light snapped out, and Kenmore was in darkness again.

Two minutes later he felt himself being seized by unseen hands. The sack was replaced and his ankles were strapped. The bullying Sixth-Former was by no means hurt. A flogging such as the Headmaster would inflict was far more painful. But I had an idea that we should not find it necessary to capture Kenmore again.

We did not leave the quarry tunnel by the same route as we had entered; and the object of this was to confuse the culprit even more. A similar hand-cart to Warren's was concealed down the old quarry on Bannington Moor, where there was an outlet.

Kenmore, of course, believed that he was being placed on the same cart. He was wheeled about for some time, and then carried bodily by four of us. The others, meanwhile, took the cart back.

Then Kenmore was set down and the fastening of the sack was loosened. By the time he had torn it off we had vanished; we were streaking back to St. Frank's along the quarry tunnel—which was a short cut.

Thus we arrived fully twenty minutes before our late captive, and were quietly doing our prep. in our studies. There was

nothing whatever to indicate that we had been concerned in the horrible "outrage."

Kenmore was feeling rather sore, but the first thing he did was to rout out Handforth, Somerton, and the other juniors he had heard. He was quite sure that he would fix the guilt upon their shoulders.

It was a startling blow for him, therefore, when he found that the juniors in question had been with M. Leblanc, the French master, ever since eight o'clock! And it was obviously impossible for the fellows to have been with M. Leblanc and to have taken part in the alleged outrage at the same time. Kenmore was forced to conclude that it had been another trick—to confuse the scent.

Starke was in his study when Kenmore limped in. He looked up and stared as Kenmore lowered himself gingerly into a chair, screwed his face up, and then rose again, groaning.

"What the deuce is the matter with you?" asked Starke curiously.

"I've finished—I've done!" panted Kenmore. "If you think I'm going through

another experience like this, you're jolly well mistaken! They've beaten us, Starke! It's absolutely impossible to fight against 'em!"

Starke rose to his feet, and listened with growing fury as Kenmore described what had happened. To conclude, Kenmore positively stated that bullying wasn't worth the candle, and that he washed his hands of it.

"You—you infernal coward!" said Starke with contempt and fury. "I'm going to find out the exact truth, and I'm going to deal harshly with the culprits—do you understand?"

But Kenmore was too sore to understand anything.

Meanwhile, there was great rejoicing in the Remove. The first decisive step had been taken, and it had been an unqualified success.

Would Starke succeed in discovering the truth? Or would the Council of Eight be victorious on future occasions? Whatever the outcome, one thing was certain—we should have some more exciting times in the very near future!

THE END.

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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. One afternoon a black messenger comes. He tells them that if they do not immediately march to the south, his master, a white man, will wipe them out. They indignantly tell the black to clear out.

(Now read on.)

THE NATIVES PROVE LOYAL.

"**B** HADJWAN, it is death!" wailed Rembo. "Death for all of us!"

The lads looked steadily at each other, dogged resolve in the eyes of each. They were not afraid of the threat, though they realised how serious it was. Jan Swart was watching them, willing to share any perils with the English lad.

"Confound that white rascal!" Dick said hotly. "He isn't the cock of the walk in Africa, and I'll let him know it! I don't suppose you have any idea of knuckling under to him, Carne?"

"Not I!" Alan declared in scorn. "It will take more than a lot of savages to head me off from the hidden valley!"

"We'll get there right enough one of these days. But we'll have to reckon with the Bajangas first."

"Yes, they'll be sure to attack us, Selby. Let them come. They'll meet with a warm reception if your chaps can be depended on."

Could they be? Rembo had been talking to the Swahilis and Wakambas, who were muttering amongst themselves, and were evidently in terror. They appeared to be on the point of bolting, but, if such was their intention, it was promptly nipped in the bud by Dick, who drew a revolver and stepped over to the group.

"Look here, Rembo, you listen to me," he said. "You're not a fool. You can see that there's only one thing to be done. If we run

away from the Bajangas they will follow us up by day and night, and kill us one by one until there aren't any of us left alive. That will be your fate if you try to escape to the south. On the other hand, if we stand and fight, and you fellows do your share, we'll be able to beat the savages off. It's dead certain that we will. We have more guns than they, and it is the guns that will count. That's straight talk, and you know it. And now tell the rest what I've told you."

Most of the natives had understood, and the others, when Dick's words had been translated to them by the headman, saw the logic of them. They jabbered to Rembo, who informed the young American that his speech was good.

"We will all fight for you, Bhagwan, since we must," he added. "But truly there is fear in our hearts."

Dick nodded, and turned to Alan.

"It's all right," he said, in a tone of relief. "They're not going to funk it. We'll put up a stiff fight, and I'll bet you we win. We'll have plenty of time to get ready unless the rest of the Bajangas were following behind the messenger, which isn't likely. But we won't make a stand here, Carne. We couldn't protect ourselves properly. We'll fall back to that little round hill we passed just before we struck camp last evening."

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)

THE ATTACK ON THE CAMP.

THE spot to which Dick Selby had referred was a quarter of a mile to the south of the camp, and was an outcropping of earth and rocks that was roughly the shape of a cone, with the crest of it sliced off. It was a large, circular mound that sloped gradually upward to a height of a dozen yards, and it had a flat top that was about thirty feet in diameter. Its slopes were clothed with tall grass, and on all sides of it, between its base and the surrounding forest, was a short level stretch.

Here the camp was removed after a hasty breakfast, and while the members of the safari toiled hard, preparing the place for defence, Jan Swart went scouting to the north. He came back with the news that none of the Bajangas were in the vicinity, from which it was obvious that the warrior who had brought the message had been sent forward alone.

In the meantime good progress had been made with the work, and by noonday all was in readiness for the attack that was believed to be inevitable. A zareba of prickly thorn-bushes, felled from the jungle, enclosed the space on the top of the mound. There were loopholes in the hedge at frequent intervals, and it was strengthened on the inner side by the boxes and the other luggage.

Dick Selby had, fortunately, fitted out his safari with a view to possible trouble with hostile natives. The two lads had sporting rifles of heavy bore, as had Rembo and the Hottentot; and there was a gun of lesser calibre for every one of the Swahilis and Wakambas, most of whom had spears as well.

"This will do fine," said the young American, when he had distributed cartridges and assigned each man to a loophole. "I guess we'll have a long wait, though. It isn't likely that the savages will come before nightfall."

"It may be so, Bungwan," the headman replied. "Yet I think they will come very soon. In darkness they would be afraid of wild beasts, as they would have no camp-fires for protection."

"There's something in that," Dick assented. "We're ready for them, anyway." He glanced at the English lad. "Will you pot that white man if you get a chance, Carne?"

"I don't know," Alan answered soberly. "Not unless I have to do it."

Another meal was served, and the natives stretched themselves flat on the ground, each at his post. The vigil was a strain on the nerves. The silence remained unbroken, and as the afternoon wore by the little party suffered from the heat of the sun, having no shelter above them.

Rembo's prediction was not fulfilled. The day drew to a close, and the sunset glow faded to the dusk of evening. At length, at Alan's bidding, Jan slipped out again, squeezing through a gap in the zareba and crawling stealthily into the forest to the north.

He had hardly more than disappeared when the report of a gun was heard, and a moment later he burst from the cover, darted to the top of the mound, and leapt over the hedge with the agility of a cat.

"They are coming, baas!" he panted. "They are coming! Lots of them, baas! I saw them!"

"Steady, men, all of you!" bade Dick. "Don't be frightened! Aim low, and let them have it hot!"

Their approach having been discovered, the Bajangas freely gave tongue. They did not show themselves at once. They circled to right and left around the hillock, yelling and screeching like fiends, while the hollow booming of a war-drum swelled on the tumult. And when finally they rushed into the open, brandishing their weapons, they were on every side of the fortified camp. The rifles of the defenders poured a straggling volley. Several of the savages dropped, and the rest of the band, having bounded across the level stretch, vanished from sight in the thick, tall grass that clothed the slopes of the mound. It was almost impossible to see them, though a bright moon had risen above the horizon. They crept higher and higher, wriggling and writhing, until their nodding ostrich plumes were visible.

"Now for it!" shouted Dick. "Here they are, Carne! There must be three score of the beggars, instead of two! Your Hottentot can't count for nuts!"

It was a desperate, frenzied attack, and for a little time the result was in grave doubt. Pandemonium raged. The lads pumped lead into the seething mass, and the safari men, frightened though they were, stuck to their posts and discharged their rifles wildly. Those of the black warriors who were armed with guns returned the fire as wildly, and the rest tried to tear the hedge apart with their spears. Two of them pitched sprawling into the camp through a gap they had made,

(Continued overleaf.)

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ON THE RHINE!

and were promptly slain by Remho and Jan. A third got in, and grappled with one of the Wakambas, who drove a knife between his ribs.

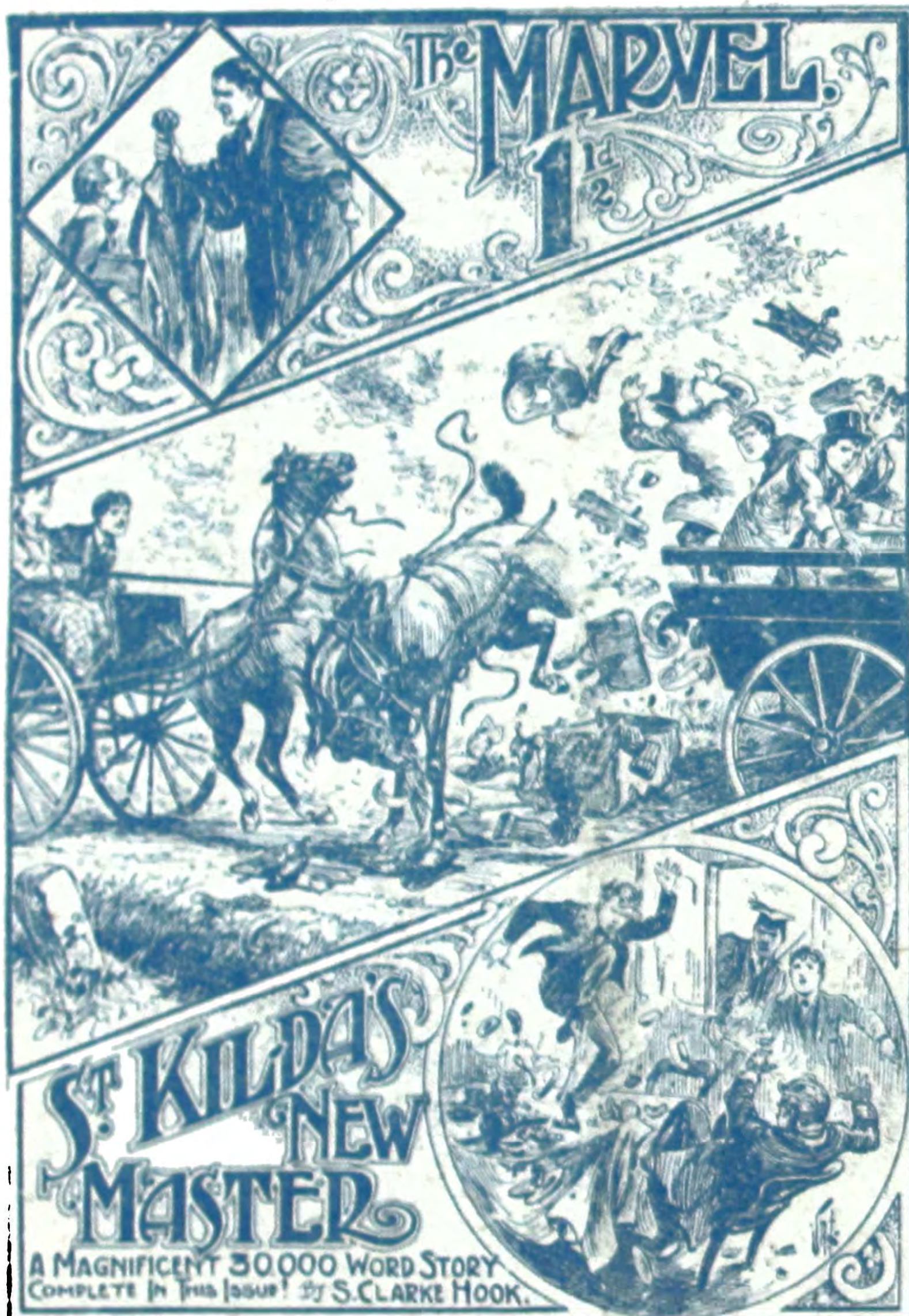
And others were about to follow, when, at this critical moment, Alan dashed to the spot, and held the breach against the invaders, emptying his revolver into them. A similar attempt was at the same time repulsed on the opposite side of the enclosure, and now, disheartened by their losses and by so dogged a resistance, the Bajangas abandoned the assault. They fled down the slope

and scuttled back to the shelter of the forest. "By George, that was hot work!" declared Dick. "They nearly had us! I wish that white rascal had put in an appearance. He must have been with the party."

"I dare say he was," Alan replied. "But he was careful to keep out of danger."

Seven or eight of the savages lay dead in the grass beyond the zareba, and a couple of crippled ones were crawling away, groaning with pain.

(To be continued).



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