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## **THE SPY OF THE REMOVE.**

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Bullies' League!" "The College House Martyrs!" "The Council of Eight!" etc.

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# The Spy of the Remove!

OR, THE SECRET COMBINE.

**A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's.**

*By the Author of "The Bullies' League," "The College House Martyrs," "The Council of Eight," etc.*

**(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)**

## CHAPTER I.

KENMORE IS SATISFIED.

**W**ALTER STARKE was looking grim. "So you understand the position," he said firmly. "If these juniors once get the upper hand, we're done—absolutely done. And it's no good denying the fact that they've started a determined counter-offensive."

"Oh, rot!" said Jesson. "The kids can't do anything."

"Of course they can't!" agreed Wilson, yawning.

The prefects were gathered in Starke's study in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. The meeting was one of importance, and Starke was presiding. The other Sixth-Formers were Kenmore, Wilson, and Frinton, of the Ancient House, and Jesson and Mills, of the College House.

It was this select circle of prefects who had formed themselves into a body—known in the junior school as "The Bullies' League." One or two Fifth-Formers, including Grayson and Shaw, were also members; but these had not the power of the prefects.

"It's all very well to talk like this," said Frinton. "But it seems to me that you're getting scared, Starke. We've got the upper hand—and the juniors know it. Why, a Remove fellow is fagging for me even now."

"And for me, too," said Wilson. "We can't fag juniors like Nipper, or Pitt, or De Valerie—they won't stand it; but so long as we keep to the meek kids, we're all right. They're afraid to resist."

Starke shook his head.

"That doesn't make any difference," he declared. "It wouldn't matter if the Remove was content to let things rest. But they've started kicking; they've formed a kind of secret society against us. And we can be quite sure that Nipper is at the head of it."

"Supposing he is?" asked Jesson. "We don't know anything for certain, but I main-

tain that the juniors will never whack us. It's simply impossible. We're prefects, and we hold the trump card."

"I'm a prefect," growled Kenmore.

"Well, what of it?"

"My trump card was a lot of good, wasn't it?" said Kenmore sourly. "I was collared and birched! Birched, mark you—me, a prefect! And I couldn't find out who did it, either! Why, I'm sore now!"

"That doesn't matter——" began Wilson.

"Oh, doesn't it?" snapped Kenmore. "I tell you plainly I'm fed up with it. I told Starke so a day or two ago, and I'm going to stick to it. Do you think I'm going to submit to another rotten birching? You fellows can do what you like, but I've finished. I'm satisfied!"

Starke glared at him.

"I told you that you were a rotten coward, and so you are!" he exclaimed fiercely. "Just because the kids drop on you for once, that's no reason you should desert us. I was collared, too, and I'm just as mystified as you are——"

"But you're not so sore!" interrupted Kenmore. "They didn't touch you—you only received a warning. But the little cads almost skinned me! I've never had such a tanning in all my life!"

"My dear chap, we sympathise with you all along," declared Starke. "But what's the good of admitting defeat? The only way is for us to accept this challenge—for that's what it amounts to—and beat the juniors before they grow too powerful. That's my programme."

"And a good programme, too," said Jesson approvingly.

Simon Kenmore rose to his feet.

"And how do you propose to start?" he inquired.

"Eh?"

"How are you going to discover the culprits?"

"We shall do it somehow——"

"Of course you will," sneered Kenmore.



"There's no starting-point at all. We don't know who the chaps are, and we can't find out. They've kept it so dark that we're helpless. And at the first sign of fresh bullying there'll be another birching. Well, I'm going to make sure that I'm safe!"

"By deserting us?"

"If you like to put it that way—yes," replied Kenmore grimly. "I don't see why I should stick in with you. The game isn't worth the candle. Bullying the kids was all right while we had the upper hand. But we've lost it. They're capable of retaliating."

"It won't last long," said Starke savagely.

"It's lasted too long for me already," went on his study mate. "You seem to have overlooked the fact that those juniors are more powerful than we are——"

"More powerful?"

"Yes."

"Oh, don't talk rot!" put in Jesson.

"I'm talking sense," said Kenmore firmly. "When we indulge in any persecution of the juniors, everybody knows it; we've relied upon our power and our authority to keep us safe. But we can't rely on it any longer. The juniors are acting in secret—do you realise that? They can pick any one of us they choose, and do what they like. And we can't punish a soul—simply because we don't know who's responsible. I tell you, the best thing we can do is to ease off."

"And admit defeat?" asked Starke.

"Certainly."

"You're a fool!" snapped Starke hotly. "I didn't think you could talk such utter rot, Kenmore! The Remove has thrown down the gauntlet, so to speak. For my part, I mean to fight; I mean to persecute the juniors more than ever before. Who's with me?"

"I am!" said Jesson.

All the other seniors assented—except Kenmore.

"Leave me out," he said. "You can play the fool until you're satisfied. I don't think it'll be long, anyhow. I know when I've had enough."

And Kenmore strolled towards the door. But before he reached it Starke jumped up in his place, his eyes blazing with fury.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed thickly.

Kenmore turned round.

"Before you go I want to tell you something," went on Starke. "If you desert us like this you're taking some of our power away. The fewer we are the weaker we are. That's obvious. And I give you a fair warning that you've got to choose."

"Choose what?" asked Kenmore uneasily.

"Well, you either remain loyal to us, or you're barred—that's all."

"Hear, hear!" said the other seniors.

Kenmore was rather taken aback.

"What do you mean—barred?" he asked.

"Exactly what I say," replied Starke. "We won't speak to you, and we won't have anything to do with you at all—not a confounded thing. Is that understood? You'd better make up your mind pretty quickly, my son. I'm not going to stand any nonsense from you!"

Kenmore's temper was rising, too.

"Oh, so that's the game!" he exclaimed

hotly. "You think you're going to force me into keeping up the foolery? Well, you won't! If you'd been through my experience you'd use a different tone. I stand firm by what I said—and you can all go to the deuce!"

And Kenmore went out of the study and banged the door after him. The other seniors glanced at one another grimly.

"He means it, too!" observed Wilson.

"The silly idiot!" snapped Starke. "This'll make a lot of difference to us."

"Oh, I don't see it," said Frinton. "Kenmore was never much of a chap in your line, Starke. He was only a kind of echo, anyhow. And I suppose we shall be as powerful——"

"That's not the point," interrupted Starke. "What will the juniors say when they find out that we've lost one of our supporters? Why, they'll claim it as a victory."

"It is a victory, too," said Jesson uncomfortably.

"We'll make him pay for it, though," snarled Starke, driving his hands deep into his pockets and pacing the study. "By gad! I'll bar him from his own study—or make his life so miserable that he won't be able to stand it. I never thought Kenmore would turn traitor."

"Oh, I suppose he'll come round before long," said Wilson.

"I don't mean to let him," declared Starke. "If he went to me on his bended knees I wouldn't listen to him. He's told us to go to the deuce, and he's finished with us. Well, we've finished with him. And he'll find that he's the chief sufferer!"

Starke and Co. were highly incensed by Kenmore's action. They were somewhat unreasonable, for they had not experienced the fury of the Secret Combine. This mysterious band had commenced operations quite unexpectedly only the previous week. And it had been highly successful, too.

To have parted a cad like Kenmore from his faithful pals was sufficiently triumphant, as a start. And it was quite probable that the experience would do Kenmore a world of good. He would have time to realise that bullying on a grand scale would not pay.

And the Secret Combine was active even during this discussion—although Starke and Co. didn't know it at the time. They knew it very soon afterwards, however. It was evening, and getting near to bedtime for the Remove.

And the prefects were about to break up the little party in order to attend to their various duties, when the door burst open with great violence. Wilson, who was on the point of opening it from the inside, received the door in his face, and he crashed over backwards on to the table.

"Yareooh!" he howled violently.

Grayson, of the Fifth, charged into the study.

"I've—I've been——" he began.

"You silly fool!" bellowed Wilson. "What the dickens do you mean by charging in like that?"

"Sorry!" said Grayson. "I didn't know——"

"Sorry, be dashed!" growled Wilson, rub-



bing his nose. "I've a good mind to punch your nose, you careless idiot! What's the matter with you, anyhow? Can't you stand up straight?"

Grayson was in a somewhat curious position and he seemed to be in pain.

"I've been assaulted!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Well, it's no good coming here," said Starke. "If you will quarrel with somebody——"

"I was collared by the Combine," bellowed Grayson.

"The which?"

"The Secret Combine!"

Starke and Co. stared at their visitor.

"Going dotty?" inquired Frinton politely.

"Don't you know what the Secret Combine is?" snapped the Fifth-Former. "That's what these confounded juniors call themselves—the secret society! I was collared less than an hour ago!"

Starke became very interested.

"Oh, so it's the Secret Combine now?" he asked. "I think I saw you knocking one of the fags about this morning, Grayson. You were a bit violent, too. Is that why you were collared?"

"How do I know?" demanded Grayson. "I was just coming up from the village, when several fellows sprang on to me, and I was on the ground before I knew it. They piled on to me——"

"Who were they?" asked Jesson.

"I couldn't see," growled the other. "They sprang from behind, and not one of them uttered a sound. Before I could turn my head a sack was pulled over me and I was carried off."

"Put into a truck and wheeled away?" asked Starke.

"Yes!"

"Just the same as Kenmore and I," went on Starke. "Didn't you find out where you were taken, Grayson? Can't you remember anything about it? It's jolly important, you know. If we can only get a clue——"

"Oh, rats!" interrupted Grayson. "What's the good of asking me questions? I don't know a thing—I don't believe the Yellows who caught me were juniors at all. When the sack was taken off I found myself in a queer little room, with curtains all round; and my feet and hands were fixed in wooden things like stocks. I couldn't move an inch, and I was whopped frightfully."

His audience grinned.

"Hard cheese!" said Jesson.

"Yes, you can grin!" snapped the Fifth-Former. "I shall be sore for a week after this. And you won't catch me interfering with the kids again, I can tell you! The price is too jolly stiff!"

And Grayson limped off savagely.

"That's another supporter lost," said Starke, gritting his teeth. "He's only a Fifth-Former, but he was a good man; the fags were completely under his thumb. After this he'll be as meek as a lamb. Something's got to be done."

"That's what we've been saying for days past," remarked Frinton. "I wonder if

there's anything in what Grayson said? Do you think this Secret Combine is really composed of juniors?"

"Of course it is——"

"Why of course?" went on Frinton. "Nobody has ever seen them, and the Remove chaps have always had alibis. We suspect them, I know, but there's not a shred of proof. All I can say is that they're jolly keen, and I'm not sure that Kenmore's idea isn't a good one——"

"Oh, so you're turning traitor, are you?" roared Starke.

"No, I'm not!" was Frinton's reply. "I'll stick by you, old man, as long as you're willing to keep the game up. Union is strength, you know. But it's my opinion that we shall have to alter our tactics if we mean to keep our heads above water. Your plan was to get the juniors under your thumb before the end of this term. I don't think you'll do it."

"We'll see about that!" snapped Starke.

The meeting broke up, and all the fellows were feeling that it had not been exactly a success. Kenmore had gone, and Grayson was lost. And the bullies had received a further intimation of the Combine's power.

Most decidedly something would have to be done.

Meanwhile the Secret Combine was celebrating the fresh victory. Kenmore had been the first victim, and now Grayson had felt the sting of the Combine's lash, so to speak.

In Study C, in the Remove passage, eight juniors were congregated. I was there, of course—presiding. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were by my side, and the visitors were composed of Reginald Pitt, De Valerie, Nicodemus Trotwood, and Christine, and Clapson, of the College House.

"And may the next victim howl even more!" said Pitt genially, as he raised a glass of ginger beer to his lips.

"Nobody could make more row than Grayson did!" grinned Watson. "Oh, my hat! It's a wonder he didn't cause that old cavern to collapse! And he's been taught a lesson he won't forget for weeks."

"Begad! I'm inclined to agree with you, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "I think this is really a ripplin' wheeze, you know. It's the most stunnin' joke we've ever perpetrated."

I shook my head.

"That's a mistake, Montie," I said. "There's no joke about it. It's a serious business, and it's up to us all to keep the thing secret. We've been hugely successful so far, and if we only remain mum we shall have the bullies beaten by the stipulated time."

"That's within a month—three weeks more, to be exact," said Pitt. "Oh, it's easy! But do you think it's wise for us all to be gathered here, Nipper? Doesn't it look suspicious?"

I grinned.

"What if it does?" I asked calmly. "The rotters suspect us already, and a gathering in a junker study is no proof. And we were here long before Grayson got back—and that's an alibi."

The Secret Combine chuckled. The punishment chamber, as we called it, was situated



down in the old quarry workings, in a secret cavity—known only to ourselves. Not another fellow in the school dreamed of its existence. So there could be no informers. The members of the Combine were all to be trusted.

And when a victim had been dealt with, he was taken out upon Bannington Moor and left there—quite alone. Two miles from the school, it took him half an hour to get back, at least. Meanwhile, the Combine used the old quarry tunnel—a very short cut, leading out into the monastery ruin, in the Triangle. As a result, we were able to be in our studies fifteen minutes before the victim arrived. So how could we be connected with the awful outrage?

"We haven't seen the result on Kenmore yet," said De Valerie. "He's been rather quiet, I'll admit, but there's no telling. He'll probably need another swishing before he's learnt his lesson by heart."

But just then the door opened and Jack Grey looked in.

"Heard the latest?" he inquired. "About Kenmore, I mean."

"No," said three or four voices. "What about him?"

Grey entered the study.

"There's been a bust-up," he said, with a grin. "Kenmore's been kicked out of Starke's study, I believe—anyhow, there's a split. And when one of the fags checked Kenmore to his face ten minutes ago he turned his back and walked away!"

I whistled.

"The medicine is having effect, my children," I observed. "One dose seems to be sufficient for Kenmore. He's broken away from his dear pals, and he doesn't bully a kid when he gets a chance. The treatment seems to be effective. We've simply got to carry on, and victory will be ours."

And this was the general opinion.

The Secret Combine, known originally as the Council of Eight, was an unqualified success. It really depended upon ourselves whether we won in the long run, or allowed ourselves to be beaten.

Personally, I was full of confidence. Starke and Co. had only received a taste of what was in store for them!

But Walter Starke was not beaten, by any means.

## CHAPTER II.

### TEDDY LONG'S NEW ROLE.

"PLEASE, Starke, I haven't done anything!" squealed Long, of the Remove. "It ain't fair to punish me for something I haven't done!"

"Don't be a young ass!" said Starke. "Come inside and close the door."

Teddy Long was nervous; he had reason to be. He had received instructions to present himself in Starke's study immediately after morning lessons. Afraid to disobey, the sneak of the Remove had arrived. He naturally assumed that a licking was in store for him—for he generally deserved a licking.

"I want to have a talk with you, Long,"

went on Starke. "Don't look so scared, you little idiot! I'm not going to swish you this time. Squat down, and listen to me. Take one of those tarts."

Teddy Long thought he was dreaming. A big dish of jam tarts stood upon the table, and he availed himself of the invitation promptly, fearing that Starke would change his mind. It was an unheard-of thing for a prefect to invite a mere Removeite to partake of grub in his study. And Teddy Long had never dared to hope that such an honour would be his.

"Nice, aren't they?" said Starke pleasantly. "Try another one, kid."

Long took two, as an experiment. Starke said nothing, and the junior proceeded to eye the plate covetously. He had high hopes of finishing the whole pile before he had done.

"Now, you've got to attend to what I say," said the prefect. "What do you know about this Secret Combine?"

Long's eyes opened wide.

"Nothing, Starke," he said, with his mouth full.

"Oh, yes, you do," went on Starke. "You're a Remove fellow, and it stands to reason that you hear a few things that I shouldn't. If you tell me who started this Combine I'll give you five shillings—and if you can give me the names of the members I'll make it a quid."

Teddy Long looked miserable.

"Quid!" he exclaimed, forgetting to eat. "I—I can't tell you, Starke—I wish I could! But the rotters keep so jolly mum about it! Everybody believes that Nipper is the chief, but we don't know. And—and I'm not supposed to say anything—not a word. If the fellows find out that I've been talking to you, I shall be ragged to death. It's worth ten bob, even if I don't give you any names."

"You won't get a farthing unless you do something for it," replied Starke grimly. "Look here, Long, I'll protect you—I'll see that you come to no harm. Now, out with those names. I'm quite sure you know them."

"I don't—I swear I don't!" gasped Long. "I'd tell you in a minute if I did!"

"I don't want you to tell me in a minute—I want you to tell me now."

"But—but I can't," said Teddy helplessly. "Besides, it's not the thing, you know. I'm a Removeite, and I'm pledged to secrecy. Even if I knew anything I couldn't tell you. You're one of the enemy—"

"What?"

"I—I mean, you're a prefect," ejaculated Long. "I should be a traitor to the Remove if I revealed any of our secrets. But those beasts won't tell me anything, you know. They don't trust me! That's a nice thing, ain't it? Even if I found anything out I couldn't repeat it—and I dare say I could find out a lot if I set myself to it. I'm an awfully keen chap, Starke."

"You seem to have a keen appetite," said Starke, eyeing the tart-dish.

"Oh, well, we don't get much grub at this rotten school," grumbled Long. "Thank's for these tarts, Starke—they're ripping, you know."



But about the Secret Combine. If I found anything out I'd let you know in a minute if it wasn't for my sense of honour. But I couldn't betray the Remove. Not likely."

Starke's eyes gleamed, but he said nothing. He took a note-case from his pocket and selected a ten-shilling note, crackling it thoughtfully between his fingers. Then he looked up.

"All right, kid," he said carelessly. "You'd better clear."

"Eh?"

"Clear—scoot!"

"But—but you wanted me to——"

"Very likely," said Starke. "But your sense of honour is too lofty. Business can't be done, it seems. I'm wasting my time, but I'm not going to waste any money. Buzz off, Long!"

"What—what about that—that note?" stammered Long.

"This?" said Starke. "Oh, nothing! I was going to give it to you, to use as petty cash, so to speak. But as you're not willing to betray the Remove——"

"Oh, rats!" gasped Long. "I—I don't care tuppence for the Remove! Most of the chaps are cads, anyhow! If I can find out any secrets—and I'm bound to, once I get started—I'll hand on the information to you in a second. I shall need some cash for exca., of course. It goes against my nature——"

"Shut up, you little worm!!"

"Eh?"

"Don't try any more of that rot with me," went on Starke sourly. "I know you, my infant. You've got about as much sense of honour as the toe of my boot! Let's get down to business. Are you willing to spy for me?"

"Oh, really, Starke!" protested Long. "It—it won't be spying!"

"Call it what you like," said Starke patiently. "Find out what you can, and give me the tip. I'll pay you well if the information is valuable. That's all. Is it a go?"

Long's eyes gleamed.

"Yes, rather!" he said, reaching for the ten shillings.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Starke. "There's no hurry. If I give you this note you'll have to earn it. To begin with, do you know the names of the fellows who organised this Secret Combine?"

"I—I think Nipper began it——"

"Of course Nipper began it—we all guess that," interrupted Starke. "And Watson and Pitt and De Valerie and a good few others are in with him. But we want proof of it, Long—proof. Can you get it?"

"I'll try," promised the sneak of the Remove.

"Keep your eyes open, and watch Nipper and Co. particularly," said Starke. "Don't let them see you, of course. But you're rather a practised hand at spying, I believe——"

"Oh I say, Starke!"

"And you ought to be successful," went on Starke. "If you discover where the little rotters meet, and all the rest of it. I'll give

you a quid—over and above this ten bob. Is it a go?"

"Leave it to me," said Long confidently.

"Shake hands on it, Starke!"

He extended a sticky flat, and Starke eyed it doubtfully.

"I'll take the will for the deed," he said.

"Cut off now, kid, and remember one thing; you've got to keep mum. Don't breathe a word to a soul—under any circumstances whatever. Savvy?"

"I won't talk to anybody," promised Long.

"If you utter a single word I'll skin you alive," said the prefect pleasantly. "I'll make you smart for a month. That's all—clear!"

And Teddy Long cleared.

He was not troubled by any particular scruples, and regarded his arrangement with Walter Starke simply and purely as a business deal. Long was despised by most of the decent fellows in the Remove—he was even despised by such cads as Fullwood and Co., of Study A. Therefore it did not cause him any particular worry to plot with Starke to gain all the information possible concerning the Secret Combine.

Teddy Long had an idea that he was very cute; he was quite certain that there was no fellow in the Remove as smart as himself. The truth, of course, was quite the contrary. Long was an insufferable little ass.

And his secret investigations were just about as secret as a hawker shouting his wares in a busy thoroughfare. Long fondly believed that he was quite smart at the game, and there was no doubt that he went to work thoroughly. He had his eye upon Starke's pound, and he badly wanted to obtain it.

He went to work so thoroughly, in fact, and his precautions were so elaborate, that the fact was pretty well advertised within a couple of hours. I don't say that many fellows took any notice of Long—he seldom gained attention from anybody.

But one or two of the keen spirits, such as Pitt and De Valerie, were not long in smelling a rat. Just before tea-time, while Mr Montie and Tommy and I were preparing things in Study O, Reginald Pitt walked in.

"Looking for some grub?" I said cheerfully. "Squat down, old man. We've got plenty of——"

"No, thanks. I'm not craving tea to-day," said Pitt, with a smile. "Grey is getting busy in Study E, and I'm going along presently. I came to have a word with you fellows about Long."

Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear fellow, that's rather remarkable, you know," he observed. "I was just thinking about Long myself. I don't generally waste my brain power over such a frightful ass, but I've been wonderin' if the poor chap has developed a kind of mania. He seems to be wanderin' in his mind."

"So you've noticed it, too?" grinned Pitt.

"Begad! Rather!"

"I dare say we've all noticed it," I remarked. "Since dinner-time Long seems to have developed a remarkable habit of listening at corners. Twenty minutes ago I caught



him creeping up behind De Valerie and Somerton, and the young idiot didn't seem to realise that everybody could see what he was doing."

Pitt nodded.

"Two minutes ago he was outside my study window," he said. "Grey and I were chatting about the cricket prospects, when we spotted Long's fat head outside. The window was open, but the curtains covered it. Because Long couldn't see us from outside I suppose he thought we couldn't see him."

I chuckled.

"He seems to be on the scent somehow," I declared. "I shouldn't be surprised if the little cad has been paid to— Hold on! Just open the door, Pitt. Open it suddenly!"

I uttered the last words in a whisper, and Pitt nodded, and yanked the door open with a jerk.

Crash!

A tubby form sprawled headlong into the study, practically at our feet.

"Yargoooh!" roared the visitor.

It was Teddy Long, and there was not the slightest doubt that he had been listening at the keyhole. I had detected a few suspicious sounds a moment before. Long could not have heard much, however, for we had been speaking in subdued voices.

"Begad! The frightful eavesdropper!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Long, you utter young ruffian, what were you doin' outside our door?"

Long jumped to his feet, looking indignant.

"If you think I was listening, you're jolly well mistaken!" he said, in an injured voice. "A fellow can turn his trousers up in the passage, I suppose?"

"Is it usual to lean against a study door during the operation?" inquired Pitt calmly. "You were spying, you little cad! What shall we do with him, Nipper? I don't think a bumping would do him any harm—eh?"

"It might do him a lot of good," I agreed. "Grab him!"

Teddy Long was grabbed, and held securely.

"Look here!" he roared in alarm. "I—I didn't hear a thing! Can't you believe a chap when he tells the truth? I didn't hear Pitt telling you anything about that affair outside his study window!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I was only trying to find a pencil I'd lost, anyhow," gasped Teddy. "I—I thought it might be in the passage, and I was looking for it just now—"

"And turning your trousers up at the same time?" I asked grimly. "The less you say, my son, the better. Now then, all together!"

Watson obligingly kicked the door open, and Teddy Long was escorted into the passage—somewhat forcibly. He roared in advance, because he wasn't hurt yet. But a moment later he had some excuse for roaring.

Bump!

Long hit the passage floor violently, and, judging by the noise he made, it might have been supposed that he was being half killed. Several fellows came out to see what the trouble was about. Handforth thought that a fight was proceeding, and he charged out of

Study D with the intention of assisting the weaker side. Any sort of scrap attracted the warlike Handforth.

"Oh!" he said, with disgust. "I thought somebody was having a scrap. If you want a hand with that little bouncer, I'm willing. It's about time he had a bumping, and a frog's-march wouldn't do him any harm."

"Yow!" howled Long. "Lemme go, you beasts! Yoooooop!"

"I think he's had about enough now," I said breathlessly. "We can try the frog's-march next time, Handy. And don't forget, you little worm, if we catch you spying again—well, you won't forget it in a hurry!"

Teddy Long scuttled off painfully, and peace was restored in the Remove passage. Starke's paid spy had not begun his work very auspiciously. The facts he had learned regarding the Secret Combine amounted to nil.

"What's that you were saying about Long being paid?" asked Watson, after we had got back into Study C. "Don't you remember?"

"Yes," I replied. "I shouldn't be surprised if Long has been paid by somebody to spy on us. He's in funds this afternoon—I've seen him at the tuckshop two or three times."

Sir Montie nodded wisely.

"An' I saw him comin' away from the Sixth-Form passage before afternoon lessons," he observed. "It's very significant, old boy—it is, really. I wonder if Starke has been payin' Long?"

"It's quite likely," I replied. "I thought Starke had more sense. We'll wait an hour or two longer, and see how Long goes on. If he keeps up the game, we shall have to take action."

It soon became evident that Teddy Long was keeping up the game, in spite of the lesson he had received. His activities were so apparent that he became a nuisance, and I decided that the occasion was worthy of a little attention.

Accordingly, a meeting of the Secret Combine was forthwith arranged. The Combine numbered eight juniors, but the eight was not always the same. There were about sixteen of us altogether—with Christine and Co., of the College House. A Combine meeting never consisted of more than eight fellows. And I, as president of the organisation, always selected the members of a conference.

On this occasion the Combine consisted of Watson, Pitt, Grey, Handforth, McClure, Christine, De Valerie, and myself. The meeting-place was the gymnasium, and we all pretended to be engaged in exercises of some kind. Any senior chancing to look in would suspect nothing. And it was highly necessary to take the most elaborate precautions.

"Personally, I don't see the reason for this meeting," said Christine bluntly. "It's about Long, isn't it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, he's not worth it——"

"Perhaps not," I agreed. "But Long is only the tool, remember. Starke's behind this, and I don't see why we shouldn't do all we can to oblige."

"Eh?"



"There's no reason why we shouldn't give some material help," I went on. "Teddy Long is spying on us, and he wants to find out a few facts. Well, my worthy comrades, we'll give Master Teddy a good opportunity of securing solitude for reflection."

"Blessed if I can understand you," said Handforth, staring.

"The idea is to teach Long a lesson," I explained. "He needs one badly. Spying is a rotten game, and Long must be made to realise that it doesn't pay. He's had a bumping, but it hasn't done him much good——"

"Why not give him the frog's-march round the Triangle?" suggested Grey.

I shook my head.

"We can do better than that," I replied.

"Starko and Co. would see in a moment that we were alive to the situation—and that's what we don't want. I've got a better wheeze, my sons. Listen!"

They did listen—for about two minutes. Then they grinned, and nodded with great approval.

"Top-hole!" declared Pitt. "I second the proposal."

"Carried," grinned Do Valerie.

"Unanimously," said Christine, nodding again.

And the Secret Combine, having come to a decision, broke up the conference and went its various ways.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE MYSTERIOUS X AT WORK AGAIN.

**W**HILE we were so concerned in mind with regard to Teddy Long, other events were taking place. This, of course, was only natural. But I mean that other events occurred which were destined to be connected closely with our own affairs.

Nelson Lee, to begin with, was undertaking an investigation.

I knew nothing of it at the time. The gov'nor had not mentioned the matter to me, and the whole affair had been kept rather secret. Nelson Lee—who was the House-master of the Ancient House at St. Frank's—was not acquainted with the facts until tea-time.

He learned them while Sir Montie and Tommy and I were partaking of tea in Study C; but, as I have just remarked, I did not know it until afterwards. The gov'nor was quite alone in his study when Tubbs, the page-boy, arrived.

"There's a gent wants to see you, sir," he announced. "It's Mr. Field, from the village, sir, and he asked me to give you this paper."

Tubbs laid down a half-sheet of notepaper upon Nelson Lee's desk, and the detective picked it up and glanced at it. It simply contained the following words:

"Can you please spare me ten minutes of your valuable time? If so, I shall be most grateful.—J. FIELD."

Nelson Lee smiled, and nodded.

"Yes, you may as well bring Mr. Field in, Tubbs," he said.

"Yessir!"

The page-boy departed, and Nelson Lee wondered what could have brought Mr. Field to St. Frank's. The gentleman in question was the owner of a small jeweller's shop in the village. Strictly speaking, he was only a watchmaker and repairer, but the sign over his establishment read, "James Field, Jeweller."

And, in a way, I suppose he was a jeweller, for he made a somewhat decent show of brooches, rings, pendants, and such-like—in fact, quite a novelty for a small place like Bellton. His stock was of the cheap variety, naturally, but fairly valuable, for all that.

Mr. Field was ushered into Nelson Lee's study. He was a small, wizened man of about fifty, and at present there was a scared look upon his face; his forehead was wrinkled with worry.

"Come in, Mr. Field," said Nelson Lee genially. "You're just in time for a cup of tea——"

"Really, no!" protested the visitor. "I—I'm afraid I am intruding, Mr. Lee. It is very thoughtless of me. I did not realise the hour."

"I can see that you are somewhat agitated, Mr. Field," said Lee smoothly. "Please sit down and accept a cup of tea. You can then tell me your trouble far more easily. I dare say we shall be able to arrange things."

The jeweller seated himself, accepted a cup of tea, and proceeded to sip it. Lee's advice was excellent, for Mr. Field became far more composed after two or three minutes had elapsed.

"It is very good of you, Mr. Lee," he said gratefully. "You will pardon my saying so, but my anxiety is lessened already—being in your presence seems to have calmed me down. The—the fact is, I am most anxious for you to investigate a robbery for me—— Oh, please do not look surprised. I know well enough that I am impertinent for even approaching you, but I hope that you will pardon——"

"My dear Mr. Field, you must not think anything of the sort," interrupted Nelson Lee. "If there has been a robbery, I shall be quite pleased to look into it for you. Can you let me know the facts—in a word?"

Mr. Field nodded.

"My shop has been ransacked," he replied. "Fully sixty pounds' worth of stock has vanished—and the thief is that scoundrel who calls himself the Mysterious X! See! I found this card on the premises."

Nelson Lee became far more interested at once, and he took the card almost eagerly. He had already encountered the Mysterious X on more than one occasion, and had been quietly investigating for some little time. Personally, I had an idea that the gov'nor knew a great deal more than he would admit, and that he was only awaiting his opportunity to spring.

The Mysterious X was a daring thief who had been operating in the district for some



weeks. He had brought off several coups, but they had always been of a minor character, and one or two of them had fizzled out owing to the intervention of Nelson Lee. The Mysterious X himself, however, always eluded capture. He had been seen by several people—myself included; but he always wore a long cloak and a mask, and he had never been recognised.

Yet it was fairly certain that the fellow lived openly in the district, for at intervals his activities became apparent, and they were always confined to the locality around St. Frank's.

"The Mysterious X!" said Nelson Lee thoughtfully, as he glanced at the neatly printed words on the card which Mr. Field had handed him. "This is most interesting, my dear sir. And when did you discover your loss?"

"Less than an hour ago, Mr. Lee."

"I assume, then, that you have been away from home?"

"Yes, that is the case," replied Mr. Field. "You see, my brother lives in Bannington, and his daughter was married this morning. My wife and myself were invited, and we went to Bannington last night, planning to return this afternoon—which we did."

"Leaving your own premises quite empty?"

"Yes."

"Was that not rather unwise—considering the nature of your stock?"

"Unwise!" echoed Mr. Field bitterly. "It was madness, sir! My wife was uneasy all along, but I told her not to worry herself. Until fairly recently my son has been at home, and if ever we went out he was left. But on this occasion I thought it would be quite safe. It is the first time we have been absent from home for five years—that is to say, leaving the house empty. And while we are gone this scoundrel breaks in. It is appalling—quite appalling!"

"What time did you leave yesterday?"

"During the evening."

"It is therefore quite safe to assume that the Mysterious X performed his plundering work during the night-time," said Nelson Lee. "Did you not even advise Sparrow, the constable, to keep his eye on your premises?"

Mr. Field snorted.

"Sparrow's eye is worth nothing!" he declared. "I met the man on the way from the station, only an hour ago, and he told me that he had watched the house thoroughly, and that everything was all right. I gave him five shillings, too!"

"That was rather premature," smiled Nelson Lee. "But Sparrow probably kept his eye upon the shop front, while the thief got in at the back. I presume that quite a number of people knew your plans well in advance?"

"I am afraid they did," said Mr. Field. "My wife talked about the affair rather too openly. But we never dreamed that a thief would attempt to plunder such a small stock as ours. From your point of view, Mr. Lee, I expect this seems a very paltry affair—a mere sixty pounds—but to me it is extremely

serious. My capital is not large, and I doubt if I can replace the missing stock."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"The amount of the loss is of small importance, so far as I am concerned," he replied. "That is to say, from an investigator's standpoint. I will look into this affair for you, Mr. Field, and I will accompany you to the village at once. What have you done with regard to the police?"

"I have told Sparrow, and he has 'phoned to Bannington, I believe," replied Mr. Field. "Thank you very much, Mr. Lee, for your great kindness. I am afraid——"

"That your resources will not permit of your paying me an excessively large fee?" interrupted Nelson Lee smilingly.

"Yes, I was about to say something of that nature," confessed the visitor.

"Then please leave it unsaid," said Lee.

"In a way of speaking, Mr. Field, we are neighbours, and what I shall do for you will be in a friendly spirit—and not from a professional point of view. And please do not attempt to thank me until I have done something to make myself worthy of your gratitude."

Mr. Field's eyes sparkled.

"You're a wonderful man, Mr. Lee," he declared enthusiastically. "You'll excuse my saying so, but you seem to make a fellow contented. With all this worry on my mind I'm now feeling confident of regaining my property."

The schoolmaster-detective chuckled, and a few minutes later he and Mr. Field took their departure to the village.

When they arrived at the small jeweller's shop they found the police in charge—in the persons of P.-c. Sparrow and Inspector Jameson. They were looking very important, and the inspector had evidently been questioning Mrs. Field—who was as big as her husband was small. And the good lady was rather flustered.

"Good evening, Jameson," said Nelson Lee pleasantly. "Another little affair of the Mysterious X. The man seems to be quite enterprising."

"Confound him!" growled the inspector. "I wish I could lay my fingers on his infernal hide! I don't suppose he's made a slip even now, and there won't be any chance of Mr. Field getting his stuff back."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Field, in distress.

"You mustn't talk like that, Inspector," said Nelson Lee. "Simply because the Mysterious X has been successful in the past, it doesn't mean to say that he'll never be tripped. It is quite likely that we shall meet with success on this occasion."

Jameson did not look very pleased.

"In what capacity are you here, Mr. Lee?" he asked shortly.

"As a friend of mine," put in Mr. Field—"that is, if Mr. Lee will permit me the honour of referring to him as such?"

"Then I am afraid you cannot make any investigations until I have completed my own work, Mr. Lee," said the inspector. "You will oblige me by remaining an onlooker."



"Mr. Field forgot to mention that I have been commissioned to investigate this robbery on his behalf," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "In that case, inspector, I shall expect you to allow me every facility. And I may as well add that, if you refuse—well, I shall allow myself the facilities."

Jameson made no reply. He was a pompous old sort, and liked to throw his weight about. And it galled him somewhat to have Nelson Lee butting in and taking all the glory. This is how Jameson regarded it. As a matter of fact, if the inspector was left to himself, precious little would be done. And in this particular instance precious little was done—even by Nelson Lee.

For, after an hour's very close inspection of the shop and rear premises, the schoolmaster-detective was forced to the conclusion that the Mysterious X had left absolutely no trace—with the sole exception of the printed card.

There were footprints, certainly, but they were blurry ones, proving that the thief had worn pads over his boots—or, possibly, he had adopted the simple expedient of wearing a pair of thick woollen stockings over his shoe-leather.

It was the same with regard to fingerprints. The Mysterious X had worn gloves, and there was nothing of any value left behind. The real reason for this was because the robbery was so simple.

There had been no complications of any kind. The shop was in the High Street, but it stood quite alone, with a wide space on either side of it. And although Mr. Field had paid great attention to the fastenings of the door and windows in the front of the house, he had been less careful at the back. The thief had entered by means of the kitchen window—smashing this, and unfastening the catch in the ordinary manner.

A heavy, locked door divided the shop from the private part of the house, but this had been forced open by some heavy implement. And the Mysterious X had simply helped himself to a large assortment of gold trinkets, and had had plenty of time in which to perform his work.

Not a single watch had gone, and all the trinkets were capable of being disposed of without much fear of them being traced. In fact it seemed highly probable that Mr. Field would never recover his property.

"And I'm not insured, either," he complained. "Most foolish of me, Mr. Lee, I will admit. To-morrow I intend to take out a policy at once—I won't be caught like this a second time."

"I am afraid it will be somewhat difficult to get on the track of this thief," put in the inspector. "I don't wish to alarm you, Mr. Field, but let me say that there is a very poor chance of your jewellery being found."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mr. Field huskily.

"And let me say something of a more cheerful character," smiled Nelson Lee. "I can give you my promise, Mr. Field, that the

lost articles will be again in your possession before forty-eight hours have elapsed."

The jeweller was greatly relieved.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "Without being offensive to the inspector, I much prefer to believe what you say."

A few minutes later Nelson Lee found himself alone with Jameson, and the latter regarded him rather coldly.

"I don't believe in that, Mr. Lee," he said. "In what?"

"Why, in making a definite promise of that character when you know well enough that there is only a small chance of it being fulfilled."

"On the contrary, my dear Jameson, I can assure you that I am quite confident," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "There is small enough data here, I will admit; but I am not relying upon that alone."

"Indeed!" said Jameson. "Then may I ask—"

"No, not at present," interrupted the detective. "I am not quite certain as to my facts, Jameson, and I do not wish to make myself look foolish in your eyes. Well, I think I may as well be off."

The inspector was more irritable than ever. He had investigated two or three robberies perpetrated by the Mysterious X, and he had failed every time. The unknown thief was getting on his nerves. Moreover, Jameson had an idea that Nelson Lee was acquainted with some inner facts.

Having bade Mr. Field good evening, Lee took his departure, and strolled very thoughtfully through the village, back towards St. Frank's. It was now growing quite gloomy, for the dusk was drawing in.

Near the gates of the school Nelson Lee observed a figure hurrying down the road towards him. It turned out to be Frinton, of the Sixth—one of Starke's pals, and a bully.

Nelson Lee regarded him somewhat closely as he approached, and the detective came to a halt in the middle of the road.

"Where are you going, Frinton?" he inquired.

"Oh, to the village, sir," said the prefect.

"Then will you please buy me twelve penny stamps from the post-office—I failed to get them when I was in Sellton a short while ago," said Lee. "I will pay you afterwards, Frinton."

"That's all right, sir," said the Sixth-Former.

He went on his way; but it was quite obvious from his expression that he disliked the mission. And it was equally obvious from Nelson Lee's expression that the schoolmaster-detective was not quite satisfied.

He knew something of Frinton's character. Possibly he suspected that the prefect was bound for the White Harp—or perhaps he suspected something quite different.

There was really no telling.



## CHAPTER IV.

## TEDDY LONG'S TRIUMPH.

**T**EDDY LONG'S little eyes gleamed.

"My hat!" he muttered. "There's something on, sure enough!"

The sneak of the Remove was crouching in a corner by the Ancient House steps. And from this point of vantage he could see the movements of fellows as they emerged from the lobby into the Triangle.

Long had originally been attracted by the somewhat mysterious behaviour of Pitt and De Valerie. These two juniors, in passing through the lobby, had apparently overlooked the fact that Long was there. For they paused, put their heads together, and whispered.

"Yes, outside—in five minutes!" exclaimed Pitt, quite audibly.

"Good!" said De Valerie.

They passed outside, and Teddy Long stared after them. He went out into the Triangle, too, and crouched down beside the steps—quite satisfied that nobody had seen him.

Unfortunately he was not aware that the whole programme was being carried out for his especial benefit.

Suspicious at first, he was now quite certain.

For after Pitt and De Valerie had disappeared into the gloom of the Triangle, two other juniors made their appearance. They were Tregellis-West and myself. We stood on the steps, looking across towards the gates. It was nearly dark, and the Triangle was quiet.

"We must go to the meeting-place without delay," I exclaimed, in a whisper that carried quite a number of yards. "Everything depends upon this, Montie. We mustn't fail to-night."

"Begad! Rather not, old boy," said Tregellis-West. "Our meeting-place in the wood is unknown—"

"Shurrup, you ass!" I hissed. "Walls have ears, don't forget!"

We passed down the steps, and I nearly burst into a laugh. Starke's spy, in his eagerness to hear what we said, had revealed himself quite distinctly—although he wasn't aware of that interesting fact.

And as we strolled across the Triangle, with elaborate movements of precaution, we observed that Master Long was on our track. Just outside the gates we met De Valerie and Pitt, and paused for a moment.

"All here, comrades?" I asked tensely.

"All here, chief!" said Pitt.

"Good! Follow me!"

We set off down the lane, and Teddy Long followed us at what he considered to be a safe distance. As a shadower his skill was of a very poor order, for we were aware of his close presence right from the start. Whether he thought he was very sharp, or we were very careless, I don't know. At all events, he stuck to the trail closely.

He was on the track of the Secret Combine—and, incidentally, on the track of Starke's quid! If he could only take back definite information, that sum of money would be his!

So Teddy Long was fully determined to distinguish himself this evening.

Arriving at the stile which led into the wood, we paused there to hold another short—and audible—conversation. Long crept up nearer, and squashed himself against the hedge so that he should not be seen. The fact that several twigs cracked noisily did not disturb us at all. We seemed to be very deaf that evening.

"Comrades, the time has come for us to strike!" I exclaimed.

"We demand an advance—" began Pitt, grinning.

"This is no time for flippancy, Comrade No. 4," I said severely. "The time has come for us to strike for the cause of liberty. We will now proceed to the sacred meeting-place. Follow me carefully, or I may be lost amongst the trees. And when we don our mystic garb—"

"We will talk of that later, chief," interrupted De Valerie. "Come!"

We crossed the stile and plunged into the wood. Long, who was now quivering with excitement, panted heavily as he climbed the stile and followed in our footsteps. He was on the eve of discovering the whole secret!

The little idiot was ready to puff himself out with pride, and he thought gleefully of the reward he was to receive. As for betraying the Remove—that never entered his head.

And presently Long found himself wandering from the footpath—which led straight through the wood. We, in advance, had branched off, and Long came charging after us, highly alarmed.

It was very dark under the trees, and he was afraid of losing sight of his quarry. But then he gave a gasp of relief. For a small light gleamed occasionally ahead, and then came a voice.

"This way, comrades!" it said.

Long assumed—rightly—that the light was caused by an electric torch, and it was easy enough for him to follow. Under ordinary circumstances he would have been scared out of his wits, for he was an arrant funk, and the very thought of being in the dark wood would appal him.

But now he cared for nothing. In any case he had our company, and that was quite sufficient. It seemed to him that we were going round in circles, and this was not very surprising, considering that we actually were. But Long assumed that it must be his fancy.

And then, in one of the thickest parts of the wood, the faint light twinkling ahead suddenly vanished. And with the vanishing of the light all sounds ceased, except for the murmur of the breeze overhead.

Long came to a halt, quaking.

He listened intently, and strained his eyes. Then he blundered forward. But his quarry had vanished.

As a matter of fact, we were still quite near to him. But we had crouched down, and were creeping away silently. Within five minutes we had regained the footpath and were hastening towards the lane.

"Oh, he's lost all right," grinned Pitt.



"It'll be half an hour before he finds his way out of the wood, and he'll be like a jelly by that time."

"Rather!" said De Valerie. "And it'll teach the little boulder a lesson—what?"

"That's the idea of it," I observed. "I'll bet he won't follow any of us again—after this experience. It'll finish his spying activities for good. He's an absolute coward, and finding himself lost in the wood will scare him."

"I'm not altogether sure that I approve, dear old fellows," said Sir Montie slowly. "It seems somewhat unfeelin', you know. But still, Long is a shockin' little sneak, an' he certainly deserves a lesson. I suppose I must quell my finer feelin's, an' agree."

"It doesn't matter whether you quell 'em or not," said Pitt cheerfully. "If you don't we shall quell you—and that comes to the same thing."

And we set off for St. Frank's, feeling quite satisfied with the result of our little trick. But it was to develop in a manner which we certainly had not anticipated.

Teddy Long was lost in Bellton Wood, but his adventure was by no means at an end. Strictly speaking, it had only just started.

For several minutes—after finding himself alone—he crouched down at the foot of a tree, trying to collect his scattered wits. He was extremely hot after his exertions, and was rather glad of the rest. But he was in a blue funk; he had not bargained for being left alone in the dark recesses of the wood.

"Oh, my goodness!" he muttered. "Where—where are they?"

He seemed to feel himself isolated, somehow. While actually on the track he had never even anticipated being left by himself. But now it was all different. He tried to convince himself that he was not alone.

"I—I expect the silly asses are only gone down a hollow, or something," he told himself. "They'll appear again soon, I'll bet."

But he waited, minute after minute, and still there was no sign. And Teddy Long determined to escape from the wood as soon as he could manage it. He forgot all about Starke's pound now; he forgot all about the Secret Combine.

But then, just as he was about to move, he started.

Somebody was approaching!

Footsteps sounded dully, accompanied by the crackling of twigs. Teddy Long remained quite still, intensely relieved. He believed that it was a Remove fellow; but he was not very particular. Company of any sort was welcome.

The newcomer hove into sight at last. At least, Long could see a twinkling light, caused by an electric torch. It was only natural, perhaps, that he should immediately assume that he was on the track of his original quarry.

This supposition was further strengthened when the newcomer passed fairly close to him. The figure was curiously cloaked, and was wearing a mask! It passed him, and continued its way through the wood.

"My hat!" muttered Long, forgetting all

his fears. "I'll bet a quid that's Nipper, or Pitt, or one of the other fellows! He's dressed up, of course—just like we heard about. It's one of the chaps going to the punishment chamber of the Secret Combine! I shall get at the truth even now!"

He followed in the wake of the cloaked figure, at a fairly respectable distance. And very shortly afterwards he found himself on the footpath once again. The stranger stalked on without looking behind him; and he made such a noise on his own account that Long's movements were quite concealed.

And so the pair went through the wood, the leading one unaware of his shadower, and Long quite sure that he was following a member of the Combine, and that the destination was to be the secret meeting-place.

Long's mistake was not such an absurd one, after all.

The wood was left behind at last, and the sneak of the Remove was very glad. He and his quarry crossed two meadows, and then found themselves upon the Bannington Road.

Long certainly met with great luck, for he was not detected—and this was rather remarkable, considering his clumsiness. But at length the cloaked figure vaulted a five-bar gate and approached an old farm building.

It was a lonely place, the building itself being a kind of barn, low in construction, with a loft above it. The roof was very shallow, and was tiled, with a single skylight in the centre.

Long watched from the gateway. He saw the figure open the lower door, pass inside, and close the door behind him. And this, to the sneak of the Remove, was quite significant enough.

He decided that his chase was at an end.

"It's the meeting-place of the Combine," he muttered excitedly. "It's the giddy punishment chamber! My hat! Won't Starke be jolly pleased when I tell him! I reckon I've done wonders!"

And, without further delay, Teddy Long turned, and raced back for St. Frank's with as much speed as his squat form would allow of.

He arrived in a very breathless condition—to find that the gates were locked. But on such an occasion as this, this was a detail. He scrambled over a wall, careless as to whether he was seen or not.

Fortunately for him, he wasn't seen, and he rushed towards the Ancient House. In the lobby he met Owen major and Farman, and they barred his path.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Owen. "Been seeing ghosts, Long?"

"Lemme get past!" gasped Teddy.

"I guess we'll let you pass after we've heard you hand out the information," said Farman. "Say, you're kind o' lookin' skeered—a whole heap skeered. What's wrong, you doggone igit!"

"Lemme get past, blow you!" shouted Long desperately. "I'm looking for Starke!"

"Gee whiz!"

"Looking for Starke!" repeated Owen major wonderingly.

"Yes, I am!"



"It's queer what taste some people have," said Owen. "All right, kid—you can get past. You seem to be looking for trouble, and I'll bet you'll find some—if you go to Starke in that state."

"He'll sure find a hull heap," agreed the American junior.

Long scuttled down the passages until he arrived in the Sixth-Form corridor. And here he ran into Kenmore, of the Sixth.

"I—I say!" panted Long. "Where's Starke?"

"I don't know—and I don't care!" snapped Kenmore. "But he's not in his study—so you needn't go. Get out of this passage!"

Kenmore was feeling very sore. Owing to his attitude with regard to the Secret Combine, he was practically barred by all the other prefects, and Kenmore didn't like it.

"Oh, I say, Kenmore!" exclaimed Teddy Long. "If Starke isn't in his study, you might tell me where——"

"Clear off!" said Kenmore savagely.

He was in the act of pushing Teddy Long out of the passage when Starke himself appeared.

"What's the trouble, Long?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, thank goodness!" gasped Teddy. "I've been looking for you, Starke, and this beast tried to stop me. Like his cheek, I must say—— Yaroooooh!"

Kenmore had delivered a hearty cuff, probably as a means of relieving his feelings, and he strode away without even glancing at Starke, his study-mate. They had not exchanged a word during the whole day.

"Didn't I tell you to be careful, you little idiot?" snapped Starke sharply. "What's the matter with you? What have you been looking for me for? Out with it, you young ass!"

Long pulled himself together.

"I want that quid, Starke," he said importantly.

"Well, you won't get it——"

"But I've discovered everything!" exclaimed Long excitedly. "I've found out where the Secret Combine——"

"Hold your silly tongue!" rapped out the prefect hastily. "If you've got something to tell me, come into my study."

And the pair walked along the passage, and a moment later they had both passed into the privacy of Starke's study. At least, Starke assumed that it was private.

As it happened, it wasn't!

## CHAPTER V.

### THE HIDING-PLACE.

REGINALD PITT stood quite still.

"Oh, rats!" he muttered impatiently.

Pitt was engaged upon special work, and he hated being disturbed. It was quite certain that he was going to be disturbed now—and Pitt didn't like it. To tell the exact truth, he was standing in Starke's study.

And the special work consisted of setting an

elaborate booby-trap. It was the object of the Remove to show Starke that it had no respect whatever for him—and this was one way of showing him.

Fortunately, Pitt hadn't actually commenced the work.

The materials which he had in readiness for the purpose of constructing the trap were just outside the window, which was open. Pitt was performing the work alone, according to his own expressed wish.

He had made quite sure that Starke was settled for a considerable time in Wilson's study, and Pitt thought that he would be undisturbed. It was very annoying, therefore, when he distinctly heard Starke exclaim, out in the passage:

"If you've got something to tell me, come into my study!"

This remark was followed by footsteps, and Pitt knew that the time had arrived for him to make himself scarce. Starke's study was no place for him at the present moment.

So he gently switched off the electric light, strolled across the room, and vanished behind the curtains—just in time. For as he nipped out of the window the study door opened and the light was switched on.

Pitt, crouching beneath the window, saw the stiff figure of Mr. Pagett, the master of the Fifth, crossing the Triangle. Mr. Pagett, in the words of the juniors, was "an inquisitive old beast." And Pitt did not venture to move just at the moment.

He remained perfectly still.

And in the study Starke was talking to a visitor. And the visitor, without the slightest doubt, was no less a person than Master Teddy Long, of the Remove.

Pitt was very interested.

"Now what's all the excitement about?" Starke exclaimed. "And look here, Long, I've a good mind to swish you for making such a fuss out in the passage. All the fellows will be talking about it——"

"But—but it's important, Starke," exclaimed Long eagerly. "I've found out everything, you know!"

"Is that so?" said Starke, quite unmoved. "Well, to begin with, who's the ringleader in this Secret Combine movement?"

"I—I don't know exactly——"

"But I thought you'd found out everything?"

"Oh, really, Starke. I didn't mean it literally," protested the junior. "But I've found out where the rotters hold their meetings, and where they take the chaps to for punishment. I've found that out all right."

Pitt was more interested than ever. He felt that he was quite justified in remaining beneath the window. He was by no means alarmed, because he was positively certain that Long had found out nothing of importance. The sneak of the Remove had been left in Bellton Wood, and it struck Pitt that Long was trying a game on with the Sixth-Former—hoping to bring it off, as a kind of consolation for the trials he had gone through.

"Tell me what you've discovered," came Starke's voice. "Don't fidget about like that, you little ass. Sit down in that chair and

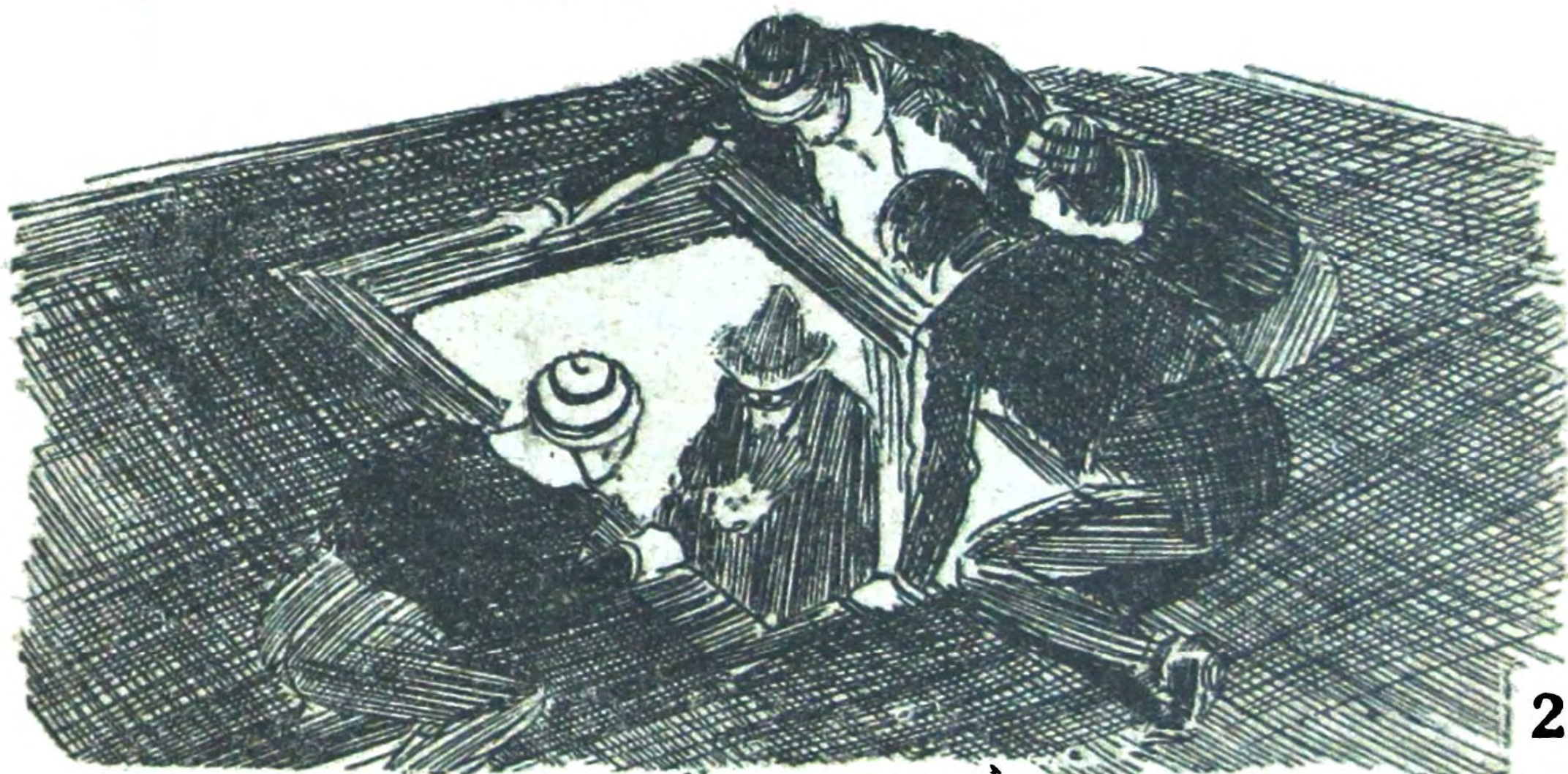




1



**Teddy takes a little exercise.**



2

**1. Teddy Long enjoyed playing the eavesdropper so much that it never even occurred to him he might have been noticed.**

**2. Nipper and Co. gained the skylight, and there in the room below stood the Mysterious X!**



tell me what you've been doing; you look pretty grubby, anyhow."

"That's because I've been in Bellton Wood," explained Long. "Oh, I've had an awful time, Starke. "I—I say, I think you ought to give me two quid——"

"I'll give you a thick ear if you don't buck up!" interrupted the prefect. "What were you doing in the wood?"

"I was shadowing Nipper and Pitt and De Valerie and Tregellis-West," said Long. "You see, I was on the alert, and certain things struck me as being suspicious. Being jolly keen by nature, it didn't take me long to put two and two together. And I soon found out that the four rotters were planning to visit the secret punishment chamber. They talked all sorts of rot——"

"What kind of rot?"

"Oh, they called themselves comrades, and Nipper was referred to as 'Chief,' and they said that the hour had come to strike," replied Long. "I followed them right into the wood, and they didn't know a thing. Naturally, they wouldn't, considering that I was on their trail."

Pitt grinned to himself amusedly.

"Is this meeting-place in the wood, then?" asked Starke, with interest.

"Not—not exactly in the wood," replied Long. "You see, they came to a stop when they got right in the middle of the wood, and held a consultation. Of course, this was a chance for me to find out a few things, and I crept forward as silently as a cat—until I was almost next to 'em."

"And didn't they see you?"

"Not likely!" said Long, with scorn. "Don't you think I know how to do a bit of shadowing? You don't seem to realise, Starke, that I was born to be a detective! I'll bet I could show Nelson Lee a few points! Why, when I leave St. Frank's I mean to——"

"Never mind about that," interjected Starke. "What did you do in the woods?"

"I was just telling you," exclaimed Teddy. "I crept up to those four cads and listened. They were planning to collar somebody—I couldn't catch the name—and give him a ragging. And they were putting some queer togs on, too."

"How did you see that, if it was dark?"

"They had a little electric lamp with 'em, and some boxes and things," went on Long, drawing upon his own imagination to supply the picturesque details. "And after they had put on those queer togs they started off again, with me still on their track, until they arrived on the Bannington Road."

"All dressed up—on the public road?" asked Starke sharply.

"Well, of course, they were only there for a minute, and there wasn't another soul about," went on the Removite. "They cut straight across and went into an old barn with a kind of loft above it——"

"Yes, I know the place," put in Starke. "It's deserted, I believe. Well, what happened after that?"

Pitt listened with interest;—he wondered how many more details Teddy Long would

provide. Pitt did not know that the bulk of Long's story was true—that he had actually followed somebody to the old barn.

"I watched, and saw one of the chaps—Nipper, I believe—go into the barn," said Teddy Long. "He closed the door behind him, and the other three chaps went round behind somewhere. Of course, it's obvious what they were doing. Nipper went in first to prepare the place—to get everything ready. Anyhow, it's a dead cert, Starke. That loft is the punishment chamber, and I've found it all out by being so jolly smart. It's not my way to boast, but I think you'll admit that I've shown myself to be the real goods this trip."

Starke nodded.

"Yes, you've done pretty well," he agreed. "I don't mind admitting, Long, that you've done better than I expected you would. You can buzz off now, and I'll see you again to-morrow——"

"What—what about that quid?" asked Long, in alarm.

Starke laughed unpleasantly.

"You'll have that quid when I've got some proof," he replied. "You might be telling me a yarn, and I'm not going to take any risks——"

"Oh, I say, don't be—be an ass, Starke!" blurted out Long. "I—I mean, don't say that! It's all true—every word of it. Honour bright! And I reckon I've earned that quid, and you ought to give it to me."

Starke regarded Long intently, and could see that the junior was in earnest; he could also see that Long bore many signs of having passed through Bellton Wood. His story was obviously true.

"No, I won't give you the quid now," said Starke. "But here's ten bob, and I'll give you the rest to-morrow. Now you can clear. I'm going to get some of the other fellows, and we'll soon find out the exact truth about that loft. It's going to be settled now—this evening!"

Reginald Pitt, outside, did not think it necessary for him to wait for any more. He crept away, and two minutes later burst into Study C, in the Remove passage. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were just beginning their prep. I was oiling a cricket-bat.

"I say, you fellows, there's something on!" exclaimed Pitt quickly.

"Begad! We must do our prep, old boy——"

"Blow your prep," interrupted Pitt. "Long's got back, and there's no doubt that he's been paid by Starke to spy on us. You know about that booby-trap?"

"Well?" I asked. "Haven't you set it?"

"I didn't have a chance," replied Pitt. "Starke and Long came in before I could even begin. And Long's been telling Starke a frightful string of whoppers—all about that old barn near the Bannington Road. He told Starke that our meeting-place is in the loft—and Starke believed him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Watson.

Pitt grinned.

"But that's not the best of it," he went



on. "Starke's going to collect some of his pals together, and they're all going to the loft now—to make sure. What a giddy suck in—eh?"

"Jolly rich," I agreed. "It's a wonder Starke hasn't got more sense. Look here, why shouldn't we buzz along quickly and get there first? We can easily do it by taking the short cut."

"My idea exactly," said Pitt. "There's a skylight in that old barn, looking down into the loft, and we can get on the roof and squint down through the glass. I reckon it'll be as good as a pantomime!"

"Begad! It'll be rather funny, certainly," agreed Montie, laying down his pen. "But what about our prep, dear fellows?"

"We can leave prep for once," I said, jumping up. "No need to tell anybody else—four of us will be quite sufficient."

Within three minutes we had started off—and not without the satisfaction of seeing Starke and Co. emerging from the Ancient House. They didn't see us, because we were just making our way on to the playing-fields. Even if the prefects took the same short cut we should get there well in advance.

We ran quickly, and when we arrived within sight of the barn everything was still and quiet. Starke and his pals were probably half a mile behind, and we had ample time to get on to the roof.

Of course, we believed that Long had invented most of his story—that nobody had visited the barn at all. And I had a kind of hope within me that we should be able to work some trick upon the seniors while we had the chance.

It was a comparatively easy matter to climb on to the roof.

It was low to begin with, and at the rear of the building there was a small lean-to shed. By getting on to this it was simply a step from there on to the roof of the barn itself. And as this was nearly flat it was almost possible to walk up it in an upright position.

We all four arrived at the skylight, and peered down through the glass. All was pitch dark within, of course. We did not expect to find anybody there, and we sat down and prepared to wait.

The night being mild and fine, this was no particular hardship.

"We've got about three minutes before they arrive," I whispered. "Now, we'd better come to a decision. Why can't we improve the shining hour? What's wrong with looking Starke and his pals up in the loft?"

"Yes; but how can it be done?" asked Watson.

"Easy," I replied. "As soon as they're in the loft you chaps can create a disturbance up here, and I'll nip down and fasten up the trap-door somehow. Then we'll scoot back to St. Frank's, and be in bed by the time Starke and Co. arrive. We'll mess up their evening completely."

"Good wheeze!" said Pitt, with approval.

"Dear fellows, I am in full agreement," observed Sir Montie. "At the present time we are representin' the Remove—an' the

Remove is up against the bullies. We've got to seize every opportunity of wieldin' our lower. An' this is one of the best opportunities—"

"Shush!" whispered Watson. "I can hear somebody!"

The skylight in the roof was on the side away from the road. Seated as we were, therefore, we were quite hidden; our figures could not even be seen against the skyline.

But I ventured to raise myself a trifle and peer down at the open space in front of the building. A figure was approaching. But even in that gloom I knew at a glance that it did not belong to any St. Frank's fellow. For the figure was clothed in a long cloak, and it came forward stealthily.

"This is queer!" I breathed. "Don't make a sound, you chaps. Somebody is just entering—"

"Starke, perhaps," said Pitt.

"No, it's not Starke," I replied, "and it's not one of his pals. But don't talk, or he'll hear us. We'll watch."

We fixed our eyes upon the glass, and listened meanwhile. We heard the door creak, and this was followed by the distinct sounds of somebody mounting a wooden ladder. A ~~dim~~ thud followed—which I took to be the opening of the trap-door—and then a light appeared.

It was an electric torch, held in the hand of the individual beneath us. He, of course, was quite unaware of our presence.

For our part, we could see him distinctly.

He was standing in the centre of the floor, fiddling with the torch, and obviously attempting to fix the push, so that the light would continue to be switched on when the torch was laid down.

We could only see his back view, and I must admit that it seemed to strike me as being somehow familiar. The cloak was black, and the fellow was wearing a wide-brimmed soft hat.

"Queer-looking merchant!" breathed Pitt.

"Who is he?" asked Watson.

"Shurrup!"

I nudged the others, and we continued to watch. The man in the loft moved after a time, and laid the torch upon the floor. Then he turned his side view to us and lit a cigarette. While puffing at this he glanced at his watch.

And for the first time I saw that the man was masked! The truth came to me in a flash.

The man was the Mysterious X!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I whispered. "Don't you see?"

"Of course we can see—"

"I mean, don't you recognise him?"

"How can we recognise him—?" Watson broke off, and took a deep breath. "Why, it's—it's that thief merchant!" he added.

"The Mysterious X, begad!" said Sir Montie.

"My only Aunt Jane!" exclaimed Reginald Pitt.

We were all very much astonished, and our visit to the old barn had turned out to be



highly important—although we had come as a mere joke, to start with.

Without a doubt this loft was the lair of the mysterious thief who had been plundering the district for so many weeks!

"It's quite possible that Long did see something, after all," whispered Pitt. "I suppose he spotted this chap, and followed him—"

"How?" asked Watson. "He's only just come."

"Yes; but he could have been here before," said Pitt. "That's about the truth of it. He came here, went away, and has come back again. For all we know, he might have committed a burglary in the meantime."

"Don't talk so much, you fatheads!" I breathed. "Watch with all your eyes. The chap might take his mask off soon, and then we shall be able to recognise him."

"Can't we collar him?" asked Watson.

"Not much chance of that," I replied. "If we so much as move a foot he'll hear it, and will scoot like a shot. Keep absolutely still—and watch. That's the main thing."

I was intensely eager. If I could go back to St. Frank's—to Nelson Lee—with the knowledge of the Mysterious X's real identity, it would be something to be pleased about!

I was fairly certain that I should recognise the man if he once removed his mask. I knew that I had made no bloomer. In addition to the mask he was wearing a coarse, straggling beard—which I was quite sure was false. What with this beard and the mask, there was no hope of probing the disguise.

The Mysterious X proceeded to act in a curious way.

He produced several small linen bags, and laid them upon the floor, just in front of the beam of light. He turned the contents of one out, and I heard my chums draw in their breath.

"Jewellery!" muttered Pitt, with a slight whistle.

We did not know anything about the robbery at Mr. Field's, but we easily guessed that the Mysterious X had been at work.

Having examined his spoils, the man put them back in the bags and crossed over to the side of the loft. Here he fumbled about for some seconds, and then a board came away in his hands.

A dark cavity was revealed.

The barn was built of wood, and there was a kind of lining. Therefore a space existed between the lining and the outer weather-boards. And in this space, between two of the upright supports, the Mysterious X had provided himself with a hiding-place.

He proceeded to place the bags inside. And, having done so, he replaced the board and stood upright. Pitt nudged me, but I paid no attention. I was counting the number of boards from the corner of the loft. The loose board was the fifteenth. In this way it would be much easier to locate the spot when I wanted it later on.

"Long has been jolly useful, after all," I murmured. "We only played a jape on him, but he's been the means of revealing to us

the hiding-place where the Mysterious X keeps his loot."

"We can get that stuff easily enough," said Watson. "But I should like to get the thief as well."

"It would be rippin' if we could," observed Sir Montie.

"There's no sense in talking like that," I declared. "If there was the slightest chance, I should be on it in a second. But, as matters now stand, there's no chance at all."

"Couldn't we drop through this skylight on to him?" suggested Pitt.

"Impossible!"

"Why is it?"

"Because the skylight isn't made to open, for one thing—it's fixed," I replied. "Before getting through we should have to smash all the glass—and that would take too long. He'd get away in a minute."

"Well, I suppose we shall have to be satisfied with locating the property," said Watson. "That's ripping, anyhow."

"You don't seem to realise the full significance of it," I went on. "The Mysterious X won't know that we have seen him, and he's bound to come back here for that loot. And it'll be a perfectly easy matter to place an ambush in readiness. The guv'nor will see to that."

But just at that moment I remembered something else.

Starke and Co. were even now on their way to the barn! What would happen when they arrived? It would be quite interesting to see the result of the encounter. There was a distinct chance that the Mysterious X would be trapped, after all.

And while I was thinking of Starke and his precious companions, we heard the sounds of hurried footsteps in the road. Gently edging my way upwards, I peered over the apex of the roof.

"They've arrived!" I breathed. "This is where the excitement starts."

Sir Montie nodded.

"Dear fellow, I believe you're right—I do, really!" he exclaimed mildly.

## CHAPTER VI.

### SOMEWHAT MIXED.

"O F course, I don't take his word absolutely, but the little cad seemed to be telling the truth," said Starke. "And that old barn is just the kind of place the youngsters would choose for their headquarters."

"It's comparatively near the moor, too," said Wilson. "Yes, I think we've got them, Starke. But what if we find the place empty?"

Starke grinned.

"It doesn't make much difference," he replied. "We shall wreck the whole show—pull it to pieces. And after that we'll defy the kids to do their worst. Oh, we've got them on toast now—or we shall have, soon."

Thus fondly deceiving themselves, Starke and Co. trudged from St. Frank's towards



the deserted barn on the Bannington road. Although so much had happened during that evening, it was still comparatively early.

Starke's companions were Wilson and Jesson and Mills—the latter two being the prefects of the College House. And they had come for the purpose of learning whether Teddy Long had told the truth or not.

Personally, Starke was inclined to believe that the Removite had performed his work thoroughly. He didn't possess brains enough to invent the whole story, and he would not have dared to invent it, in any case.

Therefore Starke and Co. were jubilant.

They arrived outside the barn, and saw that it was in total darkness. It seemed to be quite deserted. But there was really no telling from the outward appearance. It was the loft the prefects were interested in, and the loft had no window. A close examination was necessary.

Starke led the way, and he made no attempt to walk silently. He opened the lower door, in fact, with quite an amount of noise. We, on the roof, heard everything, but we were watching the interior of the loft through the convenient skylight.

And the effect upon the Mysterious X was what we had expected.

The man started, threw down his cigarette, and grabbed up the electric torch. Then he stood over the trapdoor, both feet firmly planted upon it. It was quite clear that he did not mean to admit the intruders.

Starke was first up the ladder, and when he arrived at the top he felt above his head and grunted.

"A trapdoor!" he exclaimed. "It seems to be locked, too."

"Isn't there a bolt?" asked Jesson. "Strike a match, somebody."

Wilson obliged, and when the light flared up it was seen that the trapdoor was, indeed, provided with a bolt, but that it was already drawn. Yet the door would not budge.

"There must be a bolt inside," suggested Jesson.

"If so, there's somebody up there now," grunted Starke. "This is the only exit from the loft, anyhow. By gad! I wonder if the little beasts are here, all of them standing on the trapdoor?"

"Quite likely," said Wilson. "Use your strength, old man."

Starke was doing so, but he could not make any impression—except on one brief occasion. Then the trapdoor lifted a trifle and slammed down again. This was sufficient to show that the door was being held down by sheer weight, and not because of any upper lock or bolt.

"If you don't let us come up, we'll half slaughter you!" roared Starke furiously. "The game's up, you little cads—we've run you to earth. Open this door and let us come up!"

Silence.

"Do you hear me?" bellowed Starke.

There was not the slightest doubt that the Mysterious X heard the command. Even we, on the roof, heard it. And we waited with much curiosity to see what would occur.

In our own position we could not do much to help; in fact, nothing at all. There was not sufficient time for us to act. But if Starke and Co. succeeded in holding the rascal to begin with, it would not take us long to get down and lend a hand.

The Mysterious X was greatly alarmed. We could see that quite easily. He stood upon the trapdoor, the torch in his hand, gazing anxiously to and fro. He glanced over to the hiding-place in the wall, and appeared to be satisfied.

And then he came to a decision.

Quite abruptly he extinguished the light, and the loft was plunged into utter blackness. I almost pressed my face to the glass, attempting to see what was happening.

But it was impossible.

Meanwhile Jesson had joined Starke at the top of the ladder, and the pair of them were heaving away with all their strength, attempting to force the door up by sheer weight.

It moved two or three times, but always crashed down again before the bulks could get sufficient leverage.

This went on for fully two minutes, and at last Starke desisted. It was perfectly clear by this time that somebody was in the loft, resisting powerfully and determinedly.

"If you don't open this door, I'll gate the lot of you for a week!" shouted Starke, hoarse with anger and his exertions. "You little fools! Can't you realise that there's no sense in resisting?"

Silence.

"They don't mean to answer," panted Jesson. "I don't see that we can do anything. Starke. It doesn't matter much, anyhow. They can't get out while we're here, and we've only got to wait."

"I don't believe there's more than one up there," growled Starke. "Come on—we'll have one more try. Use all your strength, Jessy."

Jesson and Starke heaved upwards with terrific force.

There was a crash, two howls, and Jesson nearly fell headlong to the floor below. He only just saved himself by clinging to Starke's legs.

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned Starke. "I'm nearly brained!"

The trapdoor had been released when the two prefects heaved. The result was that it flew open, and they both charged upwards, Starke banging his head severely, and Jesson losing his grip.

"I'll make you pay for it!" snarled Starke. "Come on, you chaps. Climb up quickly! We've got him trapped in here!"

"Can't you strike a match?" demanded Mills, who was half-way through the trapdoor. "This darkness is— What the thunder— Who's that treading on my shoulder? Look out!"

There was a scuffle, and Mills nearly fell headlong, with Wilson on top of him. They had somehow jammed in the entrance, although neither knew how it had occurred. And at that moment Starke struck a match.

I was still on the roof, of course, and I saw the light flare up. I wondered what



would happen now, and was expecting to see a terrific scrap in progress during the next few seconds.

"It's about time for us to hop down," I breathed. "The Mysterious X will take those cads by surprise— But he's not there!" I added abruptly. "Why, what the dickens—"

I paused, in sheer wonder.

For, peering down, I saw that Starke and Co. were the sole occupants of the loft! The Mysterious X had utterly vanished!

The prefects were just as puzzled.

"This is jolly queer!" said Starke, striking another match and looking round uneasily. "There's—there's nobody up here, you chaps. And I could have sworn that somebody was pushing against that trapdoor."

"And somebody was, too," declared Jesson, sniffing the air. "There's cigarette smoke here—and we haven't been smoking. It's quite fresh. There must be another exit."

"What about the skylight?" asked Jesson.

They looked up, but saw nothing suspicious there. And it was apparent that nobody could have escaped by that means. For one thing, the skylight was out of reach, and it was not made to open, either.

There was no other trapdoor, and no door in any wall.

"I—I say, this is rather uncanny," said Starke, looking round at his companions. "The fellow couldn't have vanished into thin air, and— Hallo! I didn't know you were with us, Frinton!"

Starke stared at Frinton of the Sixth, who was hanging halfway through the trapdoor, almost side by side with Mills, who was also half-way through.

Frinton grinned.

"I came up just now," he replied. "Didn't you hear Mills making a fuss? I nearly pulled him down."

"It felt as if you tried to push me down," snapped Mills. "Why can't you be more careful? It's a decent drop to the floor below."

"But you didn't come with us," said Starke, eyeing Frinton.

"I tell you I have just arrived," replied the Sixth-Former. "Kenmore told me about it—about your coming here, and I thought I'd like to see the fun. Where does it come in? I understood that this place was the headquarters of the Secret Combine?"

"So did I," snapped Starke. "But that's not worrying me for the moment. There was somebody up here, but yet when we forced our way in we found the place empty. It's jolly queer."

"Oh, rats!" said Jesson. "There must be another exit—that's all there is about it."

But although the seniors went over the loft foot by foot, they found no other trapdoor and no other means of exit. It was really astonishing, and Starke and Co. would have believed themselves mistaken but for the fact that the air was heavy with cigarette smoke. This proved beyond doubt that another person had actually been present.

"There's only one explanation," declared Starke. "He must have slipped down through the trapdoor during the confusion."

Somebody kicked your shoulder, Mills; he must have been the chap as he slipped down."

"Impossible," declared Mills. "Frinton was coming up at that second, and there's not room for three of us in the opening—there was barely room for two. I simply can't understand it."

"Neither can I," said Frinton. "Nobody came down during that confusion—I can guarantee that. I was at the foot of the ladder when you first got in, and I was on the ladder after that. Nothing could possibly have passed me—nothing human, at all events."

"Let's—let's get away," said Jesson, rather nervously. "It's too queer for my liking, I can tell you. There couldn't have been anybody here at all."

"Of course not," sneered Starke. "There was nothing here except a cigarette—which smoked itself. Or perhaps a ghost was smoking it, and he vanished as soon as I struck a match."

"Oh, don't rot!" grunted Wilson. "In any case, it couldn't have been Nipper, or any of his gang. The little prigs have got a horror of smoking, and regard it as something wicked."

"I don't like it," said Starke. "I wish I could find out how the fellow got away. But, quite apart from that, I mean to give Teddy Long the hiding of his life."

"What on earth for?" asked Frinton.

"Didn't he tell us to come here?" snapped Starke. "Didn't the little fool say that this was the meeting-place of the Secret Combine? Why, I even gave him ten bob because I thought he was telling the truth. It was all a yarn—just to get the money out of me."

"It's far more likely that the little idiot was spoofed by Nipper," said Wilson. "Nipper's pretty keen, don't forget, and Long has got about as much sense as my right foot. He was simply decoyed here, and was made to believe that this was the headquarters of the Combine."

"Of course!" growled Jesson sourly. "We've been tricked—we've been sucked in by the kids once more! Instead of the victory being ours, the victory's theirs. And all because Starke was ass enough—"

"Me?" roared Starke furiously.

"Didn't you tell us to come here?"

"Yes, but Long led me to believe—"

"That's what I'm saying!" exclaimed Jesson. "Long was spoofed, and you were spoofed; and, if it comes to that, we've all been spoofed. The Remove will be cackling over this to-morrow, you mark my words."

"There's nothing here," said Wilson, looking round. "This loft was never used as a meeting-place. The best thing we can do is to clear off. And we'll take it out of Long—hot!"

"I'll half skin the little fool!" snarled Starke.

The disappointed prefects made their way down from the loft, regained the road, and marched savagely back to St. Frank's.

"A beastly frost, if you like!" said



Frinton irritably. "I'm blessed if I should come if I'd known!"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Starke fiercely.

Frinton did shut up, and shortly afterwards the ill-tempered Sixth-Formers crossed the Triangle. Jesson and Mills went into the College House, while the others made for the Ancient House.

The time was only just nine, and it wanted half an hour to bed-time for the Remove. Starke did not mean to delay matters. When Teddy Long went to bed that night he would go to bed sore.

Starke was also still puzzled about what had occurred at the barn. He couldn't understand how the stranger in the loft had got away. And it was, indeed, a bit of an enigma.

This puzzle, however, was put aside for the moment. In the Sixth-Form passage Starke came to a halt and compressed his lips.

"You fellows go along to my study," he said to Wilson and Frinton. "I'll find Long and bring him up here. And you might get a new cane out of the cupboard. Long's going to smart for this!"

Starke strode off, and his first call was at the junior common-room. Teddy Long was not there, and the other juniors displayed no amusement when Starke appeared.

This was rather a good sign, and Starke began to hope that the affair had not been organised by the Remove, after all. But Long had brought a purely imaginary story, and the bullying prefect meant to make him pay.

Starke was furious with himself for having credited the story, and he would obtain satisfaction out of Long's hide. This, of course, was rather hard upon Teddy, for that youth had been quite sincere in his belief.

Starke looked into Study B, which Long shared with Hubbard, and here he ran his victim to earth.

"Oh, so you're here, are you?" said Starke grimly. "Come to my study, Long; I want a word with you."

"Right you are, Starke," said the junior readily.

He followed Starke down the passage with a jaunty air. Had he not been quite so confident, he might have read the danger signal in the Sixth-former's eye. But the fatuous Teddy was not brainy enough to see that there were breakers ahead.

"I didn't think you'd get back quite so soon, Starke," he said, as they turned into the prefect's study. "Well, wasn't I right? Didn't you find everything exactly as I said?"

"Shut the door, Long," said Starke grimly.

Long raised his eyebrows.

"No need to bark at me!" he exclaimed. "I suppose you've called me here to hand out that other half-sev? Well, I can do with it. I believe in settling up promptly—it's the best way!"

"Exactly," said Starke. "I'm going to settle with you at once."

"Oh, good!"

"And I'm going to give you more than you bargained for," added Starke.

Teddy Long nodded.

"Well, that's jolly decent of you," he said. "Not that I'm very surprised—I thought you'd be generous, Starke. What's it going to be—two quid, after all? I think it's worth it, you know——"

"No, it's not going to be two quid," interrupted Starke furiously. "It's going to be the biggest hiding you've ever had in your life! You crawling little worm! I'm going to half skin you!"

Long started back in alarm.

"You're—you're joking!" he gasped.

"Hold him!" snapped Starke. "Hold him tight—and make sure that he doesn't squeal."

Wilson and Frinton obliged, and the now thoroughly frightened Long was grasped and held in a most convenient position across the study table. He attempted to roar, but Wilson jammed a cushion against his face.

Starke whistled his cane through the air.

"I'll teach you to come to me with a faked-up yarn!" he exclaimed savagely. "I'll make you smart, hang you! I suppose you thought you could play about with me as you liked; but this'll show you different!"

Swish!

"That's for telling lies!" said Starke.

Swish!

"That's for cheeking me!"

Swish!

"That's for sending me off on a wild-goose chase!" went on Starke, warming to his work.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

"They're for being a young fool generally," panted Starke, flinging the cane aside. "I haven't given you many cuts, but they've been pretty severe. Hold the little beast a minute—I'm going through his pockets."

Teddy Long had been caned with great severity. Starke was strong, and he had used all his force in administering the swishes. But Long was unable to howl. He only gurgled and gasped into the cushion.

Within a few seconds Starke had recovered his ten-shilling note. The tuck-shop had been closed, and Long had been unable to "blue" the money.

"Now you can kick him out," said Starke.

The cushion was removed, and Long wriggled from the table like an eel.

"Ow-yow!" he roared. "Oh! I'm half killed! Oh! You awful beasts! You caddish bullies! I'll set the Combine on to you for this! Yaroo!"

"Clear!" snarled Starke violently.

"Oh, you—you frightful cad!" shouted Long, sinking into a chair, and jumping up again in extreme haste. "Yow-ow! I'm absolutely raw! I'll report you to Mr. Lee, you—you thief——"

"Collar him again!" snapped Starke, reaching for the cane.

But Teddy Long was not quite so weak as he made himself to be. He dived for the door, wrenched it open, and simply shot out



into the passage. The next second he was fleeing as fast as his legs would carry him.

He was not in a position to understand the reason for his unexpected hiding—for he had fondly believed that he had supplied Starke with correct information. But something had gone wrong, and the result for Teddy had been painful—not to say disastrous.

And the sneak of the Remove was convinced of one thing.

Spying for Walter Starke was a game that was certainly not worth the candle!

---

## CHAPTER VII.

### VERY MYSTERIOUS!

**Q**UEER—jolly queer!" I exclaimed thoughtfully.

Starke and his pals had departed from the barn, leaving Tregellis-West, Watson, Pitt, and myself, in sole possession. We had scrambled to the ground, and gone round to the front of the old building.

And now we stood at the foot of the ladder, and I turned the light of my electric torch upwards.

"Jolly queer!" I repeated.

"What is?" asked Watson bluntly.

"I should think you ought to know," I replied. "Where did the Mysterious X disappear to? How did he get away?"

"It's rather amazin', old fellow," said Sir Montie.

"And yet there must be a fairly simple explanation," said Pitt. "Let's go up the ladder and have a look round. We might be able to spot something that we couldn't see from the skylight."

We mounted the ladder and arrived in the loft. A very close examination proved that the only possible exit was the single trap-door in the floor. There was no other opening of any kind whatever.

"Now, let's go over exactly what happened," I said slowly. "The Mysterious X was in this loft, wasn't he?"

"He was," said Pitt.

"We saw him distinctly," I continued. "He was here when Starke and Co. arrived. He was alarmed, and we saw him standing on the trap-door, so that it couldn't be raised."

"Then the light went out," said Watson.

"Exactly," I agreed. "There was a little confusion then—which isn't surprising. The next thing we saw was Starke and Co. in the loft; but no sign of the Mysterious X. From what we heard it seems practically certain that the fellow didn't squeeze through the trap-door in the confusion—"

"But he must have done," said Watson. "There's nothing else to think."

"I can't see how it could have been done," I went on. "Anyhow, the Mysterious X vanished. And there was something else that was a bit queer—although I don't know if you noticed it."

"The sudden appearance of Frinton?" asked Pitt.

"Yes," I replied. "I'm not suggesting

that Frinton's appearance is connected with the Mysterious X's disappearance, but the whole thing is a bit significant. That's all I can say at the moment."

"But you think a lot more—eh?" suggested Pitt.

"Well, perhaps I do," I admitted. "A good deal might have happened during that short interval of darkness. The Mysterious X, for example, could have taken off his false beard and mask, and— But it's no good talking. We don't know anything for certain, and suspicions and guesses are of no particular value. Let's buck up and get back."

"I should think so!" grunted Watson. "It's nearly nine."

He made for the trap-door, but I pulled him up.

"What about the swag?" I exclaimed. "We might as well take that, my sons."

"Yes, rather!" agreed Pitt. "It might not be here in the morning."

"It won't be, begad!" said Sir Montie.

It did not take us very long to locate the loose board. And, having opened it, we discovered the little bags of valuables which had been deposited there by the Mysterious X.

They all went into my pockets, and I nodded with approval.

"It's been a jolly successful evening, on the whole," I declared. "We haven't got the thief, but we've collared his latest batch of loot. And we shouldn't have known anything about it but for Long. So the little ass's spying has been turned to a good use, after all."

Pitt grinned.

"I'd like to see the expression on the face of that chap when he comes to look for his swag," he exclaimed. "But, of course, he may not come back at all. He's unsuspecting at present, but he may hear something before the morning."

"He might come back to-night," I said. "That's why we've got to rush back to St. Frank's with all speed—"

"St. Frank's?" interrupted Watson. "I thought you were going to take this stuff to the police-station?"

"Not likely," I said promptly.

"But stolen property is queer stuff to have about—"

"Don't you worry yourself, Tommy," I put in. "Leave it to Mr. Lee. The guv'nor will know exactly what to do, and it's quite possible that he's heard of a burglary. Anyhow, all these bags are going to be given into his charge. So let's hurry up."

Two or three minutes later we were making towards the school at the double, and we arrived in the Triangle a good twenty minutes before bed-time. We managed to slip in without being observed—being quite experienced in that art—and we went straight to Study O.

"You chaps wait here while I go to the guv'nor," I said. "You can come along, too, if you like—but I don't think it's necessary. We don't want to all crowd in, do we?"

"You go alone," said Pitt.

I took his advice, and went. And it was



fortunate that I did not delay, for I ran across Nelson Lee in the passage. He was attired in readiness for going out, and he looked at me curiously.

"I'm afraid I can't spare you any time just now, Nipper—" he began.

"Yes, you can, sir—you must," I interrupted.

"Indeed?"

"It's frightfully important, sir," I said earnestly.

The gov'nor gave me another look, and retraced his steps along the passage and entered his study. I followed him, and closed the door carefully after we had both got inside.

"Do you know anything about a burglary, sir?" I asked bluntly.

"Yes," he replied—"do you?"

"Not for certain, sir," I said. "But I do know that the Mysterious X has been getting to work again."

"You are quite right, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "The Mysterious X has made a somewhat rich haul—in short, he has helped himself to a good deal of Mr. Field's stock of jewellery. You know Field—"

"Of course I do, sir," I said. "The village watchmaker. So he's been robbed, eh? What do you think of this, gov'nor?"

And I produced from my pockets the various bags which I had taken from the hiding-place in the old loft. Nelson Lee sat down, removed his hat, and examined bag after bag.

"You have saved me a journey, Nipper," he said. "All this property belongs to Mr. Field. I think it is fairly intact, and I am quite sure he will be most delighted to get the stuff back so quickly. I will take it to him at once, in order to allay his anxiety."

I looked rather impatient.

"But you don't seem a bit surprised, sir," I exclaimed. "You seem to take it as a matter of course that I should come here and hand you all this stuff. And yet I didn't know a blessed thing about the robbery until a minute ago."

"Quite amusing, isn't it, Nipper?" smiled the gov'nor. "You have saved me a little trouble, and I am pleased. I have not been watching you this evening, but I think I can guess where you found these bags."

"I don't think you can, sir," I said.

"But, my dear Nipper, I was bound for the old barn even when you stopped me," said Nelson Lee coolly. "You found this property in the loft—am I right?"

I stared.

"How—how the dickens did you know?" I asked wonderingly.

"I didn't know—I simply guessed," smiled Nelson Lee. "Needless to say, Nipper, I had a certain amount of information at my disposal. I have not been altogether idle during the last week or two, and the Mysterious X will not be operating in this district much longer. This robbery at Mr. Field's is probably the last he will indulge in."

"I suppose you've been watching the fellow?" I asked.

"Well, I have been on the alert, and I have

seen certain things," admitted the gov'nor. "Accordingly, I promised Mr. Field that his property would soon be returned to him—and I gave that promise because I had a pretty keen idea where I could lay hands upon the stuff."

"And you were going to fetch it now?" I exclaimed. "Well, it beats me, sir. I thought I should give you a big surprise over this. Perhaps I shall even yet. I've seen the Mysterious X this evening—I saw him pack all this jewellery into a recess in the wall."

And I told the gov'nor exactly what had occurred, even telling him about the visit of Starke and Co.

"What I can't make out is how the fellow vanished," I continued. "But it does seem a bit queer that Frinton should appear—"

"Don't get absurd ideas into your head, Nipper," interjected the gov'nor. "The Mysterious X did not vanish into thin air—you may be sure of that. And please do not question me now."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because I am pressed for time—and more particularly because I am afraid you will receive no answers," replied Nelson Lee calmly. "Have a little more patience, young 'un, and the whole truth will soon be known. I have been conducting my inquiries patiently and unobtrusively. And I think my efforts will bear fruit in a very few days' time."

There was really nothing further for me to say, so I took my departure, and went back to Study C.

"Well?" asked three voices.

I grunted.

"It's no good trying to surprise the gov'nor," I said disgustedly. "He actually told me where we found that swag—before I could tell him! He was actually going to fetch it himself!"

Reginald Pitt grinned.

"Mr. Lee is pretty wideawake," he said. "I'll bet he knows who the Mysterious X is, and all the rest of it. He's simply waiting his chance to spring—that's all. We shall know the truth before long."

"Well, I'm not going to worry my head about it any longer," I said, yawning. "Let's be satisfied that Mr. Field has got his property back, and that the thief has been dished. As for Starke and Co.—well, they've been dished, too!"

Pitt nodded.

"Starke engaged Long to spy on us," he said. "The whole thing failed, and Long will be sore for a week, judging by what I can hear. The bullies are helpless, and everything in the garden is lovely. Our campaign is going ahead ripplingly—"

"But we mustn't be too confident," I broke in. "There's all the more reason for us to be cautious. Starke has shown that he is determined to root out our secrets—and he'll do it, too, if we're not wideawake."

The door burst open and Teddy Long crawled in.

"I—I've been half killed!" he groaned. "Look here, Nipper, it's up to you to do something! The Secret Combine ought to



get hold of Starke and birch him until he can't stand!"

"But what for?" I asked.

"Because he's been bullying me," groaned Long. "Isn't that enough?"

I shook my head.

"Starke hasn't been bullying you," I replied. "You've had a thrashing, my son—a thrashing that you thoroughly deserved."

"What?" gasped Teddy.

"If Starke confined himself to that sort of

thing, we shouldn't mind," I went on. "But you accepted bribes to betray the Remove. Buzz off, you little worm! You haven't received half you deserve!"

"I think we'd better bump him—just for luck!" suggested Pitt reflectively.

But Teddy Long had vanished. And he had learnt the lesson that it didn't pay to be a traitor to his Form. Some other fellows were destined to learn that lesson, too, before many days had passed!

THE END.

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By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

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

## READ THIS FIRST.

**ALAN CARNE** is a young Britisher captured by the Germans during the fighting in German East Africa. He is kept a prisoner in a little camp far in the north-west when the news of Germany's defeat comes to his captors. Full of rage, they pretend to give him his freedom, and cast him out alone, without food, in the African jungle, knowing that he must either starve or be killed by some wild beast. Bravely the lad sets out. Before he has gone far he is surprised to hear footsteps coming along the trail behind him. It is **JAN SWART**, a Hottentot servant of the Germans. He has brought food, and Alan is glad of his company. The next morning they find the northward trail of a safari, with which they eventually come up, and Alan makes the acquaintance of Dick Selby. They swap yarns, when they are suddenly interrupted by a voice coming from a swamp. On investigating, they find a man on the point of dying. He is able, however, to tell his story. His name is John Hammond, the man whom, by a strange coincidence, Dick is seeking. He tells them of a mysterious valley, and they set out to seek it. 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. In the evening their camp is stormed by a party of warlike Bajangas. A fierce fight rages, but the white men's marksmanship prevails.

(Now read on.)

## ATTACKED BY LIONS.

**T**HE enemy would have lost more heavily but for the poor aim of the Wakambas and Swahilis, one of whom had been killed and three slightly wounded. Rembo strutted about, as proud as a peacock, boasting loudly of his courage.

"Wah! Wah! I am a great warrior!" he exclaimed. "Did you see how well I fought, Bhagwan? Those black dogs could not stand against me!"

"They will return," Dick told him. "They haven't had enough of it yet!"

The gap in the hedge having been closed, fresh cartridges were distributed and the vigil was resumed. For half an hour there was not a sound from the forest. The lads, seated by their loopholes, had scarcely uttered a word.

"So you're down in the mouth, too, are you?" said Dick, after a long pause.

"I'm not feeling very cheerful, I'll admit," Alan assented.

"You think we're going to be wiped out, Carne?"

"I'm afraid we are. We haven't much of a chance."

"Well, that's what I think myself. Those blackies have learned something, and they won't play the same game again. When they come back they'll rush straight up to the zareba in a mass and smash clean through it, and be on top of us before we can——"

"Here they are, Selby! Be ready!"

The Bajangas were returning. In silence, save for the muffled patter of feet, they glided out from the thickets, the pale glow of the moon lighting up their weapons and faces. They paused for a moment in a body at the verge of the open, their limbs quivering for a dash to the attack. Dick levelled his rifle and drew a bead.

"I'm going to plug that big fellow in front," he said nervously. "I don't like his looks. He reminds me of a buck nigger in New York who used to——"

"Good heavens, look!" interrupted Alan, in a hoarse whisper.

"Where, Carne? Where?"

"Over there to the left! Do you see?"

An amazing and unexpected thing was about to happen. From the black shadow of the trees to one side slunk a huge, tawny form, and other and dimmer forms were visible behind it.

"A lion!" muttered Dick. By George, the fearlessness of the brute!"

Not one lion, but five! A pack of them, hungering for human flesh, and as bold and venturesome as if they had been stalking a herd of gazelle. What followed was swift and ghastly. For a brief instant the five mighty breasts crouched, switching their tails; and then, with a chorus of deafening roars, they leapt upon the stupefied warriors, who had just perceived their peril. There was a writhing whirl of black figures and yellow.



Horrid crunching and snarling blended with shrieks of terror and anguish.

Only for a few seconds. In mad panic the Bajangas took to their heels, plunging back into the forest. And the pack of lions, each with the limp body of a warrior in its jaws, bounded off in the direction from which they had come. The rapid floundering of feet and the exultant roars of the animals ebbed gradually to silence. And now the safari men, who had witnessed the daring raid, and had been gazing spellbound, burst into loud cheering.

"Great Scott, what a sight it was!" exclaimed Dick. "Those lions have saved us, Carne!"

"Yes, I believe they have," Alan declared. "The Bajangas are making tracks for their camp, and they won't stop until they get there."

The flight of the enemy was a vast relief to all. The Swahilis danced about the enclosure, and the Wakambas raised their voices in a joyous song of victory. From a distance rang a blood-curdling sound. It was the dying wail of one of the victims of the lions.

"Bhagwan, there will be no more fighting," said the headman. "Is it not so?"

"There won't be any more to-night, at any rate," Dick replied. "If the savages return it will be by daylight. On the other hand, they may clear out of the neighbourhood for good. Do you think they will, Carne?"

"I doubt it," Alan answered. "I rather think that white man will send them to attack us again. But perhaps not. We'll let Jan go on a scout to their camp in the morning, to see if they are still there."

Whether or not there would be another attack, there was no danger to be feared during the hours of darkness. The weapons having been reloaded and a couple of sentries put on guard, the rest of the party stretched themselves on the ground.

All were soon in heavy slumber, except Alan, who had much on his mind. He lay awake for an hour or so before drowsiness overpowered him, and he had not been long asleep when he was roused by a tug at his arm. It was the little Hottentot who had disturbed him. He sat up, looking about him in confusion.

"What is it, Jan?" he asked loudly. "What's wrong?"

His voice roused his companions, and they sprang to their feet, rubbing their eyes. Some of the natives snatched their rifles and peered through the loopholes.

"Baas, I can smell smoke," said the Hottentot.

"You have a keen scent," Alan replied. "It is the smoke of the camp-fires of the Bajangas."

"No, baas, there is much smoke. It is not only wood that is burning. It is grass and—"

"I can smell it myself," Dick broke in uneasily. "There must be a lot of it."

They could all smell it now—a pungent, acrid odour that was keen in their nostrils.

The course of the wind had changed. A stiff breeze had sprung up, and was blowing from the north. Jan sniffed, and nodded gravely to Alan.

"I may be able to see what this means, baas," he said.

Squeezing through the hedge, he ran to a tall tree that was a few yards to the south of the camp. He climbed to the bushy top of it, and, when he had remained there for a brief time, perched on a swaying bough, he rapidly descended and hurried back.

"There is a big fire, baas!" he gasped, pointing to the north. "From the tree I could see the light of it shining! It is very big! The flames are far to one side and far to the other! And they are coming this way, baas!"

"Good heavens, it is the work of those devilish Bajangas!" exclaimed Dick. "That white scoundrel has put it into their heads! Knowing that the wind is towards us, they have started fires along a wide stretch, with the intention of burning us to death! And that's what will happen! I don't see how we can escape! The whole country is as dry as tinder, even the grass in the open spaces!"

There could be no doubt that the young American was right. Above the sound of the breeze an ominous crackling and roaring could be faintly heard, and over the crests of the trees to the northward a pale, red glow was now quivering. The forest extended for miles in every direction, and beneath the thick timber was a maze of parched undergrowth that would burn like matchwood and feed the conflagration in its devouring course—scrub and grass and vegetation. Rembo quaked with terror, and the Swahilis and Wakambas were panic-stricken.

"Baas, what are we to do?" asked the Hottentot. "If we stay here we will perish."

"There is only one thing for it," said Alan, turning to Dick. "Let us strike to the west along the line of the fire, and try to get past it or around it. I believe we can, Selby."

"By George, that's not a bad idea!" cried Dick. "I'm glad you thought of it! I guess there's a chance for us, and a good one! But we'll have to hurry! Come along, Carne! Grab your loads, you fellows! And stop snivelling, Rembo, or we'll leave you behind!"

Not an instant was wasted. With alacrity the porters and gun-bearers burdened themselves with weapons, boxes, and other luggage. A gap was torn in the zareba, and the whole party, the two lads leading the way, with Jan at their heels, swarmed down from the hill and across the open stretch. They dived into it, and settled to a rapid pace. They could now hear more distinctly, to the right of them, the ominous, crackling roar of the burning scrub.

"It sounds much nearer than it was!" declared Dick, as he took his compass from his pocket. "I say, Carne, hadn't we better push to the south-west?"

"That would be foolish," Alan replied. "We would have farther to go to escape

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)



from the flames. No; it will be best for us to hold due west, and race with the fire until we've got beyond it. I think we can do it, Selby," he added. "It isn't likely that the forest is burning on a front of more than a mile at the most."

### THE RACE WITH THE FLAMES.

**O**N the extent of the conflagration that the Bajangas had so fiendishly started, and on the rapidity with which it was travelling, depended the lives of the two lads and their companions. From the first their chances were precarious, and as they held to their course the prospects grew more discouraging. Fanned by the strong breeze that was blowing, fed by the dry vegetation in its path, the fire swept nearer and nearer from the north, with a strident, steady roar that swiftly increased in volume.

Yet the fugitives dared not swerve from their course, which was parallel with the line of the flames, lest they should lose what slim opportunity they had of turning the flank of the stretch of the forest that was burning.

Presently they could not have done so had they wished, for when they had gone for half a mile, with the fire raging to the right of them, they perceived by the glimmer of the moon that on their left was a low range of sheer cliffs which they could not possibly have scaled. They now found themselves on a trail that had been beaten through the undergrowth. The Hottentot studied it, and read the signs that it indicated to him.

"Baas, it has been trodden by animals," he said eagerly, "and many have passed not long ago. I think it will lead us to water—to a river or to a big pool."

"I hope so," Alan replied. "We'll stick to it."

As he spoke, there was a startled exclamation from Rembo, caused by the sight of a rhinoceros that had just lumbered out of the cover on the north. It plunged at the cliffs, swerved from them, and trotted ahead of the safari. Heavy crashing was heard, and soon more beasts appeared, large and small, of various species. They were in flight, driven from the forest by the march of the conflagration.

"Don't shoot at them!" bade Dick. "They won't hurt us!"

There was nothing to be feared from even the most ferocious of the animals, whose sole impulse was to escape from the threatening peril. Faster and faster they poured from the tangled jungle and streamed along the beaten trail. They were mad with fright, and paid no attention to the human beings, who, seeing that there was no danger, paid no heed to them.

It was a wonderful spectacle. Lions and leopards, hyenas and jackals, went bounding westward, some of them so close that the men of the safari could almost have touched hooved quadrupeds came a bunch of rhinoceroses, a brace of giraffes, and a herd of

buffalo. And there were reptiles as well. Cobras and puff-adders, pythons and boa-constrictors, writhed and hissed in the grass and scrub, as indifferent to the band of human fugitives as were the savage beasts.

Meanwhile, the fire advanced with leaps and strides, crackling and spluttering and roaring. The forest to the north was aglow with crimson patches, and now and again a tree crashed to earth. The heat grew intense, and smoke and sparks drifted overhead. Possibly it was instinct that was guiding the animals. There might be a stream or a pool not far off, or open shelter from the devouring flames. If not, the lads and their companions must perish. They could not endure much more of this.

"I'm afraid it's all up with us," said Alan. "Those devils have got us in a death-trap."

"I'm afraid so," Dick assented. "If only we could climb to the top of those cliffs, Carne!"

Panting for breath, with perspiration streaming from their bodies, the porters and gun-bearers staggered under their burdens. They were inclined to drop them, and Dick, who was determined not to lose any of his precious luggage while a ray of hope was left, slipped back to the rear of them, and spurred them to fresh efforts.

"Don't throw anything down!" he shouted. "Get on with you, men! Faster! Faster! There is still a chance for us! Stick to your loads, and keep up your courage!"

In front of the natives pushed Alan and Jan, calling encouragingly to the frightened headman, who was close behind them.

It was an awful ordeal, and it grew worse. The heat was scorching, and it was difficult to breathe, so dense was the air with the billowing smoke. The fire had eaten its way very near. A short distance within the forest tongues of flame were darting from the thickets, and licking the vines that hung from the boughs of the trees. Dick, still in the rear shepherding his men, was on the point of giving the order to abandon the luggage. But now, when the situation was most critical, seemingly hopeless, a faint sound of splashing was heard.

"Baas, baas, it is water!" exclaimed the Hottentot.

"Ay, truly it is!" declared Rembo. "We are near to it, Bhagwan! Very near!"

Alan's heart throbbed with joy. He put his hands to his mouth and shouted loudly to Dick, who hastened forward to the head of the column. As fast as they could, with the splashing noise ringing in their ears, the little party pressed on along the trail. And when they had held to their flight for a few more yards, gasping and choking, fighting desperately against failing strength, they came suddenly to the crest of a low bank, and saw beyond them a broad river that was bathed in the red light of the flames.

To the right the forest was blazing furiously, and on their left, to the south, the terrified animals that had been driven from the cover were struggling in a seething horde,

*(Continued overleaf.)*



in panic and confusion, along the margin of the stream.

"We're saved!" cried Dick. "Saved, thank heaven! And in the nick of time, Carne! It would have been the end of all of us if we had had to go any farther!"

Eagerly, their fatigue forgotten, the lads and Jan slid to the bottom of the bank and plunged into the cool water. And the natives followed them, jostling one another in their haste and still clinging to their loads.

"Wah! Wah! Bhagwan, this is good!" panted Rembo. "The witchcraft of the Bajangas has not killed us!"

The river was about a hundred yards in width, with sand-bars in the middle of it, and a jungle on the opposite shore. It was probably a tributary of the Bana, as it flowed from south to north. Its tide was turbid and swollen, indicating that there had been a heavy storm of rain in some locality to the south. Above and below the water flowed smoothly, and appeared to be of considerable depth; but where the fugitives had emerged from the forest, straight in front of them the current brawled in cascades and rivulets over boulders and ledges, and was obviously shallow.

The fire had now reached the barrier of cliffs, which did not check it. While the little party stood waist-deep in an eddying pool, slaking their thirst with their hands, the wind-blown flames caught the parched vegetation on the summit of the rocks, and swept rapidly southward on their devouring course.

Dick called attention to this.

"Do you see that?" he said. "It means that we can't go either north or south on this side of the river."

"No, certainly we can't," Alan assented. "The ground will be hot and smouldering for days."

"And there are the Bajangas to be thought of, Carne. They may believe that we have been burnt to death—I hope they will—or they may not. Anyway, we must get as far from them as we can, and try to cover our trail; so they can't pursue us if they suspect that we have escaped."

"Well, we'll have to cross the stream," Alan said dubiously, with a glance at the swollen tide. "There's nothing else for it."

"No, I guess there isn't," Dick replied. "And the sooner we start the better. We'll travel through the rest of the night, and afterwards we'll work round to the north-west until we come to the Bana River, which we ought to reach in five or six days."

It was a risky venture, but there was no alternative. The lads went first, with Jan and the headman; and the Swahilis and Wakambas followed, making as much noise as they could to frighten crocodiles and hippopotami.

Slowly and carefully, now submerged to their knees, and now to above their waists, they threaded the rapids, scrambling amongst boulders and ledges. They had got half-way across the stream without mishap, when Dick slipped, and the next instant, before he could recover himself, he was carried off his feet by the boiling current, and whirled headlong into deep, swift water. He sank for a moment, and rose to the surface, calling lustily for help as he tried to swim.

*(To be continued.)*

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