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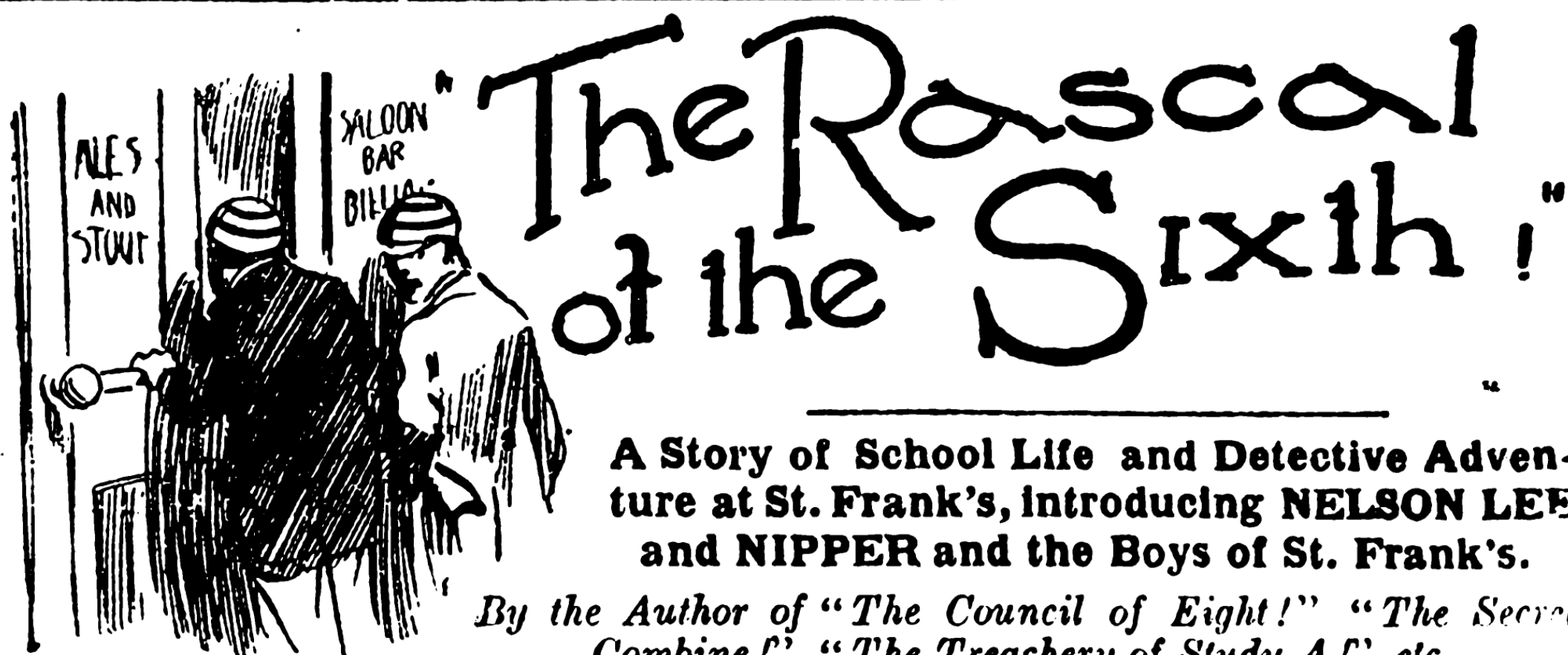
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

VICTORY IN SIGHT!

"**S**UBDUED!" said Tommy Watson bluntly. "My dear old ass, Starke and Co., are whacked to the wide. Subdued isn't the word to use at all."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West shrugged his elegant shoulders.

"Have it your own way, dear old boy," he observed mildly. "Don't mind me, begad! But I have an idea that the bullies of the Sixth aren't quite whacked yet. Starke is a frightful rotter—he is, really."

"And Starke received a frightful birching a day or two ago," said Watson. "He hasn't forgotten it yet—he must be sore still when he sits down. He'll be as mild as milk in future."

Watson and Tregellis-West were chatting in the lobby of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. I stood listening, and watching the rain as it pattered down into the puddles in the Triangle.

It was a somewhat miserable evening, although the April showers were not at all unseasonable. It was only natural to expect such weather conditions in the month of April. Still, the showers had developed into a steady downpour, and cricket was impossible.

"I agree with Montie," I remarked, joining in the discussion.

"Eh?" said Watson.

"Starke won't be as mild as milk just yet," I went on. "Don't you make any little bloomer, Tommy, my son. The Sixth-Form bullies have received several nasty shocks lately, but the knock-out blow hasn't been delivered. The Secret Combine has been a terrific success, but its work isn't done."

Watson grunted.

"Have it your own way," he said. "But I know jolly well that Starke and Kenmore and Frinton and Jesson have been as meek as little lambs during the last few days. They haven't bullied anybody—not even a kid in the Second."

"What about the fagging?" I inquired.

"The fagging?"

"Yes."

"Well, what about it?" asked Watson. "The Sixth is allowed to fag the Third—"

"The Third—yes," I agreed. "But not the Remove, my son. And there are two or three weak-kneed fellows in the Remove who are still doing certain duties for Starke and Co. They don't call it fagging; but it is fagging, actually. And it's got to stop, too."

"Quite right, begad," said Sir Montie, nodding. "It is a shockin' disgrace for the Remove to have fellows faggin' for such cads as Starke an' his set. Seniors like Fenton or Morrow wouldn't dream of makin' a Removeite fag for them."

"And Starke won't dream of it before long," I said grimly. "The treatment needs to be continued a little longer—that's all. I mean to call a meeting of the Remove almost at once—within half an hour, in fact."

"What for?"

"To find out exactly how many fellows are performing fagging duties for the Sixth," I replied. "I also want to give them a word of warning and advice. The time has now come for decisive action."

"That sounds frightfully business-like, dear fellow," observed Sir Montie.

"And the Remove is business-like, too," I said. "Starke and Co. challenged us to a campaign; they formed a sort of league, and thought that they would be able to ride the high horse. Starke was out for power, and he meant to lord it over all the juniors."

"And he made a bloomer," said Tommy Watson.

"He did," I agreed. "He made a terrific bloomer. The Remove, instead of remaining passive, resisted with all its strength. For a good many weeks we have been fighting the bullies, and I think it's fairly obvious that we can claim all the honours."

"Without your leadership, dear boy, the Remove would have been nowhere," said Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez and surveying me with urbane approval. "It was your idea to organise the Secret Combine—"

"I didn't ask you to sing my praises."

Montie," I grinned. "I'm skipper of the Remove, and it's my place to lead. If it comes to that, I should have been helpless if I hadn't had a crowd of strong chaps to back me up. The Remove, as a whole, has shown the gang of bullies that the Remove isn't standing any nonsense. And, as I said before, the time has now come for a decisive step to be taken. It's a miserable evening, and we can't go out, so we'll hold a meeting."

"Good!" said Tommy Watson heartily.

We were all feeling very elated over the success of the Secret Combine. Finding it impossible to hold our own against the bullies by ordinary methods—for they possessed authority, while we had none—we had organised a kind of Secret Society. Starke and his fellow cads had been systematically punished for almost every brutal act they perpetrated. And the Sixth-Formers had at last begun to realise that the game didn't pay.

Starke, as leader of the bullies, had vainly attempted to discover our secrets. He had even gone to the length of commissioning Fullwood and Co., the cads of the Remove, to spy out our meeting-place.

Unfortunately, Fullwood had succeeded almost at the first attempt, but owing to our thorough system of scouting, we had spotted his game. Consequently, Starke's attempt to unmask us had failed—although we had been compelled to shift our headquarters to a little island on the River Stowe.

It is hardly necessary for me to add that Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell received the reward for treachery they deserved. They were still sore, in all probability, for they had been captured by the Combine, and had been given a thorough thrashing. It was hardly likely that Fullwood and Co. would become traitors again. The cost was too dear.

And now, having been successful so far, I intended taking a further step. And the very first thing was to call a meeting of the Remove—at least, of that section of the Remove which boarded in the Ancient House.

The order was sent out broadcast, and within a very short time the common-room was crowded. The only absentees were one or two fellows who were not available, and such undesirables as Fullwood and his set.

It was an unwritten law at St. Frank's that a call for a Form meeting should be obeyed without question—for a Form meeting generally meant that something was to be discussed which affected almost everybody. It was therefore to the individual interests of the juniors that they should attend.

Handforth and Co., of Study D, were the last to arrive.

"Rot," said Handforth, as he came in. "That's what I call it—sheer rot! What's the idea of a Form meeting this evening? Everybody knows that I'm not feeling very well—and a Form meeting can't be held without me!"

"We've had a fearful job, dragging him here," said McClure tartly.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"Oh, we had some sardines for tea," grinned Church—"at least, Handforth had 'em. We told him they were squiffy, but he only snapped at us, as usual. And now he's got pains in his tummy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rate!" said Handforth, glaring. "It wasn't the sardines at all. It was that beastly stew we had for dinner. I'm going to get up a complaint about stews! I hate 'em—they always make me ill——"

"This meeting hasn't been called to discuss stews!" I broke in. "I dare say a referendum of the Form——"

"A which?" asked Handforth, staring.

"A referendum—to bring it down to your mean intelligence, a vote," I explained sweetly. "I dare say a vote of the Form would decide that stews are to be kept on the menu. So we won't discuss the matter, Handy."

"Of course not!" said Handforth, with a sneer. "Anything I suggest is always jeered at—I'm used to it. Even my intelligence is called mean. I contend that this meeting is unnecessary——"

"It's about the bullying, you ass," put in Watson.

"Oh! That's different," said Handforth briskly. "About the bullying? Well, I'm your man if there's any work to be done. I'm not exactly fit, but I don't mind raiding Starke's study if I'm well backed."

I chuckled.

"You always want to do something violent, old son," I grinned. "Raiding a prefect's study is the very last thing I should advise. It's all very well for the moment, but masters get to hear of it, and that means trouble. I've called this meeting to discuss the question of fagging."

"Fagging?"

"Exactly."

"But that doesn't affect us," said De Valerie. "Remove chaps don't fag for anybody. It's against the rules——"

"There aren't any actual rules," I broke in. "Still, it's never been the custom to have Remove chaps fagging for the Sixth. Starke altered the custom to suit his own purposes. He tried to institute fagging in the Remove."

"And it failed," said Pitt.

"Certainly," I agreed. "It failed—but only partially. Finding that we wouldn't stand such nonsense, Starke and a few others compelled a number of Remove fellows to do odd jobs—they didn't call it fagging. But calling an onion a rose doesn't alter its scent. Starke and Co are using several members of the Remove as fags, and it's got to come to an end."

"How can you stop it if the fellows want to do the work?" asked Grey.

"The fellows don't want to do it," I retorted. "They're simply afraid of refusing—that's all. Until this term the Remove was absolutely free of fagging, and it's got to be free in future—as long as I'm skipper, anyhow. They've given it up in the College House, and it's got to be given up here."

"Quite right."

"Hear, hear!"

"I'm going to punch the nose of any fellow who's doing fagging work," said Handforth firmly. "A chap who can fag for Starke is either a rotter or a funk. So he deserves to have his nose punched."

"You won't do anything of the sort, Handy," I exclaimed. "That's the very way to make the fellows keep mum. Gentlemen, don't take any notice of Handforth. Ignore him."

"Why, you—you——"

"Now, Handy, we don't want any trouble," I went on briskly. "Everybody in the Remove isn't a firm, determined chap like you are. Plenty of fellows with heaps of pluck are sometimes timid. And it's the timid ones who are mostly victimised by the bullies. We've got to help them—not punch their noses."

"Oh, just as you like," growled Handforth. "Have your own way—as usual. But I can tell you things would be jolly different if I was Remove skipper!"

"They would!" murmured McClure.

Handforth looked round.

"What did you say, Arnold McClure?" he demanded.

"I said that things would be different if you were Remove skipper," replied McClure.

"We should be something like Russia."

"Russia!" gasped Handforth.

"In a state of chaos," explained McClure.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth sniffed.

"Sneers again!" he said bitterly. "From my own study-mate this time. Oh, well, I expect it, so it doesn't matter. I've given up looking for my support or respect in this Form!"

"You're not likely to find it in any other," grinned Watson.

"Who brought Handforth in here?" I demanded tartly. "He's always diverting the discussion into other channels. I never saw such a chap! We're dealing with bullying, and I call upon every fellow here who has been fagging for Starke and Co. to hold up their hands."

There was silence, and no hands were raised.

"Don't be afraid," I went on grimly. "I know jolly well that you've been fagging, Doyle, so you might as well put your hand up."

"I've only done a few odd jobs for Wilson," said Doyle uneasily.

"Of your own free will?"

"Well, not exactly," replied Doyle, turning red.

"Did Wilson threaten to whop you if you refused duty?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then yours is a case of fagging," I declared. "To all intents and purposes, you are at present Wilson's fag. It won't do, Doyle. You've got to stop it. From this moment you must refuse all further duties."

"But—but he'll half skin me," protested Doyle.

He was a decent enough fellow, but quiet and mild, with very little desire to resist the impositions of older fellows. Juniors

of Doyle's type were the very sort who were imposed on by the bullies.

"Half skin you!" snorted Handforth. "You've got flats, I suppose? Why don't you dot him in the eye——"

"Because he's not a fatheaded chump like you, Handy," I put in. "Striking a prefect is an offence. The Remove has to use other measures, and we've been successful, too—owing to combined action. Individual action is worse than useless. You ought to know that."

"Perhaps you're right," said Handforth thoughtfully. "I tried to have a go at Starke once, and I didn't get over it for a week! Still, I'm blessed if I'd do any rotten fagging for the cads."

"Who else?" I asked, looking round. "Remember that this meeting is to help you. The fagging has got to stop. Up with your hands."

After a moment's hesitation three more hands were raised, and I nodded as I noticed that they belonged to Ellmore, Simmons, and Young. They were all meek youths of about the same calibre as Doyle.

"I reckoned there were about four of you," I said. "Who have you been fagging for, Ellmore?"

"Printon," said Ellmore. "But I couldn't help it——"

"Of course you couldn't," I interrupted. "Well, look here, you chaps. You are hereby given orders that you've got to refuse all fagging duties in future—no matter what they are. I'm not telling you to be mean; you mustn't refuse to do a favour when it's asked of you by a senior. But that's different. Asking isn't ordering. The bullies got you to fag for them by compulsion—by threats. From this minute onwards you must be firm."

"But they'll cane us if we refuse," said Young nervously.

"Well, you've got to stand that——"

"S-s-stand it?"

"For once, yes," I replied. "Take your gruel without grumbling—but refuse. After that come and report to the committee, in Study C. You can then rely upon the Secret Combine dealing with the culprits."

The four fags brightened up.

"I'm game," said Ellmore promptly.

"I'm fed up with it, anyhow."

"That's the spirit," I said. "You won't be bullied more than once—you can rely upon that. We've got the rotters beaten so far, but we can't claim any real success until the Remove is completely freed from fagging."

"Hear, hear!"

"And if you don't report—well, look out!" said Handforth threateningly. "I shall keep my eye on you, don't forget. You're between two stools, my cons, so mind you don't fail. It's up to you."

Handforth loved to have the last word, and I let him have it, because, in this instance, his utterance was rather sensible. It was just as well for the quartette to know that they would receive punishment from the Remove itself if they ignored my instructions.

I had, in a manner of speaking, given the word for Doyle and Co. to strike. And I was rather curious to see how the experiment would work.

CHAPTER II. ON STRIKE!

"I SUPPOSE we'd better do it?" said Young doubtfully.

Doyle and Simmons and Ellmore nodded.

"No help for it," said Doyle. "If we don't, we shall catch it hot from the Remove. And I'm fed-up with being fagged, anyhow. It only means a bit of pluck to start with, and the beasts can't kill us."

The four had collected in a corner of the lobby, and were talking over the situation. Most of the other juniors were busy at prep., for the evening was comparatively young.

Doyle and his companions knew well enough that it was their duty to pluck up courage and to strike. And, mainly because they were afraid of what their Form fellows would do, they resolved to do their duty.

"Wilson told me to report in his study this evening," said Doyle, somewhat gloomily. "You've got to report, too, haven't you, Simmons?"

"Yes."

"What shall we do—fail to turn up?"

The point was considered. Wilson and Conroy major, of the Sixth, shared the same study. Doyle fagged for Wilson, and Simmons for Conroy major. Not that the latter was a bully. He simply had a fag from the Remove because Wilson had one, and Simmons had never really protested. He had performed his duties because he was afraid to do otherwise.

"I think we'd better turn up," said Simmons, at last, with a show of spirit. "Why not go straight away and tell them that we're not going to fag any more? There's nothing like getting it over, you know. They can't eat us, and the Combine will settle things if we're whopped."

"Oh, all right!" said Doyle. "I'm game. But you'd better leave the talking to me, Simmy. You stutter when you get excited."

"Rats!" said Simmons.

The pair went off, full of courage. But by the time they reached the Sixth-Form passage the courage had oozed away and they were decidedly nervous. They almost crept up to the door of the study occupied by Wilson and Conroy.

"You go in first," whispered Doyle.

"But—but you said—"

"Go on, you funk—go in!" hissed Doyle bravely.

But Simmons hung back, and the chances were that the pair of them would have sneaked away, but at that moment the door opened and Wilson glanced out into the passage.

"What the deuce are you whispering outside my door for, you young asses?" he demanded. "You ought to have turned up ten minutes ago!"

"Pup-pup-please, Wilson, we—we—we—" stammered Simmons.

"What?" said Wilson. "Why can't you speak, you young fathead? Come inside—the pair of you. There's the fireplace to clear up, and the tea-things to put away, and Conroy wants you to go down to the village, Simmons."

"Pup-pup-please, Wilson—" began Simmons again.

"We're a bit late!" gasped Doyle. "I—I hope you don't mind, Wilson! But we'll buck up now, to make up for lost time."

"You'd better!" said Wilson grimly.

The two Removites entered the study, and the door was closed. Conroy major was sitting in a chair, reading. He looked up, and smiled.

"Hallo, kids!" he said. "I want you to run down to old Binks for me, Simmons. Get some stuff for the toothache—he's got some, I believe, although he's not a chemist. My minor's got the jaw-ache, you know."

Simmons seemed to swallow hard.

"Are—are you giving me an order, Conroy?" he asked.

The Sixth-Former stared.

"An order?" he repeated. "No, I'm asking you."

"Then I'll go!" said Simmons, with great relief.

"And I suppose you wouldn't have gone if you'd been ordered to?" inquired Wilson.

"N-no!"

"Oh, so you're getting rebellious—eh? I've got a cane in the corner—"

"Leave the kid alone, Wilson," interrupted Conroy. "After all, he's right. We're not supposed to order these Remove fellows about. If Simmons goes to the village for me, it'll be a favour."

Wilson sniffed.

"That's your way of looking at it," he said sourly. "These two kids are fags, and they've got to do what we tell them—whether they like it or not. Go down on your knees, Doyle, and sweep up the hearth."

"Y-yes, Wilson!" gasped Doyle weakly.

He was about to obey the order, but Simmons grabbed his arm.

"Don't—don't you do it!" he exclaimed.

Both Wilson and Conroy gazed at the juniors in wonder.

"What's the meaning of this, you little sweep?" demanded Wilson, shaking Simmons's arm. "You'd better not talk that rot—"

"If Conroy had ordered me to go to the village, I shouldn't have gone," said Simmons, in a rush. "And Doyle's not going to sweep up the hearth. Fagging in the Remove isn't allowed. See? We're going to strike!"

"Of course we are!" said Doyle, plucking up courage.

"Strike!" repeated Wilson dazedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Conroy major.

"That's the stuff, young 'uns!"

Wilson spun round.

"You'll make them worse, confound you!" he shouted.

"Well, I don't mind if I do," said the

other senior. "As a matter of fact, I don't believe in fagging myself. We've had a few squabbles about it, Wilson, and we'll probably have another. Are you going to the village for me, Simmons?"

"Yes, Conroy."

"Good lad! Here's the money to get that stuff," said Conroy. "You can keep sixpence of it for yourself, if you like. And thanks for going—it's a rotten evening, and I appreciate the favour."

Wilson glared at his study-mate, but Conroy only grinned.

"You're doing this on purpose!" snapped Wilson.

"Of course!"

"Well, I'm not going to be humbugged about," said Wilson angrily. "If you don't sweep up that hearth, Doyle, I'll swish you with a cane!"

"I—I won't!" shouted Doyle defiantly. "Nipper's told us to refuse all fagging, and I'm blessed if I'll do any more! Rats to you! Yah! Go and eat coke! You're a rotten bully! Do your own beastly fagging! And if you cane me, you'll be jolly sorry for it!"

Doyle, having delivered himself, went decidedly pale. Wilson simply stared in wonder and Conroy chuckled afresh.

"You can reckon that you've been nicely told off, old man," he observed. "Take my advice, and let the kid go. The Remove is getting independent—and you know what happens to bullies!"

Wilson pointed to the door with a quivering finger.

"Get out!" he roared. "Clear! And be jolly thankful that you're not half skinned!"

Doyle shot through the doorway with extraordinary agility, and he was followed at a slower pace by Simmons. They scudded down the passage, and didn't halt until they arrived in the lobby, panting.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Doyle. "It—it worked!"

"Of course it worked," said Simmons, with a grin. "You've only got to be bold, and they won't do a thing. I was expecting Wilson to slaughter you, but he was scared. He remembered the Secret Combine. Just see what an effect it has on the rotters!"

"But you're going to the village," said Doyle.

"That's different. Conroy asked me to go as a favour," replied Simmons. "And Nipper told us not to be mean beasts, didn't he? I don't mind doing things if I'm asked properly."

And Simmons, who was a most obliging junior, went off cheerily into the cloak-room, in order to get his overcoat. Doyle joined the other two fags—Ellmore and Young—who were anxious to hear how things had been going.

"It's easy!" said Doyle. "Why, if I'd known it, I'd have done it long ago! You ought to have heard the way I slanged Wilson. I thought he was going to eat me, but he simply told me to get out."

This piece of news brightened up the

others wonderfully. There was not the slightest doubt that Wilson had completely caved in—neither was there any doubt that he had caved in because he feared the consequences. Indirectly, it was another triumph for the Combine.

But Young and Ellmore were not so lucky.

Even while they were standing there, in the lobby, Frinton, of the Sixth, came in from the Triangle. He was somewhat muddy, and rather wet. He nodded as he saw the juniors.

"Just the chap I want, Ellmore," he said briskly.

"Me?" said Ellmore. "What for?"

"To obey orders—that's what for!" snapped Frinton. "My bicycle's in the shed, and it's muddy and wet—I've just been using it. Go out and clean it up. It'll take you about an hour, because it's in a beastly state. If you don't do it properly, I'll tan you!"

This could certainly not be called a request; it was an order, accompanied by a threat. Doyle, who was feeling very plucky now, nudged Ellmore rather forcibly in the ribs.

"Go it!" he muttered.

"I—I say, Frinton, I'm not going to do your bicycle," said Ellmore.

Frinton was just entering the cloak-room, but he stopped abruptly.

"What's that?" he said.

"You're not allowed to give me an order," said Ellmore. "That's fagging, you know and fagging ain't allowed in the Remove. Blow your bike! If you want it cleaned, you can clean it yourself!"

"That's the idea!" murmured Doyle.

"Well, you little rat!" snorted Frinton furiously.

He strode forward, and it was quite evident that he had no intention of taking the defiance as Wilson had taken it. Before Ellmore could dodge he was seized. Doyle and Young backed away into safety.

"Take that, for cheek!" said Frinton roughly.

Clap!

His heavy fist came in contact with Ellmore's cheek, and the junior staggered.

"Ow! Yaroooooh!" he roared painfully.

"And if I have any more of your rot, I'll give you some more!" exclaimed the prefect. "Go outside and clean that bike! Go on, confound you!"

"I—I won't!" shouted Ellmore shrilly. "Lemme go, you bully!"

Clap!

This time Frinton boxed the junior's ears, and Ellmore staggered away. Frinton was about to follow him up, with the idea of inflicting further punishment, when a quick step sounded in the passage. A moment later Mr. Crowell appeared—the master of the Remove.

"Is anything wrong here?" he asked.

"Only a little insubordination, sir," said Frinton. "Ellmore cheeked me, that's all. You can go now, Ellmore."

Frinton was rather alarmed; he was afraid that the junior would sneak. But Ellmore tried to look unconcerned, and he strolled away with the others. Frinton entered the

cloak-room, and Mr. Crowell passed on his way, not exactly satisfied.

It was not the end of the affair, either. Ellmore still refused to clean the bicycle, and Frinton was forced to get a couple of Third-Formers to perform the work. He gave Ellmore two hundred lines—which Ellmore was determined not to write.

The junior came straight to Study C and reported the whole matter.

"So Frinton is resisting—eh?" I said. "Well, never mind, my son. I think he'll be all right to-morrow. Keep out of his way for the rest of the evening, and you'll be O.K."

Scarcely five minutes later, when we were just finishing our prep., the door burst open and Young blundered in.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie horrified. "Have you been run over, dear boy? You're in a shockin' condition—you are, really!"

"Hold up, Young," I said quickly. "What's wrong?"

The Removite could hardly speak for a moment. He was panting for breath, his eyes were streaming with tears, and his nose was bleeding and greatly swollen. In addition, his left ear was decidedly inflamed, and he was looking a wreck generally.

"Silly ass!" said Watson tartly. "Who the dickens have you been fighting with?"

"Oh, the cad—the beast!" gasped Young, sinking into a chair.

"Well, you shouldn't fight," said Watson. "I don't think he's been fighting, old man," I said quietly. "This looks like some of Starke's work—Young has been fagging for Starke, remember. Did Starke do this, Young?"

"Yes, the awful cad!" moaned the visitor.

"Well, my only hat!" exclaimed Watson wrathfully. "Starke ought to be reported to the Head for this!"

"Tell us what happened," I said quietly.

"Starke told me to go to his study, and I went," said Young tearfully.

"You oughtn't to have gone at all——"

"Let him finish, Tommy," I interrupted. "It was rather a mistake to go, Young, because Starke had you in his power there, in a way of speaking. Did you refuse to obey orders?"

"Begad! It looks like it!" murmured Sir Montie.

"Yes!" said Young, wiping his nose tenderly. "I did just what you said, Nipper, and—and Starke knocked me about terribly, and kicked me into the passage. I've got an awful bruise on my left leg!"

"Hard lines!" I said sympathetically. "Still, it's all for the good of the cause. Keep out of Starke's way, and you'll be safe enough by to-morrow. Leave the rest to me. It seems that Starke and Frinton are the only two who need attention—and they'll get plenty of it."

Young, who was really knocked about badly, went away to his own study, which he shared with two other fellows named Lincoln and Skelton. And I pushed aside my books and thrust my hands into my trousers pockets.

"Action is required," I said grimly.

"Another birching in the Punishment Chamber?" asked Watson. "It's getting rather stale, isn't it?"

I nodded slowly.

"It is, a bit," I admitted. "But that really doesn't make much difference. The more pain the bullies suffer, the more they'll realise that their game is hopeless. We want to make them thoroughly understand that the Remove is determined to put a stop to bullying in every form."

"Well, they only bully the Third and Remove," said Watson.

"I don't mean that kind of form, you ass!" I went on. "In every shape and form—see? It's got to stop! And a birching is calculated to make a fellow think before he commits any act of violence. At the same time, I think we'd better try some other dodge this evening."

"What kind of dodge, old boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"Well, what's wrong with a bedroom rag?" I suggested.

"There might be a frightful lot wrong with it if we were surprised by a master," said Tregellis-West, shaking his head. "Raggin' a senior in his bedroom is shockin'ly risky, old fellow——"

"Not in the way we should do it," I put in. "Anyhow, we'll hold a committee meeting, and decide. The Secret Combine will do the job, of course—all in the dark. Starke first, and then Frinton. They won't know a thing—except that the Combine has punished 'em. And it'll be a change."

Accordingly a meeting was called in Study C. The other five fellows who attended were Reginald Pitt, Nicodemus Trotwood, De Valerie, Handforth, and his Grace the Duke of Somerton.

They listened with attention as I outlined the scheme.

"Jolly good!" said Handforth heartily. "Ripping, in fact! I couldn't have thought of anything better myself."

"I don't believe you could, old chap," said Somerton drily.

"It ought to work well," declared Pitt. "We shall have to be careful about being spotted, that's all. I'm ready to take the risk. And it'll be rather good to have the Secret Combine visit the cads in their own bedrooms."

"Rather!"

"We'll do it!"

The committee was unanimous, and I nodded.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "At ten-thirty exactly, then, we arise from our cots and prepare for the dirty work. If any fellow is unwilling to get out of bed he will be bumped until he changes his mind."

So the matter was settled.

Not another junior in the Remove knew a word; the Council of Eight were to be trusted, but we had had experience of spying. Fullwood and Co. were not likely to try the game on again; but Teddy Long was an incorrigible little sneak, and if he thought it

was safe he would inform in a moment—just for the love of sneaking.

When we tumbled into bed we gave no sign; we did not even discuss our plans in whispers. I had warned the fellows particularly against any private talks. The plans were made, and nothing was to be done until ten-thirty.

Several of the chosen avengers fell asleep long before ten o'clock, and when the chimes sounded the half-hour I was the only one awake. The dormitory was quiet, and I noiselessly slipped out of bed.

"Up you get, Montie," I whispered, shaking my noble chum.

Tregellis-West rolled over in bed.

"One duokin' will be quite sufficient, surely?" he mumbled into the pillow.

"Eh?"

"It ought to finish the frightful boulder—Eh? Begad!"

Montie sat up, and blinked at me.

"Awake yet?" I inquire. "Who were you ducking—in your dreams?"

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West mildly. "I was dreamin', you know—I was, really. I was dreamin' that we were suspendin' Starke over a tank of bollin' oil, an' Handforth was sayin' that it would be necessary to duck him twice!"

I grinned.

"What a pleasant dream," I murmured. "Starke deserves a lot, but we draw the line at boiling oil. Get up, my son—it's time for the dark deed."

Tregellis-West tumbled out, and Tommy Watson soon followed suit. Within three minutes all the other members of the Combine were dressing. We did not hurry; there was plenty of time.

It was nearly ten minutes to eleven when we crept silently out of the dormitory. Our first journey was to a box-room on the second floor. Here we donned the special garb, which had been placed there in readiness—cloaks and cowls, and all the rest of it. With these covering us, recognition—in the event of a surprise—was impossible. And it was just as well to be prepared.

"Now for Starke's bedroom," I said softly.

"Better let me go first," breathed Handforth.

"What for?"

"If there's any trouble I can deal with it—"

"Rats!"

I led the way, regardless of Handforth's hissed intimation that he had serious thoughts of punching my nose. And we arrived in the Sixth-Form passage without mishap.

Some of the Sixth-Formers slept in cubicles, but all the prefects had bedrooms to themselves. As events turned out, no ragging was to take place in the prefects' quarters that night.

Our plans were quite upset, in fact.

Upon the whole, however, I am inclined to think that the alteration was a decided improvement. We did not even enter Starke's bedroom, for as we entered upon the Sixth-Form passage something unexpected occurred.

Starke's door opened, and a flood of light was allowed to escape into the dark corridor. I drew back against the wall, and breathed out a warning to the others. They all came to a halt.

"What's wrong?" whispered Handforth.

"Shush!" I hissed. "Keep that as quiet!"

I was watching the bedroom doorway. Starke himself appeared, fully dressed, even to his cap. He switched off the light, closed the door softly, and passed along to the next bedroom.

He opened the door, and another stream of light was allowed to escape.

"Ready, old man?" I heard him murmur.

"Coming now," said the voice of Frinton.

And a moment later the two prefects left the bedroom and walked stealthily and silently down the Sixth-Form passage—in the opposite direction to where we were crouching, of course.

It was quite obvious that Starke and Frinton were intent upon a night out.

CHAPTER III.

A QUESTION OF CHOICE

"WELL?"

Pitt asked that question in a soft voice.

"We'll follow, of course," I said promptly. "Our original plan is messed up; but we might be able to do something better. It's a ten-to-one chance that the rotters are off to the White Harp."

Handforth snorted.

"Billiards, or nap, or poker!" he said disgustedly—"for money, naturally. My hat! Prefects! They ought to be shoved in quod!"

"That's a frightfully common word, dear old boy," protested Sir Montie. "'Quod' sounds vulgar, you know. You ought to say 'chokey'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shurrup, you asses!" I muttered. "There's no time to lose. Look here, I'll follow the cads alone—"

"Eh?" said Handforth.

"Alone," I repeated firmly. "I'll—"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "I don't see—"

"What you don't see amounts to a terrible lot," I snapped. "I'm leader, and you chaps must follow; my orders have got to be obeyed. Unless I can plan what's got to be done I'll give the whole thing up."

"Nipper's right," said the duke. "Dry up, Handy!"

"Oh, have your own way!" growled Edward Oswald—"as usual!"

"Unless we make haste we shall miss the rotters altogether," I went on. "I'll go first; you keep me in sight, Pitt, and Watson can keep you in sight. See? String yourselves out; we can't all go in a clump. We'll hold a discussion later."

Several precious minutes had been wasted, but I reckoned that Starke and Frinton would waste a few moments in their study before

venturing out. I hastened down to the Remove study-passageway and turned into Study C. Pitt was fairly close behind me as I scrambled out of the window.

We weren't too late, after all.

Starke and Frinton were just crossing the Triangle; I could see them over by the outer wall, preparing to scale it. But just then a third figure appeared, and I gathered that he was another senior—probably from the College House.

"Jesson, of the Sixth, I expect," I told myself. "All this was prearranged."

The three rascals scrambled over the wall, and I scudded silently across the Triangle and reached the wall just as the Sixth-Form trio were hurrying down the lane. Pitt was close in my rear, and the other shadowers were following according to my plan. It was certainly the safest method.

I was not feeling quite so confident now, for there were three seniors to tackle. There were eight of us, and I knew well enough that we could win if it came to a tussle; but it would be a stiff task, and during the scramble the identity of more than one of us might be disclosed. And that, of course, would never do.

For the present we could only keep on the track, and seize any opportunity that chanced to come along. As I had suspected, the prefects were bound for the White Harp, a shady public-house on the outskirts of Bell-ton.

In this establishment a certain kind of "sport" could always be obtained, and it was much favoured by Fullwood and Co. and the Nuts of the Sixth. Mr. Porlock, the landlord, also dabbled in bookmaking.

Fortunately, the night was dark, and I was able to keep my quarry within earshot, almost. And when the three fellows collected at the side gate of the White Harp I took advantage of the chance and slipped along under cover of the hedge.

"...not coming in, then?" I heard Starke saying.

"No, I don't think so," replied Frinton. "I've got to see somebody over in Caistowe, and I want to get off as quickly as possible."

"Business?" inquired a voice, which I recognised as Jesson's.

Frinton laughed.

"Well, yes, in a way," he said. "I've got some money owing to me—over a little flutter I had last week—and I want to collect it. I don't suppose I shall be back until you fellows are in bed, so I'll say good-night."

"Right you are!" said Starke. "Good-night, old man!"

Frinton went off, but not down the street into the village. He turned aside and went by a footpath which led towards the river. Starke and Jesson, after waiting a moment, passed into the garden of the White Harp, and entered by means of the side door.

I crept back, nearly bumping into Reginald Pitt.

"All serene!" I whispered. "We shall be able to collar the bounders as they come out. I've got another idea now."

"Where've they gone to?" asked Watson, who was behind Pitt.

"Frinton's gone off by himself somewhere—to Caistowe, he said—and Starke and Jesson are in the White Harp," I replied. "I reckon they'll be there for about an hour; and that gives up time to prepare."

"To prepare what?"

"You'll hear in a minute. Wait until the others come up."

Before long the rest of the Combine had straggled in, and we took up a position behind the hedge, in a dry ditch. We were quite unseen from the road, but could watch the gateway of the White Harp garden without trouble.

"I'm blessed if I see the fun of this," said Handforth grumblingly.

"Well, nobody expects you to," I replied. "It's not supposed to be funny, old son. It's a serious matter. We've got to decide what we shall do when Starke and Jesson emerge."

"What about Frinton?" inquired De Valerie.

"We shall have to leave him until some other time," I replied. "And, after all, Starke is the principal chap. Things couldn't really be better."

"But we've got no quarrel with Jesson," said Watson. "He's a College House fellow. Christine and Co. ought to—"

"But Christine and Co. aren't here," I interrupted. "Besides, it doesn't make any difference—the Combine's duty is to squash the bullies; it doesn't matter which House they belong to. And Starke and Jesson are the two chiefs—the worst bullies in the Sixth. If we can only squash those two, we can say that we've squashed the lot. Deal with the leader, and a movement fizzles out."

"And how do you propose to deal with those interesting individuals, my good Nipper?" inquired Trotwood mildly. "At the present moment they appear to be rather inaccessible. I am a patient fellow, and I have no objection to waiting, but I am afraid a few of our worthy companions will grumble."

"Handforth, for example?" I said. "Well, if Handforth grumbles, he'll be sat on. We're out for blood to-night—and we're going to get it."

"Really, dear old boy, you sound frightfully murderous," protested Sir Montie. "What is the plan you are thinkin' of adoptin'?"

"It's quite simple," I said softly. "We're fairly close to Willard's Island from here—and that's where our Punishment Chamber is situated. We'll go back to the good old birching idea—there's really nothing to beat it. We simply wait here until the eads come out, and then collar them—in the ordinary manner. But it'll be different this time, because we shall collar two. What's more, we'll whop the beggars harder than ever."

"Good!" said Handforth heartily. "I'll use the birch, if you like."

"That's a question that can be decided later," I said. "The bullies are in fear of the Combine even now—although they

won't admit it; and when they find the Combine capturing two of 'em at once—well, they'll begin to crumple up. I've got another idea, too."

"Begad! You seem to be full of 'em, dear fellow."

"Why shouldn't we give the rotters a choice?" I suggested.

"A choice?"

"Exactly."

"But what kind of a choice?" asked Pitt. "What's the alternative to a birching to be?"

"Signing a paper—just that and nothing more."

Handforth stared at me.

"You silly fathead!" he exclaimed deliberately.

"Thanks!"

"You babbling lunatic!" went on Handforth. "Signing a paper! Do you call that any punishment? I don't agree to this—I protest—in fact I won't have anything to do with it. A whopping, or nothing!"

"The paper," I proceeded, "will contain several passages which Starke and Jesson will writhe at when they see what they are. If they sign the paper we shall have the bullies in our power—completely. But you needn't worry, Handy; they won't sign. They'll take the birching in preference."

"Not they—they're too funky!" snorted Handforth.

"When I tell you what the paper is to contain, your temper will be sweeter," I observed. "You're such an impulsive chap, Handy."

His temper certainly was better after I had outlined the idea in full. And the others were equally enthusiastic. We all thought, however, that Starke and Jesson would submit to any pain rather than sign the document.

It was written out without delay—Pitt producing a sheet of blank paper which could not be recognised or identified. I wrote the words, and I would defy a Scotland Yard handwriting expert to identify the "list" as my own. I've got a bit of a knack of disguising my handwriting.

"Well, that's done," I said at length. "I don't suppose we shall need it—but you never know. All we have to do now is to wait until the sporting gentlemen emerge from their retreat. And don't forget—not a word! Not a single sound. The Combine is always silent."

"You needn't look at me," said Handforth tartly. "You don't think I shall make a noise, do you? A naturally quiet chap like me—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No laughing, you asses!" I said. "I'll admit Handforth is enough to make a gate-post laugh—but we must keep ourselves well under control. We shall dispense with the barrow on this occasion; but it won't matter much."

As a rule, we wheeled our victims about on Warren's hand-cart, in order to thoroughly confuse them; but that was only when we captured our man in the Triangle. Starke and

Kenmore would not be expecting any assault so far from the school.

"There's nothing like being prepared," I said. "Pitt, you'll take charge of the second four, and you'll go for Jesson. To be prepared in advance is to avoid confusion when the critical moment arrives."

"Quite right," agreed Pitt. "Who shall I have with me?"

"Handforth, Somerton, and Watson."

Pitt nodded.

"That leaves you with Tregellis-West, De Valerie, and Trotwood," he said.

"I don't agree," said Handforth firmly. "I consider that I ought to take the lead. As one of the chief fellows in the Remove—"

"What you consider, Handy, has nothing to do with the point," I broke in. "This is my plan, and my arrangement has got to stand. If you keep objecting like this, I sha'n't bring you with me next time!"

"Why, you—you—"

Handforth paused, at a loss for words. And before he could really explode—for he seemed on the point of doing so—the sound of an opening door came to our ears. All argument was effectually terminated.

"Watch the door!" I breathed—"and get ready!"

We watched closely, and were somewhat relieved when we saw only two figures emerge from the side door of the White Harp. They were the figures of Starke and Jesson.

The door closed again, and the two Sixth-Formers left the untidy garden and stepped upon the road. We were waiting behind the hedge twenty or thirty yards up. And we were ready to spring.

"You seemed to be off colour to-night, Jessy," Starke said pleasantly.

"Rotten!" growled Jesson. "They skinned me!"

"How much?"

"Nearly two quid!" snapped the College House prefect.

"Well, you can't always have the luck your way," said Starke. "I'm twenty-five bob in. You'll be able to have your revenge—Hullo! What the deuce—"

"Look out!" gasped Jesson in alarm.

A crowd of dim, indistinct figures had appeared as though from nowhere, and were rushing at the prefects with grim determination. The next moment a fierce tussle was in progress.

"The Combine!" panted Starke savagely.

There were four of the mysterious figures attacking him; and their charge was so determined that the bully of the Ancient House went over before he could even attempt to protect himself.

He collapsed into the dust, roaring. But his mouth was soon silenced, as something was pulled over his head. Then, while Sir Montie and Trotwood sat on his legs, I secured his ankles with stout cord.

Meanwhile, Jesson was faring in exactly the same manner. And neither prefect had the faintest idea regarding the identity of the attackers. They were mystified—as they always had been on these occasions.

Not a sound was uttered. Handforth was noisy enough, as a rule, but he was particularly careful not to breathe too forcibly. When it came to a matter of importance Edward Oswald could always be trusted. He was not such an ass as he looked—not by any means.

And in this present case he was of great value—for he could certainly use his fists with wonderful precision. And his strength was far greater than that of the average junior.

The two hapless seniors were carried bodily across a meadow, through a small portion of Belton Wood, until the banks of the River Stowe came within sight. It was very quiet here, the current being sluggish. Scarcely a sound broke the stillness of the night.

There was a large, old punt moored in a backwater nearly opposite Willard's Island. And, while the prisoners were placed upon the grass and held down by six of us, the other two prepared the punt.

It was rather a task, getting Starke and Jesson across the short stretch of water without letting them know that they were near the river. We got over the difficulty fairly easily, however.

Starke was taken first. Four of us seized him, carried him into the punt, and then continued marking time and jerking him about. Meanwhile, the punt was pulled across by De Valerie and Watson, who had crossed to the island first. Starke had no idea what was happening. His head was muffled up, and it was really impossible for him to hear much.

Jesson was taken over in the same way, and then the pair were carried into the old stone building which was known in the district as Willard's Folly. It was a kind of miniature castle, and had never been inhabited. Within one of the half-finished rooms we had erected our black curtains, and had converted the place into the punishment chamber of the Secret Combine.

Starke was placed in the "stocks"—a stout, wooden contrivance which abolished the necessity of holding the victim down. It also did away with any need for a soul to be seen.

A tiny electric light, supplied by a battery glowed in the curtains above. But this did not come on until Starke was in position. But this time, too, his headgear had been removed. And Walter Starke was in a rare fright. He had hardly recovered from the effects of the last birching.

Jesson was lying near by, helpless, still bound and gagged. He was to be dealt with later.

"Look here, you little rotters!" gasped Starke. "I know that you're members of the Remove, and if you'll let me go now——"

"Silence, brutal one!" commanded a voice against Starke's ear.

It was really Trotwood speaking. Nicodemus was a ventriloquist of no mean order, and it was easy for him to disguise his voice and to throw it into the curtained-in portion of the room, while he remained outside.

"Prepare to receive the punishment decreed by the Secret Combine!" said Trotwood

sternly. "You have been guilty of base conduct towards a boy named Young——"

"I—I'm sorry!" panted Starke. "Don't—don't touch me with that confounded birch! Look here, I'll promise to be different in future—hang you! I won't touch any of the kids again! Will you let me go now?"

"A promise from you, base one, is hollow like a barrel," said the invisible voice. "The Secret Combine cannot accept your bare word. Not by long chalks! However, since you appear to be penitent, the Combine is prepared to offer you a choice, an alternative. It is for you to decide. You will either sign a paper which will be placed before you, or you will receive a birching of greater severity than you have ever received before. What is your answer?"

Starke took a deep breath.

"This paper!" he exclaimed harshly. "What—what is it?"

"The words upon it," said the voice. "are framed as follows: 'We, Starke and Jesson, of the Sixth Form at St. Frank's College, acknowledge that we have been guilty of much cowardly bullying. We further acknowledge that we have been frequent visitors, after lights out, at the White Harp Inn, using that disreputable establishment for the purpose of satisfying our craving for gambling. We hereby make a faithful promise to finish with bullying for all time. Signed——' That is the text of the document, O worthless Starke. Your signature must be appended, followed by that of your fellow-prisoner."

Starke laughed gratingly.

"You—you fools!" he snarled. "I'll never sign anything like that!"

"Then let the sentence of the Combine be carried out," said the voice.

The curtains parted and a hand appeared. The hand was encased in a long black glove which reached right up the arm. And in the hand a very grim-looking birch was grasped.

Swish!

The birch descended with great force, which was not very surprising, considering that the gloved hand belonged to Handforth.

"Yaroooooh!" howled Starke.

Swish! Swish!

"Ow! You—you little cads!" roared Starke fiercely. "I—I—— Yarooooop!"

The pain he was enduring was considerable. He was still rather sore from the last hiding, and this fresh infliction of punishment was naturally harder to bear, for he was already tender. Moreover, Handforth was laying it on with a will.

"I—I—ow—I'll agree!" howled Starke. "I'll sign!"

Swish!

"Stop it!" hooted Starke, almost crying with pain. "I'll sign, I'll tell you!"

"Let the punishment cease!" came the voice.

Handforth, with great reluctance, and with considerable indignation, withheld his hand. He was just getting into his stride, as it were, and he hated the idea of letting Starke off.

"You will sign, O prisoner?" asked Trotwood softly.

"Yes," snarled Starke hoarsely. "I'll sign, confound you!"

"It is well!"

The light snapped out. A short interval was followed by a sudden click as the stocks were unfastened, but only from Starke's hands. His feet were still tightly secured.

When the light appeared again Starke was still alone. Before him, on a small box, lay the written document and a fountain-pen.

"Sign," came the voice relentlessly. "Do not destroy the paper or the pen. There are others. And such destruction will be followed by severe punishment. Sign, and show your wisdom."

Starke writhed. For a moment he hesitated. Handforth became impatient, and swished the birch through the air suggestively. The sound proved to be the last straw. Starke picked up the pen and signed the paper.

"There you are!" he grated. "Now let me go!"

The light snapped out again. Starke was released from the stocks, but securely bound. Jesson had yet to be dealt with. The College House prefect found himself in the position just vacated by Starke.

"Will you sign, or will you be birched?" inquired the voice politely.

"I'll not sign, you fool. Yaroooh—ow—oop!" shrieked Jesson.

Handforth, without waiting for the word, brought the birch down with terrific force. Jesson roared and yelled.

Swipe! Swipe! Swipe!

"I'll sign!" howled the prisoner wildly.

Behind the curtains we all grinned, and Handforth gave Jesson another for luck.

"Oh—oooh! Where's the pen?" yelled Jesson. "I'll sign, I tell you!"

"It is well!" said Trotwood ventriloquially, so to speak.

Out snapped the light once more, and Jesson's hands were released by Pitt and myself, although, of course, we worked in total darkness. Jesson signed, and he was then bound in the same way as Starke.

Meanwhile, we were chuckling with delight.

Our victory was complete and absolute; we had never hoped for such a stroke of wonderful luck. Starke and Jesson, the leaders of the bullies, had signed away their freedom—for that is what it amounted to. With that fatal document in our hands Starke and Jesson were utterly powerless. The slightest act of bullying might mean the production of that paper, and then the sack!

The bullies had signed in the extremity of the moment. They would regret it afterwards; they probably regretted it already. But it was too late now. They had signed rather than take the thrashing, a proof of their innate cowardice.

The Secret Combine had completed its great work.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROGUE OF THE SIXTH

HANDFORTH — and several of the others—were eager to talk and to discuss the great triumph, but talking was impossible. Even whispering was forbidden. The Combine had always performed its work in complete silence.

While we were roping up the prisoners, in readiness for their return journey, De Valerie had been placed outside, to make sure that the coast was quite clear. I took care to place the precious document safely in my pocket-book. It was a kind of Damocles' sword, which we could constantly hold over our enemies.

Just when we were about to emerge, carrying Jesson, De Valerie appeared, in a hurry. He made a quick sign to me, and placed his mouth against my left ear.

"Go easy!" he breathed. "There's a boat on the river."

I looked at him in surprise and doubt.

"Fact!" he said, nodding. "It's making for the island, too!"

Without delay I sent the whisper round that the prisoners were to be kept in the Punishment Chamber, with three fellows on guard; another junior was to remain at the door.

Then I crept outside, accompanied by Watson, Tregellis-West and Pitt. We were anxious to see who the night-bird could be. A boat on the river after midnight was something of a novelty.

I was half inclined to believe that De Valerie had made a mistake, in spite of his assurance to the contrary. But I soon found that I was wrong. A small rowing-boat was coming up the river—silently, stealthily, and it was heading straight for Willard's Island.

"Who the dickens can it be?" murmured Watson.

"Somebody after wild-fowl, perhaps," suggested Sir Montie brilliantly.

"There's only one chap in the boat," said Pitt. "Don't move, you fellows. We'll crouch here, behind these bushes, and watch the beggar. There's no need for him to see us at all."

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West. "It wouldn't be healthy for us to be seen, you know. There would be a frightful row with the Head—there would, really. The Head is so unreasonable over these matters, dear old boys. He wouldn't see eye to eye with us in this matter of the Combine."

"I don't suppose he would," I muttered drily. "Keep quiet, you asses."

We watched the approach of the boat with an interest which was not entirely unmixed with anxiety. If we were found on the island by anybody who would be likely to inform against us—well, we should have a very painful interview with our respected Headmaster, Dr. Stafford.

It behoved us, therefore, to remain in hiding.

The boat came nearer and nearer, and at last the nose of it grated slightly against

the bank. The night was not entirely dark; the stars were shining, and it was possible to see with a fair amount of distinctness at close quarters.

The stranger secured his boat, and then came quietly across the grass towards us—towards the old stone building. He was wearing a long cloak and a slouch hat, and he walked briskly, as though intent upon a certain object.

With some relief I saw that he was making for a little doorway which led into a kind of cellar—a place separate and apart from the rest of the building. I had only been down in that little cellar once—months ago—but I knew that there was no connection with any other quarter of the quaint place. This was good, for we did not want the stranger to run right into the prisoners and the guards.

The man came within three yards of us, and passed by. I felt curious as he was approaching; I was startled as he passed, and I was positively excited after he had vanished into the little doorway.

"My hat!" said Pitt, taking a deep breath. "Did you see?"

"The Mysterious X!" I exclaimed tensely.

"Himself!" said Reginald Pitt.

Watson and Tregellis-West gasped.

"Begad! You don't say so, old boy!" murmured the latter. "The Mysterious X! Are you sure, Nipper?"

"Certain," I replied. "Didn't you see his beard—didn't you see his mask? Why, I would know him anywhere. But what the dickens is he doing here on this island? My children, this looks queer!"

"Let's go and collar him!" muttered Watson excitedly.

"Don't be in such a hurry," I said. "The very last time we tried to collar the Mysterious X the gov'nor grumbled at me, and told me not to interfere. We'll just make a note of what happens now, and then act as we think best."

I did not want to get myself into hot water. The Mysterious X had been operating in the district for some few weeks, and it was high time that he was laid by the heels.

The man, whom nobody had actually seen in his own personality, was a very mysterious individual. He had committed a number of minor burglaries, and would have been successful in most of them but for the activities of Nelson Lee. The gov'nor had spoilt the cracksman's game on many an occasion.

Only a few days previously I had surprised the Mysterious X quite near the school, and I had captured him, with the assistance of my chums. But he turned out to be Frinton of the Sixth. Frinton declared that he had been having a joke; that he had dressed up as the Mysterious X in order to scare somebody.

The others had believed the story, and the prefect had been released. And I was compelled to accept the same view. When I mentioned the matter to Nelson Lee he

had appeared rather impatient, and had calmly told me not to interfere!

So I meant to go easy now. The gov'nor had plans of his own, in all probability, and those plans would be upset if I butted in. I quite understood that. So I decided that our best plan would be to watch, and do nothing else.

And we were soon rewarded.

A figure appeared in the little stone doorway, looked round carefully, and then hurried towards his boat. He was certainly under the impression that not another soul was in the vicinity.

But there was something different about the man now. We all watched him closely as he approached, for he would find it necessary to pass quite near us again on his way to the water.

The Mysterious X seemed slighter; he was not wearing his cloak, and a cap had replaced the slouch hat. And then the truth dawned upon me in a flash. The fellow who passed within a yard or two of us was Frinton of the Sixth!

The Mysterious X had entered the doorway, and Frinton had emerged.

There could be only one possible explanation.

Frinton of the Sixth was, positively, the Mysterious X, after all! And I did not doubt that he had been out upon one of his plundering expeditions. He had not gone to Caistowe at all—as he had intimated to Starke and Jesson—but had been helping himself to somebody else's property.

"Great pip!" muttered Watson. "It—it's Frinton!"

"Begad! That's what I thought, dear boy," whispered Montie. "But it can't be, we must be mistaken."

"It was Frinton," said Pitt quietly.

"And there's no practical joke about this," I exclaimed. "I suspected it all along, and now we've got the proof. The Mysterious X is a St. Frank's senior! A fine thing for the old school if it's made public—eh?"

"It's shockin', old boy, really shockin'!"

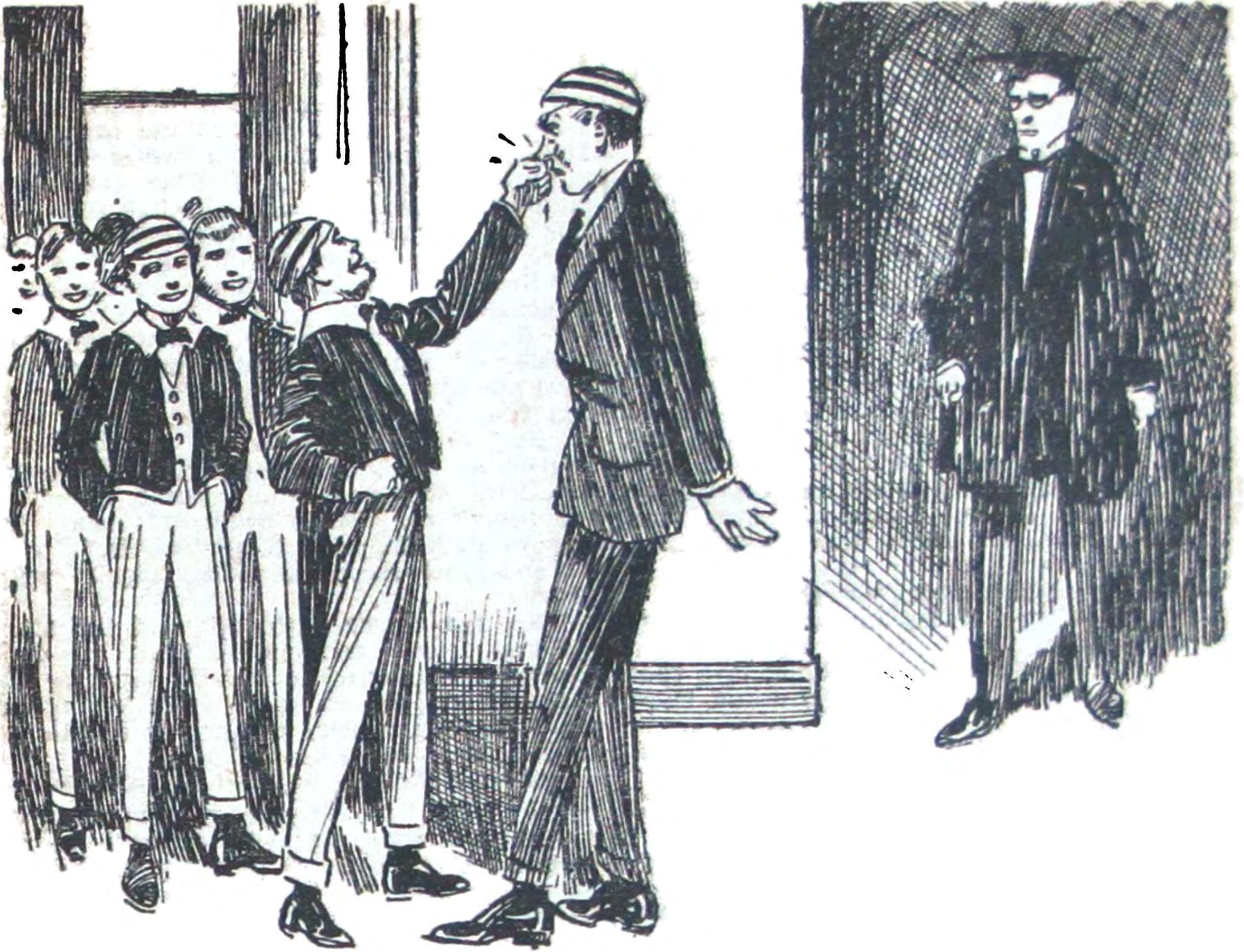
By this time Frinton had got into his boat, and was rowing away. He had seen no sign of the punt, because that craft was at the other end of the island, completely hidden by the bushes and reeds.

"Look here, we had better not say anything about this!" I exclaimed. "We'll tell the others that somebody came on the island, but we needn't say whom. And I'm not quite sure whether I shall mention it to the gov'nor."

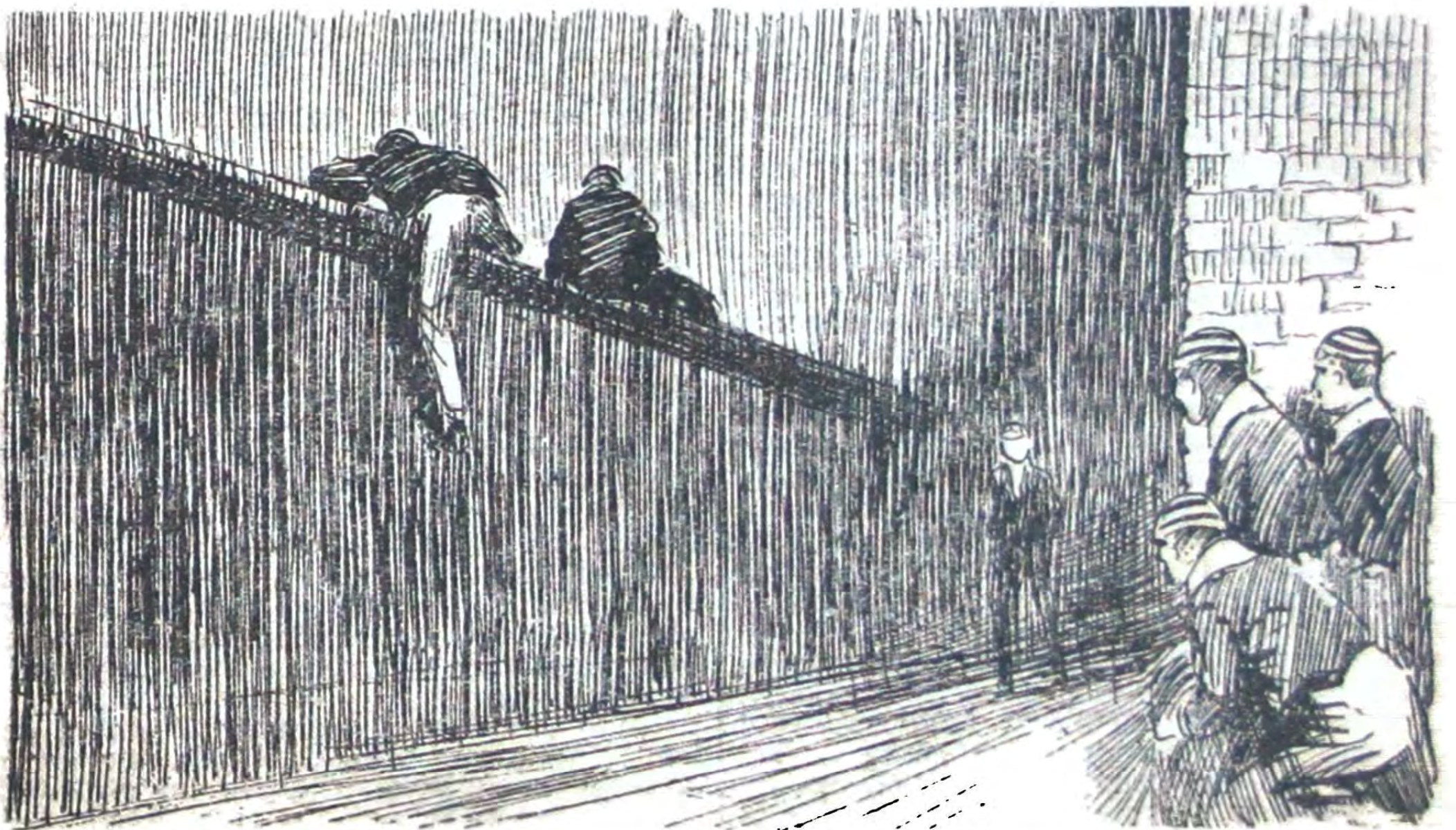
"But this is the rotter's hiding-place!" exclaimed Watson.

"Well, we'll decide what to do later on," I said. "For the present we've got to settle with our prisoners. We'll leave the Mysterious X until the morning. It's rather a shock to discover that he is Frinton, but there may be something more in this than we know about."

A few minutes later Frinton had vanished up the river, and there was nothing for us to do but get rid of Starke and Jesson. This we did, in the usual manner. Bound and



"How many lines will you give me if I"—biff—"punch your nose?"
asked Handforth sweetly. (See page 16.)



As Nipper and Co. crouched in the shadow of the building they could plainly see the two bullies scaling the high wall. (See page 8.)

helpless, the captives were carried on to the mainland by means of the punt, and then conveyed to a spot near the wood. It was our usual custom to leave a victim on Bannington Moor, but we did not think it necessary on this occasion.

Having loosened the bonds, we made ourselves scarce. Starke and Jesson would be easily able to free themselves, but by that time we should have vanished completely. And before our victims arrived at St. Frank's we should be asleep—or, at least, snugly in bed in the Remove dormitory.

Our expedition had been highly successful—far more successful than we had hoped for. Our plan had been to rag Starke and Frinton in their bedrooms. Instead of this we had forced Starke and Jesson to sign the all-important document, and we had established the fact that Frinton was none other than the rascal who had made himself known as the Mysterious X.

It was a splendid night's work.

We had left no clues, and we were quite convinced of our own safety. Starke would suspect me, no doubt—he would believe that I held the signed paper—but he would know nothing for certain.

"All serene—what?" murmured De Valerie, as he tumbled into bed.

"Rather!" grinned Pitt.

"We've drawn their horns this time," I said comfortably. "Kenmore and the rest have almost caved in without any signing, and they'll be meek enough when they see how Starke and Jesson are behaving."

"What if Starke bullies as badly as ever?" asked Watson.

"He'll receive a note——"

"A what?"

"A note of protest," I replied grimly. "He'll be given twelve hours warning that his signed confession will be placed in the right hands. That'll scare him, not that it will be necessary. Starke's finished, my sons."

"Begad! I believe you're right," said Montie sleepily. "Goo'-night, dear old boys. Sleep well."

A few minutes later the Remove dormitory was quiet.

And meanwhile two sore, sour-tempered youths were trudging towards the school. Starke and Jesson had freed themselves from their bonds without much difficulty, and had found themselves near the wood.

"It was all your confounded fault," Jesson was saying, as they walked. "But what's the good of talking, the thing's done now."

"What do you mean, my fault?" demanded Starke harshly.

"I mean what I say!"

"Didn't you sign the rotten paper, too?" roared Starke.

"Yes, but not until you had," retorted Jesson. "There wasn't much sense in my standing out once you had done the thing. We're helpless, Starke, we sha'n't be able to do a thing!"

Starke nodded.

"And we don't know where that paper is, who's got it, or anything," he said gloomily.

"What a couple of fools we were to sign the thing, Jessy."

"Speak for yourself!" snapped Jesson.

"That's what I am doing," replied Starke.

"Hang it all, we're both in the same boat. I didn't realise at the time what it would mean, but I do now. And those rotters were laying the birch on so thick that I couldn't think of anything. How they managed it is more than I can imagine."

"How do you know that the Remove is responsible?"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" interrupted Starke harshly. "Nipper's at the bottom of this. He's not an ordinary kid—he's lived in London with Nelson Lee—he's been to all parts of the world—and he's got as much confidence as all the rest of the Remove put together. We made the mistake of regarding Nipper as just an ordinary junior. And now we've been made to pay for it."

"Did you recognise that voice?" asked Jesson.

"No, but that's nothing," said the other.

"What really matters is that we don't know where we were, we don't know who captured us, and we don't know where that paper is. We suspect Nipper—as I have just said—but we don't know."

Jesson nodded.

"We shall have to go easy to-morrow," he said. "We shall have to go easy always, in fact. If that paper gets into the Head's hands we shall be sacked, Starke—we shall be kicked right out. Why on earth did you sign it?"

Starke snorted fiercely.

"What's the good of saying that now?" he snapped. "There's just a chance that we shall be able to get hold of the paper—I mean to make a good try, anyhow. It'll be in Nipper's possession somewhere, and it ought to be fairly easy to get hold of the thing."

The two prefects walked on for a few moments in silence.

"And what if we do?" asked Jesson abruptly.

"Eh? Do what?"

"Get hold of that paper?"

"Why, we shall destroy it."

"But the position will be almost as bad, even then," continued Jesson. "We haven't found out anything with regard to the Secret Combine, and if we do the slightest thing we shall be collared again and birched. It's—it's unbearable. Life isn't worth living at this rate. And yet we can't do anything!"

"Those kids are smart—there's no sense in denying it," said Starke. "But we shall bowl them out before long—leave it to me. Just for a day or two we'd better keep to ourselves, though."

"Why not ignore the paper?" asked Jesson. "Why not treat the kids worse than ever to-morrow—just to prove our contempt? If the paper is sent to the Head, we'll swear that we know nothing about it. I only signed my name hurriedly, and it doesn't look much like my usual signature——"

"That won't do," interrupted Starke.

"You forget that Nelson Lee's on the premises, and he's an expert in handwriting. He'd know in a moment that the signatures are ours. We might be able to diddle the Head, but not Lee. No, until we get that paper back, we're helpless."

And Starke and Jesson, still gloomy, made their way into the Triangle, and parted under the old elms. Starke entered the Ancient House, and took care to look into the Remove dormitory before going into his own bedroom.

Everybody was asleep, and everybody had apparently been asleep since the lights were extinguished. There was no clue, and Starke went to his own room in a bitter, angry mood.

CHAPTER V.

GETTING THEIR OWN BACK

"**G**AMMON!" said Jack Grey.
"My dear, chap, it's a fact."
"Rats!"

"Well, if you won't believe me, I don't suppose I can make you," said Reginald Pitt calmly. "But that's the fact, anyhow."

The chums of Study E were strolling in the Triangle, enjoying the bright morning sunlight before breakfast.

"A fact?" repeated Grey doubtfully. "Do you mean to seriously tell me that Starke and Jesson have signed a paper acknowledging that they've been bullying, and that they have paid frequent visits to the White Harp?"

"Exactly," said Pitt.

"You're pulling my leg——"

"Oh, my hat! What a disbelieving boulder you are!" exclaimed Pitt. "I'm not pulling your leg, and I'm not telling you the tale. It's just the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Starke's reign is at an end, and we can be pretty certain that his followers will cave in, too."

Jack Grey was considerably surprised—when, at last, he was convinced. He had not been with the party overnight, so the news came fresh to him. Grey was a member of the Combine, but all the fellows in that famous organisation were never active at one and the same time. Each undertaking of the Combine was performed by a group of six or eight—never more.

Handforth had the extreme pleasure of telling Church and McClure all about it. Only the fellows who could be positively trusted were let into the secret. We could have sent the word broadcast that Starke and Jesson had signed away their freedom; but I did not want the matter talked too much about. If the bullies caved in tamely, all well and good. It was only fair to give them a chance.

"Yes," said Handforth, in the privacy of Study D. "I don't mind admitting that Nipper is a keen fellow—almost as keen as I am, in fact. I'll even go so far as to say that he's keener than I am!"

Church and McClure stared.

"Didn't you sleep well, Handy?" asked Church anxiously.

"Eh? Of course, I slept well!"

"But you're not quite yourself, old man," said McClure. "You can't be yourself if you admit that——"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Handforth. "I suppose it's only fair to give the devil his due?"

"Are you talking about yourself?" asked Church.

"No!" roared Handforth.

"Well, I don't consider it quite the thing to call Nipper a devil——"

"You—you silly ass!" bawled Handforth.

"That's only an expression! Last night Nipper proved himself to be worthy of great praise—and I'm the very first fellow to acknowledge it. Of course, if Nipper hadn't thought of the idea, I expect I should; but I always meet with bad luck like that."

"Did you rag Starke and Frinton in their bedrooms?" asked Church. "You said something about it last night, but I went straight to sleep. I suppose the thing fizzled out?"

Handforth nodded.

"In a way, yes," he replied. "We didn't do anything to Frinton at all—the rotter went off somewhere. But Starke and Jesson paid a visit to the White Harp, and we colared 'em on the way home."

And Handforth proceeded to go into details, while Church and McClure listened with great interest. Like Grey, they could not quite believe the statement that the two chief bullies had signed away their liberty.

"Oh, rot!" said McClure. "Even Starke wouldn't do a dotty thing like that. It would place him in a frightful position——"

"Don't you believe me?" roared Handforth.

"Well, it seems a bit thick," said McClure.

Handforth was about to explode, but he calmed down suddenly.

"Yes, I suppose it does," he admitted.

"In fact it is thick. But it shows what a beastly funk Starke is. Fancy signing a thing like that rather than take a licking! I'm going to rag him like the dickens this morning—in front of everybody. He can't even give me lines!"

"Don't be an ass, Handy," said McClure.

"Be content that the bullies are whacked—don't ask for trouble. If they'll let us alone, I reckon we ought to let them alone. If we don't, we shall get into hot water."

Handforth shook his head.

"I'm going to get my own back," he declared firmly. "I've been putting up with Starke's rot for so long that I'm going to make him put up with——"

"Some of your rot?" inquired Church.

"Exactly!—No!" roared Handforth hastily.

"You silly chump! Starke will have to put up with some of my cheek. That's what I'm going to do—cheek him. It'll be rare sport."

"Don't do it, Handy," said McClure.

But Handforth never took advice from his chums. If I had known of his plan I should have stopped it at once. To deliberately cheek a prefect was asking for trouble. The fellows naturally felt like hitting back when

they knew it was safe to do so; but that didn't make it right.

If Starke and the others did not interfere with us we had nothing to grumble at. It was certainly not the thing for us to interfere with them. Such action, in fact, would be deserving of punishment. We were only justified in resisting the prefects when they bullied us.

However, such little details as these did not worry the great Handforth. A few minutes after the discussion in Study D the three chums sallied out, and went along to the lobby.

As luck would have it, Starke of the Sixth was just descending the stairs. Handforth grinned, winked at his chums, and noted with some satisfaction that several other fellows were present. Handforth liked an audience.

"Good-morning Starke!" he said genially.

Starke looked at Handforth with a sour expression on his face.

"Morning!" he said gruffly.

"I hope you slept well?" continued Handforth. "Rather difficult, perhaps, after a bout of smoking and drinking. I suppose you had the usual gay time last night—eh, Starke?"

Under ordinary circumstances Starke would have slaughtered Handforth on the spot—metaphorically speaking. But now he turned red with fury, took a step forward, and then checked himself.

"You young beggar!" he snapped. "Get out of my way!"

Handforth didn't budge.

"Anything wrong?" he inquired mildly.

"No need to show your temper, Starke—it's rotten enough, I know. I suppose it's because you haven't done any bullying this morning. The fact is, Starke, you've been a bit of a cad, you know, and what you need is some good advice."

Starke nearly forgot himself. He clenched his fists, but knew that he was helpless. The other juniors looked on with undisguised pleasure. They all had their backs to the doorway—including Handforth. But Starke was facing the doorway, and a gleam suddenly appeared in his eye.

"You are impertinent, Handforth," he exclaimed loudly. "Impertinence to a prefect is not allowed. You will write me two hundred lines; and if you repeat the offence I will make it three hundred."

Starke spoke calmly, and in a manner which could have compared with that of Morrow or Fenton—the two most popular prefects in the Ancient House. Starke did not use a bullying tone.

"Three hundred if I repeat the offence?" said Handforth pleasantly. "What shall I get if I punch you on the nose? Like this?"

Biff!

Starke staggered back as Handforth's heavy fist landed upon his nose.

"Ooooop!" gasped Starke.

"How many lines shall I get for that?" inquired Handforth pleasantly. "Of course. I can give you a few more if you're not quite satisfied—"

"Ease up, Handy!" shouted McClure. "Don't be an ass!"

Starke made no attempt to retaliate. He seemed to possess a certain dignity, which had hitherto been lacking.

"I shall report you to the Housemaster, Handforth," he said, in a suppressed voice. "No, you need say nothing further. I have put up with your insults—"

"Insults!" echoed Handforth. "Why, you silly ass, a rotter like you can't be insulted! My opinion of you, Starke, is that you're unfit for your position, that you're a beastly cad, and that you ought to be kicked out of the school! You're about the worst outsider—"

"Handforth!"

The voice belonged to Mr. Crowell, the master of the Remove, and Handforth spun round, gasping. The other fellows were surprised also; and Handforth realised, all at once, why Starke had acted with such restraint. He had seen Mr. Crowell approaching, and he knew that the master could see—and hear—him.

"Speaking to me, sir?" gasped Handforth faintly.

"Yes, Handforth, I was speaking to you," replied Mr. Crowell grimly. "How dare you? How dare you have the utter audacity to speak to Starke—a prefect—with such outrageous insolence?"

"I—I—I—" gasped Handforth. "That's to say, he—he—he—"

There was a chuckle from the other fellows.

"When you can speak intelligibly, Handforth, I shall be obliged if you will supply me with an explanation of your conduct—if, indeed, such conduct can be explained," said Mr. Crowell. "Starke acted in the only way possible under the circumstances, and I am pleased to see that he kept his temper."

"Thank you, sir," said Starke quietly.

"You not only insulted Starke, but you struck him," continued Mr. Crowell. "I do not think it will be necessary to bother Mr. Lee with the matter, Handforth. You will take five hundred lines."

"Why—why—should I, sir?" demanded Handforth indignantly. "Everybody knows that Starke is a rotter—"

"That is sufficient, Handforth," cut in Mr. Crowell. "You have no excuse whatever. You will follow me to my study at once!"

"To—to your study, sir?"

"Exactly. I intend to give you a caning."

"A—a—c—caning?" asked Handforth dazedly.

"A very severe caning!" declared Mr. Crowell.

"A—a s-s-evere caning?" said Handforth, holding his breath.

"Good gracious me! Are you a parrot, boy?" snapped the Form-master. "Follow me, Handforth."

"But—but you just gave me lines, sir!"

"You will do the lines after you have received the caning," explained Mr. Crowell.

"Oh, corks!"

And Handforth followed the master down the passage. Starke, with a grin of triumph, went out into the Triangle. Perhaps it was

unfeeling, but everybody in the lobby was grinning also.

"Ask, and thou shalt receive," said Pitt calmly. "If Handforth didn't ask for it, I don't know what asking means!"

"Serve the silly ass right," said McClure. "We told him not to be such a potty ass, but you know what a mule he is."

I had witnessed the final stages of the affair, and I was quite in agreement with McClure. It was rather hard lines on Handforth, no doubt, but he had chipped Starke in the most reckless fashion—as Pitt had said, he had asked for trouble.

"If Starke doesn't interfere with us, there's no reason why we should interfere with him," I said. "He's whacked, so we've got everything our own way."

A good many of the juniors, however, did not quite agree with me. They felt that here was a good opportunity of getting some of their own back. Handforth would have been safe but for the inopportune arrival of Mr. Crowell.

And before midday both Starke and Jesson found it a very unwise proceeding to venture out in the Triangle. They were chipped by the Removites, Third-Formers, and even by little beggars of the Second.

The Third and Second knew nothing about the signed paper; but when they found the Removites insulting the prefects with impunity, they followed the example with alacrity.

Not on one occasion did Starke forget himself, although he came near to it once or twice. No case of bullying was brought to my notice. Starke and Jesson knew well enough that they were in the power of the Secret Combine. That signed paper was a nightmare to them already, and they heartily wished that they had taken the thrashing.

Handforth, contrary to general expectation, was by no means meek. The lesson had no effect on him; and at every opportunity he ran across Starke and gave the latter a few truthful words regarding his character.

"You'll only get it in the neck again, Handy," said McClure, at dinner-time.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "My hands smart a bit, but I can stand a little pain, I suppose? As for those lines, I'll do 'em after lessons. It was just a bit of bad luck—that's all. I shall make sure that any masters aren't sneaking about in future, though."

This was quite characteristic of Handforth. If his punishment had been inflicted owing to caddish behaviour on Starke's part, Handforth would have raged. But he had fallen into a trap because of his own carelessness.

I won't deny that it gave us great pleasure to see the discomfiture of Starke and Co. For Kenmore and the rest were equally as cautious in their behaviour. The Secret Combine had beaten them—positively. There was not the slightest doubt about that point.

And Starke knew it. It was gall and wormwood to him to be compelled to stand the unlimited cheek which was hurled at him from all sides. He could not retaliate in any way—he could do nothing. And there

was the thought of that signed paper in his mind the whole time.

Just after dinner he became quite desperate, and he managed to get hold of me as I was crossing the lobby.

"I want to speak to you, Nipper," he said gruffly.

"Well, you're quite at liberty to do so," I replied.

"Come with me to my study, then."

Starke walked away as he spoke, but I did not follow. Just as he was entering the passage he turned round and looked back.

"Come on!" he shouted.

"No thanks!" I replied calmly.

"Look here, I want you to——"

"If you like to come to my study, I don't mind giving you a couple of minutes," I said sweetly. "We shall have the room to ourselves—if your conversation is to be of a private nature."

Starke didn't reply for a moment. I knew well enough that he was feeling rather sick. For a junior to refuse to go to a prefect's study, and to suggest that the prefect should accompany him to the Remove quarters, was something of a novelty. And Starke only controlled himself with difficulty.

"Oh, all right!" he growled fiercely.

He walked along the Remove passage to Study C. It was empty—as I had known—and I looked at Starke inquiringly as I closed the door.

"Well?" I asked, as though he were some inferior sort of being.

"I suppose you know that this sort of thing is jolly rotten," said the Sixth-Former bluntly.

"What sort of thing?"

"Treating me in this way," said Starke.

"But, of course, you've got the thing in your own hands—just for the moment. But if you think I'm going to stand it for long, you're thundering well mistaken!"

"My dear chap, when you cease to talk in riddles, and when you say something sensible, I'll probably understand," I remarked. "I thought you wanted to say something to me—something important."

Starke glared at me.

"Look here, you little sweep!" he exclaimed. "If you'll let me have that signed paper back, I'll give you five quid—on the nail!"

"Paper?" I repeated, frowning. "What paper?"

"I'll give you ten quid!" exclaimed Starke fiercely.

"If you feel inclined to chuck money about, that's your affair," I observed. "What kind of paper would you like, Starke?"

I looked round the study.

"There's the 'Daily Mail' over there," I went on. "It's not exactly worth ten quid——"

"You silly young idiot!" shouted Starke. "You know well enough that I'm talking about that paper with my signature on it! Look here—I'm talking to you privately. Is it a go? Will you accept a fiver?"

I shook my head.

"I can't accept money for nothing," I replied. "As for any paper with your signature on it—well, what on earth do you come to me for? Why should you believe that I know anything about your papers?"

"Didn't you collar me last night?" asked Starke harshly.

"Collar you?" I said, staring. "How could I collar you when I was in bed?"

The prefect glared at me.

"You're chief of the Secret Combine," he said. "And you can——"

"Hold on," I interrupted. "Who told you I was the chief of the Combine? I've heard of the society, of course. Everybody has. But as for any paper with your signature on it—well, you'd better ask somebody else."

And I opened the study-door invitingly.

Starke appeared to be on the verge of a furious outburst; but he restrained himself, and strode out of the study with compressed lips. He had been unable to obtain the slightest satisfaction, and he was feeling bad. Bribery, even to the extent of ten pounds, was obviously useless.

I grinned cheerfully, and decided that it wouldn't be a bad idea to go along to the gov'nor's study and have a word with Nelson Lee about our success. For the gov'nor knew something about our activities; he was well aware of the fact that we had been fighting the bullies.

Nelson Lee, in point of fact, had agreed to leave the matter in my hands. If I succeeded in stopping the bullying he would take no hand. And it would be rather decent to go to him and announce that victory had been secured.

Accordingly, I made my way to the House-master's study. I knocked upon the door, and entered. And at that very moment Nelson Lee lifted the receiver of the telephone from its hook, for the bell was ringing.

That 'phone call, as it turned out, was to be of the utmost significance.

CHAPTER VI.

FRINTON IS WANTED!

"ALL right, Mr. Jameson, I'll come over at once," said Nelson Lee briskly. "You may expect me in about half-an-hour. Yes, that's right. Good-bye!"

The gov'nor hung up the receiver. He had been talking for several minutes—or, to be more exact, he had been listening. And now he looked at me with a somewhat grim expression in his eyes.

"Anything important, sir?" I asked. "I wanted to have a chat with you——"

"I am sorry, Nipper, but I'm afraid I can't stop just now," interrupted the gov'nor. "Our daring friend, the Mysterious X, has been busy again. It appears that he committed a serious burglary in Bannington last night."

I started.

"Last night, sir?" I repeated.

"Yes."

"But where—at whose house?"

"The place is called The Oaks, I believe, and it is a large house owned by a Mr. Norman Brent, a retired banker. But really, Nipper, I cannot stop a moment longer; you must talk to me when I come back."

"But look here, sir——" I began.

"When I come back, young 'un," repeated the gov'nor crisply.

He passed out of the study, and walked quickly away. I was half inclined to run after him, but I decided that my information would do just as well later on. Besides, he was not inclined to give me the attention I required.

The Mysterious X had committed a burglary during the night! And we had seen the Mysterious X land upon Willard's Island during the night—we had seen that the fellow was Frinton, of the Sixth!

Now I understood where Frinton had gone after he had parted with Starke and Jesson outside the White Harp. The rogue of the Sixth had made his way to Bannington, had committed the theft, and had probably concealed his booty in the old building on the island.

It was something of importance to know, but it would be just as well, perhaps, to reserve the telling until the gov'nor returned from his investigation. It would be rather interesting to see if he hit upon any clues at the actual scene of the crime.

Nelson Lee had been appealed to by Inspector Jameson, who was in charge of the Bannington police-station. Jameson was not exactly a brilliant official, and he had sense enough to know when a case was beyond his powers. Inclined to be somewhat haughty, he was nevertheless compelled to acknowledge that Nelson Lee was his master in all detective matters.

Jameson also knew that the gov'nor was particularly interested in the Mysterious X, and he had rung Lee up to tell him of this latest crime, and also to hint that Lee's presence on the scene would be welcomed.

So the gov'nor took his small racing car from the garage, and was soon speeding towards Bannington. The robbery, so far as he could gather, was the most serious one which the Mysterious X had undertaken. Valuables to the extent of eight hundred pounds were missing, and one of Mr. Brent's servants had been injured during a tussle. This was all Lee knew at the moment.

The Oaks were situated on the outskirts of the market town, and as Nelson Lee's car pulled up at the gateway, the famous detective was greeted by Inspector Jameson, who had evidently been waiting.

"Glad you've come, Mr. Lee," he said gravely. "By what I can see, this affair is rather closely connected with your school, and it is only right that you should be here. The Mysterious X again, you know."

"Yes, you told me that over the 'phone," nodded Nelson Lee. "I also understand that the crime is rather more serious than the others committed by the Mysterious X. Is that so, Jameson?"

The inspector pursed his lips.

"This crime, Mr. Lee, is not only serious, but positively shocking," he declared. "Mr.

Brent is in a great way, not on account of his loss, but because of the injuries received by Simpkins, a manservant."

"What is the nature of the injury?"

"Well, you may guess when I tell you that Simpkins is still unconscious," replied Jameson. "There is not the slightest doubt that he was disturbed in the night, and that he went downstairs to investigate. He was then attacked from behind and brutally struck down."

"How can you know that if he is still unconscious?"

"Because the man is suffering from terrible injuries on the back of his head, and there is also a blood-stained iron poker in my possession," replied the inspector. "The doctor is confident that Simpkins will recover, but it is a bad business. Apart from this aspect of the case, Mr. Brent's loss amounts to nearly a thousand pounds."

"H'm!" said Lee quietly. "The Mysterious X had certainly acted very drastically on this occasion. What about clues, Jameson? Have you discovered anything of importance?"

The inspector looked rather mysterious.

"I have!" he replied. "But come inside, Mr. Lee."

They walked towards the house, and Nelson Lee's thoughts were busy. This crime was of a very grave nature, totally different from the other crimes committed by the Mysterious X.

Hitherto the man had been satisfied with fairly light hauls, and he had never once attacked a would-be captor. But this time he had proved himself to be a dangerous criminal.

The attack had been made with a poker, and it was quite obvious that it had been deliberate, and not the result of a heated fight. Simpkins had been struck down from behind, and the Mysterious X could only have performed that operation by a cold, calculated attack.

Nelson Lee was forced to confess to himself that he was rather startled. He had hardly expected anything of this nature, although he had been keeping his eye upon things for quite a long time.

For example, the governor knew as much as I did, and probably a great deal more. He knew that Frinton was the Mysterious X, and he was accordingly shocked to discover that the St. Frank's senior had been guilty of a crime which stamped him as a dastardly rogue.

And, what was more, Inspector Jameson had his suspicions. He and Nelson Lee entered the house, and after the detective had had a few words with the owner, Mr. Brent, he accompanied Jameson to the actual scene of the crime—Mr. Brent's study. The inspector pointed to a safe.

"As you will see, Mr. Lee, this safe has been scientifically forced open," he said. "Almost all the stolen property—jewellery and that kind of thing—is missing from this room. I can only conclude that the thief has had a good deal of experience at this sort of thing."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"That is rather contradictory, surely?" he asked.

"I don't quite understand you."

"Well, I mean that all the other thefts committed by the Mysterious X have been rather clumsy—the work of an amateur," said Nelson Lee. "And yet this crime, according to your statement, seems to be the work of a professional."

"Yes, that is curious, certainly," agreed Jameson.

"Are you quite sure that the Mysterious X—"

"There is not the slightest doubt with regard to that point," interrupted the inspector. "One of the usual cards was left behind, and one of the other servants distinctly saw the thief as he was escaping. He was the Mysterious X, and this time it seems that he has given himself away. In fact, Mr. Lee, I asked you to come here because I have more than a suspicion that the criminal is connected with St. Frank's."

"Indeed!" said Nelson Lee quietly.

"It is absolutely amazing, and I scarcely know what to think," went on Jameson. "But facts are facts, Mr. Lee, and we must accept them at their true value. It will please me immensely if I find that I am wrong, but just at present everything points to the suspicion that a senior schoolboy of St. Frank's is the culprit. It is staggering, and almost unbelievable, but there it is."

"Was the Mysterious X so careless, then?" inquired Lee.

"I can only conclude that he was rather scared by the magnitude of this particular crime, and he failed to take his usual precautions," said Jameson. "At all events, I have discovered a sheet of paper with several well-defined finger-prints upon it. Further, there is this cap."

And Jameson produced from a cupboard a cap which was plainly the property of a St. Frank's boy, and the colours were those of the Ancient House. Nelson Lee took the article of headgear somewhat gravely.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, after a moment.

For inside, written in ink, was the name "J. Frinton." This was a clue which could not possibly be ignored.

"Frinton, I understand, is a member of the Sixth Form at your school?" asked Jameson. "Is that correct?"

"Quite," agreed Lee. "But, honestly, Jameson, I cannot accept the view that Frinton is responsible for this crime—"

"The matter must be investigated," interrupted the inspector grimly. "This cap was dropped by the thief as he was escaping. The servant who saw the Mysterious X found the cap on the lawn; he actually saw it drop from the fleeing thief. What will you say if these finger-prints are identified as Frinton's?"

"I hardly know," replied Nelson Lee. "The case will certainly be conclusive. Are there any other clues of value?"

"One or two. For example, the piece of paper used by the thief was found in the fireplace, and it is the paper which is always supplied to the boys at St. Frank's," said Jameson. "I am of opinion, Mr. Lee, that

an immediate visit to the school is essential. I intend to question Frinton closely; I intend to test the finger-prints. And if the lad can give no satisfactory explanation, I am afraid that he will have to be detained."

Nelson Lee was silent for several minutes.

During this time he walked about the room, taking stock of almost every article it contained. He also looked closely at the paper containing the finger-prints, and he gave particular attention to the forced safe.

"Yes, I am afraid that all the evidence points to the fact that Frinton is the culprit," said Lee at last. "The wretched boy has completely done for himself, Jameson, although, of course, he deserves no sympathy. May I have a look at Simpkins before we go to the school? I should also like a word with the doctor, if he is available, and a word with that other servant, too."

Nelson Lee was able to gratify his wishes.

He interviewed the doctor, he had a chat with several servants, and he examined the unfortunate man who had been attacked. Lee also paid quite a lot of attention to the garden.

And his conclusions all pointed to the one fact, that Frinton, of the Sixth, was the culprit. It was staggering, as the inspector had said. But the facts could not be ignored. The evidence was overwhelmingly strong.

"Judging by what I have seen and heard here, Frinton will soon be in a reformatory, or in prison," remarked Lee grimly. "The only point which gives me a little hope is the obviousness of the whole affair."

"How do you mean, sir?" asked Jameson.

"Well, it is all so plain—so clear," said Nelson Lee. "And you must admit that in that respect it differs from all the other crimes. One would be half inclined to suspect that Frinton committed this crime with the sole intention of giving himself away. However, we must go into the matter more thoroughly."

The very first step was to visit St. Frank's, and Inspector Jameson accompanied Nelson Lee back to the school in the latter's car.

They arrived just before afternoon lessons were due to finish, and Jameson was left in the Housemaster's study, while Lee went in search of Frinton.

But the perfect was not in the Sixth-Form room, neither was he in his own study. The master of the Sixth informed Lee that Frinton had complained of a headache, and had gone out over half an hour earlier.

However, Lee seized the opportunity to test Frinton's finger-prints. There were several articles in the senior's study—books, and such-like—which provided excellent specimens.

And the schoolmaster-detective was very concerned when he found that Frinton's finger-prints were exactly identical with those found in the study of Mr. Norman Brent's house.

The evidence against Frinton was accumulating, and the gov'nor was to realise this even more after I had given the information which was in my possession. But where was Frinton? What had become of him?

It seemed that the rascal of the Sixth had made himself scarce.

CHAPTER VII.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?

"HALLO, sir!"

I made that remark as I came along a passage in the Ancient House. Afternoon lessons were over, and I had run into Nelson Lee unexpectedly. He looked up, and nodded.

"Don't bother me now, Nipper," he said. "I'm rather busy."

"But I thought you were in Bannington, sir," I exclaimed, eyeing him keenly. "What's wrong? You look jolly worried about something."

"I am worried, Nipper—very worried indeed."

"Then you haven't got time to hear what I was going to tell you earlier in the afternoon?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not, Nipper."

And the gov'nor prepared to walk on.

"It's about the Mysterious X, sir," I said. "Important, too."

Lee came to a halt.

"And about Frinton," I added invitingly.

"Oh!" Lee looked at me in a very straight way. "About the Mysterious X—and about Frinton? You'd better come with me, Nipper. It seems that you know something that might be of value to me. Come to my study."

I went, and was surprised to find Inspector Jameson in possession.

"Why, hallo, inspector!" I exclaimed.

"I didn't expect to see you here."

"It gives me no pleasure to be here, I can assure you," said Jameson. "I mean no insult to this famous school, Nipper; I merely wish to imply that my business here is of a really painful nature. I have come to arrest—"

"One moment, inspector, if you don't mind," interrupted the gov'nor. "Nipper has something to tell us, and I wish to hear what he says before we let him know the object of your visit."

I was rather mystified for a moment. But, of course, I easily guessed that Jameson had come to arrest Frinton. The Mysterious X had been bowled out at last.

"Go ahead, Nipper," said the gov'nor.

"I only want to tell you, sir, that I know the real identity of the Mysterious X," I said calmly. "I've suspected it for some little time, but last night I found out for certain."

"Oh, did you?" put in the inspector. "And who is he?"

"A fellow named Frinton."

Jameson whistled, and glanced at the gov'nor.

"Another link, Mr. Lee," he said. "But why is Nipper so sure?"

I lost no time in relating what had taken place on Willard's Island between the hours of twelve and one, during the night. I knew that Nelson Lee would not ask any awkward questions with regard to breaking bounds.

"This happened at about half-past twelve, sir," I concluded. "The Mysterious X came up the river in a boat, landed on the island, and went into that old building. When he came out his disguise was off—and he was Frinton."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the inspector, his eyes gleaming. "This information is of the utmost importance. Mr. Lee, Nipper's evidence corroborates the whole thing. We suspected Frinton, and now we are supplied with first-hand information that Frinton was out abroad last night."

"And I expect the swag is on the island," I put in.

"Why, of course!" ejaculated the inspector. "Good gracious me!"

Nelson Lee tapped my shoulder.

"You had better come with us, Nipper," he said. "We are going to the island at once. Say nothing, except to your own chums. This affair is exceedingly grave, and we want to keep it quiet as long as possible."

"Don't you think it would be better to make sure of Frinton first?" asked Jameson. "I have no warrant for his arrest, but I shall certainly use my own discretion, and detain him."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Unfortunately, inspector, Frinton is not to be found," he said. "I have made inquiries, and the boy is nowhere in the school. It is just possible that he has received word of his danger, and that he has escaped. However, that need not worry us; he cannot have got very far."

But Jameson was decidedly perturbed, and he was enormously anxious to get to the island without delay. And we started off immediately.

I was half expecting to meet Sir Montie and Tommy out in the Triangle, but did not see them. There was certainly no time to go in search of my chums. The most important thing was to examine the cellar into which the Mysterious X had plunged—the cellar of the old building on Willard's Island.

There was not the slightest question of Frinton's guilt now. He was certainly the Mysterious X, and I could not help marvelling at the astute manner in which he had kept his secret. In nearly all his enterprises he had performed his work cleverly and cautiously.

And this fellow—this daring crook—was none other than a prefect of St. Frank's. It gave me rather a jar when I thought about it. Frinton—a common thief! It was appalling.

And I could not help wondering, too, at the utter lack of precaution which Frinton had displayed in his last coup—the biggest coup of all. He had succeeded in getting away with his loot, certainly, but he had left a regular trail behind him. Success had apparently made him careless.

Arriving at the island, we found a small boat handy, and in this we crossed the short stretch of water. Down the river I spotted several familiar figures—Pitt, Burton, and Handforth and Co. It was a fine, mild afternoon, and they were evidently taking a walk

before tea. And I noticed that the juniors were looking our way with undisguised curiosity.

"They'll know all about it soon enough," said the inspector grimly. "By to-morrow the whole county will be ringing with the news. Bad for the school, Mr. Lee, and I'm sorry. But it can't be helped."

We landed on the island, and the boat was moored securely. Then I led the way to the quaint old stone building, and went straight to the little door which led into the cellar. Unless it was absolutely necessary, I had no intention of taking my companions into the other part of the building, where, of course, they would see the Secret Combine impedimenta.

"This is where he went, sir," I said briskly.

We all plunged into the doorway. A few steps led downwards, and all was darkness until I switched my electric-torch on. We found ourselves in a small, square apartment. The walls were bare and the floor was damp. And in one corner lay a pile of clothing.

"A black cloak!" exclaimed Inspector Jameson triumphantly. "A cloak and a hat—yes, and a mask as well!"

"To say nothing of this false beard," I put in. "This is the Mysterious X. Without these the chap is Frinton. I expect he's always kept his disguise here, handy, and ready for use."

"Undoubtedly, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "But there appears to be no sign of the stolen property. Either Frinton has been here before us, or the loot was never concealed here. However, we are well repaid for our trouble."

A moment or two later we emerged into the afternoon sunlight. And as we did so I gave a yell. For there, floating away out of our reach, was the boat in which we had crossed to the island. A little further down the river another boat was being rowed away—and the fellow in it was Frinton of the Sixth!

"Look at that!" I roared.

"Confound it!" snapped Nelson Lee. "We deserve it for our carelessness! The fellow was on the island at the time, and he saw us enter the cellar. And we are unable to follow, for he has set our boat adrift."

Inspector Jameson danced with excitement and fury.

"But he must be stopped!" he shouted, rushing forward. "Hi! Frinton! Come back! Come back at once! Stop—stop!"

Frinton, who heard the shout, took no notice. Pitt and Handforth and Co. also heard, for they were near by.

"Anything wrong, sir?" shouted McClure.

"Yes—yes!" roared the inspector. "Stop that fellow in the boat—try and head him off somehow! But stop him, at all costs!"

"Trust me, sir!" bawled Handforth. "Come on, you chaps!"

They were all about to rush off, but Lee stopped them.

"There is no need for you to go, Church," he called out. "Get that boat as soon as it drifts to the bank and row it across to

the island here. I don't feel inclined to swim just now."

"Right, sir!" shouted Church.

The others were hurrying off, and Handforth led them. They went pelting down the towing-path, and we lost sight of them owing to intervening trees and a bend in the river.

Handforth was determined to distinguish himself. He knew that Frinton was in the boat, and Handforth's opinion of Frinton was not exactly favourable. He had been told to stop the boat and its occupant, and Handforth meant to do so. He was quite grim.

Pitt and McClure were with him, and they soon picked up Tom Burton. The son of a sea captain was rather astonished to see the three juniors rushing along the river bank as though their very lives depended upon speed.

"Souse my scuppers!" he exclaimed. "What's wrong, shipmates?"

"We've got to stop Frinton!" gasped Handforth, without pausing. "Come on, Bo'sun! You can lend a hand! The only way is to head the rotter off by diving into the river."

"Rats!" exclaimed Pitt, as they ran. "I've got a better idea. I don't see the fun of getting soaked."

"I'm doing this job—not you!" roared Handforth.

"If you like to take a swim fully dressed, you're welcome to it," panted Reginald Pitt. "But the best plan is to make a short cut across the meadows, get to the bridge, and wait there. We can jump into Frinton's boat as it goes underneath and collar him easily."

"You're right, messmate—souse me if you're not," said the Bo'sun.

Handforth was compelled to admit that Pitt's plan was the best, and it was put into execution. The breathless juniors arrived on the bridge with plenty of time to spare. And there they crouched down, waiting. Frinton, with his back to the bridge, and rowing hard, had no idea what was in store for him.

But as his boat swept beneath the low bridge four figures suddenly appeared. They dropped in a heap. Handforth, careless as usual, tumbled overboard before anybody could stop him. He tumbled into the water with a terrific splash and a roar of alarm.

But the others were quite capable of dealing with the situation. Frinton, taken completely by surprise, was held securely, although he struggled with the strength of desperation.

Five minutes later he was on the bank—

exhausted, helpless, and completely in the power of his captors.

The Mysterious X was at large no longer!

"I'm innocent, sir—I swear I'm innocent!"

Frinton gasped out the words feverishly. He had just been arrested by Inspector Jameson, and the latter had stated the charge—burglary, with brutal assault. And I stood looking on, with the other fellows behind. Handforth had vanished—he was intent upon getting into dry things!

"You needn't appeal to Mr. Lee in that way, Frinton," said the inspector grimly. "Good gracious, boy, do you dare to deny that you are the Mysterious X?"

The Sixth-Former groaned.

"No, I don't deny that—I can't deny it," he muttered wretchedly. "But I swear that I didn't commit that crime in Bannington! It wasn't me at all, inspector."

"That's enough," put in Jameson coldly. "You were seen, boy—your escape was witnessed. Let me advise you to say as little as possible. You will only make things worse by talking."

And, in a state of collapse, Frinton of the Sixth was led away by the triumphant police inspector. In the morning he would appear before the magistrate, and the news was spread broadcast in a very short time.

The Head was vastly upset, and there was great commotion everywhere. Amongst the juniors Frinton's exposure was the sole topic of conversation. My own chums quite agreed with me that there was no doubt about Frinton's guilt.

But Nelson Lee was of another opinion.

"The lad is certainly guilty of the former thefts which were committed," said the gov'nor. "But this last affair, Nipper, is different. Frinton was telling the truth. He did not commit that assault upon the man Simpkins; indeed, I do not think he was in Bannington at all. It is my intention to get to the bottom of the whole affair."

"But—but there's nothing more to discover, sir," I protested.

"You think not—eh?" said Nelson Lee smoothly. "Well, I differ. The true secret of the Mysterious X is not yet out—but it will be before long!"

I had to be satisfied with that, for Nelson Lee would say no more. But it was quite certain that the climax had arrived, and the end of the whole affair was within sight.

What was that end to be?

And how would Frinton of the Sixth fare in the finish?

THE END.

Next Week's Story,

under the title of

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THE HOUSE IN THE JUNGLE; OR, JOHN HAMMOND'S DELUSION.

A Tale of the Adventures of an English Lad and a Young American in the
Wild Heart of Africa in Quest of a Mysterious Valley.

By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

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

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

ALAN CARNE, a young Britisher captured by the Germans in East Africa, is cast out at the end of the War, to wander in the jungle. He is joined by a Hottentot servant named

JAN SWART. After a few days of hardship they fall in with

DICK SELBY and his native servants. Alan and Dick become great pals. They witness the death of an old man named John Hammond, who tells them a wonderful story of a house in the jungle, where an English girl is kept captive. The chums determine to find this mysterious house. On the way Dick slips and falls into a river. He is carried along by the current, but manages to cling to a log.

(Now read on.)

CAST ADRIFT.

DICK SELBY was not despondent. After two narrow escapes from death, the sandbar and the log having saved him, he was at present in a situation that was less perilous than uncomfortable. It was not likely, he felt, that he would be attacked by crocodiles or hippopotami in such a deep and raging flood.

"I guess there isn't much to worry about," he reflected. "I'll get ashore by and by, in an hour or so, and strike south until I meet Carne and the safari. I dare say I shall float for a few miles first, though."

The night was drawing near to its end, and the air was raw and biting. The lad shivered in his wet garments, and now and again made futile attempts to steer the big, unwieldy log, which remained obstinately in the middle of the stream.

For a couple of hours it rode on with the seething current, which was swollen to such a height that not even a ripple marked the bars and islands which were buried beneath it. The grey spears of dawn quivered above the horizon, and the light of day broke, revealing to right and left wooded hills, at the base of which half-submerged thickets protruded from the water.

Dick was hungry and tired, and in gloomy spirits, knowing that he must have travelled a good many miles from his companions. His limbs were so stiff and cramped that he could scarcely move them, and he was in danger of toppling from his perch, when a native canoe

that was hollowed from the trunk of a tree, and had been gaining on the log, drifted within his reach.

At the risk of falling into the stream he scrambled into it, and, finding no paddle, he seated himself in the stern and tried to drive the craft with his arms towards a spit of land that jutted out from the bank on the west. It was a mile below him, and he was confident at first that he would succeed in landing there.

But his exertions were of no avail. To his bitter disappointment, he missed the promontory by a very few yards, and as he swung round the point of it—he dared not attempt to swim the short distance, because he could use only one leg—he saw before him a basin formed by the encroachment of the swollen river over miles of bare plain. It was like a vast lake, skirted on both sides by low, dense jungle, and through the centre of it ran a swift, heaving tide that was dotted with driftwood and clumps of grass and vegetation. The flood was still high, and was of a tawny-brown colour.

Dick was worried now, and his anxiety increased as he was swept across the basin and into a narrower stretch of the stream, where he was shut in by wooded hills again. He was more than a hundred yards from either shore, and the current was so strong that he could not swerve the canoe to the left, hard though he paddled with his arms.

"Since this river flows north it must empty into the Bana," he told himself: "and I guess I am within something like forty miles of that stream, judging by the distance John Hammond would have covered on foot in four hours. Hammond would have covered on foot in four hours as if there was precious little chance of my ever seeing Alan Carne and my safari again. They are far behind me now."

The sun mounted into a brazen sky, and the heat soon dried the lad's clothing. He had meanwhile renewed his efforts, and with discouraging results, having made scarcely any progress towards the left bank. At length, utterly exhausted, and with the pangs of hunger gnawing at him, he dropped down on the bottom of the craft. His eyes closed, and, little dreaming of what was in store for him, he sank into a heavy slumber.

TROUBLE WITH THE NATIVES.

WHEN the dawn broke that morning Alan Carne was seated on a stone outside of the tent, which had been pitched in a glade of the forest near to the west bank of the river, and a short distance below the rapids by which the safari had crossed.

Jan had got safely ashore at the end of the rope, bringing the news that Dick Selby was adrift on a log; and after he had repeated the words that the young American had shouted to him, Alan, who was now in command of the party, had wanted them to push on to the north at once. They had obstinately refused to budge, however, declaring that there would be danger from wild beasts if they were to travel by night, which was quite true. Having held a palaver in their own tongues, the Wakambas and Swahilis had erected the tent and built a big fire, and stretched themselves on the ground.

They were still lying asleep by the glowing embers of the fire, but there had not been a wink of sleep for the English lad. Fearing lest the men would desert if they had an opportunity, and flee to the south, Alan had remained on guard during the two or three hours of darkness, with a rifle by his side.

His heart was heavy, and there was a sombre look in his eyes as he glanced around the camp and through the screen of foliage to the turbid, racing stream, beyond which he could see smoke slowly rising from the smouldering ashes that had been left in the wake of the conflagration.

It was more than anxiety for his friend that worried him and caused his despondency. For days past the strange story that John Hammoud had told had been on his mind, and he was thinking of it now as he sat there in the grey light of the dawn. He drew from his pocket a sealed letter that was encased in oilskin, gazed at it for a moment and put it back. He had brought that thin parcel from England to South Africa, and had carried it about with him for a couple of years. It had been in his possession while he fought with Driscoll's Scouts, and while he was a prisoner with the German soldiers it had been concealed in one of his boots.

"I want badly to get to that hidden valley," he murmured. "I must do it somehow, even if Jan and I have to go alone. And that's what it will come to, I imagine, if Dick has lost his life. These cowardly black fellows won't be willing to—"

He paused at a sound of footsteps and voices. All of the safari were awake now, and the little Hottentot was approaching the tent.

"The night is over, baas," he said. "Which way do we march?"

"To the north, if I can persuade the men," Alan replied. "We must go in search of Dick Selby on the chance that he is alive, and that we will find him coming towards us along the river."

"There was a very good chance for him, baas. I don't think he has been drowned.

He was on a big log, and it would have drifted in to the shore with him."

"But probably not until he had been swept down the stream for many miles, Jan. We may have to travel for days before we find him. I am greatly afraid that he is dead, though."

"If we do not find him, will we turn back?" asked the Hottentot.

"I don't know," Alan answered. "We will talk of that again, you and I, after we have searched far to the north."

Rising to his feet as he spoke, he walked to the edge of the river and strained his eyes down its foaming course, as if he was hopeful of getting a glimpse of his missing friend. When he returned to the camp, fearing that the worst had happened to Dick Selby, the natives had thrown fresh wood on the embers of the fire and were beginning to prepare the morning meal. They were all in a sullen mood. They did not question Alan in regard to his plans, nor did he speak to them until he had had his breakfast. And then, resolved to have his own way, he called the headman to him.

"I have words for your ear, Rembo," he said. "I am your leader now, and you must obey me. I will speak first of our enemies, the Bajangas. They are over yonder, miles behind the smoking jungle, and they believe that all of us perished in the flames last night. There is nothing to be feared from them, so we are going to march north to seek for my friend Dick Selby, from whom I had a message by the mouth of the Hottentot. Perhaps he has been drowned, yet it may be that he was washed ashore after drifting for a long distance down the stream; and if so, he is in need of help, since he has neither food nor firearms. Should we not find him we will go on as far as the river Bana, and I will then have more talk with you. And now tell your men what I have told you."

Rembo's black features were inscrutable.

"It is a long way to the Bana," he demurred, "and it is near to that river, Bhagwan, that the tribe of the Bajangas dwell. It will be a dangerous journey."

"We are not likely to meet any of them," Alan replied; "and if we should be attacked we will fight as we did before. You have said that you are a brave warrior, Rembo, and therefore you should not be afraid of anything."

"But the men are not so brave, Bhagwan. They may not be willing to travel north."

"They've got to go, whether they want to or not. I'll shoot the first man who refuses to march. Moreover, Rembo, if you all desert in a body, I will tell the tale of your cowardice and disobedience when I get down to Nairobi, and not one of you will ever be employed on safari again. You know that. You will be put to shame, and your own people will call you women."

"My men shall hear your words, Bhagwan. Yet it was not you who hired them, and if they will not obey I can't help it."

The natives had been looking on, huddled in a group. Rembo strode over to them, and

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

while he conversed with him Alan waited calmly, with his rifle in his hands, and Jan stood by his side. An earnest discussion ensued. The Wakambas and Swahilis shook their heads at first, and it was evident that they were in a mutinous mood, loth to obey the English lad's orders. But at length their sullen, scowling faces relaxed a little. They had been persuaded by the headman, who left them ~~and~~ came back to Alan.

"It is good," he said. "They will march as you wish, Bhagwan, but no farther than the river Bana."

With this concession, which was more than he had expected, Alan had to be content for the present.

"They have chosen wisely, Rembo," he answered. "I am pleased with them and with you. And now let us start."

There was no delay. The tent having been rolled up, and the luggage shouldered, the safari set off to the north through the forest, keeping close to the bank of the swollen river. Rembo took the lead, and Alan, accompanied by the Hottentot, hung in the rear to guard against possible desertions.

He was not in very cheerful spirits. He was mistrustful of the natives, feeling sure that they would have refused to obey him but for the threat to denounce them at Nairobi. He foresaw that there would be serious trouble with them in the future, whether or not Dick Selby should be found.

He was determined, however, that no obstacle should deter him from attempting to reach the mysterious valley where lived the Englishman and the girl whom John Hammond had seen.

DICK HAS SOME STARTLING ADVENTURES.

AT the close of that day, while Alan Carne was looking for a suitable camping-place for the safari, Dick Selby awoke from his long slumber of exhaustion. He sat up in the canoe, which was stranded in a clump of reeds, and gazed around him in bewilderment. His thoughts were confused at first, and when he had recalled all that had happened, and had taken a more observant survey of his surroundings, he was gripped by a feeling of despair.

"Great Scott, that must be the Bana!" he said to himself, half aloud. "What the deuce am I to do? No food, no weapon, and miles and miles from my safari! I couldn't be in a much worse scrape!"

The sun was below the horizon, but the warm, red glow of it was still flushing the horizon. The flood had subsided, and had left the craft high and dry at the extreme end of a spit of sandy soil that was clothed with dense scrub, and projected from the western bank of the river down which the lad had made his perilous journey.

That stream flowed behind him and to the right, its sunken channel now split by rocks and rapids; and in front, just beyond the promontory, it emptied into a wider stream, which was doubtless the Bana. It ran from west to east, its current swift and smooth,

and on the opposite side of it was visible a stretch of jungle, with low hills in the background.

Somewhere to the eastward, across the smaller river, John Hammond had been put ashore by the Somalis, and had begun the weary tramp that had ended in his tragic death. And two or three hundred miles to westward, up the course of the Bana, and on the north bank of it, was the hidden valley.

"What the deuce am I to do?" Dick repeated. "I must have drifted at least fifty miles in all with the flood. Alan Carne and my men were that far to the south, and even if they have pushed in this direction to-day, as I dare say they did, I'll have to trudge about twenty miles to meet them. Such a distance as that on foot, and with nothing to eat! There's no use in thinking of it!"

Death by starvation, or from wild beasts! Such was the dismal, discouraging prospect. But it was not in the young American's nature to yield to despair, no matter how desperate his plight might be. His sleep had refreshed him. His strength had been well maintained, in spite of the pangs of hunger, and his injured knee was so much better that he could walk without pain.

He would spend the night in the safe shelter of a tree, he told himself, and in the morning he would follow the smaller stream to the south until he dropped from fatigue, when perhaps he would be found by his companions while life was yet in him.

He stepped from the canoe, and when he had slaked his thirst at the edge of the water he made his way westward along the middle of the spit of land, which mounted gradually as he pressed through the scrub. There was no shelter for him here. He must find thick timber if he was to sleep amongst the boughs of a tree.

The sunset glow had now faded, and the dusk that comes so swiftly in the tropics was falling. Dick pushed on for a hundred yards or so, and then he suddenly stopped, sniffing the air. He could smell smoke. He was sure of it. He moved a little farther, and paused again as a confused sound of voices floated to his ears.

"By George! What can it mean?" he muttered. "Who can be here?"

Alan Carne and the safari? It was impossible. The Bajangas and the treacherous white man who had hounded poor John Hammond to his death? No; they could not have got so far since the previous night, when they must have been forty or fifty miles from the Bana.

Had they turned back they would have had a march of several days to the big river, where, some distance to the east of the other stream, they must have left the canoes in which they had pursued Hammond and the Somalis from the vicinity of the hidden valley. Who, then, could be encamped in this neighbourhood? Perhaps other savages of the Bajanga tribe, who dwelt to the westward. It was the most plausible explanation.

The lad's wisest course would have been to

(Continued overleaf.)

steal quietly away; but curiosity, and his need of food, urged him to investigate. There was a remote possibility, he felt, of his finding white men, hunters of big game or explorers, who would befriend him.

Guided by the low murmur of voices, which were to the right of him, he crept stealthily and noiselessly in that direction for a number of yards. He came from the dense scrub to a fringe of palm-trees, and slipped through them to the crest of a steep slope. And here, crouching between two of the palms, he gazed down at a barbaric and picturesque scene.

He had discovered a camp of strange people. Beneath him was a glade, semi-circular in shape, that opened on to the Bana River. On both sides of it were small huts of woven reeds, and in the middle of the open space, squatted around a big fire, were a dozen men of a negro type, some with black beards, who wore white turbans, robes of blue cotton-cloth, and belts that bristled with sheath-knives and silver-mounted pistols.

One of them, a stalwart bearded man, with brutal, repulsive features that were disfigured by scars, appeared to be the leader of the party. He had gold bangles on his wrists, and his belt of red leather was richly embroidered. To the left of the fire, at the base of the steep bank, were guns with long barrels, bales of luggage, and a heap of elephant tusks. Beyond the glade, at the edge of the river, four canoes were moored to stakes, and a strip of white cloth hung motionless in the still air from the top of a staff that was planted in the pebbly shore.

"By Jove, they're Arabs!" Dick said to himself. "And I'll bet anything that big, ugly fellow is Tib Mohammed!"

There could be no doubt that such was the case. While fitting out his safari at Mombasa, and later at Nairobi, the young American had heard of the notorious slaver. The man had been described to him, and he had been warned against him.

Tib Mohammed was a ruthless ruffian, with

a following of many Arabs as cruel as himself, and for years he had been the terror of Central Africa. He had twice been caught and imprisoned at coast towns, once by the English and once by the Portuguese, and each time he had contrived to escape.

On the last occasion, several years ago, he had collected a larger band of followers, and gone with them to the wilds of the far north, whence had come to the south tales of his trafficking in slaves, and of his slaughter of elephants for the sake of the ivory.

And here he was now, encamped on the Bana River with some of his band, and very likely discussing fresh villainy with them. The cloth that hung from the staff at the water's edge was, it was to be presumed, a signal to guide to the camp others of the band who were absent on some quest.

There were only a few of them here, and Dick wondered where the rest were. He had been told at Nairobi that the Arabs numbered more than a hundred in all, and that they had a formidable stronghold somewhere in the north.

"This is no place for me," he murmured, when he had gazed at the scene for a brief interval. "I had better be off. These fellows are as much to be feared as the Bajangas, and if I were to fall into their hands they would probably—"

At that instant, as he turned to leave, he was startled by the hissing of a snake which he had disturbed. Leaping aside to avoid being bitten, he lost his balance, and swayed on the verge of the slope, then pitched to the bottom of it, and rolled over the grass to the middle of the glade, where he scrambled to his feet.

He had no chance to take to flight. He was at once seized by a couple of the Arabs, all of whom had jumped up in consternation and amazement; and the rest, uttering cries of alarm, snatched their rifles and stood on guard, peering into the gloom above them.

(To be continued.)

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