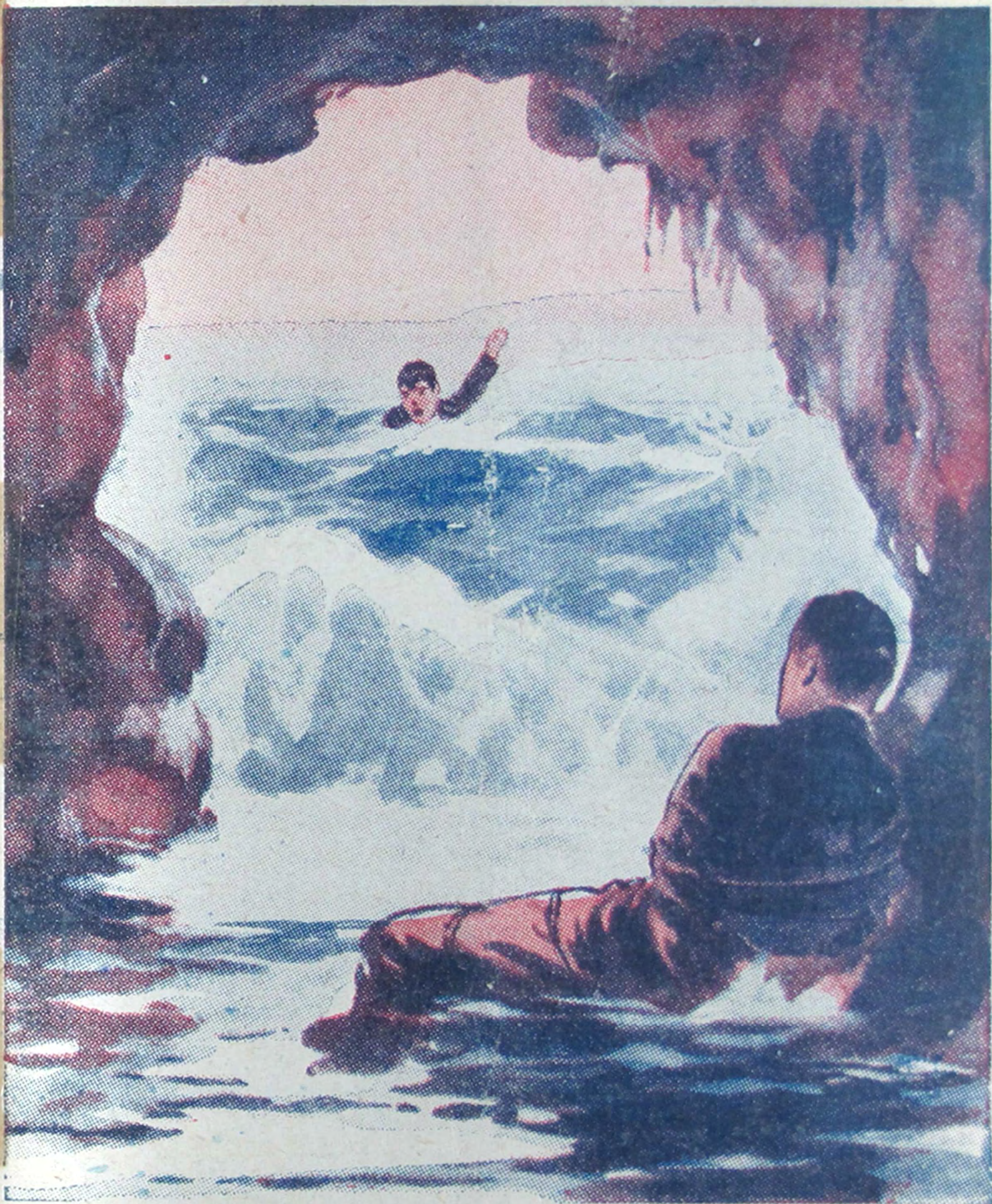


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

VALUABLE EVIDENCE!

"**S** HOCKING!" said Gulliver.

"A disgrace to St. Frank's!" exclaimed Fullwood piously.

"Things have got to a pretty pass," put in Bell. "A member of the Sixth in gaol, accused of wholesale robbery! My only hat! An' we always thought he was such a decent chap, too!"

"Only this mornin', when I ran down to the village," continued Fullwood, "one of the yokel kids yelled insults after me—me, you know! Asked if I was goin' to quod next week!"

Gulliver and Bell grinned.

"We shall be chipped for weeks," said Gulliver. "An' no wonder!"

The Nuts of the Remove at St. Frank's were chatting in the lobby of the Ancient House. Morning lessons were just over, and the one topic of conversation in the whole school seemed to be the recent sensation regarding Frinton of the Sixth.

Frinton was a prefect, and at that very moment he was confined in Bannington police-station—or, at least, he had been confined there—charged with being concerned in several burglaries which had recently been committed in the neighbourhood of Bellton and St. Frank's.

But this was not all. The affair which had led to Frinton's arrest had been rather dramatic. A robbery had been committed in Bannington itself, and somebody had been brutally assaulted. Frinton was suspected.

For several weeks the countryside had been haunted by a strange marauder who called himself "The Mysterious X"; and Frinton of the Sixth had turned out to be the rascally plunderer.

"It's a frightful affair," went on Fullwood. "When a chap like Frinton turns out to be a common thief there's no tellin' what might happen. It makes a chap feel ashamed of belongin' to St. Frank's——"

"Eh? What's that?"

Handforth of the Remove was just pass-

ing, and he paused. Church and McClure, his faithful chums of Study D, were with him, and they paused, too. Handforth frowned as he looked at the three Nuts.

"What's that you were saying, Fullwood?" he demanded.

"I wasn't speakin' to you," said Fullwood sourly.

"Yes, but I heard you!" exclaimed Handforth. "So you feel ashamed of belonging to St. Frank's? I'm not surprised! Nearly everybody else here is ashamed of you disgracing the school with your presence!"

"I was talkin' about Frinton," growled Fullwood.

"Oh, that cad!" said Handforth, with a sniff.

"We all thought he was a decent fellow until he turned out to be the 'Mysterious X,'" went on Fullwood.

"Did we?" said Handforth. "I didn't, anyhow. I always thought that Frinton was a rotter. Wasn't he a pal of Starke? Wasn't he a bully? Wasn't he a gambler and a smoker? Wasn't he a regular outsider?"

"Of course he was," said McClure.

"Well, when we found that he was the 'Mysterious X' it wasn't much of a shock," went on Handforth. "Serves the beast right—he deserves to be sent to chokey for twenty years! And as for his downfall making you feel ashamed to belong to St. Frank's—— Here! I'm speaking to you, Fullwood!"

"Really?" said Fullwood, strolling away. "Thanks all the same, but your voice grates on me. Speak to the wall, will you?"

Handforth pushed back his coat-sleeves.

"When a fellow asks for a punch on the nose I generally oblige," he said grimly. "What the dickens—— Leggo my arm, Church, you ass!"

"Don't contaminate your fist, old man," said Church soothingly.

"Don't what?"

"Fullwood isn't worth touching, you know," explained Church. "Why waste a good

punch, Handy? Reserve it for a deserving case."

Handforth nodded and rolled down his sleeves.

"I suppose you're right," he admitted. "It is rather a pity to use my strength on such a cad. Rats to him! At the same time, he deserves punching."

Church and McClure exchanged a glance of satisfaction. Handforth was fairly easy to manage if they only went to work the right way; and they did not care to see their leader get into trouble, as he certainly would have done if he had started punching Fullwood's nose in the public lobby. Masters had an unpleasant habit of appearing at such inopportune moments.

A few minutes later I strolled through the lobby, accompanied by Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, my chums of Study C. A cricket bat was tucked under my arm, and Watson was fondling a ball.

"Heaps of time for a bit of practice before dinner," I said briskly. "Hallo, sir! Feeling fit this morning?"

Nelson Lee had just appeared from outside. His clear-cut, clean-shaven face was unusually thoughtful, and he paused as I addressed him. The guv'nor had been busy on the Frinton case, and I guessed that he was thinking of it now.

"Yes, Nipper, I am quite fit, thank you," he replied. "By the way, I should like you to come to my study for a few minutes."

"Now, sir?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Anything important, guv'nor?"

"Fairly," replied Lee. "I am well aware that you regard me as a nuisance, that you want to get out on to the playing-fields. But you must be generous, Nipper; you must present me with ten minutes of your valuable time."

I grinned.

"All right, sir," I said. "I'll come at once. You fellows had better wait for me on Little Side. Take this bat, Montie."

"With pleasure, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West.

I followed the guv'nor to his study, wondering why he wanted me so urgently. When I had closed the door he sat down, and eyed me thoughtfully as he lit a cigarette. Then he motioned me to a chair. I sat on a corner of the table.

"I want you to tell me, Nipper, exactly what happened on the night when you saw Frinton arrive on the island in the River Stowe," he said. "He approached in the disguise of the 'Mysterious X,' and left the place in his own character?"

I nodded.

"That's right, sir," I said. "The rotter had been away in Bannington committing that burglary at Mr. Norman Brent's place. Have the police discovered the loot, by the way?"

"Not yet," replied Lee. "They think that Frinton has hidden the stuff, and that he refuses to disclose the spot."

"Well, isn't that right?"

"I think not," said the schoolmaster-

detective. "But you have not answered my question, Nipper; you have not done as I required. Frinton arrived on the island, and you saw him. At what time was that?"

"Somewhere about half-past twelve, sir—"

"That won't do, young 'un," interrupted Lee. "'Somewhere about' is too vague. Don't you know for certain?"

"Well, yes," I said. "The time was almost exactly twelve-thirty."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Positive."

"You would be willing to swear to it?"

"Yes, of course, and so would the other fellows who were with me," I replied. "But why? What does it matter?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Because the man who was assaulted—Simpkins—has recovered," he answered.

"Blessed if I can see any connection," I said.

"You will when I tell you that Simpkins has made a positive statement to the effect that the 'Mysterious X' attacked him at twelve-thirty-five exactly," said Nelson Lee quietly. "The man was seriously hurt about the head, but he is going on well now, and the doctor hopes—"

"Hold on, sir!" I gasped. "You—you say that Simpkins was assaulted at twenty-five to one?"

"Yes; and the 'Mysterious X' was seen in the grounds of the Oaks—Mr. Brent's place—at twenty minutes to one," said Nelson Lee.

"You will now realise, perhaps, that there is a big discrepancy somewhere."

I nodded, rather bewildered.

"Rather, sir," I agreed. "It's not at this end, I'll swear. When we saw the 'Mysterious X' the time was just half-past. And the 'Mysterious X' was in Bannington five minutes later! He couldn't have been, guv'nor, because five minutes later we saw Frinton without his disguise."

"It is certainly out of the question to suppose that Frinton was in two places at one and the same time—and that is what we are asked to believe," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "There is only one explanation, Nipper. Frinton was not in Bannington on the night of the crime."

"Then—then Frinton isn't the culprit?"

"Of course not," said Lee. "I never thought he was."

"But who is?" I demanded.

"Ah! That remains to be disclosed," went on the guv'nor. "But you will see the extreme value of your evidence, my boy. If you can swear in a witness-box that Frinton was on Willard's Island at twelve-thirty—that you actually saw him there at that time—his acquittal will be certain. At all events, he cannot be charged with this last crime. He has confessed that he committed the former robberies, but they were small, petty affairs."

"Watson will swear that about the time, too," I said, "and so will Montie and Pitt. We all saw him. I'm blessed if I can understand it all, sir! It's a rare puzzle! Who

really committed the assault and the robbery?"

"The Mysterious X."

"But Frinton's the 'Mysterious X'!" I protested, "and Frinton wasn't there!"

"Then there must be two of them," smiled Nelson Lee.

"Oh, my hat!"

I stared at the guv'nor in amazement.

"Two of them!" I went on. "But—but do you mean to say that Frinton had an accomplice? I thought the whole thing was cleared up, and now I'm jiggered if it doesn't seem more mysterious than ever!"

"Yet it is really much clearer," said the guv'nor. "Much depends upon the reliability of your evidence."

"I'll swear to the time, sir—within a minute or two, at all events," I declared. "We were all in bed before one o'clock that night, and we saw Frinton a clear half hour before that."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"That is excellent," he said. "It may not be necessary for you to give your evidence at all, but it is just as well to be prepared. I can assure you, Nipper, that the real secret of the 'Mysterious X' is not yet disclosed. There is just a chance that I may be able to learn the truth this afternoon. At all events, I mean to do my best in that direction. Frinton is a young rascal, but he is not so black as he has been painted."

A few minutes later I left the guv'nor's study and went out to Little Side in a thoughtful mood. I did not notice that Starke of the Sixth was on the stairs as I passed through the lobby; but Starke saw me, and he watched me cross the sunny Triangle.

And Starke, for some reason, seemed quite pleased.

CHAPTER II.

NOT VERY SATISFACTORY.

THE bully of the Sixth descended the stairs quickly and beckoned to Kenmore, who happened to be passing. Kenmore was Starke's study-mate, and a fellow of the same calibre as Starke himself.

"I want a word with you, Kenny," said Starke briskly.

Kenmore halted.

"Come over into this corner," said Walter Starke. "An idea's just come into my head, and I want you to tell me what you think of it. Things have been pretty rotten for us just lately."

"Ever since the Remove fellows started that beastly Secret Combine business, anyhow," agreed Kenmore. "There's no getting over the fact, Starke, that the kids have got us whacked. That's putting it bluntly."

Starke nodded grimly.

"I don't know about being whacked," he said, "but they have been having things their own way during this week. We had the Remove at our mercy, so to speak, until the

Secret Combine was started. And then the trouble began. Two or three of us were collared by fellows we couldn't recognise, and we were birched. The rotten part of the whole thing is that we don't know who did it."

"But we do know that we shall be birched again if we try any of our games on," said Kenmore. "I've decided to finish, Starke, as you know. The game's not worth the candle. Rats to the kids!"

"I don't agree with that," said Starke. "But look here, about that idea I've got. I told you about that last birching affair, didn't I?"

Kenmore grinned.

"Yes," he replied. "You and Jesson were collared on your way home from the White Harp, after lights out. You were taken to the meeting-place of the Combine, and we were given a choice—a licking, or your signature to a paper."

"We signed!" exclaimed Starke. "Like a couple of silly idiots, we put our names to that document, which practically places us in the juniors' power. That paper says that we've been bullying, and that we visited the White Harp in order to gamble. We were mad to sign it."

"That's what I told you at the time."

"Oh, it's no good rubbing it in," snapped Starke. "You'd have signed, too, if you had been in our position. The little beasts were ready to half skin us, and Jesson and I had to do something. But that's not the point. That paper is in Nipper's possession."

"How do you know it is?"

"Well, I don't know for certain, but I suspect it," said Starke. "Who else would be the chief of the Combine?"

"I'll admit that Nipper's the most likely fellow."

"Well, then, it's fairly safe to assume that that signed paper is in Study C," said Starke. "Nipper wouldn't carry it about with him, it might get lost that way. It'll be in his study, stowed away somewhere. Now, my idea is to search the room while we've got the chance. Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson are on the playing-fields, and we've got a clear—"

"Not me," interrupted Kenmore. "We might be found there, and we shouldn't have a leg to stand on."

Starke grunted.

"I'm not going to ask you to take any risks," he said tartly. "All I want you to do is to stay in the lobby, here. If you see either of the three coming in, just pop along and give me the word."

"Oh, I don't mind that," said Kenmore. "Buck up!"

"Good!"

Starke went off. He was extremely anxious to recover that incriminating document, and he felt that by searching Study C there was some prospect of success. The Remove passage was quiet, for nearly everybody was outside.

And Starke succeeded in getting into the study without being seen. He closed the door, and then looked round hurriedly. There

were several likely places—the cupboard, or the bookcase, or the small chest of drawers in the corner.

"No, not the cupboard," muttered Starke. "And I don't suppose it'll be in one of the drawers, either. The chances are that the paper is slipped in between the pages of some book in that case."

As a preliminary, therefore, Starke proceeded to take the books down, one by one, and examine each. He had hardly got through half of them when he heard steps out in the passage, and junior voices.

He looked up in alarm.

There was just a chance that somebody was making for Study C, and Starke had no wish to be found there. He did not believe for a moment that any junior was about to enter, but precaution cost nothing. And in this case he had cause to congratulate himself a moment later.

He glanced round quickly; there was only one possible haven of refuge—behind the curtains in the window recess. So he stepped quietly over to them, and concealed himself behind their folds.

And he was only just in time.

For the door opened, and two juniors entered. One of them was Reginald Pitt, and the other Sir Montie Tregellis-West. Starke kept absolutely still, cursing his luck for being placed in such an awkward position.

"Really, dear fellow, I don't know where the thing is," said Sir Montie. "You have succeeded in draggin' me in from the playing-fields—"

"Why, you silly ass, I said you needn't come," interrupted Pitt. "Nipper said that the bat was in this study— Yes, there it is, over in the corner. I must have left it here this morning."

"That's all right, then, old boy," said Tregellis-West.

Starke felt relieved; it seemed as though the juniors were about to retire. But Pitt paused before opening the study door, and he looked at Sir Montie in rather a thoughtful fashion.

"By the way, about that Starke affair," he said. "There's no doubt, old son, that we've got the bullice on toast. With that signed paper in possession of the Secret Combine we're as safe as houses. The bullice daren't do a thing."

"You're quite right, old boy," agreed Tregellis-West. "Starke an' Jesson are particularly helpless, an' the others daren't do much. The Secret Combine has been a great success—"

"I suppose you know where the paper is?" asked Pitt. "That paper with the writing on it, I mean?"

"Well, dear fellow, I'm not quite sure," said Sir Montie. "But it's quite safe, an' you needn't worry—"

"I'm not worrying," interrupted Pitt. "The paper I'm referring to is one that Starke would like to get hold of—and he'd be rather surprised if he knew where it was to be found."

"But it's in this study, dear fellow—"

"That paper?" repeated Pitt. "Don't you

believe it, Montie! Starke wouldn't mind searching the study, if the fit seized him, and nothing would be safe here. But in that old tunnel the paper is secure."

Sir Montie raised his eyebrows and adjusted his pince-nez.

"Really, dear boy, I fail to follow your remarks," he observed mildly. "In the tunnel? I wasn't aware that the paper was in any tunnel, begad! I think you must be mistaken, Pitt—I do, really."

"Not likely!" said Reginald Pitt. "Don't breathe a word about it, of course—it's a secret; but the paper is down in the tunnel which leads out of the old vault, beneath the monastery ruins. Who'd think of looking for it there? My dear old Montie, it's as safe as the Bank of England!"

"You surprise me, Pitt!" said Tregellis-West. "I was under the impression that the beastly paper was hidden in this study. Whose idea was it to take it down into the old tunnel? I don't think I quite approve of it, you know."

Pitt grinned.

"Starke would never think of searching there for it," he exclaimed. "Starke is a spy and a beast—a blackguard of the first water—and he hasn't any more scruple than a professional criminal."

Starke, behind the curtain, gritted his teeth as he listened to this candid opinion of his own character. But his position was such that he could take no steps to punish the author of the utterance.

"Starke wouldn't hesitate at playing the spy," continued Pitt. "Therefore it is better to take precautions. That paper I was just talking about is pushed into a little crevice in the stonework, about twelve feet inside the tunnel. Nobody would possibly see it unless they knew where to look. So we can reckon on it being safe. Starke won't find it, anyhow."

"Perhaps it's rather a good idea," observed Tregellis-West. "But I should feel more secure if the signed document was behind a lock an' key somewhere. It seems rather public, you know, to put it in a crevice. But I suppose you know best, dear boy. I'm no good at arrangin' these things, begad!"

"Well, let's get back to the playing-fields," said Pitt, opening the door.

They passed outside, and Starke, with his heart beating fast, listened to the footsteps of the juniors as they walked down the passage towards the lobby. The sounds died away at last, and the prefect ventured to emerge.

"By George!" he muttered gloatingly.

He did not venture to waste another moment in Study C. The coast being clear, he stole out, and walked along the passage until he came across Kenmore. The latter looked at Starke curiously.

"All serene?" he inquired.

"Yes. But why the deuce didn't you warn me?"

"My dear chap, I didn't have a chance," replied Kenmore. "They were in before I knew it, and had passed me within a second."

So I simply had to let them go, and leave it to chance."

Starke nodded.

"Well, as it happens, everything's all right; but it was a near shave," he said. "I want a word with you, Kenny. Come to the study."

Kenmore followed the other prefect to the Sixth-Form passage, and they turned into their study, and Starke closed the door.

"Listen!" he exclaimed mysteriously.

Kenmore knew that something unusual was afoot. Starke's very attitude was eloquent of excitement and triumph. His mission to Study C had evidently been highly successful.

"I suppose you've got the paper?" asked Kenmore.

"No, not yet," said Starke; "but I shall get it within ten minutes. I know exactly where I can lay my fingers on it. I'll just tell you what happened. Those young bounders—Pitt and Tregellis-West—walked right into Study C while I was there."

"And cornered you?" asked Kenmore staring.

"No; I took good care of that," replied Starke. "I managed to get behind the curtain, and by a piece of splendid luck the young sweeps started talking about that paper I signed."

"Jolly convenient, eh?"

"I should think it was!" said Starke. "That paper, according to what Pitt said, is concealed in a crevice about twelve feet along that old tunnel which leads from the vault under the monastery ruins. All we've got to do is to slip down there and take it away."

"Good!" said Kenmore.

"Of course, it doesn't interest you much, I know," went on Starke. "You didn't sign the paper, and you don't care. But I think you might show a little feeling, instead of—"

"Oh, all right," interrupted Kenmore. "Anything to oblige, old man. I'm awfully pleased to hear that you've located that paper. You'll feel a lot easier when it's burnt, won't you?"

Starke's eyes gleamed.

"Rather!" he agreed. "And it's going to be burnt before dinner—within ten minutes, in fact. We'll go down into that vault at once and settle the matter straight away. You'll come, I suppose?"

"I don't mind," agreed Kenmore.

They hurried out, but Starke slowed his pace as he and Kenmore were crossing the Triangle. They did not want to draw attention to their movements. But they succeeded in reaching the old monastery ruins unobserved.

A stone stairway led down from the ruins into a spacious vault. And from this vault a tunnel led into the deserted workings of the old quarry on Bannington Moor. The place was generally quiet, and the prefects had no fear of meeting anybody, especially at this particular hour of the day.

"Got any matches?" inquired Kenmore, when they had reached the bottom of the

stone stairs. "It's as black as pitch down here—"

"I've got a bit of a candle," interrupted Starke. "We sha'n't be here more than two minutes, anyhow; it ought to be easy to find that crevice."

Starke lit the piece of candle he had brought, and, holding it between his thumb and forefinger, he crossed the vault to the dark patch which marked the entrance to the tunnel.

"Now, let's search carefully," he said.

For the first three or four feet the stonework was quite intact, with no sign of a crevice whatever. But after that there were several small openings visible, and each one was subjected to a close scrutiny.

"Hallo! What's this?" muttered Starke suddenly.

He came to a halt, and Kenmore gazed over his shoulder. There, clearly visible between two pieces of stonework, a slip of paper was tucked away, almost out of sight. Unless the Sixth-Formers had been deliberately looking for the paper they would never have seen it.

"That's it—that's the fatal document," said Kenmore easily. "You'd better fish it out with your pocket-knife."

Starke proceeded to do this without delay, and after a few moments he was successful in bringing the folded paper to the front, where he could grasp it. He pulled it out, and passed the candle to his companion.

"Hold this," he said. "I'll just have a look, to make sure."

He unfolded the paper with every show of confidence, and his eyes gleamed as he held it before him, spread out.

"I'll burn the rotten thing at once," he declared. "There's nothing like making sure—Why, what the thunder—"

Starke paused, and his face went red with fury and consternation. For the paper contained nothing but the following words: "Sold again! Eavesdroppers beware!" The rest of the sheet was blank.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Kenmore.

"You—you silly fool!" snarled Starke, crumpling the paper up in his hand. "There's nothing to laugh at, is there? We've been dished—we've been spoofed!"

"You have, you mean," said Kenmore. "Don't drag me into it. One of those young bounders must have been here before us not five minutes ago. And they must have known that you were behind the curtain, old man."

Starke scowled fiercely.

"All that jaw was for my benefit," he exclaimed. "It was Pitt's doing, of course. Pitt worked the wheeze, hang him! And now we shall be laughed at by all those infernal juniors. You'll be included, don't forget!"

Kenmore's smile vanished.

"Yes, I suppose I shall," he said sourly. "The next time you go looking for that paper, Starke, you'd better go alone! I didn't think you could be so easily spoofed!"

And Kenmore marched out of the tunnel, leaving Starke to follow at his leisure. For

bullies were completely done; and Starke's temper was not improved in the slightest degree.

Meanwhile, Reginald Pitt was explaining to a group of fellows near the pavilion what he had done. I stood listening, and I couldn't help grinning at Pitt's ingenuity.

"It didn't take me a tick to write those words on the paper," chuckled Pitt. "I simply dodged down into the tunnel and shoved the thing into a crevice—and was up again before Starke and Kenmore appeared. I expect they're finding it now—the important signed document!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Really, old boy, you're too swift for me—you are, really," he observed. "I hadn't the slightest inklin' what you were drivin' at in the study. You said that the paper was down in the tunnel——"

"I didn't mention what paper," interrupted Pitt. "I simply said 'the paper I'm referring to.' Well, that wasn't the signed document, was it? By the way, Nipper, I should advise you to take it out of your study and put it in a safer place."

"I will," I replied. "I didn't expect that Starke would descend to pilfering from a chap's study. He's a bigger blackguard than I took him to be. But how did you know he was in there, Pitt?"

Reginald Pitt grinned.

"I didn't know—I suspected it," he replied. "I happened to see Starke jawing with Kenmore in the lobby shortly before, and then I saw him going into the Remove passage. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but when I entered Study C and saw the curtain moving I guessed things. Montie, here, being short-sighted, didn't notice anything."

"Allow me to correct you, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "I am not short-sighted in the least. Quite the reverse, you know. I am obliged to wear glasses in order to make my vision normal——"

"Well, we needn't go into that," said Pitt. "I guessed that Starke was there, and I thought it would be decent to oblige him with a little information. At any rate, he knows by this time that he was spotted, and I don't suppose he's feeling very comfortable."

When we went in to dinner Starke and Kenmore were nowhere to be seen. We did not catch sight of them until we took our places in the dining hall; and the bullies of the Sixth took particular care not to look in our direction.

They were feeling considerably sore, I imagine.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE POWER OF A ROGUE.

NELSON LEE nodded.

"Yes, Nipper, I am off to Bannington this afternoon," he said—"almost immediately, in fact. Frinton, as I think you know, has already been before the magistrate, and has been remanded."

"In custody, sir?" I inquired.

"No, my boy. He has been released on bail," replied the gov'nor. "Mr. Frinton, the foolish lad's father, is staying at an hotel in Bannington. He came down from London a day or two ago, gravely troubled—as you may imagine. Everything at the present moment points to the fact that Frinton is the author of the brutal assault upon the man Simpkins, at the Oaks—when a considerable quantity of valuables was stolen."

"I can't help feeling that Frinton is guilty, sir," I said. "Yet that point about the time seems very queer. Frinton couldn't have been in Bannington at half-past twelve——"

"He wasn't there, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee. "This affair of the Mysterious X is somewhat more complicated than you seem to imagine. That is why I have been somewhat slow in making my inquiries—and why I warned you to leave the matter entirely in my hands. This afternoon, no doubt, I shall succeed in obtaining the whole story."

"You'll let me know all about it, won't you, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Yes, you can be quite sure of that," replied Nelson Lee, with a smile.

A moment or two later he took his departure, and I watched him as he drove out of the Triangle in the speedy little two-seater. It was a half-holiday that day, and I had hoped that I should be able to go with the gov'nor. However, he had planned differently, and I didn't go.

Arriving in Bannington, Nelson Lee pulled up before the Station Hotel—the most select establishment in the town, and an hotel of considerable size. Lee's car was taken round to the garage, and the detective himself entered the wide vestibule, and directed that his card should be taken up to Mr. Howard Frinton.

A few minutes later Lee was ushered into Mr. Frinton's sitting-room. Mr. Howard Frinton proved to be a smallish man, with grey hair and a grizzled moustache. He was a gentleman to his finger-tips, and his face was lined with worry and anxiety.

He greeted Nelson Lee warmly.

"I am delighted to see you, my dear sir," he said. "If there is anything to be done for my poor boy, I am quite sure that you will do it. This terrible trouble has been a great blow to me."

"It is scarcely to be wondered at, Mr. Frinton," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Where is the boy at present?"

"Jack is in the next room—we always call him Jack at home," replied Frinton's father. "I have tried to be stern with him; but how is it possible? He is my own son, and it seems that he is not solely to blame. He has been led away by a scoundrelly brute——"

"I think it would be better if the lad told me the story in his own words," interrupted Lee. "That is my object in coming here, Mr. Frinton. I want to know the whole truth about this Mysterious X affair—I want the boy to be absolutely frank with me. To keep

Anything back now would be fatal. His only chance of mercy is to be truthful."

"You are quite right, Mr. Lee; I have told Jack the very same thing," said Mr. Frinton. "And he, I am glad to say, is willing—indeed, anxious—to confide in you. He has erred greatly, and I must admit that I am downright ashamed of him. But he has been sinned against most atrociously."

"What is your opinion with regard to the affair which led to your son's arrest?" inquired the schoolmaster-detective.

"I am convinced that he is innocent."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Because Jack, whatever his faults, would never have descended to such a foul act of violence," said Mr. Frinton. "The man was attacked with a poker, and I shall never bring myself to believe that Jack committed such a dastardly deed. No, Mr. Lee, my son is innocent of that crime."

"I agree with you," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Frinton has confessed that he committed the series of minor robberies which took place previous to this more serious affair. Those robberies were, after all, of little importance. But in this present case I understand that Mr. Norman Brent has lost articles to the value of seven or eight hundred pounds—a very rich haul. And your son is charged with the crime."

"The police are mad," exclaimed Mr. Frinton bitterly. "While the real criminal is escaping, they are wasting their time in attempting to get evidence against Jack. I know well enough that the boy committed the other thefts—but not this one. And the burglary at Mr. Brent's is, after all, the only important one. I seriously doubt if the earlier victims would consent to prosecute."

"I am quite sure they would not," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, I shall make certain of that. Therefore, if we can only clear your son of this particular charge, the police will have no further hold upon him. And I may as well tell you, Mr. Frinton, that I have already sufficient evidence in my possession to clear the unfortunate lad. When he appears in court again he will be acquitted."

Mr. Frinton's eyes sparkled.

"You are amazingly good, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed fervently. "But how can you produce this evidence?"

"I can produce witnesses to testify that your son was in the neighbourhood of the school while the burglary at Mr. Brent's was actually being committed," replied Nelson Lee. "But, in my opinion, the police will be far more satisfied if I can hand over the actual culprit—and that is my ambition."

"I sincerely hope that you will be successful, my dear sir."

"I can only be successful if Frinton tells me the whole truth concerning this miserable affair," replied the detective. "Will you please bring him into me, so that I may question him?"

"I will fetch him at once," said Mr. Frinton.

A minute later Frinton of the Sixth came into the room. He was a very different fel-

low from the senior who had been known at St. Frank's. Pale, haggard, and with down-cast head, he looked utterly careworn and humiliated.

"Well, Frinton, I am sorry to see you in this deplorable plight," said Nelson Lee quietly. "What made you act so foolishly, my boy? What made you act like a black-guard, instead of a gentleman?"

"I—I don't know, sir!" exclaimed Frinton huskily. "I—I mean, I do know! I must have been mad! I must have been insane to listen to that awful brute! But I don't want to blame Sheldon for what I've done. I deserve to be punished for everything I'm guilty of."

"That, at all events, is the right spirit," said Nelson Lee. "You are the individual who has been haunting the countryside in the character of the Mysterious X."

"Yes, sir," said Frinton hoarsely.

"It may interest you to know that I have been aware of the fact for several weeks past," went on the detective.

"You—you knew, sir?"

"I did."

"And you didn't expose me?"

"You are well aware that I did not, Frinton," said Nelson Lee.

"But—but why not, sir?"

"Because I was convinced that you were merely the tool," replied Lee. "My object was to get hold of the actual culprit. I had almost succeeded, when this affair occurred at the Oaks, and that brought matters to a head. Your cap was found upon the premises, and also a paper bearing your fingerprints—"

"But I wasn't there, sir!" protested Frinton tensely. "I didn't go to Bannington at all that night—I swear I didn't!"

"You need swear nothing here, Frinton," said Lee. "I am quite ready to believe your statement—because I know it happens to be true. A moment ago you referred to somebody named Sheldon. Who is this man, and what relations have you had with him?"

"He's a bookmaker, sir—a card-sharper, and a scoundrel in every way!" exclaimed Frinton fiercely. "I've been a fool to have anything to do with him; but I couldn't help myself. I was forced into it."

"That is not the truth, Jack," said his father. "You were not forced into playing cards with the man during the Christmas holidays, were you? And that, it seems to me, was the commencement of the whole trouble."

"Tell me about it, Frinton," said Nelson Lee.

"Well, sir, during the holidays I was idiot enough to get mixed up with this sharper—his name is Will Sheldon," said Frinton. "I was with some other fellows, and I didn't like to look small. So I played for the same stakes—"

"The other fellows, I judge, were confederates of Sheldon's," interrupted Lee grimly. "In short, my boy, you were plucked by a gang of rascals. The case is quite a common one. I can assure you."

"They didn't pluck me for much, sir—not

at that time," said Frinton. "I'd been boasting a lot—oh, I was an awful fool! I'd been saying how much money I had—and really I had very little. But Sheldon thought I was really in funds, and he tried to rook me—although I was too excited and flustered to see it at the time."

"And what followed?"

"We played poker, and at the end I was about thirty pounds out," said Frinton miserably. "Of course, I couldn't pay, but I blustered out of it somehow—said I'd left my bank-notes at home. And the next day I played again, and tried to win back what I'd lost."

Nelson Lee smiled grimly.

"With the result that you were in a worse plight than ever?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Frinton. "It was so awful that I couldn't take it seriously. I owed Sheldon ninety pounds!"

"Pah!" exclaimed Mr. Frinton contemptuously. "You ought to have told me at that time, Jack—you ought to have brought your trouble to me. You were afraid to? Of course you were. But you should have been brave."

"I was absolutely terrified, pater," said Frinton. "Sheldon threatened to have me in court if I didn't pay up. I didn't realise at that time that he couldn't do anything of the sort. And he threatened to go to you, too."

"And what was the arrangement you came to?" inquired Lee.

"Nothing, until I went back to St. Frank's," said Frinton. "I thought it was all over; but Sheldon met me one day in Bannington—a week after the new term commenced. And he told me that if I didn't pay him what I owed him he would go to Dr. Stafford—and that would have meant expulsion."

"Expulsion would have been better than what has happened now," said Mr. Frinton. "For you will certainly be expelled from the school—it is impossible to expect anything else. You will be wonderfully fortunate if that is all you are called upon to suffer. The disgrace to myself matters nothing, of course—"

"Oh, don't, dad!" pleaded Frinton. "I don't know how to express myself. I'm so rottenly sorry for all I've done!"

"I should hope you could express yourself better than that, at all events," said his father grimly. "Please don't use these ridiculous terms."

"I—I'm sorry, pater!" said Frinton. "Well, Mr. Lee, I was so frightened by what Sheldon said that I was ready to agree to anything he suggested; I was willing to do anything which provided a way of escape. And when he mooted the 'Mysterious X' idea I agreed to it."

"Without protest?"

"Oh, no, sir!" said Frinton. "I told him the whole idea was mad, and refused at first. But he pestered me and threatened until I was forced into it. He told me that it would be quite easy to get the ninety pounds by taking stuff from the school and from

other places. Nobody would be suspected except the Mysterious X—and he was really only a myth. Besides, I didn't actually steal the money, because I didn't have it —"

"That won't do, Frinton," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You certainly did steal the money—or property which could afterwards have been turned into money. As it happens, I was able to frustrate many of your designs."

"I know, sir," said Frinton. "And Sheldon was terribly angry. He thought I was telling lies, and renewed his threats. Well, that went on until last week—and I still owed him over sixty pounds."

"What did you do on the night of the robbery at Mr. Brent's?"

"Sheldon told me to meet him on the Caistowe Road at midnight," replied Frinton. "I went in a boat up the river. But he wasn't there, so after waiting a bit I returned."

"I think the case is fairly clear," said Nelson Lee. "Sheldon's object in getting you to go out on that night was to incriminate you. He himself committed the robbery in Bannington—disguised in a garb exactly similar to your own. He placed one of your caps on the scene of his crime, and also a paper containing your finger-prints. He meant to make quite certain that you would be implicated and accused of the theft. And while the police were paying all their attention to you, he meant to get away. A fairly complete scheme—and a villainous one into the bargain."

"The—the awful brute!" said Frinton hotly. "He tricked me into serving him—he made me create the character of the Mysterious X—and then he used it against me at the finish. He's got away with hundreds of pounds worth of stuff, and has left me to bear the blame! I shall be put into prison for ten years, I expect! The police will never believe me—"

"It will not be necessary for the police to believe you," interrupted Lee. "You will be surprised to learn, Frinton, that you were seen when you returned to Willard's Island on that night. I can produce witnesses who will prove that you arrived at twelve-thirty. The assault upon the man Simpkins was committed by the supposed Mysterious X at twelve-thirty-five. It can therefore be established beyond question that you are not the culprit."

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Frinton breathlessly.

"However, that is of minor importance," continued Nelson Lee. "My main object is to place my hands upon Sheldon. And you, Frinton, must give me all the information you can concerning this man."

"I will, sir," said Frinton eagerly.

"To begin with, where does he live?"

"I—I don't know, sir!"

"You don't know?"

"No, sir."

"But you must have some idea—"

"I haven't, sir," replied Frinton. "He wrote to me and made an appointment in some lonely place several times; but he

never put any address on the letters. He may have been staying at some public-house."

"Did he never mention where he lived?"

"Never, sir."

"Or make any remark concerning his associates?"

"No, sir."

"H'm! I'm afraid you are rather unsatisfactory when it comes to information," said Nelson Lee. "I must tell you, Frinton, that you have been a rascally young fool, and you must answer for your folly."

"Yes, sir," said Frinton huskily.

"At the same time, I intend to see that justice is done," continued Lee. "Sheldon is the real scoundrel—you have only been the fool. I intend to bring Sheldon to justice. That is the only safe method of establishing your innocence."

"But I don't know where you can find Sheldon, sir. He may be hundreds of miles away from here!" exclaimed Frinton. "It seems to me that it's pretty hopeless, and I don't know——"

"I don't regard it as hopeless at this stage," interrupted Lee. "Think again, my boy. Do you honestly mean to tell me that you know nothing about Sheldon's friends?"

"He never said anything, sir," replied Frinton. "Whenever he met me we always talked about the Mysterious—— Oh, but there was one chap Sheldon mentioned. I've just remembered."

"Well?"

"A man named Jem Baker, sir," said the Sixth-Former.

"I fancy I have heard the name," nodded Lee. "Unless I am mistaken, Baker is a drunken rascal who lives in Bellton—a man who frequents the public-house known as the White Harp."

Frinton nodded.

"That's right, sir," he said. "Sheldon mentioned Baker two or three times, and I expect they were pals. But do you think that Baker will know anything of value?"

"I think nothing," replied Lee. "I shall wait until I have interviewed the fellow. It is highly probable, however, that Sheldon would confide in a fellow spirit. I shall certainly find Mr. Baker at the earliest opportunity."

"And when will that be, Mr. Lee?" asked Mr. Frinton.

The detective consulted his watch.

"Within an hour, if the man is at home," he replied grimly. "In a case like this time is of value, and I must be quick. You are quite sure, Frinton, that you know nothing else?"

"Yes, sir, I'm quite sure," said Frinton.

"Very well, I will waste no time here," said Lee, jumping up briskly. "If I meet with any success, I will let you know at once. For the present, Mr. Frinton, I will bid you good-bye."

"I hardly know how to thank you, Mr. Lee," said Frinton's father gratefully. "You are doing a wonderful service——"

"Nothing of the kind," interrupted Lee. "Sheldon is the culprit, and I mean to catch him—that's all."

"It's—it's splendid of you, Mr. Lee," faltered Frinton. "If it wasn't for you I should be in a ghastly hole. Oh, sir, I don't know what to say! You must think I'm a terrible rotter——"

"I think you have been extremely foolish," interrupted Lee grimly. "I think you have been led away into evil paths. I am making no excuse for you, Frinton. You have acted disgracefully, and you really deserve no pity."

"I—I know, sir!" said Frinton, hanging his head.

Five minutes later Nelson Lee had taken his departure, and his chief object was to discover the whereabouts of Mr. Jem Baker, and to put some very close questions to that beery gentleman.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRACK!

"MY sons, you can reckon that the governor is getting busy on the case," I said confidently. "Frinton is several kinds of a rotter, but he's not half so bad as people are saying. And what's more, it'll be proved before very long. You mark my words."

"I expect you're right," said Watson. "But I wish we weren't left out in the cold so much. Can't you make your gov'nor tell you a few things, Nipper? It ought to be easy——"

"Oh, it's very easy!" I interrupted. "You might as well try to make this gatepost talk! When the gov'nor is in one of his moods, he won't say a thing—he won't even drop a hint."

"I can quite believe you, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "But perhaps Mr. Lee isn't in one of his moods—— Begad! Do my eyes deceive me, or is that Mr. Lee's car comin' up the road at this very moment?"

We were lounging near the gates—for it was a half-holiday that day—and Sir Montie shaded his eyes as he spoke and gazed down the lane. He was quite correct, for the gov'nor's car was just roaring up. It came to a halt outside the gateway—after we had stood aside in order to give it space.

"Any news, sir?" I inquired eagerly.

"I haven't seen the paper yet, my boy," replied the gov'nor.

"I wasn't talking about general news!" I exclaimed. "News about the Mysterious X. I mean—about Frinton?"

"No news that I can tell you, at all events," said Lee. "I was going to get you to take this car to the garage for me, Nipper; but I think I'll take it myself. Meanwhile, you can fetch Boz."

"Boz!" I echoed. "What do you want him for, sir?"

"He can probably do with a little exercise," replied Lee calmly.

He said no more, but drove in. And I looked at my chums squarely.

"There's something on," I declared. "Taking Boz out for exercise—eh?"

"Gammon!" said Watson bluntly.

"Of course it's gammon!" I agreed. "The

guy'nor has discovered things, and he's on the track. If we can be in this—well, we shall be in it, that's all."

"Begad! Don't you think you'd better be fetchin' Box?" inquired Tregellis-West mildly. "If you don't look out, Mr. Lee will be back here before you start—and then there'll be a frightful row."

I went off without delay—round to the kennels. Box was my little spaniel—one of the cutest little dogs in existence. He had a scent which was equal to that of any trained bloodhound, and was possessed of quite a singular amount of canine wits. In short, he was a treasure.

He was glad enough to be released from the kennels, and accompanied me, frisking about. When we arrived in the Triangle Nelson Lee was just emerging from the private doorway in the Ancient House.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Now, Nipper, you may as well come with me to the village if you have nothing particular to do. I want to interview one of the inhabitants."

"I'm your man, sir," I said promptly. "Can the others come?"

"I think not," said Lee. "It is hardly necessary for three of you to look after one dog."

I stared.

"Are you taking me just to look after Box?" I demanded.

"Exactly!"

"While you interview somebody?"

"That is the precise idea," said Lee calmly. "If you don't care for it, young 'un, you needn't come."

"Well, it's a bit thick—but I'll go with you," I said. "Who do you mean to interview?"

"A gentleman we shall probably find at the White Harp," replied the guy'nor. "His name is Mr. Jem Baker, and he is a character of questionable habits. However, he may be able to supply me with the information I require—and that, after all, is the only point that matters."

As we passed out of the gateway I briefly told my chums that I should soon be back. Watson glared, and Sir Montie looked mildly curious. They both wanted to come, but Tregellis-West was too polite to ask. Not so Watson.

"Ain't we coming, you ass?" he called, after us.

"I beg your pardon, Watson?" said the guy'nor, turning.

Poor Tommy went very red.

"I—I was talking to Nipper, sir," he said. "I—I thought we might go, too."

"A very natural supposition," said Nelson Lee. "But I am afraid your services are not required on this occasion, Watson. Another time, perhaps. It may be some comfort to you to learn that I am only taking Nipper for the purpose of looking after the dog!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

"Oh, I say, sir!" I protested, as we walked on.

"I always believe in telling the truth, my lad," chuckled Lee. "I want you to look

after Box while I enter the White Harp. After that I don't think your services will be required. It all depends."

"Have you found out anything about Frinton, sir?"

"Not much. I am now on a mission of inquiry, and I really cannot venture to guess what the result will be," said the guy'nor. "I may as well tell you, however, that the man I am mostly interested in is named Mr. Will Sheldon. There is just a chance that I shall glean some information at the White Harp from Mr. Jem Baker."

"I think I know the chap, sir," I said. "A plump, beery-looking rotter who plays billiards and drinks whisky and beer. He's the man who has swindled Full——"

"Well?" said Lee, as I paused.

"Oh, nothing, sir," I said hastily.

The guy'nor very discreetly refrained from pressing me. I had been about to say that Mr. Baker was a man who had skinned Fullwood and Co. of a good proportion of their pocket money. But it wouldn't be wise to mention such a thing to a Housemaster.

When we arrived at the White Harp we met with success at once. The afternoon was mild and sunny, and Mr. Jem Baker was seated outside, on a bench, with a large pot of beer in front of him.

"The very merchant, sir," I murmured.

"Yes, Nipper, quite fortunate."

Mr. Baker was dozing in the sunshine, and he looked up suspiciously as the guy'nor took a seat beside him. I remained on the other side of the rustic table, with Box squatting at my feet. The arrangement was quite excellent, for I was now in a position to hear all that passed.

"I think I am addressing Mr. Jem Baker?" said Lee smoothly.

"That's my name, sir," said the man.

"An' wot may you happen to want, may I ask? I don't think I've 'ad the pleasure of meetin' you afore, although I know that you're Mr. Lee, from the school."

"Exactly," said Lee. "Oh, landlord, you can bring me a glass of your best ale, and also a glass of ginger-beer for my young friend here," he added, as Mr. Porlock, the innkeeper, appeared.

The drinks were fetched, and then we were left quite to ourselves. Mr. Baker had brightened up considerably, for his own pot had been replenished—with no expense to himself.

"I want to ask you a few questions concerning a man named Sheldon," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Sheldon, sir?" repeated Baker.

"Yes."

"Never 'eard the name afore," declared the man.

"Oh, yes, you have," said Nelson Lee.

"That game won't do, Baker. Sheldon is a friend of yours, and you will serve no purpose by professing ignorance. It may interest you to learn that I am quite willing to pay liberally for any information that you can supply."

"Wot do you call liberal?" inquired Mr. Baker.

The guv'nor handed over a ten-shilling note.

"I am giving you this before you say a word, Baker," he said. "The rest of your reward will be in proportion to the value of your information. In any case, you will be well paid."

The man seized the note and put it in his pocket.

"Well, Sheldon an' me was pals, in a manner o' speakin'—I won't deny it," he said. "But I don't see 'ow that interests you, sir."

"I want you to tell me where Sheldon is to be found at the present moment," said Lee.

"Sorry, sir, I can't tell you."

"Have you no idea at all?"

"None wotever, guv'nor," said Mr. Baker stoutly.

"When did you see Sheldon last?"

"One day last week," was the reply. "E told me 'e was clearin' out o' the district, an' that's all I know, honest!"

"I don't know whether to believe you, Baker," said Nelson Lee. "Did Sheldon mention nothing to you regarding his probable destination?"

The man hesitated.

"Not about 'is destination, sir," he replied.

"That utterance savours of an evasion," said Nelson Lee keenly.

"It wot, sir?"

"I mean that you are in a position to say something, but are afraid to," went on the guv'nor. "I don't intend to utter any threat, but I may as well tell you Baker, that unless you are quite frank you may find yourself compelled to attend the police-court as a witness. If you will give your information to me, however, it will not be necessary."

"I don't know nothin', sir," protested the man. "Sheldon said that 'e was goin' to clear out, an' 'e's cleared. He didn't mention nothin' about where 'e was goin'."

"I don't believe you, Baker," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Sheldon did mention something, and you must tell me what that something was. Come on, out with it. Don't try any further evasions!"

The man grunted.

"Well, sir, Sheldon did say somethin' about stayin' in Caistowe for a bit, but that's all," he replied sullenly. "But I don't s'pose 'e's there now. If 'e ain't, I don't know where 'e is, an' that's the real truth. The real, honest truth, as sure as I'm sittin' 'ere!"

Baker's tone was earnest, and I believed him.

"Well, that's all very well as far as it goes," remarked Nelson Lee. "We won't pursue the subject. But you say that Sheldon was talking about staying in Caistowe. Where?"

"Why, you've just said it, sir—in Caistowe!"

"There are several quarters of Caistowe."

said Nelson Lee. "Didn't Sheldon mention any particular spot?"

"No, guv'nor."

"Upon my word, Baker, you are extremely obstinate," said Lee irritably. "Why are you so afraid to talk? No harm will befall you, and you can serve no purpose by refusing to speak. Come, be perfectly frank. Sheldon told you where he would be staying, don't deny it."

The man shifted uneasily in his seat.

"You seem to know more about it than I do," he growled. "If you want to know the exact truth, I'll tell yer. But I shall want a quid for it, an' that's straight. A quid, an' you can have the info!"

A pound note exchanged hands.

"Well, Sheldon said that 'e was thinkin' about stayin' a few days in a cottage on the Caistowe cliffs," said Baker. "It's a little cottage all by itself, just near the big gap—you can't miss it, sir. An' if you was to offer me five 'undred quid, I couldn't tell you no more."

"I don't think I'll risk it, Baker," said Nelson Lee drily. "Let me warn you, however, that if you have given me false information, you will suffer. You have been quite truthful?"

"I'll give you my word on it, sir," said the man firmly.

Nelson Lee wasted no further time, but bade Mr. Baker good afternoon, and we strolled down the village street.

"Excellent, as far as it goes," said the guv'nor. "It was my intention to present Mr. Baker with two pounds for his 'info', as he calls it; but as he named his own price I did not think it necessary to alter it."

"It may be a yarn, sir," I said.

"It may be, certainly, but I don't think it is," replied Lee. "The man would not dare to invent the story for my benefit. The information, such as it is, is quite true. But it may prove to be valueless."

"Shall we go to Caistowe and see?" I asked carelessly.

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I wouldn't dream of occupying so much of your valuable time, Nipper," he said, glancing at his watch. "Boz and I will go alone—there is really no telling when we shall get back. There is a train within ten minutes, as it happens, so I must lose no time. Good-bye, young 'un."

And Nelson Lee went marching down the street, and Boz followed him, as though fully aware of the fact that he was required. I stared indignantly after them for a moment or two, and then made my way back to St. Frank's, a grim resolve in my mind.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee and Boz just managed to catch the train, and they were landed in Caistowe within ten minutes, for the distance was only three or four miles.

The little coast town was looking bright in the afternoon sunshine. A fairly stiff breeze was blowing, and the sea was decidedly choppy. The waves near the shore were big and rough, owing to the rocks which abounded. But Nelson Lee did not waste any time in admiring the scenery. He had

come here with a grim object in view, and it was his intention to achieve his purpose.

He was ready to believe Baker's statement because he had noticed the little cottage in question on more than one occasion. It was a small place near the edge of the cliff, quite isolated.

It had been empty, to the best of Lee's belief, for some long time. And, knowing what he did, it was easy to imagine that the cottage would provide Sheldon with an excellent temporary haven until it was safe to move further afield.

Sheldon was evidently astute enough to realize that it would be a fatal mistake for him to journey to London, or any great town far distant. For the police could easily track him if they set their organisation to work.

By remaining near by, watching events, he would be able to direct his movements according to the necessity of the moment. And Lee had distinct hopes of finding Sheldon at home.

And the man would consider himself safe.

The police were still devoting all their attention to Frinton; they had not even suggested that anybody else was implicated. Sheldon was quite free to walk about as he desired. It was not even necessary for him to go into hiding. His idea, probably, was to be in readiness to make a bolt if such a move became necessary.

Therefore Lee's hopes were not idle.

But when he came in sight of the cottage he felt less confident. The place was in a bad condition. Two of the windows were boarded up, and there was no sign of life. The little building stood on the downs, close against the cliff. The spot was never visited by anybody. Even in the summer-time strollers along this particular cliff were few.

Lee made no pretence about his movements. He walked up to the cottage briskly, and hammered upon the door.

A minute passed.

"It seems that everybody is out, Boz," remarked Nelson Lee.

The little spaniel wagged his tail by way of reply.

Nelson Lee did not knock again. He grasped the latch and pushed against the door. It opened quite easily, so easily, in fact, that the detective nearly fell headlong.

He found himself in a bare room. At first glance he would have said that the place had not been inhabited for months. But a very careful search revealed one or two little clues.

Upon the floor, for example, he found several strands of fresh shag tobacco. It could not have been there for more than twenty-four hours, at the outside. For its colour was full, with no sign of mould.

Then there were one or two crumbs lying about, and a few other indications of the same type. Sheldon had cleared up with the intention of removing all traces. But he had not reckoned on the place being searched by a man with such keen eyesight as Nelson Lee.

And Sheldon made a bad blunder. For, at the rear of the cottage, Lee found a little

brickwork receptacle—which had apparently been provided for refuse. And here, amongst a lot of rubbish, Nelson Lee unearthed a portion of a waistcoat. The rest of the garment was missing, but this portion was quite sufficient.

"I should say that the man has been patching up some clothes," mused the detective. "This old vest was used for the purpose, and this piece is the sole remnant. However, it will be quite enough for Boz."

He bent down and allowed the little dog to sniff the piece of cloth. Boz was quite ready; he knew what was wanted. And, without being told, Boz commenced nosing about, in order to pick up the scent.

"That's right, *boy*," said Nelson Lee. "Find him, Boz—*and him!*"

And Boz did find the trail—within three minutes. After casting about for a brief period, he set off along the cliffs in the direction of the big gap, his nose to the ground, his hairs bristling.

Nelson Lee followed. Having failed to find Sheldon in the cottage, the detective had little hope of finding him at all. But it would have been foolish to go away without allowing Boz to see what he could do.

And the little dog went for the gap and then plunged down the rough, rugged path which led to the beach. The gap was a considerable one, and it provided the only method of reaching the beach for a mile each way, for the cliffs were sheer. Indeed, in many places they overhung.

The tide was coming in, but there was still a large strip of beach uncovered, and Nelson Lee had no fear of being trapped by the tide. He picked his way down the path, and at last arrived at the foot.

Boz was never at fault. He led the way across the hard sand—not that his efforts were now required. For Lee could distinguish Sheldon's footprints quite clearly. And this gave him added satisfaction, for the presence of the footprints there proved beyond question that the man had walked on the beach since the morning.

And as there were no returning footprints it was also fairly safe to conclude that the man was still on the beach, unless, of course, he had made his way into the town by means of the shingle.

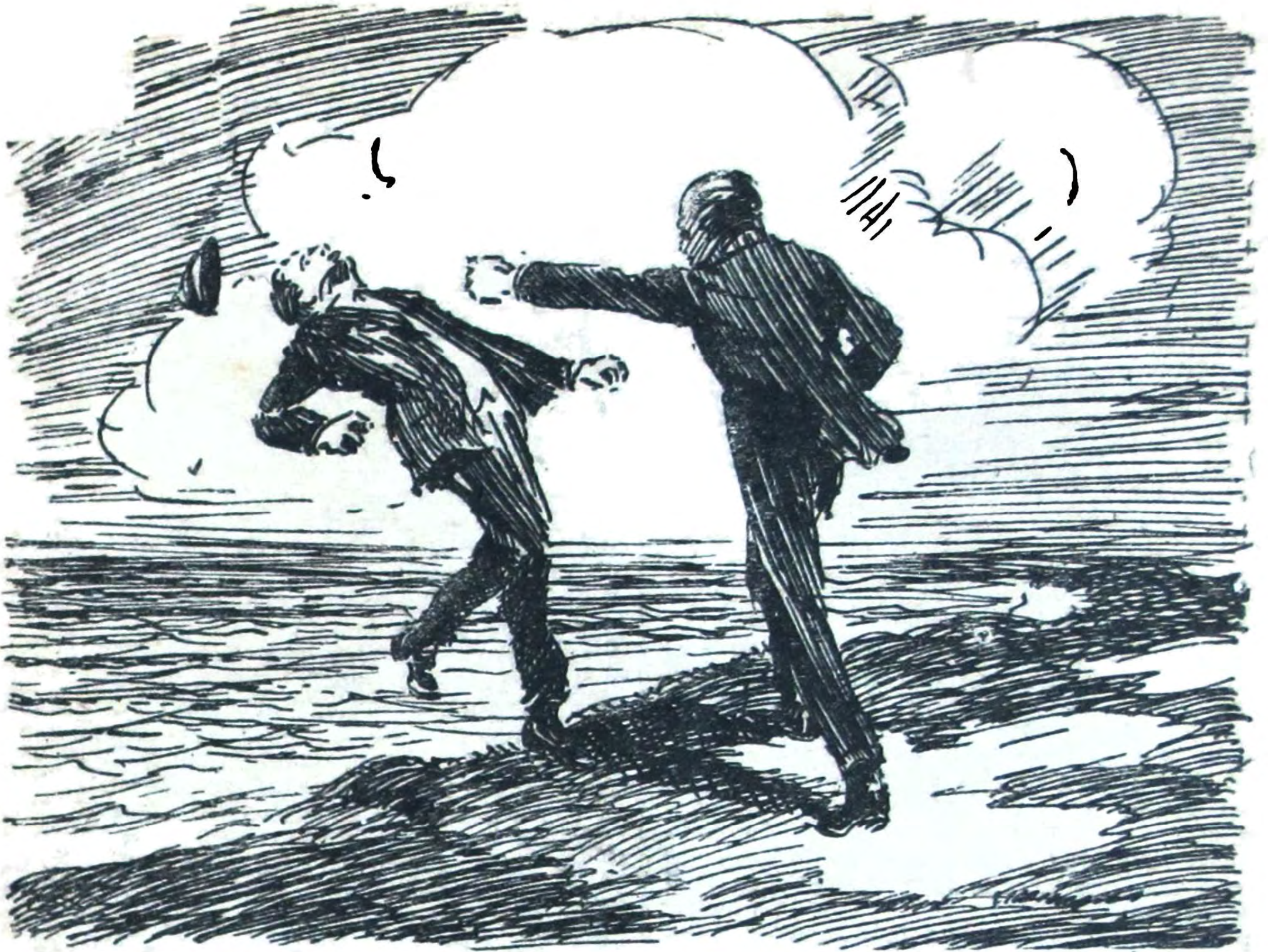
In any case there was every reason for Lee to feel satisfied.

The waves were breaking on the rocky shore with thunderous crashes as the detective followed Boz along the beach. Lee took good care to make sure that there was no possibility of his being trapped by the incoming tide. He was not feeling in the mood for a swim.

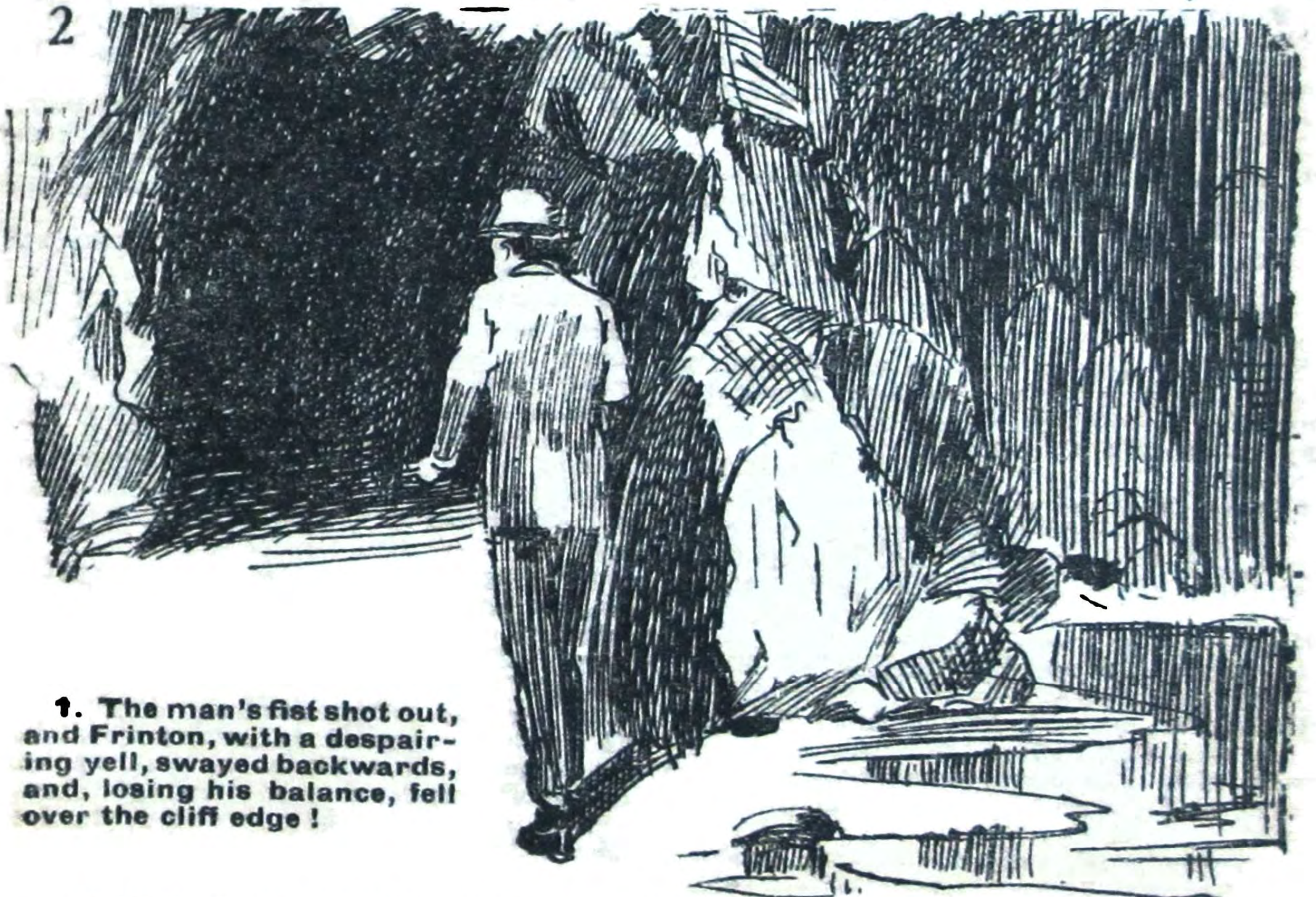
This particular spot was quite isolated from the town, and was deserted and quiet. There was no other human being in sight, and no habitation of any sort could be seen. Lee felt himself to be quite out of the civilised world for the time.

"Ah! This looks interesting," murmured the detective.

He had suddenly passed a jutting breastwork of rocks, and had come within sight



2



1. The man's fist shot out, and Frinton, with a despairing yell, swayed backwards, and, losing his balance, fell over the cliff edge!

2. Whizz! Something shot past Nelson Lee's head. Sheldon was evidently lurking in the dark interior of the cave.

of a low cave entrance. The green slime upon the rocks proved that the cave was under water at high tide. At present, however, the sand was dry, and the coast was quite clear for an hour, at least.

The trail of footprints led straight towards the cave, and Nelson Lee was more than ever convinced that he was hot upon the track of the man he wished to lay hands upon.

But near the cave entrance there were so many footprints that it was really impossible to tell whether Sheldon had left the place or not. The chances were that he had, but Lee would make sure.

The detective, after feeling for his electric torch, bent down and cautiously entered the cavern, going in a moment from brilliant daylight into a darkness which was absolutely pitchy.

CHAPTER V.

IN DARK STRAITS!

NELSON LEE had no real hope of finding Sheldon within the cave. With the tide coming in it was most improbable that the man would be there. But it was just as well to have a look round and to see what the fellow had been doing.

Whiz!

Something shot past Nelson Lee's head and struck the side of the cave behind him with a shattering crash.

"Dear me!" murmured Lee calmly.

Sheldon evidently was there!

And Lee knew that his own position was an unfavourable one. For he was clearly visible to anybody at the back of the cave, being outlined against the entrance. But he could see nothing.

It was surprising to find that Sheldon was so desperate. Why had he thrown that chunk of rock? He had no reason to fear pursuit, and it was astonishing to find that he should resort to such a measure before he could even be aware of the intruder's identity.

Nelson Lee had no wish to give Sheldon's sin a second test, so he quickly moved to one side. As ill-luck would have it, that very action was his undoing.

Whiz!

Another piece of rock shot through the air. It had probably been aimed at the spot where Lee was originally standing, but it flew wide, and the detective walked right into it.

Crash!

It struck him on the forehead forcibly, and he reeled back.

Half-dazed, he sank to the floor, and was aware that Box was barking furiously close beside him. The next moment there was a rush of feet, accompanied by a series of curses.

A thud followed, and then a dismal howl.

Box had received a violent kick—a kick which sent him flying yards. The little spaniel was no fighter—he made no pretence

of being one—and he scooted out of the cave, yelping painfully.

"Come an' interfere, would you?" snarled a thick voice. "I'll show yer! Let's see what sort o' dial you've got?"

A match spluttered, and Nelson Lee saw through a kind of haze a bleary face leering at him. The detective had been hit severely, and he was quite incapable of resisting at the moment, although he was still conscious.

"S'help me!" gasped Sheldon, with an oath. "I know yer—you're Lee! You're that master from St. Frank's—that detective pig! You're Nelson Lee, an' you've come 'ere to lay your dirty fingers on me!"

The man certainly arrived at the truth, although he had given himself away by uttering the words. Had Lee been in possession of his normal strength and activity he would have cared nothing for the man's attitude. But he was at present under a disadvantage.

"You infernal rogue!" he muttered unsteadily. "What was the idea of hurling that piece of rock——"

"I'll show yer wot the idea was!" interrupted Sheldon harshly. "You want me for that Bannin'ton affair, don't you? You want to give me over to the police for swipin' that fool servant? Well, you won't do it! I'll see you at the bottom of the ocean first—an' that's where you'll be afore long!"

Nelson Lee attempted to rise. But Sheldon threw him down, kicking Lee brutally on the side of the head. Less than a minute later the detective's hands were bound behind his back.

Sheldon produced several lengths of rope, and with these he proceeded to bind his victim's ankles together. He did so cruelly, and was not content with this precaution. He passed the rope round Lee's wrists—which were already secured by a neckerchief—and drew the stout twine so tight that the detective's skin was chafed.

At all events, to work the bonds loose was quite impossible.

By the time this task was over Lee had almost recovered, and he was not foolish enough to abuse himself for what had occurred. The whole thing had been an unfortunate mishap—an unlooked-for disaster.

If Lee had had the slightest suspicion that Sheldon would act in such a murderous fashion, he would have taken due precautions. But he had had no reason to suspect such a thing.

And owing to Sheldon's bad aim, the detective had been hit and had been placed hors-de-combat just at the moment when he required all his strength and agility. It was a piece of bad luck.

And Lee was rather alarmed.

It would be absurd to say that he felt easy in mind. Helpless as he was, he was quite at this man's mercy. And why should Sheldon bind him unless he had some dastardly object in mind?

The reason for Nelson Lee's alarm was that Sheldon was very obviously the worse for drink. His breath stank of whisky, and when

he spoke his words tumbled one over the other.

He had apparently been indulging in a solitary orgy in the cave, and was now quite drunk—just in that condition when a man is not responsible for his actions—when he does not realise what he is doing.

Sheldon had sense enough to know who the new-comer was, and his befuddled wits told him that Nelson Lee was on his track. But he did not realise the terrible nature of the weapon which lay in his own hands.

A scoundrel when sober, he was a veritable madman now.

"I should advise you to calm yourself, Sheldon," said Nelson Lee quietly. "This exhibition of violence will do you no good whatever. You have given yourself away by acting—"

"Stow that!" snapped the man. "Given myself away, 'ave I? Wot did you come 'ere for? Just to pass the time o' day, I s'pose? You, a 'tec.? You didn't come 'ere to lay 'ands on me, did yer?"

Sheldon uttered a coarse laugh and walked to the other side of the cave. He lit two candles, and set them upon a ledge of rock. The light enabled Nelson Lee to see the nature of his prison.

The cave was not very large: not more than six feet wide, but about twelve feet deep. The lower end was choked with a mass of seaweed, and the roof was smooth with the constant action of the sea, and was only five feet above.

Down beside the rock wall were three whisky bottles. One was full, one empty, and the third half-full. It was quite easy to understand how Sheldon had got into his present condition.

Close beside the bottles stood a bulky leather travelling-bag. And this, Lee had not the slightest doubt, contained the stolen property from the burgled house in Bannington.

Sheldon took a long drink from the half-empty bottle, and when he set it down there was only an inch or two left in it. This added liquor was not calculated to make him more reserved in his actions.

"I reckon it's a good thing you came 'ere, Mist' Lee!" he exclaimed thickly. "You'n me can 'ave a nice li'l talk—eh? The idea was to take me back to the lock-up—eh? Well, I sha'n't see the inside o' one this trip—no more won't you. You won't see the inside of anything agin, except this durned cave."

"Don't talk such nonsense, man," said Lee sharply. "Pull yourself together, and don't be such a fool!"

"Gettin' insultin', are yer?" leered Sheldon. "Well, you won't 'urt me. I'm goin' to stand 'ere an' wait—S'help me!"

Swish-h-h!

A wave had broken outside the cave, and the surf came surging into the entrance, to recede with a roar. Sheldon leered at it in a drunken fashion, but did not seem to realise what it meant.

"Come, don't be insane!" exclaimed Lee.

"The tide is coming in rapidly, and before long we shall both be trapped—"

"Both!" echoed Sheldon. "Not likely! Not both of us—you will, but not me. I can see that I shall 'ave to be goin', ole chum! But I'll leave you 'ere to welcome the fishes when they come in to 'ave a look round. The tide don't make any mistake about this cave, I can give yer my word. Just 'ave a swig wi' me afore I go—"

"Sheldon, you had better realise what you are saying," interrupted Nelson Lee steadily. "If you go out of this cave now, leaving me bound up like this, you will leave me here to die. There will be no escape whatever. And you will be wanted for murder."

"Tryin' to scare me, ain't you?" leered Sheldon. "Well, you won't, darn you! I'm goin' to leave you 'ere—see? I'll be generous, an' let you 'ave them two candles—until the tide comes in an' washes 'em away."

The drunken man reeled across the cave and took possession of the leather bag and the full bottle of whisky. Then he emptied the other bottle and threw it upon the floor.

"So long!" he said thickly.

Nelson Lee was about to speak, but he realised the futility of attempting to argue or reason with this spirit-soaked ruffian. The man had gone a moment later, and Lee was left quite alone—helpless, and in one of the most hopeless predicaments he had ever been in in his life.

He was quite sure that Sheldon would never have acted in such a way if he had been sober. Upon recovering his normal wits he would be quite horrified by the thought of what he had done.

But then it would be too late. Under the influence of drink men commit acts which can never afterwards be repaired.

Meanwhile, other events were occurring which were to make a great deal of difference to the whole situation. Boz, for one thing, was on his way back to St. Frank's. The little spaniel was scared, and he was making for home.

After that kick he had received he had scrambled up the cliff-path, and had made a bee-line for the road which led to Bellton. Boz had been brought by train, but he knew the way home.

He had been brought frequently to Cais-towe, and he knew the road well. And the little dog pelted along with all his speed.

On that particular eventful afternoon many different happenings were taking place at the same time; and all were destined to reach a certain climax at about the same time.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and myself were cycling along the Cais-towe Road.

This was my doing.

After the gov'nor had calmly walked away outside the White Harp, I had come to a firm resolve. I marched back to the school, and found my chums lounging about in the Triangle.

To them I quickly related what had occurred.

"So, you see, something has got to be—"

done," I exclaimed firmly. "If the guv'nor thinks he's going to leave me in the cold, he's mistaken—that's all!"

"What can we do?" asked Watson.

"Do?" I repeated. "Why, we can get our jiggers out and ride to Caistowe. Mr. Lee's gone by train, and he's there by now. But we sha'n't be so very long after him—and he may need help. With a chap like Sheldon to deal with, he'll have his hands full—and we might be able to chip in at the right moment."

I little realised how true my words were to come shortly afterwards! Sir Montie and Tommy heartily agreed with me that a trip to Caistowe was most necessary. The only objection came from the noble Montie.

"Supposin', dear fellow, your guv'nor doesn't approve?" he inquired. "Supposin' he thinks that we're interferin'—"

"He'll have to think it, that's all," I replied briskly.

And very shortly afterwards we were cycling along the road to Caistowe at a steady pace.

"Of course, we may be going for nothing," I remarked, as we rode along. "It's just possible that we sha'n't be able to find the guv'nor at all. If Sheldon isn't in that cottage—"

"He'll be somewhere else," suggested Watson.

"You ass!" I snorted. "He might be in London, or Liverpool, or Glasgow, or Swansea—"

"Or Timbuctoo or Dahomey?" said Sir Montie blandly.

"Oh, cats!" I snapped.

They chuckled, and we rode on. About five minutes after this, just as we were breasting a stiff rise, I saw something small moving swiftly along beside the road. Then I gave a sudden shout.

"There's Boz!" I panted.

"Begad!" said Montie. "So it is!"

"Then Mr. Lee must be near at hand," put in Watson. "Boz went with your guv'nor, Nipper, so it's as clear as daylight that Mr. Lee must be here. I'm blessed if I can see him, though."

We had reached the top of the hill, and a long straight stretch lay before us. And there was no living soul on the road with the exception of Boz—if he could be called a soul.

"That's queer!" I muttered.

We dismounted, and waited. The little dog came up, and he gave a breathless yelp of joy as he recognised us. He frisked round me for a moment, then flopped down in the dust and panted, his tongue lolling out.

"Where's your master, Boz?" I asked sharply.

He jumped up, and ran a few paces along the road to Caistowe. Then he turned, looked round, and barked urgently.

"Begad! That's rather strange, you know," remarked Sir Montie, adjusting his eyeglasses. "Why should he do that, dear boys? An' why isn't Mr. Lee here? Why has Boz come back alone?"

"I don't like it," I said. "And we shall have to—"

"What's happened to the little beggar's jaw?" asked Watson suddenly. "It's been bleeding, or something."

I bent down.

"Here, Boz!" I called. "Come on, old boy."

He came running up, and I examined his jaw. The next moment I gave a whistle. There was an ugly bruise on the side of the dog's nose, and part of the flesh was jagged and torn.

"My hat!" I exclaimed. "He must have received a kick of some kind here—a pretty rotten kick, too. This looks rather bad, you chaps. Who's been kicking the poor little fellow?"

"Sheldon!" said Watson.

"That's the most obvious answer, anyhow," I replied. "But I'm thinking about the guv'nor. What was he doing to let Boz be kicked? And why has Boz come back all on his own?"

"Old fellow, I think we can answer those questions in the best way by speedin' ahead to Caistowe," said Sir Montie. "There's really no reason for alarm, but I must say that things look pretty queer."

"We won't lose another minute," I declared.

We didn't.

Mounting our bicycles, we were soon hurrying towards Caistowe. But Boz, already half-exhausted, was not capable of running with us; so it was necessary for us to accommodate our speed to his pace.

We didn't exactly like doing it, but we couldn't leave the poor little chap to come on alone. Besides, I realised that he would probably be able to lead us to the spot where he had last seen the guv'nor.

But, although we were well on the track, it was not left for us to be the first to reach Nelson Lee's side in his dire extremity. Somebody else was in Caistowe on that fateful afternoon.

And that somebody was Frinton of the Sixth.

CHAPTER VI.

NEARING THE CLIMAX!

FRINTON was rather excited.

After Nelson Lee had departed from the Station Hotel in Bannington the boy had remembered something which might have been very valuable. He had not called it to mind until Lee had departed.

Frinton had said nothing to his father, but had ventured out while Frinton senior was in another part of the hotel. That which the Sixth-Former remembered was something Sheldon had once said to him.

Frinton called to mind that on one occasion fairly recently he had met his persecutor when the latter was rather the worse for drink. And Sheldon had then made mention of the fact that a cave just below the big gap on the Caistowe cliffs would come in handy in a time of emergency.

At the moment Frinton had thought no-

thing of the remark, and he had not thought of it while being questioned by Nelson Lee. But afterwards, when he had time to think things over, it struck him that there might be something significant in Sheldon's utterance.

Had the man gone to that cave now?

Was he hiding there?

Frinton did not think it at all likely, but he made up his mind to tell Nelson Lee. And with this object in view he hurried out to the station, and found that a train was departing within ten minutes.

But this train did not stop at Bellton; it went straight through to Caistowe. There was no train for Bellton until another hour had passed. And Frinton decided, on the spur of the moment, to go straight to Caistowe.

He would waste no time by doing so, for he would be able to catch another train back to Bellton without losing a minute. Meanwhile, he would have had a look at the cave—in order to satisfy his own curiosity.

If there was nothing to be seen there, he would not bother Lee at all. So, upon the whole, he considered this plan to be the best. Frinton therefore arrived on the cliffs most unexpectedly—at a time when he was needed.

For, to tell the truth, Sir Montie and Tommy and I would have been too late to render any material assistance to the governor. Frinton was on the spot twenty minutes before we could have arrived.

As he walked along the cliffs there was not a soul in view; he seemed to have the whole place to himself. But then, just as he was making for the gap, a familiar figure lurched into view above the edge.

Frinton stooped short, his heart beating rapidly.

"Sheldon!" he muttered.

The man was Sheldon, and he was in a decidedly drunken condition. He saw Frinton almost as soon as Frinton saw him, and for a moment the pair gazed at one another in silence.

Then Sheldon lurched forward.

"Oh, so this is the game, is it?" he exclaimed drunkenly. "You thought I was goin' to be collared, an' you came to see me took away? You snivellin' little traitor!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," exclaimed Frinton steadily. "You're drunk, Sheldon!"

"Wot if I am?" leered the man. "I know it—an' I'll be more drunk than ever afore long. I'm my own master, I s'pose? I've 'arf a mind to throw you down this 'ere cliff—"

Frinton backed away.

"Don't—don't be a fool!" he exclaimed hotly. "You—you vile rotter!"

"Wot?"

"You scoundrel!" shouted Frinton, gaining courage. "What about the burglary at Bannington? What do you mean by laying all those tracks—leaving clues for the police to find?"

Sheldon grinned.

"Got you into a nice 'ole, ain't it?" he said. "Well, that's wot I meant. You've failed to carry out your promise—you still owe me the best part o' that money. An' so I took matters into my own 'ands. As for gettin' you jugged—well, it's all you deserve."

Frinton's eyes blazed with fury.

"And you're content to see me go to prison for your crime!" he shouted. "You confounded blackguard! If there was somebody else in sight I'd call for help and have you overpowered! But you needn't look so pleased—you'll be in the hands of the police before long!"

"Owin' to Mr. Lee?" sneered Sheldon.

Frinton started.

"Oh, I know the game!" went on the man. "You've planned it between yer—you sent Lee to lay 'is fingers on me, an' you come up expectin' to see me with the brace-lets on—eh?"

"I hope I shall see them on before long, anyhow," said Frinton angrily. "If any man deserves to go to prison, you do. I've been a silly fool to take notice of your threats for so long—they've been worthless, right from the start. You had me in your power, and I was mad to allow it. And after what happened in Bannington—after you attacked that poor chap with a poker—you deserve to break stones at Dartmoor for ten years!"

"It's you who'll break stones at Dartmoor, my young shaver," said Sheldon thickly. "You're only out on bail. When the case comes on agin you'll be booked for a long stay in chokey. The police think you're the culprit—an' there's nothin' to prove you ain't. Wot we say now don't matter a cuss."

Frinton went pale with anger.

"And you'd be content to see me go—to suffer for your crime?" he asked.

"Why not? D'ye think I care about you?"

"Whether you care about me or not, you won't have everything your own way," exclaimed Frinton. "Within a week you'll be in prison."

"Owin' to your treachery!" snarled Sheldon, moving forward menacingly. "If it 'adn't been for your tongue, Lee wouldn't 'ave come along. Why, you young rat, I'll show you wot I'm goin' to do to you!"

Sheldon flung his bag down and suddenly threw himself at Frinton. The boy was unable to dodge, even if he had wanted to do so. But just at present Frinton was feeling in the mood to fight the scoundrel tooth and nail.

He had been worked up by his recent experience and by Sheldon's callous attitude. And Frinton, notwithstanding his manifest faults, was not a coward.

"All right!" he shouted. "I'm ready for you!"

The next moment the pair were at grips.

Frinton, under ordinary circumstances, could have beaten his man easily. But just now Sheldon was possessed of added strength. His fury, and the liquor he had consumed, made him reckless of personal hurt, and his one desire seemed to be to get Frinton down and to keep him down.

"I'll show you, you little brute!" he snarled.

The pair swayed about, fighting fiercely. And in their excitement they neither noticed that they were getting nearer and nearer to the edge of the cliff. Down below the tide was already lapping the rocks. The strip of beach was quite covered, and the entrance to the cave was being filled with water with every wave that broke.

But the cave was some little distance to the right, and was set further back.

Immediately below the spot where Frinton and Sheldon were struggling the sea was already several feet in depth and the waves were rough and violent.

The sea was by no means gentle on that afternoon.

"Betray me, would you?" panted Sheldon. "I'll finish you now, once and for all. I'll settle you!"

But Frinton was fighting gamely.

He rained blows upon Sheldon's face and chest, and the blood was soon streaming from a cut lip and from the man's nose.

"You'd better give in, Sheldon!" panted Frinton. "Look out, man! We're only a yard from the edge of the cliff! I shall be over——"

"Yes, you will!" shouted Sheldon fiercely.

He seemed to go mad for a moment. He lunged out with all his strength, and a rain of blows struck the boy. He staggered back, totally unable to save himself.

The next second, with a wild shriek, he went over the edge of the cliff.

"That's done yer!" panted Sheldon wildly.

But Frinton was not done—yet.

Some coarse bushes were growing out of the cliffs near the summit, and by chance Frinton's fingers grasped a stout bough as he fell. His fingers slipped for a moment, but then he secured a hold.

He clung there with the desperation of despair, six feet below the edge. Beneath him the angry sea was roaring in premature triumph, waiting to receive its victim.

"Help!" shouted Frinton desperately. "Oh, help me!"

Sheldon, swaying drunkenly near the edge, gave a start. He had thought that the boy had gone down into the sea; and in his present condition the fact did not seem at all terrible to him.

He was rather glad, in fact, to have got rid of the fellow who had been punching him so violently. Now, realising that Frinton was still at hand, he flung himself face downwards and hung his head over the edge.

"Oh, so that's where you've got to!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I must say you don't look very comfortable. Well, you can 'ang there until you drop—I don't suppose you can stand it for more than ten minutes."

Frinton was wild with terror.

"You—you murderous rogue!" he gasped. "Help me up—can't you help me to get back? I'm slipping! I can't last another two minutes!"

Sheldon laughed harshly.

"All the better!" he exclaimed. "You'll

go down there among them waves, an' you'll join that pal o' yours—Mr. Nelson Lee. The pair o' you might as well feed the fishes together!"

"What—what do you mean?"

Sheldon gave another mad laugh.

"I mean that Lee is down there in that cave!" he exclaimed. "I mean that you'll both drown! And don't blame me for it—it's all your own fault. Mr. Lee's in that cave along there."

"You're lying!" gasped Frinton.

"Am I?" leered the man. "If you go down you'll soon find out different—'e's bound up 'and an' foot, an' can't move an inch. Why don't you rescue 'im? Why don't you go down an' join 'im? This is wot comes of interferin'! It may please you to know that you've caused the death of Nelson Lee!"

Frinton went deathly pale. He was sure that Sheldon was speaking the truth. Nelson Lee was there—at the mercy of the tide in that cave. So far, he was safe, but within ten minutes he would be drowned.

Frinton thought quickly.

He had already seen that there was a chance for him. There were other bushes growing above, and, by a desperate effort he knew that he would be able to reach the summit and safety.

The first panic had already left him. Sheldon's help was not necessary. By his own effort alone he would be able to get back to the firm ground. He was quite capable of clinging to the branch for ten minutes longer, if necessary. Frinton knew this.

But what of Nelson Lee?

The man who had been doing his utmost for Frinton was down there in that cave, helpless—doomed to a terrible death. And this disaster had befallen him while he had been engaged upon the work which was destined to free the wretched boy from suspicion.

Frinton suddenly felt that a terrible responsibility rested upon him. It was a crisis, and the test was an appalling one. Should he seek safety by climbing up the cliff, or—

Frinton shuddered as he looked down at the breaking waves. For a moment his courage forsook him. Then, with a sudden, fixed determination to act decently for once in his life—perhaps for the very last time—he released his grip upon the stout branch.

He plunged down—down!

Splash!

Sheldon, watching as though fascinated, saw the boy strike the water. He saw him go under. And then Sheldon gave a hoarse, wild cry. He drew himself back, unable to watch any longer.

The unexpected disaster had sobered him almost in a moment, and the full enormity of his actions came upon him in a flood. He had not only left Nelson Lee to die, but he had sent Frinton to his death.

Sheldon was filled with an awful panic. He could do nothing to help—nothing whatever. His two victims were past all human aid now. And the man, snatching up his bag, fled across the downs like a being possessed.

He reeled along drunkenly, and at last arrived upon the little-frequented road which ran close to the cliff edge. He did not know which direction to take; he did not know which way to go.

As a matter of fact, he didn't care. His one thought was to get right away—to put as great a distance between himself and the Caistowe cliffs as possible. He did not even notice three cyclists who were speeding along at a sharp pace.

These three cyclists were Sir Montie, Tommy, and myself—to say nothing of Boz, who was panting along behind. I think I was the first to notice the curious behaviour of the stranger.

For, of course, we had never seen Sheldon, and we did not know who he was. But as the man came along I saw that his face was covered with blood; his waistcoat was torn open, and his eyes were wild.

"Great Scott! What's wrong with that chap?" I exclaimed.

"He looks as though he's been havin' a frightful scrap with somebody, begad," said Sir Montie. "I think we'd better stop him, an' ask if we can be of any assistance. His face is in a shocking condition."

"Yes, rather," said Watson.

We jumped from our machines. And Sheldon, who had been running with his head down, and who had heard no sound of our approach, suddenly became aware of our presence.

He looked up, and gave a hoarse cry.

Then, after a second, he attempted to run off across the downs. Boz was barking furiously, but keeping at a safe distance. He had already sampled Sheldon's boot, and he did not want another taste of it.

"Hold on!" I exclaimed, decidedly suspicious. "I'd like a word with you, if you don't mind!"

Sheldon's only reply was to swear. Then he stumbled, for he had turned his head. He floundered forward, and fell to the grass. Something was evidently very wrong, and Sir Montie and I dashed up, with Tommy just behind.

"That's chap's drunk!" exclaimed Watson excitedly.

"You touch me, an' you'll regret it!" snarled Sheldon, attempting to rise. "I'll treat you like I treated them others! Nobody's goin' to get the better o' Will Sheldon—see? Stand away, you young cubs!"

"Sheldon!" I exclaimed. "My hat, the chap's given himself away! Lay hold, Montie; you grab his legs! Make sure of that left fist of his, Tommy! That's the way!"

Sheldon's strength had been exhausted by his fight with Frinton, and by his hurried flight across the downs. He was not able to put up much of a scrap now, and our task was fairly simple.

Sir Montie and I succeeded in holding him down.

"Yank those straps off my carrier, Tommy," I panted. "We must have something to bind him—and they'll do well. Once he's a prisoner we shall only need to sling

him across one of the bicycles and wheel him to the lock-up!"

"But there's no warrant for him!" protested Watson.

"Rats to that—get those straps!"

Watson did not object any longer. The straps were brought, and in less than three minutes Sheldon was quite helpless. He lay groaning and cursing—a really disgusting sight.

"It doesn't matter about a warrant," I said. "He can be locked up for being drunk and disorderly, and the rest can follow afterwards. My sons, we've made the capture; we've beaten the guv'nor at his own game!"

"Yes, but where is he, old boy?" asked Montie anxiously.

"He can't be far off," I replied. "It's a bit queer, though. Look here, Sheldon, what's happened to Mr. Lee?"

The man gave a harsh laugh.

"E's where you won't see 'im no more!" he muttered wildly. "Oh, no! You won't see 'im no more—an' nobody else won't!"

Watson snorted.

"He's drunk!" he said. "We can't take any notice of what he says. The best thing we can do is to take him into Caistowe and get him off our hands. What do you say, Nipper?"

"Yes," I replied. "But we'll have a look in this bag first."

"Begad! That's a rippin' idea."

The bag was unstrapped, and I pushed the catches back and pressed the snap fastening. As soon as the bag was open I gave a shout, for my eyes fell upon several expensive jewel cases.

Opening one of these, I saw a pair of magnificent diamond ear-rings. Another case contained a set of ruby studs. And the other articles were of a similar nature—all extremely valuable.

"This is the stuff that was stolen from Mr. Brent's place in Bannington," I said triumphantly. "Don't you remember seeing a description of it in the paper? The police in Caistowe will welcome us with open arms, my sons. We've not only got the thief, but we've recovered the loot as well."

Sir Montie nodded calmly.

"It was really a rippin' suggestion of yours that we should come, dear boy," he observed. "Just think what we should have missed, otherwise. We shall be in all the papers over this job, an' that's a shockin' prospect. It is, really."

We were all feeling highly pleased with ourselves, and I don't think we could be blamed for that. We had succeeded in capturing the brutal rascal who had committed the robbery and assault at Mr. Brent's place, and we had secured all the stolen property.

"If Brent's a decent sort," said Watson thoughtfully, "he'll give us a big tip over this job."

"Begad! Don't be so frightfully mercenary," protested Tregellis-West.

"Oh, rats!" said Watson. "I'm hard up just now, and a tip would come in jolly handy—and, anyhow, we deserve it."

And I was quite prepared to agree with him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LAST OF THE MYSTERIOUS X!

SPLASH!
Frinton struck the water at the foot of the cliff flatly. Fortunately, he fell upon his back, or most of the wind would have been knocked out of him. And the rascally Sixth-Former had allowed himself to drop deliberately.

After a great deal of shady conduct, he had at length decided to perform one commendable, heroic action.

It was the supreme test—and Frinton had risen to it.

Rotter though he had been, everything that was good in him came to the fore now, at the crucial moment.

Nelson Lee, the man who was helping him, lay in dire straits within the cave. The only help that could possibly reach him was Frinton's. And Frinton surprised himself by taking the step he had decided upon.

He knew well enough that it might mean death for him. But he was reckless. He didn't particularly care what happened to him. And, if it was possible, he wanted to show Nelson Lee—he wanted to show everybody—that he was capable of doing something creditable. He was anxious to prove that he was not the contemptible rascal he had appeared to be.

Frinton, in fact, proved his mettle.

It was a risky proceeding, and one fraught with terrible peril. He could swim well, but there was a big sea running, and with the tide rising at every moment the waves were rough and powerful.

At the risk of his own life he was going to Nelson Lee. It is only fair to give Frinton his due; he was performing a magnificent act of courage—an act which would wipe out many a stain.

The water at the foot of the cliff was not more than four feet deep, and it was really fortunate that Frinton had struck the sea flatly. A clean dive would have been fatal, for he would have hit the hard sand.

Soaked, with the water in his eyes and nose and mouth, he staggered to his feet, and felt the sand under him. The next moment a wave crashed down and sent him hurtling against the rocky face of the cliff.

He struck it with some violence; he was bruised, out, and half dazed. His hands were streaming with blood, but he did not care. Vaguely he saw the entrance of the cave.

It was some distance further on, and the waves were dashing into it continuously. Unless he acted rapidly he would be too late to save Nelson Lee, and he would perish himself. For he knew the tide was rising, and in a very short time it would be impossible to get anywhere near the sloping cliff at the gap—and that was the only road to safety.

Fighting his way on, Frinton reached the cave. He only succeeded in doing so by grim

determination. Three times he had been flung down, for the waves were strong and powerful.

How he got into the cave he never knew; it was rather a miracle. The wonderful thing was that he was not dashed to pieces on the jagged rocks all round the entrance.

He was literally washed inside, and then he regained his feet. Within the dark cave the sea was comparatively calm, and was not more than three feet deep. He was in total darkness, and he felt appallingly, hopelessly trapped.

"Mr. Lee!" he gasped hoarsely. "Are you here, sir?"

"Good heavens!" came a voice. "Who is that?"

"I—Frinton, sir!" gasped the senior. "Sheldon blurted out that you were here, so—so I've come to lend a hand."

"You are just in time, Frinton," said Nelson Lee, amazed, and hardly able to believe his senses. "But we must be quick, lad. Have you a knife on you? I am bound—"

"All right, sir!" shouted Frinton, above the roar of the sea.

He floundered forward, and nearly stumbled over the detective. His pocket-knife was already out. He had some difficulty in opening it; it seemed hours before he succeeded.

Then he slashed through the ropes which bound Lee's hands. After that the detective grasped the knife and cut through the remainder of the bonds. It was amazing that Frinton should have performed this noble act, and Nelson Lee did not pretend to understand it. A few minutes before he had given himself up for lost.

"Splendid, Frinton!" he exclaimed briskly. "There is nothing to fear now; we shall make the gap in safety. How are you feeling?"

"I—I can manage, sir," said Frinton huskily.

"Well, make a dash out of the entrance when I give the word!" shouted Lee.

"I'm ready, sir."

An opportunity soon presented itself; there came a period when the waves were quieter and less violent. This is always noticeable on the seashore. Waves generally break in series—a succession of heavy waves followed by a similar succession of comparatively gentle ones, and so on.

Nelson Lee and Frinton had great difficulty in getting out of the cave, nevertheless. They were nearly swept back, but managed to fight their way forward against the tide. But it had been touch and go.

And they were by no means out of the wood yet.

The tide was further in, and all retreat was cut off; it was only possible to reach the gap by hard, heavy swimming. It was a task which demanded all Lee's energy, and he was anxious concerning the brave lad who had rescued him.

For Frinton was brave—there was no doubt about that whatever. He had proved himself to be a fellow of different mettle from that which Lee had taken him for. At the moment of crisis, Frinton had made good.

He had wiped out many of his sins.

But would he be able to get back to safety? Would Lee be able to perform the feat? Frinton was already badly battered, and he had only got into the cave by sheer effort of will.

The knowledge that he had only himself to rely upon had steeled him. Now, automatically, Nelson Lee was the leader. And Frinton seemed to be on the point of collapsing.

The loss of blood was responsible for this, perhaps. One of his arms had been badly gashed by the rocks, and the wound was bleeding severely, but Frinton set his teeth and forced his way against the tide by Nelson Lee's side.

After a while Lee found that the lad was falling back. And the detective, although he had his own work cut out, grasped Frinton by the shoulder and helped him along. The pair fought the waves grimly.

"Don't—don't think about me, sir," panted Frinton hoarsely. "Save yourself, Mr. Lee—I shall be all right."

"Don't waste your breath with words, my boy," said Lee shortly.

And Frinton said no more.

The sea, rough as it was, was not capable of beating those two determined swimmers. Foot by foot they fought their way round the cliff to the gap—where it would be possible for them to climb to safety.

And at last, nearly done for, they arrived.

But even now the danger was not over. For the waves were crashing upon the rocks in the most alarming fashion. In order to reach safety the pair would find it necessary to throw themselves at the rocks. If a big sea came behind them they would probably be swept back by the undertow and then sent crashing to their deaths.

Frinton wanted to make straight for the rocks; but Lee, who was watching the sea, bade him wait a moment. And at exactly the right moment Nelson Lee gave the word. The pair struck forward fiercely.

They reached the rocks during a comparatively calm spell, and dragged themselves upon the slippery, treacherous surface. Before a wave could wash them off they had gained firmer ground.

But Frinton, having come through the ordeal so far, collapsed into a heap, unconscious.

Lee lost no time. He dragged his young companion up the steep slope, well out of the way of the hungry waves. And when complete safety was reached, the detective gazed down at Frinton's pale face with great compassion.

"Poor lad!" he muttered. "I'm afraid he has been badly knocked about. What splendid news for his father!"

Nelson Lee was not thinking about Frinton's injuries. The splendid news would be that Frinton had performed an act which stamped him as a fellow of wonderful courage and self-sacrifice.

Mr. Frinton would have cause to be proud

of the son who had recently caused him such terrible mental pain and anxiety.

"Frinton?" said Handforth incredulously.

"Yes!"

"Frinton saved your gov'nor from drowning?"

"Exactly," I said.

"Rot!" declared Handforth.

"Tommy rot!" said McClure.

"Sheer gammon!" put in Church firmly.

"I didn't expect you to believe it at first, of course," I said. "But what have I done?"

"What have you done?" repeated McClure.

"To be regarded as a liar," I explained.

"Oh, we don't think that!" said Handforth. "But you have got hold of the yarn wrong—that's all. Why, Frinton's a regular beast—he's the chap who pinched those things from Bannington——"

"Wrong again," I interrupted sweetly.

"Eh?"

"Wrong for the second time," I said.

"As it happened, Tregellis-West and Watson and I captured the real Mysterious X this afternoon. We also got back all the loot, and——"

"He does it well, doesn't he?" inquired Handforth, with a sniff. "If you expect us to believe this, my son, you've made a large-sized bloomer. Not likely! Hub! You'll be saying that Frinton is a decent chap next!"

"Well, I believe he is," I said quietly.

"Wha-a-t?" gasped Church.

"He may not have been decent until now, but he's shown more than his share of courage and devotion this afternoon," I said. "You needn't look as though you'd swallowed your tongue, Handy! It's all quite true."

Handforth roared.

"Hi, you chaps!" he yelled. "Come and listen to this rot!"

Pitt and two or three others were strolling past the Ancient House steps—where we were talking. It was evening, and tea-time had long since gone. We had got back from Caistowe in triumph.

"No, thanks," said Pitt. "We have enough of your rot at ordinary times, Handy, without listening to a special outburst."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Pitt and Co. came over. They were rather incredulous at first. But after I had explained everything fully they were bound to believe me. Even Handforth and Co. became convinced.

"After we'd left the police-station," I said, "we want to look for the gov'nor. And, you can bet how surprised we were when we found him staggering towards us along the Downs, carrying Frinton—who was unconscious. It seems that Frinton deliberately threw himself into the sea so that he could go to Mr. Lee's rescue."

Everybody was amazed. The full story was soon all over the school, and a huge

sensation was caused. Frinton was no longer regarded as a cad and a rascal. The general opinion was that he had redeemed himself.

And Jack Frinton was pardoned.

When it became known that Sheldon was the chief culprit, the charge against Frinton was completely dropped by the police. Nobody who had been plundered by the Mysterious X earlier consented to prosecute.

And Frinton was in no fit condition to stand any trial, even if one had been necessary. After remaining in the Bannington Hospital for a week, he was taken away by his proud father.

For Mr. Frinton was indeed proud. His erring son had proved that the good in him was as powerful as the bad, and in future

there was every likelihood that Frinton of the Sixth would keep to the straight path.

Nelson Lee, naturally, was extremely grateful to Frinton for what he had done, and it was owing to Lee's influence that the Headmaster intimated that Frinton would be welcome to return to St. Frank's when he was fully recovered.

So everything, as Handforth remarked, was all serene.

As for the Bullies' League—well, it's pretty safe to say that the Secret Combine had gained the day.

But some very stirring times were brewing, even at that moment. And the fellow who was destined to suffer most in the near future was no less a person than a Removite named Nipper—to be exact, myself.

And that's all I'll say at the moment.

THE END.

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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 floats down stream and manages to make a landing. After walking for some hours he hears voices. He has unwittingly walked into an Arab camp, and the Arab leader is Tib Mohammed, the noted slave dealer. (Now read on.)

IN CRUEL HANDS.

THE Arabs were afraid of an attack, but presently, at a few words from their leader, they lowered their weapons and gathered around Dick. Having observed that the lad had no firearm, and that his clothes were dishevelled and caked with dried mud, Tib Mohammed had shrewdly judged that he was alone and in trouble.

"Where you come from?" he fiercely demanded, speaking in the broken English which he had learned at the coast. "What you do in my country?"

Dick hesitated for a moment. He must give some account of himself, and yet he was loth to say anything that might lead the Arabs to march in search of the safari. It occurred to him, however, to deceive his captors by evasive answers.

"I have lost my friends, with whom I came north to shoot big game," he replied. "Last night, as we were crossing the flooded river yonder, I slipped into deep water, and would have been drowned had I not climbed on to a drifting log. I was carried down with it for many miles, and was washed ashore close by here at the setting of the sun."

"How big a party you with?" asked Tib Mohammed.

"A lot of natives, all of them armed, and a young Englishman. I don't suppose I'll ever

see them again. They must have turned back to the south, believing that I am dead."

"No, you not see them any more. The English are my enemies, and you are one of them."

"I'm not. I am an American."

"An American? What is that? I do not know. You have lied to me, dog! I think you come from the hidden valley to the west, of which I have heard strange tales. Yes, you live there, in a big kraal of red stone, with another white man, and a white girl, and black Somalis. I wish to hear more of that place, and I have sent some of my men to seek for it. You shall tell me of it now, or I will kill you."

So the Arab slave-dealer had learned by some means of the mysterious valley and the people who dwelt there. Dick hesitated again, realising that he was in a critical position.

"I have told you the truth," he declared. "I have no knowledge of the valley you speak of. I have been on safari far to the south."

"You lie!" cried Tib Mohammed, his eyes flashing as he whipped a pistol from his belt. "I do not believe! You will tell me what I would know, dog, else I will—"

He paused abruptly as a splashing noise was heard. A shout rang on the night, and all of the Arabs, with the exception of two who remained to guard the lad, hastened to the water's edge.

Out of the darkness, from up the Bana, loomed a canoe that was paddled by three more Arabs. They came ashore, their comrades clustering around them; and it was not until they had got into the camp, where the firelight shone on them, that Dick saw whom they had brought with them. And then he stared in bewilderment, his heart throbbing with pity.

"By Jupiter, it's that girl!" he muttered. "The girl John told us of! What a beauty she is! And what a shame that she should have been caught by these ruffians! I wonder if they have raided the valley and killed the other occupants of it?"

There she was, much as John Hammond had described her, hanging limply in the grasp of two of the Arabs, who had just landed with her. A slim, lovely girl of seventeen or

eighteen, with violet-blue eyes and golden hair that flowed to her shoulders and was loosely tied with a ribbon. She wore boots of brown leather reaching to the knee, and a jacket and short skirt of rough tweed. There was nothing on her head, which she held high, with an air of defiance, revealing her charming face more distinctly, as she was led close to the blazing fire.

These details the lad noted at a glance, and then his attention was drawn to a string of uncut stones of some kind that were around the girl's neck. There were many of them, each as large as a hazel-nut, and they glittered with a dull, silvery light. They looked familiar to Dick, who had seen similar but smaller stones in New York.

"They're uncut diamonds, I'll swear!" he told himself. "And what whoppers! They must be worth a fortune!"

The anxiety he felt regarding the bearded Englishman was allayed as it occurred to him that the three Arabs who had arrived could not have raided the place. They had been sent up the Bana on a spying expedition, and having probably found their way into the hidden valley, they had discovered the man's daughter near the entrance, and had carried her off.

She had not yet seen the young American, who was standing a little back in shadow, between his two guards. The rest of the band were gathered about the Arabs who had brought the captive, listening to their guttural speech.

When they had finished their story, not a word of which had been intelligible to the lad, Tib Mohammed suddenly sprang at the girl and grasped her roughly. She shrieked in terror, and it was more than Dick could endure. Blind to prudence, his temper roused, he darted forward at once, clenching his fists.

"Let her go, you scoundrel!" he cried, in a passion. "Let her go!"

He was seized before he could reach the spot. Half a dozen of the slavers flung themselves upon him, and as he fought with them, offering a desperate resistance, he saw that his chivalrous and reckless impulse had been a mistake.

Tib Mohammed had not intended to do any harm to the girl. He was clawing at the necklace which she wore, and when he had torn it from her throat he held it to the glow of the fire and stared at it with greedy sparkling eyes. It was obvious that he, too, knew that the stones were diamonds.

Dick's struggles had been overcome, and the girl was gazing at him in amazement, wondering who he was and how he had got here. Thrusting the necklace into his belt, and drawing a pistol from it, Tib Mohammed strode over to the lad, and for a moment levelled the weapon at him.

"You dog!" he snarled. "You English dog! You try to strike me, and I kill you! But not now! To-morrow you die, and your body feeds the crocodiles!"

Replacing the pistol in his belt, he turned to his men, and spoke to them in his own language, giving some order. And now a daring idea flashed to Dick's mind. He felt that he

had an opportunity of escape, and that it might be possible for him to maintain his strength without food while he made his way along the other river to meet his companions, whom he believed to be marching north in search of him.

"I think I can do it," he reflected. "I'll have a try. If I should succeed in finding the safari there will be more than a chance of rescuing that poor girl, for with Alan Carne and myself, and the Wakambas and the Swahilis, we'll be double the number of these scoundrels."

He hesitated for a brief interval, feigning to be exhausted by his fight; and then, throwing off the loose grip of the men who were holding him, he dashed fleetly to the rear of the camp, with a shrill clamour ringing in his ears.

A shot that was fired at him missed. He scrambled nimbly up the steep slope, and he was almost at the top of it, and confident of gaining his freedom in the darkness, when he slipped back and fell to the bottom.

He had no more than got to his feet when the Arabs were upon him, striking him savagely in their rage, and after a short, frenzied struggle with his assailants a blow from the butt of Tib Mohammed's pistol stretched him senseless on the ground.

DICK HAS A TALK WITH THE GIRL.

It was a voice that sent a glimmer of intelligence to Dick Selby's mind, and helped to dissipate the clogging stupor he was involuntarily trying to throw off. A lovely face was close to his, and two big violet eyes were gazing at him with compassion and wonder in their velvety depths.

For a short interval he was sure that he was dreaming, and then, as he pulled his dazed wits together, and recalled what had happened, he knew that it was the face of the beautiful white girl, the daughter of the mysterious Englishman of the hidden valley.

She was seated cross-legged like a little Turkish maiden on the floor of one of the huts by the side of the young American, who was leaning languidly against the wall of plaited reeds, with his wrists tied behind him.

The hut was filled with a soft, red light, and through the arched doorway of it the lad had a sweeping view of the camp.

The fire in the middle of it had sunk to a heap of glowing embers, and beyond it an Arab sentry was squatted on a log, awake and alert, with a rifle resting on his knee. He was the only person who was visible.

All was quiet except for the rustling of the palm-trees in the breeze and the sound of the current as it washed the pebbly shore of the river.

"It was a blow from a pistol that knocked you down and stunned you," said the girl. "You must feel very bad."

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"I guess I do," Dick ruefully replied. "I am as weak as a cat, and I have a thumping headache. The blow couldn't have hurt me much, though, else I would be worse than I am. How long have I been unconscious?"

"For a long time. It was three or four hours ago, I should think, that the Arabs put me in the hut with you, and went to bed in the other huts, leaving that one man to guard the camp."

"And haven't you slept any?" asked the lad.

"No, I have been sitting here watching you," the girl answered. "I was afraid they had killed you. I am glad they didn't. I was so surprised when I first saw you."

"And I was surprised to see you, and awfully sorry, too. I knew at once who you were. I had heard of you."

"You—you had heard of me?"

"Yes, in an indirect sort of way. But what am I to call you? My name is Selby—Dick Selby. What's yours?"

The girl was silent for a moment. Her cheeks had coloured with confusion, and there was a vague look of mistrust in her eyes.

"You can call me Lorna," she said, in a troubled tone. "That's all. I don't care to speak of myself. But I want to hear about you. How did you get to such a far, wild part of Africa?"

"Your name first, if you please," urged the lad.

"It is only Lorna. Now tell me your story."

"It is a long one. Did you ever hear of a young Englishman called Alan Carne?"

"No, I never did. I know only two Englishmen, and one of them is my father."

The answer was a disappointment to Dick. Knowing that the English youth was keenly interested in the occupants of the mysterious valley, he had expected that his question would lead to an explanation of what had been puzzling him.

"Well, Miss Lorna," he continued. "I came to this savage country to search for a lost friend of mine, an American like myself, and that's how I happened to fall in with Alan Carne. He had been a prisoner with a party of German soldiers, who had turned him adrift to starve, and he had a little Hot-tentot with him."

"They were both in distress, without food or weapons. So they joined my safari, and marched northward with me until one night when we heard strange cries in the jungle beyond our camp. We went with a lantern to see what the cries meant, and—the lad paused for an instant—"we found a white man lying by the trail, dying from a snake-bite. That man was my lost friend, and his name was John Hammond."

The girl was obviously startled. She drew a quick, deep breath, and looked at the young American with an anxious expression on her flushed face.

"John Hammond?" she repeated, in a faltering voice. "Did—did he tell you where he had been?"

"Yes, he told us before he died that night," said Dick.

"So you know all about the valley that is hidden behind the high cliffs of the Bana River?"

"I know what poor old John knew, and that isn't a great deal. He was too ill to remember much. He spoke of the house of red stone, and of you and your father, and the Somalis, and a Masai warrior—and of somebody else whom he dimly recalled."

"Yes; he was very ill while he was there. We nursed him until he was better. But tell me more of yourself, and perhaps I will then tell you of the valley. I have no reason for trying to conceal from you what you already know."

"Very well, Miss Lorna; that's a bargain. So here goes for the rest of my yarn."

Seated side by side in the glow of the fire, while the Arab sentry kept watch, the lad talked in a low tone, and the girl listened intently, now and again making a remark.

She had a considerable knowledge of the Great War, it appeared, and she knew how it had ended.

Having spoken of the fighting Alan Carne had done in South Africa, and of his own services in France, Dick resumed his narrative with the death of his American friend, telling of the attack of the Bajangas and the burning forest, and of the mishap that had separated him from his companions, and led

(Continued overleaf.)



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to his falling into the clutches of the Arab slavers.

One thing he suppressed, however. He made no mention of the white man who had hounded John Hammond to his death, feeling that if he were to touch on that subject he would cause pain and distress to the girl.

"That's my story," he concluded; "and now I'd like to hear something about you, Miss Lorna. Poor old John's tale naturally roused my curiosity, and it seemed to interest Alan Carne more than it did me."

"I am sorry that you learned of the valley," the girl said gravely. "You will never see it. Your friend was sent away because—because my father didn't want a stranger in his home."

"You aren't willing to tell me why, I suppose?"

"No, I can't. I couldn't tell you the reason if I wished to, for I don't know myself. But I don't mind speaking of other things. My father's name is Robert Ferguson, and years ago, when I was a tiny child, he brought me from England to this wild, remote part of Africa, and discovered the hidden valley."

"He had a lot of faithful Somalis with him, and they helped him to build the house of red stone, and have remained with him ever since. It was afterwards that the big Masai warrior became his friend and servant. His name is Chanka, and he is devoted to my father, who saved him from a lion. He is a Masai who makes trips down country now and again, with some of the Somalis, and brings back papers and magazines and other things."

"It is a fascinating sort of a story, Miss Lorna," said the lad. "I guess there are diamonds in that valley of yours."

"There are heaps and heaps of them, in a deposit of blue clay," Lorna Ferguson calmly replied. "My father has many hundreds. He gave me the necklace of uncut stones which Tib Mohammed took from me."

"So you know who the old ruffian is, do you?"

"Oh yes; father has often spoken of him. He knows that the band of slavers have a stronghold somewhere in this part of the country, and he is afraid that some day they will make an attack on the valley."

"It is more than likely that they will. I'm afraid, especially since they have learned now that there are diamonds there. I saw how Tib Mohammed's eyes sparkled when he snatched the necklace from your throat. And what of the other white man that John Hammond told me of? Who is he?"

"You mean Ralph Taverner. That is his name. He is an Englishman, who came up-country with some friends to shoot lions, and was captured by the Bajangas after they had massacred his companions. They would have put him to death by torture, but fortunately he had some skill in medicine, and he saved the life of the Bajanga chief, who was critically ill. After that he was regarded as a sort of witch-doctor, and was well treated. Then he escaped from their village, and met with my father, who was shooting game to the south of the Bana River. Ralph Taverner came back with him to the valley."

"That was four years ago, and he has been living with us ever since, and always well. He has a strong influence over father, who thinks there is nobody like him."

The girl paused, and Dick imagined that she gave a little shiver. He glanced furtively at her wondering what was in her mind, and averted his gaze to conceal the angry colour which he could feel mounting to his cheeks.

His suspicions had been confirmed. He had learned that the white man who had dogged John Hammond's footsteps through the jungle, and had robbed him of the necessities of life, was the friend of the mysterious Englishman who lived in the hidden valley.

"Do you, too, like this man Taverner?" he asked.

"I would rather be dead than be the wife of that man!" she declared vehemently. "I dread the thought of it!"

(To be continued.)

THE DOPED BOXER.

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