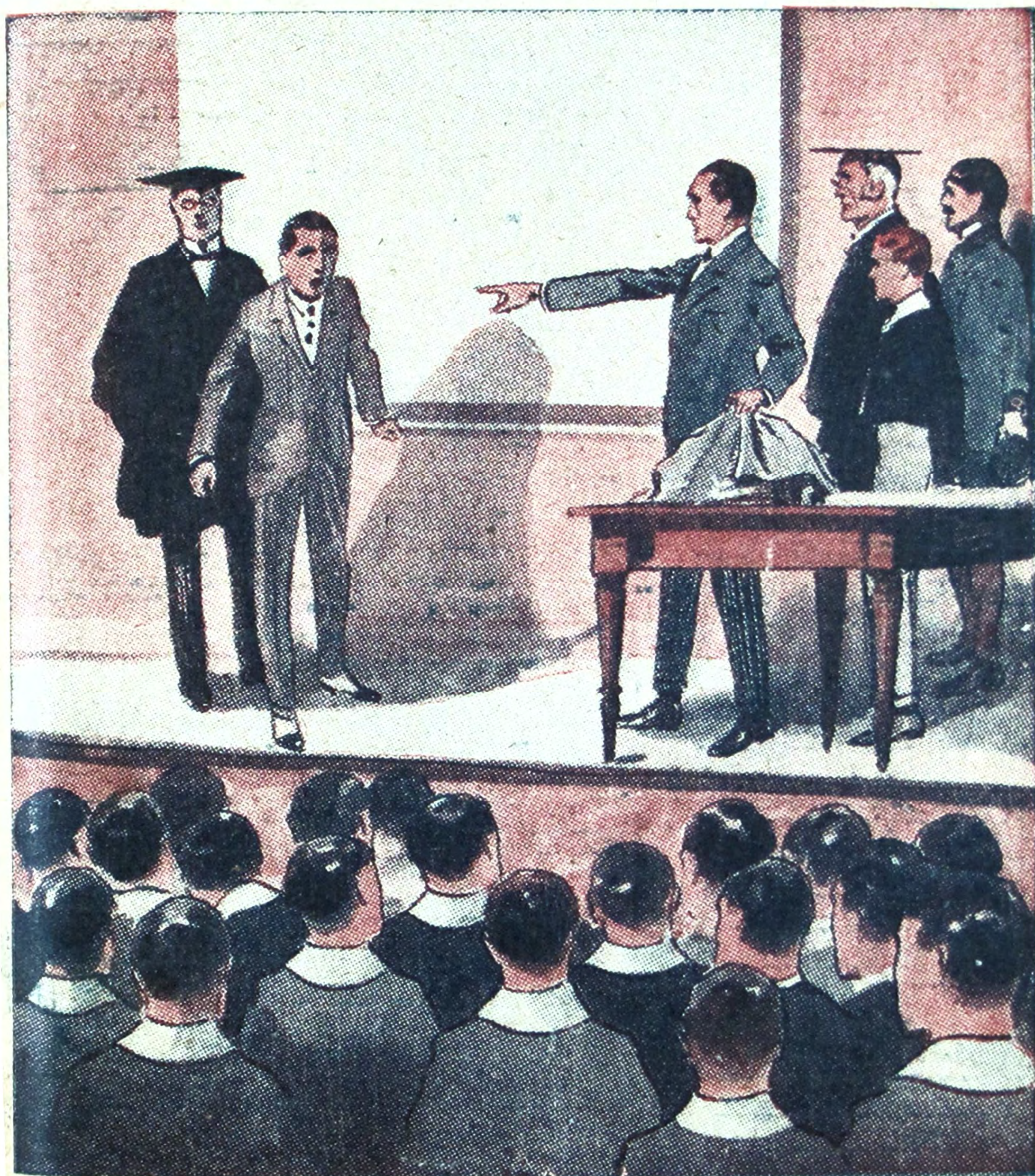


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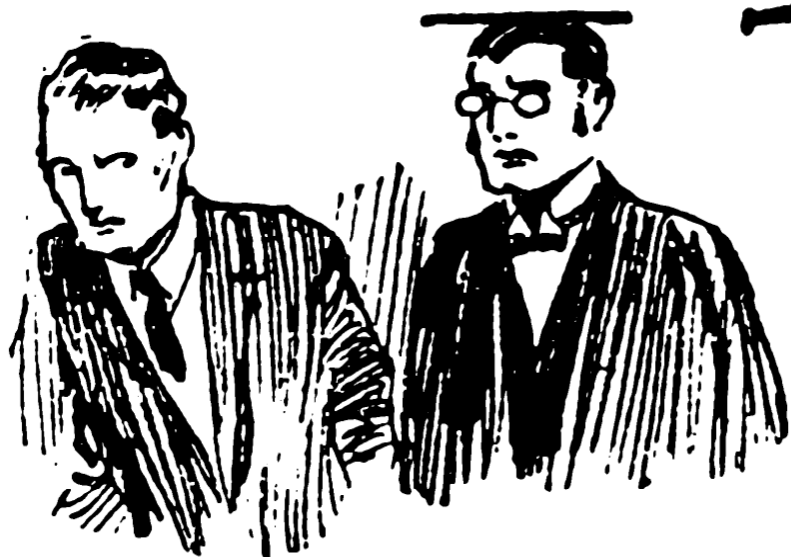
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A PICNIC ON WILLARD'S ISLAND.

TOMMY WATSON stretched himself luxuriously.

"This," he declared, "is what I call comfort."

"Begad! I have quite another name for it, dear fellow," smiled Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"Laziness!" I grinned.

"Exactly," said Montie urbane. "Frightful laziness, in fact."

Certainly we could not be accused of any laborious industry. For we were lounging in the shade of a big willow tree on the banks of the River Stowe—or, to be more exact, we were on Willard's Island.

The June afternoon was sweltering, and it was, naturally, a half-holiday—or we should not have been picnicking. The sun glared down from a cloudless sky of blue, and there was hardly a breath of wind in the heated atmosphere.

Even with the river on both sides of us we were only just comfortably cool, and we only managed to keep in this condition by lounging lazily in the shade.

For fully an hour we had disported ourselves in the river, and we were now taking our rest, content in the knowledge that a sumptuous tea was ready when we felt inclined to unpack it.

On such a blazing afternoon cricket was almost painful, and we were all glad that no fixture had been arranged for that particular date. It was a pleasant change to loll about, doing nothing.

Other parties of St. Frank's juniors were similarly engaged up and down the river. It was an afternoon when scarcely a living soul was to be found indoors. Both the Ancient House and the College House were practically deserted.

"I suppose we'd better be thinking about tea," I said, stirring myself. "You can get the sandwiches out while I prepare the spirit stove, Tommy."

"Oh, I thought it wouldn't last long," said Watson, sitting up. "But I must admit that I'm feeling a bit peckish. Bathing makes a fellow hungry, and no giddy mistake!"

He made himself busy with the hamper, and very soon a white serviette was spread out, with a liberal pile of sandwiches upon it. They were not meat sandwiches, but something far more appetising for tea on a summer's day. For the "meat," in this instance, consisted of sliced tomatoes, cucumber, and mustard and cress. I had made them myself, so I knew they were first-class.

It wasn't long before we were making the pile disappear at a record speed, and we enjoyed the meal immensely. Tommy had suggested bringing ginger beer instead of tea, but I was against this idea. Even on the hottest day tea is the best of all beverages at tea-time. Nothing else can take its place.

"I think you were right about the tea," remarked Watson, as he sipped at his cup. "There's nothing to beat it, after all. You might pass me another sandwich, Montie, before Nipper wolfs the lot!"

"Don't forget my name, you ass!" I said. "We may be alone on this island, but the river banks aren't far off."

"All right, D'Albert," grinned Watson. "Keep your hair on, Algernon Clarence! I won't forget!"

I had grown accustomed to being addressed as Algernon Clarence D'Albert, for I had borne that name at St. Frank's for two or three weeks. Since my arrival at the old school as a new boy I had led quite an adventurous life.

Owing to the machinations of Walter Starke, an Ancient House prefect, I had been expelled from the school in disgrace. I had been accused of brutally attacking Starke after lights-out, and the evidence had been dead against me. To cap everything, Starke had accused me with his own lips.

And I had been sacked—kicked out.

But, owing to the support of Lord Dorrimore, I had come back to St. Frank's with a new name—disguised. And I had

succeeded in hoodwinking the whole school, from the Headmaster down to the smallest lag.

Lord Dorrimore was a friend of the governor's, and he had come to my assistance nobly—Nelson Lee himself being in Italy at the time. At all events, I had believed that he was in Italy.

My object in returning was to establish my own innocence, so that I could return to the old school in my own identity—with my name cleared. So far I had met with much success up to a certain point.

I knew exactly what had occurred on that night when Starke was struck down, but, unfortunately, I could prove nothing. That was the hitch. Starke had been bowled over by a motor-car.

I knew whom it belonged to, and I knew who had been driving it at the time. Starke knew, too, and he had arranged with the man to keep mum. And, until I gained concrete proof of what had occurred, I was helpless.

And only a day or two earlier a startling development had taken place. For Starke himself had become suspicious, and he had managed to probe the secret. In short, he knew that I was Nipper.

For a time I had been in danger of exposure, and I had really expected to be thrown out of St. Frank's for a second time. But Starke had said nothing—he kept his own counsel.

"I wish I could find out more about that mysterious Mr. Jones," I remarked, as I sipped my tea. "I'm absolutely sure that he scared Starke into keeping mum the other evening."

"Yes, I can't get the hang of that," said Watson. "Who was the man, and what was he like?"

"I met him on the Bannington road, when I was expecting to be given away by Starke," I replied. "This man stopped me and told me that I was quite safe, that Starke wouldn't dare to say anything."

"He was right, too, old boy," observed Sir Montie.

"Yes, rather," I said. "The man called himself Mr. Jones, but that was only a name. He was a man with a dark beard, and there was something about his eyes which seemed familiar. I haven't seen a sign of him since."

"Didn't he say that you'd be cleared within a week?" asked Watson. "That you'd be back at St. Frank's in your own identity?"

"Well, three days have gone already," said Watson. "Things will have to liven up if that prophecy comes true. I don't quite see how the man could have been so confident."

I was rather thoughtful. The position, as it stood, was not exactly satisfactory. With Starke in the secret, I could not feel safe. I was fairly convinced that the bully of the Sixth would not dare to say anything. But, at the same time, it was impossible for me to feel comfortable.

"But who is this Mr. Jones?" asked Tregellis-West mildly.

"That's what I don't know," I said. "He's a friend, and I know that he's on my side. I've got a suspicion about him, but I don't want to tell you fellows what it is, because it might sound wild."

"Let's hope we'll be able to discover something before long," remarked Watson. "Shove one of those tarts across, Montie."

We continued our tea, and when it was all over we lay in the grass, lazily enjoying ourselves, reading or chatting, for an hour. And after that, as it became somewhat cooler, we voted that a row up the river would not be a bad idea.

And so we pushed off from the island and leisurely made our way through the sparkling water. It was delightful in the middle of the stream, and the gentle exercise was by no means exhausting.

We continued our way round the bend, beneath overhanging willows and other trees, passing a party of juniors every now and again. But at length we got beyond the populated section of the river, and found ourselves passing between two green meadows, far away from all humanity.

"We shall have an easy time going back," I remarked. "We can practically drop down with the current. The next time it wouldn't be a bad idea to bring some fishing tackle along. We might be able to catch something for supper."

"Dear boy, it's too frightful borin'," said Sir Montie. "One needs to have the patience of Job to be an angler, begad! If it was left to me, the people who make fishin' tackle would starve!"

"I don't know," said Tommy. "There's a certain fascination about angling, and I've heard that some people—Hullo! Who is that queer-looking merchant over there? He's watching us, too!"

I looked in the direction which Watson indicated. On the left bank of the stream a low hedge grew some little distance back from the water. And over this hedge projected the head and shoulders of a man.

It was not surprising that Tommy Watson had expressed a certain amount of astonishment. For the stranger was a really extraordinary specimen. He was attired in a white flannel suit and a Panama hat—there was nothing remarkable about that.

But his face was in a curious condition. A light brown beard covered his chin—a beard which resembled an unclipped hedge. Yet his moustache was carefully waxed and pointed, and it was of a darker hue than the beard! To make the picture even more ludicrous the man's hair (what we could see of it) was distinctly auburn in colour.

"Might he your father?" grinned Watson. "His wig is about the same colour as yours, old man!"

"I think you've hit the nail on the head, when you talk about a wig," I remarked. "If that chap isn't wearing a wig, I'll eat my hat!"

"But who can he be, dear fellow?" murmured Sir Montie. "Begad! Not—not that mysterious Mr. Jones fellow, surely?"

"He's not a scrap like Mr. Jones," I replied, shaking my head. "It's not him, Montie. But I'm interested, all the same. It's queer that we should come across a freak like this right up in this quiet neighbourhood."

We rowed past very slowly, pretending to ignore the stranger, but I was keeping my eye on him all the time. And I was somewhat surprised when the man broke through the hedge and approached the river bank.

He waved his hand, and I ceased rowing.

"Hi, you boys!" he shouted.

"Well, sir?" I said politely.

"I'm bally well lost, you know!" exclaimed the man. "It's an infernal nuisance, but I can't find my way to—to— By glory! I'd better not say anythin', though. You mustn't know about it. That's all right, my sons, you can go on with your fishin'!"

And the stranger turned his back and left us staring after him.

"Queer merchant," murmured Watson. "And what a voice, too—high-pitched, like a kid's!"

"That was put on," I said grimly. "And he reminds me of somebody, too. If he'd stayed a minute or two longer I should have remembered. Did you ever see a guy like him in all your life?"

"His beard certainly needs trimmin'—"

"His beard!" I interrupted. "My dear Montie, it's a false one, and so is that waxed moustache. I've never seen a make-up like it—except on the stage. The man must be mad to go about in that rig-out. His face simply shouts of make-up. Didn't you notice it?"

"I thought he looked rather extraordinary," said Tregellis-West. "But I don't know so much about disguises as you do, dear fellow. I've been thinkin' about what the man said. He wants to find some place, but he mustn't ask us for directions. That's strange, ain't it?"

I nodded.

"It's so strange," I said grimly, "that I mean to follow the fellow and find out what his game is. There's some more fishy business here! You leave this to your uncle, and wait here until I get back."

"But it might be a trick of some sort," put in Watson.

"I can look after myself," I said, as I directed the nose of the boat towards the bank. "Anything out of the common interests me, and that man is simply going about yelling for trouble. If he went into Bannington wearing that rig-out, he'd be arrested by the first bobby he came across. The man's obviously disguised, but he seemed to think that we shouldn't notice it!"

I jumped out of the boat as I spoke, and ran lightly over towards the hedge. Glancing beyond, I saw the white-clad figure of the stranger making his way towards the next field.

"He's still in sight," I called back softly. "You fellows hang about here for a bit. I don't suppose I shall be long."

And with that I started off on the track of the fantastically disguised stranger. There had been so much mystery just recently that I wanted to get to the bottom of this particular affair at once.

But as I started out I had not the slightest suspicion as to where my investigations would lead me!

CHAPTER II.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

I WAS really puzzled about the disguised stranger. He seemed so utterly incapable of wearing a make-up that I began to wonder if he could be an inmate from an asylum.

For he had talked to us with perfect confidence, fully believing that we should see nothing out of the common in his appearance.

He did not look back as he entered the next field, and I reached the cover of a convenient hedge and watched. There was no necessity to show myself until my quarry had passed right across the field into the next meadow.

I could not help grinning.

For the man lit a cigarette, and then deliberately removed his beard, without even glancing round to see whether he was being observed. I was not able to catch a real glimpse of his face, for his back was towards me.

He went on again, and I did not break cover until my quarry had vanished through a gap in the hedge at the bottom. I felt that it was safe for me to expose myself then, and I hurried across the intervening space.

And now I noticed a distinct change in the weirdly disguised man's actions. He no longer ambled about aimlessly, but was setting off at a brisk walk towards an old barn which stood in the next field, isolated and lonely.

It was a barn which was only used very occasionally. I had been in it on one occasion, in order to shelter from a thunderstorm. It was situated just off a little lane which led from Bellton to the hamlet of Little Hadlow.

The lane was hardly ever used, and I wondered why the stranger had wandered across the field instead of taking the lane. He reached the barn and proceeded to open one of the big double doors.

He succeeded after a few minutes and passed within. I at once seized the opportunity to get closer, and I suddenly remembered that there was a loft in the place. And, what was more, this loft could be reached by an outside ladder at the rear—for there was a little door set in the wall, high up from the ground.

I dodged round quickly and noiselessly. Then, still cautious, I climbed the ladder step by step and found, to my satisfaction, that the door of the loft was unfastened. A moment later I was within the place, treading silently over a bed of chaff which was strewn on the floor.

Sounds from below revealed the fact that the stranger was still within the building. A quick glance round showed me that I could easily find cover behind a loose pile of straw, if the man took it into his head to explore the loft.

There was a big open trap-door in the floor, and I approached this with great care. At last I was able to peep down. And what I saw made me wonder more than ever.

My late quarry was standing almost beneath me. He had hooked a small pocket-mirror upon a post, and was inspecting his reflection critically. Being almost immediately above him, I could not see his face at all, owing to the brim of the Panama hat. But I could see what he was doing.

"The chap must be dotty!" I told myself. "He can't possibly think that that disguise is effective! If he came through the village like that he must have caused a sensation!"

A chuckle came up from below, and I gave a little start. There was something so familiar about that chuckle that I was set wondering afresh.

And then came the sound of a footfall from outside. My quarry hastily packed the mirror into his pocket, and then he crept stealthily towards the door. He reached it as a shadow fell across the threshold, and I watched intently.

Another man came into view, and once again I started.

"Well, I'm blessed!" I muttered.

For this second man was wearing a black mackintosh, and I recognised him at once. He was the man whom I had seen on that other occasion, when he had called himself "Mr. Jones." He had told me that my troubles were nearly at an end, and I had formed a wild, hazy idea regarding his identity.

Was I now to be enlightened?

I felt very pleased with myself for having followed the other man to the barn. I had certainly never suspected that an interesting development of this nature would take place.

I watched eagerly, only daring to peep just over the edge of the open trap. I suspected that these two men had arranged the meeting in the barn; and it was possible that I should gain much valuable information.

I did not hesitate to watch and to listen; it was not a matter of mere eavesdropping. I was out to establish my innocence, and I knew that Mr. Jones, at least, was somehow connected with Starke's plot.

"Well, sir, and who the dooce are you?"

It was the weirdly disguised man who asked the question, and he used that same shrill, false voice. Mr. Jones regarded him in blank astonishment for a few moments, but he made no attempt to reply.

"What's the meanin' of this?" went on

the freak. "Don't you know that you are intrudin'—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The man in the black mackintosh fairly went off into a roar. He laughed to such an extent that he was doubled up. And I knelt in the loft above, quivering in every limb. For my suspicion was becoming a certainty.

I was sure I knew that laugh.

"What the dooce—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, confound you!" shouted the man in the disguise. "If you can tell me where the laugh comes in I'll be obliged. I can't see—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's rotten—that's what it is," protested the other. "You come here, a perfect stranger, an' you proceed to laugh at me—"

"Oh, you mustn't do it, old man!" gasped Mr. Jones. "Have you seen yourself in the mirror? You'd take a prize—you would, upon my honour!"

I was flushed with excitement.

"My only hat!" I muttered. "The guv'nor!"

For I had not been mistaken—I knew that voice perfectly. The man in the black mackintosh—"Mr. Jones"—was none other than Nelson Lee himself. My original suspicion, wild as it had seemed, was correct.

Nelson Lee!

The knowledge that the guv'nor stood just below me made me want to jump up and yell with joy. But I crouched there, helpless—fascinated. And I had been quite certain that Nelson Lee was still in Italy!

A hundred thoughts tumbled over one another as they rushed through my mind.

What did this mean—exactly?

Nelson Lee was here, and, what was more, he must have been in the district for some little time. And he was going about disguised. I had met him dozens of times perhaps without knowing who he was.

And what was the reason for his deception?

Could it be possible that Nelson Lee was taking a hand in my troubles? It was he who had assured me that I should soon be back at St. Frank's in my own character; it was he who had scared Starke into silence.

There was more in this than met the eye.

"Oh, you've made my sides ache, old man!" gasped the guv'nor. "You shouldn't do it—you're not made for it!"

"How—how dare you, sir!" roared the other. "My name is Mr. Dodd, an' I am here for the purpose of meetin' a friend. What the dooce do you mean by buttin' in an' insultin' me? By gad! I've a good mind to thrash you!"

Nelson Lee nearly went off again.

"But you don't think that disguise is effective, do you?" he asked. "My dear old Dorrie, you're absolutely hopeless!"

"Dorrie!" I panted.

The second surprise was greater than the first.

The disguised individual was Lord

Dorrimore! I almost kicked myself for not having arrived at the truth earlier. His lordship, however, managed to alter his voice very effectively. And his disguise was so abundant that his own features were practically concealed. He really looked like a caricature of a stage Bolshevik.

"My name is Dodd!" he said steadily.

"But you can't keep it up, man!" grinned Nelson Lee. "Take that awful beard off, for goodness' sake—it's sagging down on one side already!"

"By gad, is it really?"

Dorrie hastily took out his pocket mirror and examined himself. He was adjusting the beard, when Nelson Lee reached out and tore it off. Almost with the same movement he swept his hand up and deprived his lordship of the wig.

"You're not Mr. Dodd now," said the gov'nor, chuckling.

Lord Dorrimore looked utterly disgusted.

"It's frightfully unfair, Lee!" he protested. "You come here lookin' like an utter stranger, an' if I hadn't seen you earlier I shouldn't have known you from Adam. An' yet you spot me in a second!"

"But, my dear man——"

"You ain't a sportsman," said Dorrie stiffly. "It ain't playin' the game to see through my disguise so bally soon!" he added in a plaintive voice. "I took a frightful amount of trouble over it, too."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I imagine you did!" he said. "But what in the world possessed you to fake yourself up in that way?"

"I wanted to give you a surprise, you know."

"By Jove, you've done that!" said the gov'nor. "We arranged to meet here in our own identities—but I thought it wiser to remain Mr. Jones for the time being. Have you come from Bannington in that awful get-up?"

"I put it on after I left the road," explained Lord Dorrimore. "Do you know, it took me two solid hours to make up? I was plannin' to give you a frightful shock—an' you spot me in the first minute. It's too bad, Lee, old man!"

"You're not cut out for work of that sort," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "You look quite handsome enough as you are, Dorrie. It's a very good thing you didn't let anybody else see you in disguise, or there would have been a sensation in the neighbourhood."

Lord Dorrimore recovered his good humour and chuckled.

"I did let myself be seen, by gad!" he declared. "As I was comin' here I spotted a boat on the river—an' who do you think it contained?"

"My dear man, I couldn't say."

"Tregellis-West, Watson, an' Nipper—Nipper in his disguise as D'Albert," said Dorrie. "The lazy young beggars were havin' a glorious time, an' I felt quite jealous. It strikes me that Nipper is havin' a thunderin' good time."

I grinned as I listened.

"But you didn't let them see you?" asked Lee quickly.

"Didn't I!" exclaimed his lordship. "I thought it would be a good test, you know, so I went right up to the river bank an' asked some questions. An' the young beggars didn't suspect a thing—not a bally thing! That's why I was so sure of hoodwinking you!"

It was really too much for me. I had been nearly bursting for a full minute, and Dorrie's statement proved the last straw. I fairly let myself go and yelled:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But, somehow, in my excitement and hilarity, I leaned too far over the hole. And the next second I tipped forward, clutched wildly at the woodwork—and missed my hold. I plunged down.

Crash!

I hit the floor, fortunately, with my feet, and collapsed into a heap between Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore. I wasn't hurt in the slightest, for the loft floor was very low.

And I sat there, grinning like a hyena.

CHAPTER III.

A FEW EXPLANATIONS.

"H A. ha, ha!"

The whole situation was farcical, and I simply couldn't help letting myself go. There were the three of us, all known to one another, and all disguised. It was something like a scene out of a musical comedy.

"Nipper!" shouted the gov'nor. "What on earth——"

"By gad!" ejaculated Dorrie. "How the dooce did you get here, young 'un? I left you in that boat——"

"Oh, Dorrie, I shall die soon!" I gasped, picking myself up. "I followed you and got into that loft from behind."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed his lordship blankly. "You—you followed me? Then—then you suspected somethin', after all?"

"I thought you were a tame lunatic at large," I explained, "so I followed you. But I must admit that I didn't expect anything of this sort."

"You didn't recognise me?" asked Dorrie eagerly.

"Well, no——"

"Good!"

"How could I recognise you, with a mask over your face?" I demanded.

"But I wasn't wearin' a mask, you young ass!"

"That beard and moustache was better than any mask," I said, chuckling. "It practically hid your manly features from public view, Dorrie. I'm afraid detective work isn't much in your line."

"An' I was dreamin' of blossomin' out into your gov'nor's rival," said Lord Dorrimore sadly. "It's frightfully disappointing, but I'm not the chap to grumble. I've

finished with disguises—they're more trouble than they're worth!"

Nelson Lee and I laughed. And then the guv'nor regarded me rather seriously.

"I didn't intend you to know the exact truth just yet, Nipper," he said. "But since you have discovered so much you may as well know all the rest. Tell me, did you have any suspicions regarding my identity?"

I nodded.

"Only just recently," I replied. "It struck me that there was something fishy about you, and I began wondering. Oh, guv'nor, I'm tremendously glad you're really yourself! Until a day or two ago I thought you were in Italy."

"I returned some weeks ago," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"Weeks!" I ejaculated.

"Yes; on the day you arrived here in the character of D'Albert, in fact."

"Do you mean to tell me that you've been in this neighbourhood all the time?" I asked blankly.

"Quite so," smiled the guv'nor.

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"It seems to me that you have been getting yourself into rather serious trouble," went on Lee. "Dorrie has told me all about it, and I am in full possession of all the facts. Poor old Nipper! You've had a trying time!"

"I'm getting on all right now, sir," I said; "but I'd rather be back as myself. It's a bit strenuous, keeping up this D'Albert character. I have to be on the alert all the time."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I don't think you'll have to wait much longer now, my lad," he said. "You were expelled in disgrace, but you will shortly resume your place in the school with full honours, and I have no doubt that the boys will act like true sportsmen and give you a rousing welcome."

"Quite a number of chaps are in my favour even now," I said. "De Valerie and Pitt, and fellows like them, are sorry that I've gone—they haven't the faintest suspicion that I'm there all the time."

"You young rascal," said Nelson Lee. "What a trick to play!"

"It was my doin', don't forget," put in Dorrie. "When Nipper was sacked I happened to meet him in London, an' he was nearly dotty with worry. So we put our heads together an' thought things out. I got the idea of Nipper goin' back as a new boy an' arranged all the details."

"And Nipper has kept up the deception ever since," said the guv'nor. "Well, the experience won't do him any harm. It is all good practice for you, young 'un," he went on, patting my shoulder. "And I must say that you have kept your end up exceedingly well."

"Starke knows who I am," I said slowly.

"Yes, Starke found it out a few days back, didn't he?" said Lee. "You see, Nipper, I'm fully aware of all the facts. I knew that misfortune had befallen you—that Starke was determined to expose you. So I had a few words with him, and frightened

him into remaining silent. But this kind of thing can't go on for long. The truth must be revealed within a day or two."

"But how, sir?" I asked. "I'd give anything to tell all the chaps who I really am. But I've got no proof against Starke, and he would stick to his yarn. Then I should be sacked again."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I don't think there's any danger of that," he said. "This case is really an absurd one—it is so simple that there is practically no work to be done. But everything depends upon us obtaining the actual proof of Starke's guilt. He lied, and we must obtain evidence of that."

"You're wastin' your time, old man," said Dorrie, shaking his head. "It's painful to see a man like you potterin' about over a case of this sort—"

"You seem to forget, Dorrie, that I am working for Nipper," interrupted the guv'nor gently. "I shall be only too pleased to cast off this disguise and to resume my place in St. Frank's."

"But you can resume it when you like, sir," I put in. "There's no reason why you shouldn't go back."

"Isn't there?" said the guv'nor. "Think again, Nipper."

I did so, and then shook my head.

"I can't find any reason," I said. "You returned from Italy on the day I arrived here as D'Albert, and yet, instead of showing yourself, you played these games. You didn't even let me know that you were back," I added reproachfully.

"I wanted to see what you could do, my boy," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "You have been quite busy and have accomplished a great deal. And you seem to forget that it was impossible for me to take my place in the school."

"Impossible?" I repeated. "Why?"

"I met Dorrie just outside Bannington a short while after he had parted from you—that day you came down," said Nelson Lee. "I was on my way to St. Frank's by car, and I meant to give you a surprise. I had no idea that you had been expelled from the school, and it was a bit of a shock to me when Dorrie told me of the facts."

"But you could have come to St. Frank's as yourself, sir."

"No, Nipper, I could not," said Lee grimly. "Just consider what the position would have been. I am a Housemaster at the school, and it would have been necessary for me to wink at the deception which I know was being carried out. In deference to my position, I could not have done it, Nipper. You had been expelled, and yet you had returned. What kind of a Housemaster should I have been to allow that—for I knew all the facts, don't forget. I realised that I could not return until this affair was settled. And as I wanted it settled quickly, I decided to keep silent with regard to my return, and so I prowled about the neighbourhood, using various disguises. My object was to prove your innocence, and I think the case is now fairly complete. Starke is an utter young scoundrel, and the sooner he leaves St.

Frank's, the better for everybody concerned."

"Yes, rather, sir," I agreed heartily.

"I hoped to get things finished much earlier," went on Lee. "But Starke has been extremely cautious. He knows that he might be exposed, and he has taken every care to safeguard himself. It was a shock to him to find that you are still in the school, and he would have given the game away at once, but for my intervention. As I said before, we must act quickly now."

"I suppose you know that Starke was really knocked down by a motor-car, sir?"

The guv'nor smiled.

"I was certain from the very beginning that you did not commit a brutal assault, Nipper," he said. "Starke lied, with the deliberate intention of getting you into grave trouble. But Starke was injured by a blue-grey car owned by a Mr. Millford, of Mid-shott. The car was being driven at the time by Mr. Millford's chauffeur, a man named Beckett. He was in a bit of a panic, for he had taken the car out without permission, and he dared not stop to investigate. On the following day, however, he made discreet inquiries, and found that Starke was not gravely injured. So he held his tongue—being afraid that he would lose his job. Beckett is, on the whole, a thoroughly decent man, and it hardly fair to condemn him because of one slip."

"But he is in league with Starke, sir!" I protested.

"Unwillingly," said Nelson Lee. "Do you remember that time Beckett and Starke met at the inn in Edgemore? You were there, Nipper, and you saw an old tramp listening outside the window. I was that tramp, and I heard quite sufficient to convince me of Beckett's decency. He loathed the idea of helping Starke, but he was practically forced to. He has a wife and children, and he has a terrible fear of being discharged from his post. Starke is the real rascal in this case—and Starke must be trapped."

"Trapped?" repeated Dorrie.

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "But before we go into that I wish to remind Nipper of a few more incidents. There was an occasion when Nipper jumped into the blue-grey car as it was passing. He thought the man who drove it was Beckett."

"I did at the time, sir," I put in. "But I found out afterwards that Beckett was another chap. Who was driving—" I paused and stared. "You—you don't mean to say—"

"That I was the driver?" chuckled Lee. "Exactly!"

"But—but how did you get hold of the car, sir?" I asked blankly.

"I wanted to examine it," said the guv'nor. "I learned that it was to be taken to a garage in Bannington for a minor repair, and I arranged with the garage owner to be sent for the car. And on the way back I deliberately went round by St. Frank's to see if you would notice the car. You did—and you compared a flake of enamel, too,

proving that Starke had been knocked down by that identical car."

"Yes, and you bowled me over, and pinched that piece of enamel," I said indignantly. "Oh, my hat! You've been having a rare old game, sir—diddling the lot of us!"

The guv'nor chuckled afresh.

"Perhaps I have been rather unkind, Nipper," he smiled. "However, it was better, on the whole, that you should know nothing of my presence. And now we must face the situation as it actually is. Our case is complete—quite complete—but we are suffering from one serious drawback."

"No proofs?" I asked.

"Not a trace of one," said Nelson Lee. "When a person has lied, it is always safe to reckon that he will stick to that lie—and that applies especially to this case. If Starke admits that he told a false story, he will be utterly disgraced, and will be expelled. So we really cannot expect Starke to depart from the story he originally told. He will maintain that false statement to the end."

"What about Beckett?" asked Dorrie. "You say he's a decent sort. Wouldn't he let the cat out of the bag?"

"I think he would be only too pleased to," said Lee. "But would Beckett's evidence be sufficient? Just for the sake of argument, we will assume that Beckett will come forward and tell the actual truth. Beckett says that he knocked Starke down with his Master's car. Starke immediately swears that it is a lie—that Nipper knocked him down. Dr. Stafford is a sensible man, and his judgment is sound enough. But which story is he likely to believe—Beckett's or Starke's?"

"Why, Beckett's, of course," I said promptly.

"I hardly think so," said the guv'nor, shaking his head. "For Beckett, you must remember, will be called upon to explain why he did not make the statement at the time—and he can give no explanation. Beckett will have to admit that he knocked somebody down and said nothing about it. His story, although perfectly true, will sound just the opposite. Starke, on the other hand, will maintain his lie, and that lie undoubtedly sounds genuine enough. In any case, the whole position would be most unsatisfactory—whether Starke was believed or not. So we must think of something more complete; something which will establish the truth beyond the shadow of a doubt. In other words, we must prove conclusively that Starke faked up his evidence for the especial purpose of disgracing Nipper."

I scratched my head.

"It sounds a tall order, sir," I remarked.

"And yet it ought to be a fairly simple matter," said Lee. "Starke will have to be trapped—you understand? Trapped."

"Oh, it's easy!" said Dorrie, grinning.

"It will be a delicate task," went on the guv'nor; "but I already have my plans fairly settled. And I mean to delay no longer. Tomorrow will be the day of reckoning for that

oming scoundrel. To-morrow, Nipper, you will return to St. Frank's as yourself. This deception will be at an end. And it will come at an opportune time—for the school breaks up for the summer holidays next week."

"Yes, sir—I was worrying a bit," I admitted. "I was beginning to think that I shouldn't be able to finish in time. But how are you going to manage things?" I went on eagerly.

Lee shook his head.

"I don't think I shall tell you, young 'un," he said slowly. "You must be patient. Trust in me, and you will be all right. You may tell your two chums about this meeting if you like—but warn them to be careful. And wait until to-morrow evening. I shall not tell you."

"But I wanted to help——"

"You can help me by remaining inactive," interrupted Lee. "Starke must be given no opportunity of suspecting the denouement. If you go about as usual, seemingly resigned, he will be lulled into a sense of false security. Dorrie, here, can help me——"

"I can?" said his lordship mildly. "By gad! How?"

"I will tell you later on," smiled Nelson Lee. "I arranged this meeting so that we could settle matters, but I did not imagine that Nipper himself would be present. It was my desire to keep things dark until the very end. But Nipper is a pushing young beggar, and he didn't mean to be left in the cold. The next time you keep an appointment, Dorrie, please do so rationally. You'll get yourself locked up if you try your hand at disguises again!"

"An' I thought it was a masterpiece!" sighed Dorrimore.

There was very little more to say; so, after a short time, I decided to go back to Montie and Tommy—who, I judged, would be wondering what on earth had happened to me.

I was disappointed in a way, for I wanted to take a hand in the last act. But the knowledge that Nelson Lee himself was directing the stage was wonderfully comforting. There was every prospect of some startling events in the very near future.

I made my way back to the river, and found the boat fastened to a tree-branch which overhung the bank. Tregellis-West and Watson were lolling on the grass nearby, and both of them appeared to be asleep—with their straw hats over their faces.

"Rouse up, you lazy beggars!" I shouted briskly.

Watson sat up.

"Oh, you have come back, then?" he asked sarcastically. "I thought you'd decided to make a whole evening of it! Montie and I were going back down the river in another ten minutes!"

"You've been a shockin' time, old boy," observed Montie, placing his piece-nos on his nose. "What's the meanin' of it? What have you been doin'? I expect you've been on a fool's errand—eh?"

I sat down on the grass between my chums.

"Do I look like it?" I asked genially.

"Look like what, you ass?" said Watson.

"If I'd been on a fool's errand I should have come back growling," I explained. "Instead of which you behold me smiling and cheerful. I can give you my word that things have been happening."

"Well, out with it," said Tommy bluntly. "Who was that disguised ass, and where did you follow him to? Why can't you explain, instead of sitting there, grinning? I shall get wild——"

"Patience, children," I interrupted. "Just sit there and listen to what your uncle has to say. To begin with, I followed that disguised merchant to an old barn across the meadows. And before he'd been there five minutes somebody else arrived—and he was in disguise, too."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "A meeting of Anarchists?"

I grinned.

"I don't suppose you can be blamed for suspecting that, old son," I said. "But the second man was Mr. Jones——"

"That chap we were talking about!" interrupted Watson. "He's been prowling about the district for some time, hasn't he? And I'll bet a quid his name isn't Jones at all!" he added suspiciously.

"It isn't," I replied. "Guess who Mr. Jones really is?"

"How can we guess?" growled Watson.

"Begad! Perhaps he's Mr. Lee!" suggested Montie languidly.

I looked at him sharply.

"How do you know?" I demanded. "You boulder! How——"

"Dear fellow, pray let me speak," put in Tregellis-West. "I was only jokin'—I was, really. You can't mean to tell me that Mr. Jones is really Mr. Lee! It's impossible, old boy."

"Sheer rot!" said Watson.

"But it happens to be true," I said calmly. "And what's more, the chap I followed is somebody else we know. I don't want to set you guessing, so I'll tell you. He's Lord Dorrimore—the one and only Dorrie!"

My chums laughed derisively.

"Pity you can't think of something better than that!" said Watson tartly.

"But it's true, you chump," I said. "The gov'nor's here—he's been in the neighbourhood for weeks. And to-morrow evening, at the latest, will see the end of the case, and I shall be Nipper once again."

Tregellis-West looked at me anxiously.

"Begad! This is serious, dear old boy," he said, with concern in his voice. "Have you been walkin' without wearin' your hat? The sun is frightfully strong, an' I've heard that people get delusions from sunstroke——"

"Rats!" said Watson. "The ass is trying to pull our legs."

"You're both wrong," I said promptly. "I'm not pulling your legs, and I'm not

suffering from delusions. If you'll sit quiet, and listen like good little boys, I'll relate the giddy story."

It was some little time before Tregellis-West and Watson realised that I was serious. But at last they were convinced, and their joy was only equalled by their excitement. They knew that things were waking up at last!

"Begad! This is the best news I've heard for weeks!" declared Sir Montie. "An' how is Mr. Lee goin' to do the trappin' business?"

"That's just what I don't know," I replied. "But I'm trusting the gov'nor, and you can be quite certain that he'll keep his word. I've never known him to fail yet, my sons, and Nelson Lee won't fail now!"

"To be continued next week!" grinned Tommy Watson.

"I'm serious, you ass," I said severely. "My hat! The time's getting on, and if we're not quick we shall find ourselves late for calling-over. Buck-up!"

And, feeling happier than we had felt for weeks, we got into the boat and went back towards St. Frank's with all speed.

The end was in sight at last!

CHAPTER IV. GETTING BUSY.

NELSON LEE was himself again.

Attired in a brown flannel suit, spick and span, he looked exactly what he was—a healthy, alert man of action. His clear-cut face was perfectly clean-shaven now, and his grey eyes were as keenly attentive as ever.

The famous schoolmaster-detective was standing in the great stone porch of a large house which was situated on the outskirts of the village of Midshott. To be exact, Nelson Lee was paying an evening call at the residence of Mr. Millford.

A neat maidservant answered the door, and Lee presented his card. He was asked to enter, and after a short interval he was requested to follow the maid down the hall. Finally, he was ushered into a sumptuously-furnished apartment, which was presumably Mr. Millford's study.

The host himself was standing before the open French windows, and he came forward as Nelson Lee entered.

"This is a most unexpected pleasure, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed genially. "I am delighted to meet you, sir. But I must confess that I can form no opinion as to the reason for your visit."

Nelson Lee shook hands with Mr. Millford.

"Well, to tell you the truth, my object is to have a little chat with you concerning your chauffeur, Beckett," said Nelson Lee, as he sat down.

Mr. Millford shook his head.

"If you are asking me to surrender the man, I'm afraid your mission will be unsuccessful," he exclaimed. "Beckett has been

in my employment for a year, and I am not at all anxious to get rid of him."

"Neither am I anxious to deprive you of his services," smiled Nelson Lee. "I am afraid you misunderstand me, Mr. Millford. I wish to undertake a certain task—a task in which Beckett will be affected—but, seeing that he is your employee, I think it is only right that you should be consulted previously."

"I do not understand," said Mr. Millford.

"You will presently," Nelson Lee assured him. "To begin with, am I to understand that Beckett has always given you satisfaction?"

"Always, Mr. Lee."

"He is steady and reliable?"

"The man's character is quite excellent," said Millford. "I am always willing to trust him, and have never had cause to grumble—except in the matter of minor matters which are really of no account."

"He is a careful driver?"

"Broadly speaking, yes," replied the other. "Occasionally I have found it necessary to warn him against too much speed, but Beckett is very cautious on the whole. Some years ago he was employed by a firm testing cars on the track, I believe, and he grew accustomed to high speeds and fast driving."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Well, Mr. Millford, I feel it is my duty to inform you of a certain little episode which took place some weeks ago," he said. "Perhaps Beckett has said nothing to you? If that is so, it is because he is afraid of losing his position."

"Has the man committed some minor crime, then?" asked Millford anxiously.

"Not exactly that," replied Lee. "And I don't want you to dismiss the fellow because of what I am going to say. If you do decide to dispense with him I shall find him employment myself, for I do not wish him to suffer. To be precise, Mr. Millford, Beckett took your car out one evening while you were away—he took it out without your knowledge—"

"Is that all?" laughed Mr. Millford. "A great many chauffeurs are guilty of that offence, I imagine. I have suspected that Beckett has played the trick on one or two occasions, but it is only a trifle. He knows far more about the car than I do, and I trust him. The petrol he uses on such stolen joy-rides is quite negligible."

Nelson Lee laughed softly.

"I'm afraid all employers are not so good-natured as yourself, Mr. Millford," he remarked. "But that is not really the point. While Beckett was on this jaunt in question he returned to Midshott by way of Belton. And just outside the gates of St. Frank's he knocked down a senior schoolboy belonging to the Ancient House."

Mr. Millford jumped up.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "Then it is serious, indeed! The utter rascal! He said nothing to me about it—nothing whatever!"

"Please let me explain further," said

Lee. "At that period you were away for a week, I think, and by the time you returned the affair was quite over. Beckett therefore saw no reason why he should endanger his bread-and-butter by informing you of his mishap."

"That makes it better, certainly," admitted Mr. Millford. "But what of this boy? Was he hurt much?"

"He was rendered unconscious; but the most serious point of the affair is that Beckett drove on without stopping—"

"Then I shall certainly dismiss him at once!" exclaimed Mr. Millford furiously. "I cannot possibly retain a man in my service who could be guilty of such a base action, Mr. Lee. The heartless wretch!"

"Again I must beg of you to refrain from being hasty," said Nelson Lee. "Remember that Beckett had taken the car without permission; if he had stopped he could not have repaired the damage he had caused, and the whole episode would have come to your knowledge. Therefore, in his panic, he drove on, but was remorseful afterwards."

"So I should judge!" snapped Mr. Millford.

"The next morning he returned to the school, but not in the car," said the visitor.

"He learned that Starke—the boy in question—was not seriously hurt, and that he was in no danger. Beckett, I am sure, would have confessed at once had the lad been gravely injured. But when he found that Starke was comparatively unharmed, he considered it his best policy to remain quiet."

"Well, perhaps I can understand," said Mr. Millford slowly. "We are all somewhat apt to judge others harshly. Mr. Lee—and I dare say we should act in much the same way ourselves—in similar circumstances."

"I have not been making excuses for Beckett," went on the detective. "He acted wrongly, and he should be punished—although, if it comes to that, I think he has been punished quite sufficiently as it is. For there is more behind this little affair than one would imagine."

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Millford. "I thought you had told me all, Mr. Lee!"

"By no means," was the reply. "No doubt you have heard that I have an assistant named Nipper?"

"My dear Mr. Lee, Nipper is almost as famous as yourself," smiled Millford. "He is at the school, I believe—improving his education?"

"Well, yes," replied Nelson Lee slowly. "But I will tell you what happened. This boy Starke is an utter young rascal, and he had good reason to detest Nipper; for the youngster had put a stop to Starke's bullying. By pure chance, Nipper was the first to reach Starke's side after the accident, and he was practically accused of causing Starke's injury by means of a stick."

"But you did not think that, surely?"

"Unfortunately, I was away at the time," said Nelson Lee. "The evidence was rather against Nipper, but it was only circumstantial, and by no means conclusive. What

did make it conclusive was a statement uttered by Starke upon his return to consciousness. For Starke deliberately lied—he made a solemn statement to the effect that Nipper knocked him down; he made no mention whatever of the car."

"The vindictive young dog!" exclaimed Mr. Millford warmly. "But Nipper did not suffer, did he?"

"Nipper was expelled in disgrace," said Lee quietly.

"How terrible!"

"The lad did not accept the position tamely, however," went on Lee. "He returned to the school—disguised as another boy. A most impudent imposture, of course—but Nipper is capable of anything. I am very anxious to put an end to the false position—and that is why I am here."

"But how can I help?"

"Well, Starke approached Beckett and got him to declare that he would keep quiet with regard to the accident. Now, Beckett is your employee, and it would not be fair to you if I approached him behind your back."

"You are very considerate, Mr. Lee," smiled the other. "I appreciate your courtesy, and I hasten to say that you have my full permission to approach Beckett whenever you choose. The man was a fool to make arrangements with Starke."

"He was, indeed," agreed Nelson Lee. "I want Beckett to confess the truth to me, and I want him to help me in another way. Now that I have your permission, I can go ahead, and I am sure that everything will be satisfactorily settled in a very short time—within twenty-four hours, if possible."

"I am glad that you told me everything so frankly, Mr. Lee," said the host. "If I had learned of these facts from any other source I should have dismissed Beckett on the spot. But I suspect that Starke is more to blame than my chauffeur; and you are at liberty to tell him, from me, that a confession on his part will not cost him his job. I like the man, and I am willing to overlook this little lapse on his part."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"That is very generous of you, Mr. Millford," he said. "I can now go ahead far more comfortably—for I should not like Beckett to suffer. I intend to have a quiet talk with the man at once."

"You will find him in the garage, Mr. Lee," said Millford. "No, there is no necessity for you to go out by the door. If you will just walk along the terrace to the end, you will see a green door set in the wall. It leads directly into the yard."

Nelson Lee shook hands with his host, and passed out through the French windows. He found Beckett in the yard, as Mr. Millford had intimated. The chauffeur looked round with some little curiosity.

"Good-evening, Beckett!" said Nelson Lee.

"I am——"

But Mr. Millford appeared at that moment.

"I thought it would be better if I just came along for a minute," he said cheerfully.

"Beckett, this gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee." Beckett perceptibly changed colour.

"Ain't you a master at St. Frank's, sir?" he asked huskily.

"I am," replied Lee; "but you need not regard me with such apprehension, Beckett. I may be a detective, but I have no intention of arresting you!"

The man gave a somewhat sheepish smile.

"No, sir," he said meekly.

"Mr. Lee has something to say to you, Beckett," said Mr. Millford. "Listen to him carefully, and do exactly as he tells you. You have nothing to fear if you are straightforward. Remember that."

And Mr. Millford, with a nod, took his departure.

"I don't mind bettin' that you've come to see me about that affair what happened a few weeks back, sir," said Beckett bluntly. "It's no good me tryin' to look innocent—I can't do it, sir."

"We're going to have a quiet little talk, Beckett," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "To begin with, I might as well tell you that I am fully aware of the fact that you knocked down a boy named Starke——"

"I knew it, sir!" said Beckett miserably. "This'll mean that I'm kicked out to-morrow!"

"It will mean nothing of the sort, because your master knows everything, and he has assured me that you'll be quite safe if you only do everything in your power to repair the damage that has been caused," said Nelson Lee. "In short, Beckett, you're in a position to help me—and you must do so."

The chauffeur looked greatly relieved.

"I'll do everything I can, sir," he said earnestly. "But I thought the young gentleman was well again now——"

"Starke?" said Lee. "I am not talking about Starke. Owing to your silence regarding that accident, my young assistant—Nipper—was expelled in disgrace from the school."

"Yes, I know, sir," said Beckett huskily. "But I thought it was too late to do anything. Master Starke told me that even if I spoke up it wouldn't make no difference. Master Nipper's gone, an' he can't come back. That's what I thought, sir. Master Starke is a regular young rascal, sir."

"Then you shouldn't take too much notice of what he says," said Lee sternly. "What you must do, Beckett, is to make a complete confession to the Headmaster of St. Frank's. Nipper's name must be cleared."

"If I can only help, sir, I'll do it willingly—even if I'm given the boot!" declared Beckett easily. "But I thought it was no use talking now. An' even if I tell everything, Mr. Starke will deny it—he'll lie until he's blue in the face."

"Quite possibly," said Lee drily. "But I have a plan which will outwit Master Starke—which will trap him very neatly. That is why I want your help, Beckett. Because you can materially assist my scheme."

Beckett's eyes glistened.

"Just tell me how, sir—that's all!" he said grimly.

Nelson Lee did tell him how, and the pair were chatting together for some little time. When Lee finally took his departure he looked quite satisfied with the result of his double interview.

What the outcome was to be remained to be seen.

CHAPTER V.

WALKING INTO THE TRAP.

"LETTER for you, old man!"

Kenmore put his head into the door of the study which he shared with Starke and tossed a letter on to the table.

It was the next morning, and Walter Starke was indulging in a before-breakfast cigarette.

"Thanks!" he said, getting up lazily.

Kenmore had gone, and Starke took the letter over to the open window and lounged on the sill. The morning sunlight was streaming in quite fiercely, for the June day was very seasonable.

"Now, what the deuce——"

Starke paused as he looked a second time at the address. And he was now somewhat concerned.

"That's Beckett's handwriting," he muttered. "What the thunder can the fellow want now, I wonder?"

He tore open the flap, extracted a sheet of paper which had probably been torn from an exercise book, and read the words which were written upon it. And as he did so he frowned.

"Infernal nuisance!" he muttered.

For the note ran as follows:

"Dear Mr. Starke,—I must see you as soon as possible. It is really important, sir, and I shall be at the little pub. in Edgemore—where we met last time—at exactly six o'clock to-morrow evening. If you don't turn up I can't be answerable for what happens.—Yours truly,
JOE BECKETT."

Starke read the letter again, and paced several times up and down the study.

"I can't think why the fellow wants to see me," he muttered. "I thought I'd finished with him—but I shall have to go. I expect the fool has been blabbing to somebody! Six o'clock this evening!"

Starke tore the letter into pieces and threw them into the grate. Then he resumed his seat in the easy-chair and stared before him. He had been quite certain that he had finished with Beckett, and he didn't like the affair to be reopened.

"I'm hanged if I know what to think of things," he muttered. "With Nipper in the place still, I'm in a rotten position. I've a thundering good mind to tell the Head all about it—in spite of what that stranger said to me. How can he do me any harm? I believe it was a piece of bluff. Anyhow, if Beckett hasn't done anything foolish, I'll get rid of the kid somehow."

Starke was still looking moody and thoughtful when Kenmore put his head into the study for a second time.

"Brekker in two minutes!" he announced. Starke made no reply.

"Deaf?" inquired Kenmore loudly.

"Eh?" Starke started. "What's that?" he said irritably.

"Did that letter upset you, old man?" grinned Kenmore. "From a bookie, I suppose? How much have you gone down?"

"Go and hang yourself!" said Starke savagely.

Kenmore chuckled as he closed the door. He had noticed that Starke had become far more irritable of late weeks—and Kenmore was getting rather fed up with it. He was quite resolved, in fact, to go into another study when he returned from the summer holidays. But it wasn't worth changing just for a few days.

Starke was moody all day, and he failed altogether to turn up for tea. Kenmore was rather glad of this, because he brought a couple of visitors in with him, and they could easily dispense with Starke's company.

Starke himself was making his way to the little inn in Edgemore, in order to keep the appointment with Beckett.

Edgemore was not a village—indeed, it could scarcely be called a hamlet—for it only consisted of a tiny inn and a few cottages. It was situated right off the main road, only a mile and a half from the school.

Starke walked, for he had plenty of time. And as he strode down the leafy lanes his thoughts were busy. He was not so content as he had been at one time. Matters were not going as smoothly as he would have liked.

He arrived at the inn a few minutes before six, but he was not there before Beckett. The chauffeur was lounging in the shade of the rustic porch. He removed a pipe from his teeth as Starke came up.

"Glad to see you, sir," he said respectfully.

"Well, I'm not glad to see you!" retorted Starke, with harsh frankness. "I'd like to know what the deuce you mean by dragging me over here? Confounded impertinence—that's what it is!"

Beckett coloured slightly.

"Perhaps you'll come inside, sir?" he suggested. "We can have the little back-parlour to ourselves for a little while."

Starke made no reply. He pushed past his companion roughly, and strode down the paved passage to a low doorway at the end. He entered, and Beckett followed him. Then Starke closed the door.

"Now, out with it!" he snapped. "I've got no time to waste!"

"I'd like to know just how I stand, sir," said Beckett.

"What do you mean?" demanded Starke. "I thought this business was settled—one word, remember, and you'll get sacked. I suppose you haven't been blabbing anything in a drunken fit?"

"Not that I know of, sir," said Beckett,

remaining respectful with difficulty. "But it seems to me that we ought to come to something final. The position ain't very satisfactory as it stands."

"The position?" snapped Starke. "What position?"

"You know what I mean, sir. There's that lad who was expelled," exclaimed Beckett bluntly. "The Headmaster thought that Master Nipper knocked you down, an' it was my car that done it all the time——"

"What does that matter?"

"It doesn't seem fair to that poor lad," said Beckett, shaking his head.

"Fair!" snorted Starke. "Don't be a fool, Beckett! You know well enough that I wanted the young cad to go! I told you all this before. Nipper had been up against me for weeks, and when your car knocked me down I saw a way of getting my own back."

"It was rather underhand, sir."

"Do you think I care what it was?" sneered Starke. "Nipper was sacked because I swore that he'd knocked me down. Nobody will ever find out that Nipper is innocent, and that I lied on purpose to get him kicked out. It's a secret between you and me, Beckett—and you'd better not breathe a word, either!"

"I don't like it, sir," said Beckett. "If you care for lying, I don't——"

"It doesn't interest me what you care for," interrupted Starke. "And I might as well tell you that even if you blab you won't do Nipper any good. Your word won't be worth a farthing against mine—and I shall stick to my original story."

"I've heard that a really good liar can turn black and white, sir," said Beckett, "an' you seem to be an expert!"

Starke scowled.

"I lied to get Nipper the sack, and I'm glad of it!" he said fiercely. "But what did you want to talk about? We don't want to go over all that business again. I'm getting fed-up, Beckett."

The man rose to his feet.

"I only wanted to suggest that it would be better if we came to another arrangement, sir," he said. "I don't like keeping this secret. That's all, Mr. Starke. Wouldn't it be as well to tell the Headmaster——"

"You fool!" shouted Starke hotly. "Is that all you brought me here for? If you say a word to a soul I'll have you kicked out of the district. Don't forget that, you—you——"

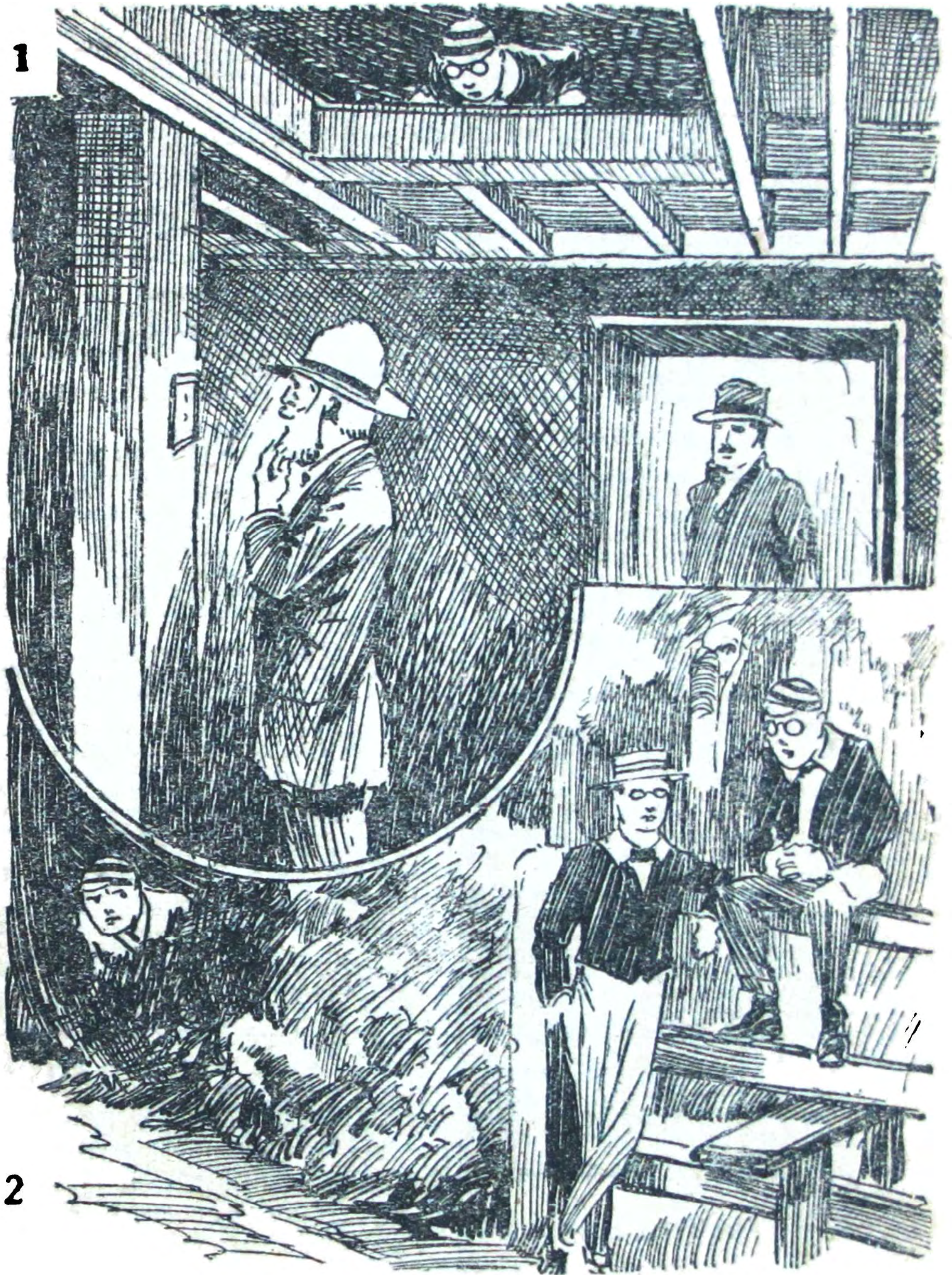
Starke so far forgot himself as to swear.

"Go easy, sir!" said Beckett sharply.

"I'm going altogether!" snapped Starke, making for the door. "And if you send me a letter again and bring me out on a fool's errand, I'll make you pay for it. I can have you kicked out of your job at any moment I like!"

"Can you?" said Beckett grimly. "Why not try it? I've kept myself in check till now, Master Starke, but you'd better remember that I'm an honest man—and not a blackguard like you are!"

Starke nearly choked.



1. My late quarry was inspecting his reflection critically.

2. Starke crept forward stealthily until within a few yards of the stile.

"I've finished with you, you scum!" he snarled.

The prefect tore the door open, passed out, and slammed it after him. But Beckett opened it again, and reached the outer door just as Starke was striding down the road.

Beckett's face was wreathed in smiles as he returned to the rear parlour. He closed the door, and then crossed over to another door, which was partially concealed by a curtain. He opened it quietly.

"It's all right, sir," he said. "The young rascal's gone!"

Nelson Lee emerged from the doorway.

"Well, Beckett, how did you get on?" he asked. "I heard a portion of what went on, but not everything. Has our little trap been successful? Have we obtained the proof we need?"

"Every bit of it, sir," said Beckett cheerfully. "Starke let it all out beautifully just as if we'd rehearsed it all for a play! It couldn't have been better, sir—not if we'd asked him to do it!"

"You're sure you caught it all?" asked Lee.

"I switched on just when Starke said 'Fair! Don't be a fool, Beckett!' and didn't switch off until after he'd swore so badly," said Beckett. "That swear is included, sir."

"Which is just as well, perhaps," said Nelson Lee grimly.

He stepped over to a small screen which stood in a corner and pulled it aside. And a most interesting instrument was revealed—to be exact, a "dictaphone"! A recording phonograph!

The movement was switched on and off by a small lever, which was fastened just beneath the edge of the small table—against which Beckett had been sitting. A cable ran from the lever to the instrument.

"I was assured Starke would hear the scratch, sir," went on Beckett. "But them ducks outside kept a-quackin', an' it wasn't noticeable much. Anyhow, Starke never suspected anything."

"In other words, Beckett, we may consider that the experiment has been a complete success?" said Nelson Lee genially. "Starke has now committed himself beyond recall; for this phonograph record contains his actual words. No matter how he bluffs and lies, he cannot dispute his own voice."

"You're a wonder, sir," said Beckett admiringly.

"We will just hear what Starke has to say again," went on Lee, removing the record from the machine and examining it. "Yes, Beckett, there is a considerable amount recorded on here."

"My voice as well, sir?" asked the chauffeur curiously.

"Undoubtedly."

"By gum! That'll sound queer, sir," grinned Beckett.

Nelson Lee carefully brushed the record, and then removed the recorder. In its stead he fitted a reproducer, and then set the machine going. He and Beckett stood near the horn, listening.

"Fair to that poor lad," came a voice, which was easily recognisable as Beckett's, although, of course, it was somewhat thin. "Fair! Don't be a fool, Beckett!" came another voice, which was certainly Starke's. "You know well enough that I wanted the young cad to go. I told you all this before

It was all on the record—right up to the point where Starke swore, and where Beckett advised him to "go easy." There was no doubt that Starke had committed himself beyond all hope.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, as he stopped the machine. "You must really allow me to congratulate you, Beckett."

"Me, sir?"

"Most certainly!" declared Lee. "You directed the conversation most adroitly; without your cues Starke would never have made the statements which are all-important. I think we may be quite satisfied."

"An' will this mean that Mr. Starke will be sent away, sir?"

The detective nodded grimly.

"It means, Beckett, that Starke can bluff no longer," he said. "Nipper will be fully and completely exonerated. And you, Beckett, will suffer in no way at all. I can assure you of that."

"I don't really deserve it, sir," said the chauffeur. "The master's very kind and generous, and I shall remember it, too. I'm glad that all this underhand work is goin' to be ended—"

"Well, old man, how goes it?"

The inquiry came from Lord Dorrimore, who had just strolled in at the doorway. His lordship was looking quite free-and-easy in his flannels and panama, but he was rather anxious—in spite of his careless voice.

"Excellent, Dorrie!" said Nelson Lee. "The trap has caught its victim."

"Well, that's decent, anyhow," said his lordship. "It would have been frightfully borin' if we had to do it all over again. I spotted Starke goin' away, so I knew it was safe to drop in."

"Just listen to this, old man," said Lee.

He put the record through again, and Dorrimore listened to it with great interest.

"Toppin'!" he declared. "It almost seems a pity this ain't a murder case, you know. It would be awfully excitin' if Starke happened to be a murderer, an' confessed his sins on a bally record!"

"We're dealing with facts—not with fancies," smiled Lee. "Our quarry is a schoolboy, and his unconscious confession will mean that Nipper will be free henceforth to take his correct place in the school. I fancy he is rather tired of acting the part of Algernon Clarence D'Albert. It was all right at first—but somewhat tedious after the novelty had worn off."

"An' what's the programme?" asked Dorrimore.

Nelson Lee consulted his watch.

"We are going to the school at once," he said briskly. "I have seen Dr. Stafford to-day—although nobody in the school is

aware of it—and the Head has arranged for the school to be called together at seven-thirty. You see, I was confident of success, and we shall arrive just in time for the little entertainment. Even Nipper does not know anything about my plans."

"Shall I come with you, sir?" asked Beckett.

"Most decidedly," replied Lee. "And we start now."

Two minutes later they were off. But before they arrived at the school a fresh development was to take place—and one which was quite unexpected.

CHAPTER VI.

STARKE'S CHANCE.

TREGELLIS-WEST shook his noble head sadly.

"Dear fellow, I really don't know," he exclaimed. "But I'm afraid that Mr. Lee was rather too optimistic. It seems too good to believe that everything will come right this evening. There ain't enough time, begad!"

"It doesn't seem like it," I agreed gloomily. "Why can't the gov'nor be more open with me? He's always so jolly secretive—he keeps me in the dark. I don't call it playing the game."

"But he never lets you down, remember," said Watson.

We were sitting on the stile in the lane, just against Bellton Wood. It was evening—getting on towards seven o'clock. And I had heard nothing from Nelson Lee. I was beginning to doubt that my freedom was to come that night.

Starke, of the Sixth, at that identical time, was on his way back from Edgemore, and he was returning by way of the meadows. The latter part of his journey lay through the wood—and he would find it necessary to cross the stile in order to get into the lane.

He was not in a very good temper, for Beckett's attitude had irritated him. And he was thinking of other matters, too. His position, taken as a whole, did not please him at all.

He approached the stile silently. He was wearing rubber-soled shoes, and the path was hard. He made no sound whatever. Approaching the stile he heard voices, and looked up sharply.

"By George!" he muttered. "D'Albert and his two chums—Nipper, rather. I wonder what the young cads are talking about? Me, most likely."

In his present state of mind Starke was highly suspicious. Ordinarily, perhaps, he would have marched straight on, and would have taken no notice of us. But in this instance he paused.

Then he crept forward stealthily until he stood within a few yards of the stile, concealed by a thick bush.

"I'm blessed if I know what to think of things," I was saying—totally unconscious of

the fact that Starke was so near at hand. I found it out later on, of course, but at the time I knew nothing of the prefect's proximity.

"They are a bit mixed, I'll admit," said Watson.

"There's Starke, for instance," I went on. "He knows I'm Nipper, but he's too scared to say anything. I'm afraid that he'll give me away before I can prove my innocence."

"He won't have the pluck, dear boy," declared Sir Montie. "He's too afraid of what will happen to his own skin, you know."

I nodded.

"And yet he needn't be, really," I said. "I don't think Starke's in any danger—yet. I wish I knew what was going on—that's all. But I honestly believe that if Starke gave the show away I should be done for."

"Couldn't that chap Beckett speak up for you?" asked Watson.

"He could; but that wouldn't be enough," I replied. "Let's hope that Starke keeps mum. If he takes it into his head to blow the gaff—to put it delicately—I shan't be able to do a thing. That's my opinion, anyhow. I may be wrong—and I hope I am."

"I'm afraid you're right, old man," said Sir Montie. "The position may be different to-morrow, of course—or even later on this evening; but just at the moment Starke's got the upper hand—if he only knew it!"

Starke's eyes glittered as he listened.

"And I do know it, too!" he muttered. "By George!"

Without waiting to hear any more, Starke crept away—which was perhaps rather unfortunate for him. If he had only remained longer he would have heard something which would have deterred him, perhaps.

"Starke's got the upper hand, if he only knew it," I repeated. "I don't know about the upper hand, Montie. And perhaps I was wrong about being helpless; I was forgetting that the gov'nor is on hand. With Nelson Lee on the spot things would be very different."

"How?" asked Watson.

"The Head would be influenced, for one thing," I replied. "The gov'nor would stick up for me, of course, and he can point things out in a way that nobody can equal. He's better than dozens of famous K.C.'s. He can pull a story to pieces if there's even a slight flaw in it. And you can bet your boots that Starke's story would bristle with flaws."

But Starke did not know that Nelson Lee was in the neighbourhood. If he had known, he would not have decided upon the course which came into his head. For, as Starke made his way to the school by another route, an idea was taking shape in his mind.

"The Head's called the school together in Big Hall for seven-thirty," the prefect murmured. "By gad! What a chance! I shall be able to give Nipper away in front of the whole school!"

Starke relished the very thought.

"There'll be a big sensation," he went on. "And that young cad will be hooted

out of the place! Things couldn't be better. I'm going to give him away—and brazen the whole thing out. I'm safe enough."

Starke, having come to this decision, did not alter his mind. It was his plan, in fact, to denounce me in front of the whole school!

And he decided, first of all, to take Kenmore into his confidence—just to see what effect it would have upon him. Starke also felt that he would like his study-mate's opinion.

He found Kenmore in the Sixth Form-room, and called him aside.

"I want you in the study," he said shortly.

"Sorry," said Kenmore. "I'm just talking to——"

"Never mind about that," interrupted Starke. "I've got something important to tell you—and I want your advice."

"Oh, all right."

Starke was not always anxious to receive Kenmore's advice; he generally considered that his own opinion was of far more value than anybody else's. So Kenmore felt rather flattered.

"Pretty mysterious, aren't you?" he asked, as they entered the study and Starke locked the door. "What's in the wind?"

"The Head's going to make a speech soon, isn't he?" asked Starke.

"I suppose so," grunted Kenmore. "Something about the holidays, I expect—or some other rot. It's a bit thick to make everybody attend in Hall, to listen to a lot of beastly twaddle."

"You don't know why the school's been called together?"

"Nobody knows," said Kenmore. "The notice didn't say—and the masters don't seem to know a confounded thing. But what about it? That's no reason why you should be mysterious."

"I thought of livening up things a little," said Starke grimly. "There's no reason why we shouldn't have a bit of a sensation this evening, Kenny. I've discovered something—something which will give the school a shock."

Kenmore regarded his study-mate curiously.

"I don't catch on," he said.

"You know that new kid in the Remove—D'Albert?" asked Starke.

"Know him?" said Kenmore. "I've seen him often enough, of course."

"Well, he's not what he seems to be."

"Why the dickens can't you speak plainly?" asked Kenmore. "What do you mean? How isn't he what he seems to be?"

"You'll never guess who he is," said Starke.

"He's D'Albert, you ass!"

"He isn't!"

Kenmore stared.

"Have you been to a pub, or something?" he asked bluntly. "You seem to be talking a lot of rot, Starke. D'Albert isn't what he is—he isn't D'Albert at all! What in the name of thunder do you mean?"

Starke leaned across the table.

"I mean," he said slowly, "that the chap

we know as D'Albert is really that young cad who was expelled a week or two ago!"

Kenmore was more bewildered than ever.

"Nipper?" he said. "He's the only kid who's been expelled this term. How can D'Albert be Nipper? You must be mad!"

"You silly fool!" snapped Starke. "You're as dense as a lunatic. D'Albert is really Nipper—in disguise!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Kenmore.

He sat down in a chair and yelled. And Starke stood over him, glaring with fury. The other prefect's laughter at that moment grated upon Starke's nerves. And at last he grabbed hold of Kenmore and shook him.

"Stop it, you idiot!" gasped Kenmore.

"Will you be serious, then?" snarled Starke. "I'm not joking, confound you!"

"Not joking?" shouted Kenmore. "You can't be serious when you tell me that D'Albert is——"

"Don't yell it over the housetops!" snapped Starke. "I'm going to give the game away in Big Hall. And I tell you seriously, Kenmore, that I haven't made a mistake. It's absolutely true!"

Kenmore at last began to realize that Starke was really serious. And he listened in a dazed kind of way as his study-mate repeated his statement—supplemented by other information.

"It can't be true!" said Kenmore at last. "Good heavens! It's absolutely mad, Starke!"

"I knew you'd say that," replied Starke. "But I mean it, Kenny. Do you think I'd be fool enough to stand up in Hall and say such a thing if it wasn't true? I'm going to give the young brute away. Don't forget that Nipper is Nelson Lee's assisant—and he's used to disguises."

"Ye gods!" said Kenmore. "I'm beginning to believe it's true, after all. The awful young scoundrel! Sacked for swiping you about, and then he comes back! I've never heard of such a dodge in all my life!"

"Do you think I'd better give the game away?"

"Of course!" said Kenmore promptly. "If you don't, I will! I don't see why we should have that murderous young hound in the school!"

Kenmore, although he was Starke's most intimate friend, was totally unaware of the fact that Starke had lied; Kenmore fully believed his study-mate's story, and he was therefore eager to have the truth revealed.

Shortly afterwards the school began to collect, for it was getting on towards seven-thirty. The juniors did not like the idea at all. To be called in from the playing-fields to listen to some of the Head's "rot"—as they disrespectfully called it—was decidedly the limit.

But it was one of those evils which could not be avoided. The command had been made, and it had to be obeyed.

By seven twenty-five Big Hall was fairly crowded. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and I strolled in just before the half-hour. I

had no idea as to why the school had been ordered to collect.

I wondered rather vaguely if it was in any way connected with my affairs; but decided that such could not be the case. I didn't believe that the affair would be made public so soon.

A few minutes after half-past seven everybody was in his place, and the prefects were doing their best to keep order—a somewhat difficult task with no masters present.

The murmur of conversation was considerable. It amounted to a buzz in the junior quarter; but this died down as Mr. Crowell, Mr. Pagett, and one or two other masters appeared.

Finally the Head himself entered the platform from the large oaken door set in the rear of the hall. He was looking unusually grave, and the silence in that great place was quite remarkable.

"Boys," he began, in a deep voice, "I have something to say to you this evening which will come as something of a surprise to you. I want you to listen to me carefully, and not to interrupt."

He paused, and the silence was as heavy as before.

And at that moment Starke decided to hurl his bombshell. He would not have had the pluck, perhaps, but Kenmore nudged him and whispered encouragement. Starke stood forward.

"May I speak, sir?" he asked respectfully.

The Head regarded Starke over the tops of his glasses.

"You may, Starke; but you must wait until I have finished," he said severely. "Do not interrupt me—"

"But it's very important, sir!" said Starke quickly.

"Indeed!" The Head removed his glasses. "Then perhaps I may change my mind, Starke. If your statement is of importance I will hear it at once. But please make it as brief as possible."

All eyes were now fixed upon Starke. He was pale, and plainly agitated.

"What's the ass going to say?" whispered Watson into my ear.

"Goodness knows!" I breathed.

"Is he going to give you away——"

"Shush, you ass!" I whispered.

The other juniors were talking, too.

"We didn't come here to hear Starke's fatheaded rot!" exclaimed Handforth sourly.

"Let's start booing, you chaps! Come on!"

Handforth booed loudly—but, unfortunately, nobody booed with him. And, as a result, his voice boomed through the hall with startling distinctness. There was an immediate chorus of tittering.

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed the Head, startled. "Who—who made that extraordinary noise?"

"I think it was Handforth, sir," said Morrow, of the Sixth.

"Handforth!" thundered the Head. "Are you ill?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was another chuckle from the assembled boys.

"I was only giving Starke a boo, sir!" said Handforth boldly. "I don't see why we should listen to his rot!"

"You—you silly ass!" hissed McClure.

"I am very gratified to hear your opinion, Handforth," said the Head smoothly. "But as we are not anxious to know your opinion of Starke, you will take two hundred lines for interrupting. And if you offend again, you will come to my study for a more drastic form of punishment."

"Yes, sir," gasped Handforth.

There was silence again, and Handforth glared round him fiercely.

"You—you traitors!" he hissed. "Why didn't you back me up?"

His voice, even when he whispered, was perfectly loud, and I noticed that the Head gazed angrily towards the Remove ranks. But, as Starke commenced speaking at that very moment, Handy just escaped.

"What I want to say, sir, concerns a junior in the Remove," said Starke firmly.

"He calls himself D'Albert—but that isn't his name at all! I wish to state in front of everybody that D'Albert is a rank impostor!"

There was a low buzz at once, and now all eyes were turned upon me. I don't mind admitting that I turned a trifle pale. Starke had decided to give me away, after all!

Perhaps he feared that exposure was imminent—exposure for himself—and he thought that it would be safer to play his own card first. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were looking absolutely dismayed.

"Don't worry," I whispered. "I'm safe enough!"

"I must ask you to explain what you mean, Starke," said Dr. Stafford gravely. "You have made a most serious statement, and I call upon you for an immediate explanation. What are your reasons for declaring that D'Albert, of the Remove, is an impostor?"

"I know the truth, sir, and I think everybody else ought to know it," shouted Starke. "Listen to me, you fellows. D'Albert isn't D'Albert at all—he's Nipper!"

The school gave one gasp, and then roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" thundered the Head.

"He's Nipper, I tell you!" shouted Starke, facing the boys. "If you don't believe me, you can ask him for yourself. If he dares to deny it, the fact can be proved within five minutes!"

"Oh, he's mad!"

"He doesn't know what he's saying!"

"Why don't you speak, D'Albert, you ass?"

"Tell Starke he's mad!"

The shouts which rang through the hall were numerous, and it was some moments before order was restored. Nobody believed that Starke's statement had an atom of truth in it.

Just for a moment I thought of bluffing. But that would have entailed lying—and I wasn't prepared for that. The crisis had come, and I had to face it squarely. There was no way out.

The blow had fallen before the gov'nor was ready!

"I will overlook this gross disturbance," shouted the Head, waiting to make himself heard. "You are naturally excited, boys. But you must be quiet now. I wish to speak to D'Albert. Stand forward, my boy."

I stood forward, and Starke regarded me malevolently.

"D'Albert, what have you to say in answer to Starke's charge?" asked the Head. "He has declared that your name is not D'Albert at all, but that you are Nipper. What is your answer?"

I took a deep breath.

"It's true, sir!" I said clearly.

I spoke in my ordinary voice—and what a relief it was to do so! In a second I had dropped all my affected manners. I could not remove my disguise completely, as my hair was dyed. But I took off my spectacles, and removed from my mouth a small instrument which altered the shape of my upper lip causing it to protrude. The thing was quite comfortable to wear, and I had grown used to it. But with that absent I looked more like myself.

"It's no good keeping it up any longer, sir," I went on steadily. "I am Nipper, and everybody might as well know it. I've deceived the whole school, and I'm proud of it, too."

"He's Nipper—he's really Nipper!"

"Great Scott!"

"It can't be true!"

"He's Nipper!"

The shouts were those of absolute amazement.

"My only Sunday topper!" gasped Handforth dazedly. "That—that chap's Nipper! Oh, hold me up, somebody!"

Handforth collapsed into the arms of Church and McClure—who were not expecting him. The three collapsed in a heap together, but in the general excitement the minor disturbance was not noticed.

"You—you silly asses!" shouted Handforth warmly.

"We shall get a flogging in a minute!" panted Church fiercely.

"Nipper!" ejaculated De Valerie, as though in a dream. "And—and we refused to give him a look in at cricket!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

"No wonder he licked Fullwood the other day!"

"The awful spoofer!"

But there were other shouts as well—shouts from the Third, the Remove, and the Fifth. The majority of the fellows believed that I was guilty of a serious crime, and they regarded me with contempt.

"The confounded rotter!" shouted Fullwood. "He ought to be put into prison!"

"Booh!"

"Kick him out!"

"Collar the rotter!"

"Give him three groans!"

The groans were given by a large majority of fellows, and the uproar was rather startling. Such a scene had certainly never be-

fore been witnessed in the solemn old hall at St. Frank's.

The fellows—seniors and juniors—were almost out of hand, and the masters and prefects could do nothing with them for the time. And the storms of boos and jeers and groans were set off, to a certain extent, by a rousing cheer which was sent up again and again from that select circle of supporters who had always remained staunch by me.

"Good old Nipper!" bawled Handforth, fairly dancing. "Give him another!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Nipper!"

"No—no! Three groans!"

"Kick him out!"

The uproar increased, and for fully three minutes I stood quite still, waiting for peace to be restored. Starke was rather startled by the sensation he had caused, but he was undoubtedly pleased.

"Give Starke a cheer," shouted somebody.

"Silence!" thundered the Head, again and again. "Boys! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

The uproar only partially diminished.

"Unless there is silence within ten seconds I will place the whole school in detention until the end of the term," shouted Dr. Stafford angrily.

The silence which followed was quite remarkable. The only sound which could be heard above the excited breathing of the crowd was Handforth's voice—Handforth being engaged in the task of concluding a fierce argument with McClure.

"Disgraceful—positively outrageous!" exclaimed the Head. "If there is a repetition of this uproar I shall take extremely severe measures. Nipper, you will stand up here on the platform."

I walked forward briskly, and as I did so there was a low murmur of contempt from a number of voices. The Head took no notice of it, and when I arrived upon the platform I received a big surprise.

For Dr. Stafford came forward with outstretched hands.

"Nipper, I must ask you to forgive me for the grave injustice which has been done to you," he said quietly. "Your deception was, in a way, fully justified, and I shall certainly not think of punishing you. My boy, I am proud to take your hand. This moment is a happy one for me."

There was now a real gasp of astonishment, and Starke started forward, flushed and agitated.

"But Nipper was expelled, sir," he shouted thickly.

"You are quite right, Starke," said the Head, in a grim voice. "Nipper was expelled, but a more unjust punishment was never meted out. The time has arrived, Starke, when you will be required to answer for your vindictive schemings. Wretched boy, come on to the platform."

Surprise was following surprise. The school could only look on now with a sort of dreamy

amazement. They hardly knew what was coming next. But they certainly did not suspect what was to follow.

And the very next surprise was the appearance of Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRUTH OUT AT LAST!

MY own thoughts were somewhat chaotic.

The events had happened so swiftly that I had hardly had time to collect my wits. Expecting to be denounced by the Head—the Head had taken my hand! And Starke, it seemed, was to receive his punishment at last.

A thrill went through me as Nelson Lee appeared.

The end had come now—with a vengeance! And it was an end such as I had scarcely dared to hope for. It was no tame conclusion to my escapade, but one worthy of the whole undertaking.

"Mr. Lee!" yelled Pitt joyously. "Oh, hurrah!"

"Welcome back, sir!" shouted De Valerie!

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!" bawled Handforth.

It was a striking proof of the gov'nor's tremendous popularity. The fellows had had no suspicion that Lee had returned to St. Frank's. And the way they let themselves go was remarkable. Seniors and juniors alike—even including the Sixth—cheered the gov'nor to the echo. Even a good many College House fellows joined in that roar of welcome.

Nelson Lee stepped forward and held up his hand. He was looking smiling, keen, and alert.

"Thank you, boys, for your generous reception," he said. "Yes, I have returned, but the end of the term will soon be here, and then we shall part again, but not for good, I hope."

"You mustn't leave us again, sir!"

"It's been awful without you, sir!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," smiled Nelson Lee. "You seem to have rubbed along quite comfortably, at all events. But there is a serious matter to be dealt with now, and I must ask you to give me your full attention."

There was not a sound to be heard.

"Starke has revealed the fact that the boy you knew as D'Albert is really none other than Nipper," went on the gov'nor. "It is just as well, perhaps, that the truth was brought to light in that way. You would have known it, in any case, a few minutes afterwards, so it makes little difference."

"Nipper ought to be kicked out, sir," shouted somebody.

"At the present moment Nipper is under a cloud—he was expelled from St. Frank's, because it was believed that he had committed a foul and brutal assault upon

Starke," went on Nelson Lee. "But that matter will now be cleared up——"

"But it's true, sir," shouted Starke thickly. "Nipper did assault me, and I demand that he shall be sent away again!"

The gov'nor turned to Starke.

"What you demand, Starke, and what you will receive are very different matters," he said coldly. "How you can have the effrontery to say anything at all amazes me. You may as well know that if anybody leaves this school in disgrace it will be you."

"I, sir?" panted Starke. "But I've done nothing! Everybody knows that Nipper knocked me down——"

"Everybody knows that you made a sworn statement to that effect, at all events," said Lee grimly. "But I intend to tell the school now that you were lying. Boys, I am in a position to tell you that Starke lied villainously—solely in order to get Nipper into disgrace."

"It's not true, sir," shouted Starke desperately.

"Keep silent, boy!" said Mr. Crowell, who was standing by Starke's side.

The prefect looked round him, pale to the lips. He was breathing hard, and he looked like a caged tiger. He was trapped—and he knew it—but even now he was not prepared to throw up the sponge.

The fellows listened with bated breath. Starke had always been unpopular, but of late he had received a certain amount of sympathy, for his injury had caused a great number of boys to feel sorry for him.

But Nelson Lee had stated that Starke had lied! And even Fullwood was prepared to believe Nelson Lee.

The whole situation was tense.

"I will remind you of what took place on that very eventful night," continued Nelson Lee, speaking easily. "I was not here at the time, but I know all the facts. Starke was found by Kenmore some little distance from the school gates. He was lying in the road unconscious, and Nipper was bending over him, holding a thick, heavy stick. Kenmore at once assumed that Nipper had struck the blow which sent Starke to the ground."

"It was Nipper, sir," said Kenmore quickly.

"Wait, my boy," said Lee. "The school was shocked when it heard the news, but it could hardly believe that Nipper had committed the crime. Starke was unconscious, for the blow had been a severe one. Suspicion against Nipper was very strong, for only the previous evening he and Starke had quarrelled. I strongly suspect that Starke picked that quarrel, for all the facts I can glean lead to that conclusion."

"It was Nipper who quarrelled with me, sir," put in Starke, with a gulp.

"In any case, that aspect of the affair is not important," continued the gov'nor. "I will proceed, boys. You waited anxiously for Starke to recover consciousness, for everything depended upon his statement. It was generally anticipated that he would at

once clear Nipper of suspicion. But when Starke came to his wife the very reverse was the case. For Starke solemnly declared that it was Nipper's hand which had struck him down."

The gov'nor paused, and everybody waited breathlessly.

"This declaration of Starke's, taken in conjunction with the previous evidence, was absolutely conclusive," continued Nelson Lee. "Nipper's guilt seemed positive. But even then Dr. Stafford was generous enough to allow Nipper a few days' grace—for he half hoped that there had been some awful blunder. Whose fault was it that Nipper was not allowed to remain?"

"Ours, sir," shouted Owen major promptly.

"Precisely," said Lee. "A great number of you boys made a violent demonstration. You demanded that Nipper should go at once. And yet I am convinced that if the lad had had those three days of grace he would have established his innocence. You drove him from the school——"

"We were justified, sir," shouted Fullwood.

"You thought you were, at all events," said Lee. "But, my boys, the whole affair was unfortunate. Starke did not tell the truth when he swore that Nipper had struck him down. Starke lied—he lied venomously and maliciously."

"I didn't, sir—I didn't!" gasped Starke hoarsely. "It's all a mistake! Somebody has been spoofing you——"

"We will come to that later on, Starke," interrupted Lee with perfect calmness. "I intend to tell the school what actually did take place—the boys shall know how you came by your injury."

"Nipper struck him down, sir," said Kenmore. "I was there—I saw Nipper standing over him."

"Nipper had arrived on the spot a few moments before you—that is the true explanation," said Nelson Lee. "Starke was not struck down by any human hand whatever. His injury was caused by a collision with a passing motor-car."

"Oh!"

The exclamation was uttered by hundreds of voices.

"How Starke got in the way of the car, I don't know," went on Nelson Lee. "Possibly he tripped and the car caught him lightly. At all events, it was not a serious accident. And because Nipper happened to reach Starke first, it was assumed that he had struck the blow. I am in a position, however, to produce the driver of the car in question."

There was a buzz at once.

Beckett came forward from the big doorway, and took his place by Nelson Lee's side.

"This man will now tell you what took place on that night," said Nelson Lee. "You will see, boys, that I am taking great pains to place all the facts before you, so that there can be no possibility of a further misunderstanding. The Headmaster called you

together so that I should have this opportunity. Beckett, please tell your story."

Beckett cleared his throat rather nervously.

"Well, young gentlemen, it was this way," he said. "I was comin' home from Caiztowe, an' as I was passing the school I hit something. I knew it was Master Starke, but I was in such a rare panic that I didn't stop. I was sorry afterwards, and I came back the next mornin' to see what had really happened. An' when I found that Master Starke was not badly hurt I kept my mouth shut."

"And you let Nipper be expelled?" roared Handforth.

"I didn't know nothing about that, sir," said Beckett quickly. "Later on Master Starke came to me and made me promise not to say anything if I was questioned. He threatened to get me kicked out of my job. Like a fool, I listened to him, and we came to an arrangement. But now I'm only too glad to tell the real truth. Master Nipper had nothing to do with Master Starke's injury."

"It's a lie!" shouted Starke feverishly.

"It's a rotten, made-up lie! You don't believe this common chauffeur, do you? He's been paid to say this, he's been paid by Nipper——"

"Silence, Starke," said the Head sternly.

"I'm not going to be silent!" shouted Starke, almost beside himself. "It's not fair, it's a shame that I should be treated like this! Isn't my word as good as this man's? He's lying, I tell you."

"Do you deny all that has been said?" asked the Head.

"Yes, sir, I do!"

"Have you ever met Beckett before?"

"This man here?" asked Starke. "Never, sir!"

"You had better be careful what you are saying, Starke," said Nelson Lee grimly. "If you are capable of one lie you are capable of others. I, myself, saw you with Beckett this evening. Do you deny that?"

"Yes, sir!" panted Starke, in despair.

"Do you still maintain that Nipper attacked you on that night?"

"He did attack me," shouted Starke. "I can tell you everything that took place. Nipper met me in the lane, and before I could protect myself he raised his stick and slashed me across the head——"

"Stop!" shouted Nelson Lee. "Before you commit yourself to further lies, Starke, I wish to tell you something. You have utterly and absolutely ruined your own case. You stand before the school a liar and a blackguard."

"I—I—I——"

Starke could say nothing; he was inarticulate.

"This evening, Starke, you met Beckett in a small inn at Edgemore," continued Nelson Lee. "And while there you made certain statements. Do you deny that you met Beckett at this inn?"

"I do!" snarled Starke, utterly desperate.

"Then perhaps you will explain how this record came to be made?" said the gov'nor grimly. "It may interest you to know, Starke, that a phonograph was placed behind a screen during your conversation with Beckett. Almost every word of your conversation was faithfully recorded. Shall I reproduce it here?"

And Nelson Lee uncovered something which stood on a table. We all saw that it was a phonograph, and many exclamations of excitement went up. I was as astonished as anybody.

Starke seemed to go mad. He knew that he was trapped, he knew that his last chance had gone. As Nelson Lee had said, he stood before the school—a liar.

"You—you infernal traitor!" he shouted frenziedly, shaking both his fists at Beckett. "You gave me away! You got me to go to that inn on purpose! I'll half kill you for this——"

"You will be silent, Starke," commanded the Head sternly.

And after that the record was given. Everybody listened to it with enormous interest. The voices sounded thin and weak in that great hall. But they could easily be recognised as those of Starke and Beckett.

"I will not let you hear everything," said Nelson Lee, stopping the instrument. "Starke used some language which is not fit for you to hear. I have only taken this course because I want you to be absolutely satisfied. Is there any boy present who still thinks that Starke is innocent?"

Not a sound could be heard.

Starke's guilt had been established beyond the shadow of a doubt. He had convicted himself, and he knew it. He stood upon the platform, his fists clenched, his head bowed.

And then the Head came forward.

"Walter Starke," he said sternly, "you are guilty of an offence which stamps you as an utter rascal. You held a position in this school which gave you authority—you were a prefect. And it was your duty to be truthful and faithful and straightforward.

"Nipper was expelled for assaulting you, but Nipper's supposed crime was light in comparison with what you did. For, deliberately and designedly, you lied so that Nipper should be sent away in disgrace. It was a foul, cowardly act, and you deserve a far greater punishment than you will receive. Although a senior, it is my intention to flog you before the whole school——"

"To—to flog me, sir?" panted Starke.

"That is what I said."

"But you can't, sir," shouted the wretched senior. "Such a thing hasn't been done at St. Frank's in all its history——"

"You are quite wrong, Starke," interrupted the Head grimly. "And let me warn you that if you dare to attempt resistance, you will be held down by force—there are plenty of Sixth-Form boys who will be only too glad to assist me in the task of thrashing you."

"Rather, sir!" shouted the Sixth.

"Therefore, if you care to save yourself

that humiliation, you will submit quietly," went on Dr. Stafford. "Come here, Starke."

Starke looked round him wildly.

"I won't!" he shouted. "Hang you! Do you think I care? I'm not going to let you lay your confounded hands on me, you old bully! I'll write to my pater——"

Starke was too desperate to know what he was saying. He half choked as he spoke, and made a dash to get away. But he was captured at once by Morrow and Fenton and half a dozen others.

His struggles and kicks were subdued at last. And then he received a flogging which made him howl for mercy. It was a disgusting spectacle, and all the fellows felt rather bad.

But Starke received no pity; he was exposed at last in his true colours. And when his flogging was over he was almost foaming at the mouth with fury. There was no repentance in him. His exposure had robbed him of all the veneer which had been worn hitherto.

"You will leave St. Frank's by the first train in the morning, Starke," said Dr. Stafford firmly. "You're expelled from this honourable school, disgraced and discredited. You leave St. Frank's a proven liar and an unscrupulous rascal!"

Starke slunk away, and as he passed out of Big Hall a storm of hisses followed him. I saw the Head give a big sigh of relief.

"I have now a much more pleasant duty to perform," he exclaimed, laying a hand on my shoulder. "This lad has been greatly wronged, and it is your duty, boys, to make reparation in some slight way. From this moment Nipper takes his place in the Remove once again——"

"And he becomes skipper, too!" shouted De Valerie. "I resign in his favour, sir—and I've never done anything so willingly before!"

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, good old Nipper!"

"Don't forget to cheer Mr. Lee," I shouted above the din. "The gov'nor's done this for me——"

"Hurrah!"

Nelson Lee was cheered to the echo, and half the school started singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." The uproar was tremendous, and the Head made no attempt to subdue it.

I was carried out shoulder high by an excited, yelling mob of Removites. The gov'nor only just escaped a similar fate. Finally I was landed in the middle of the Triangle, and a huge crowd collected round me.

"You bounder!"

"You frightful spoofer!"

"How the dickens did you do it?"

"And where did you get that giddy red hair?" yelled Handforth. "You've deceived us all along the line! My hat! It's the biggest spoof we've ever had at St. Frank's! It fairly beats the band."

I managed to make myself heard

"If you'll just wait ten minutes you'll see a change!" I roared. "I'll go indoors as D'Albert—as I am now—but I shall come out again as myself. I only want ten minutes—that's all!"

I escaped before they could detain me.

And when I got into a bathroom I locked myself in. It didn't take me long to get the dye out of my hair. It was wonderful stuff, but it succumbed rapidly to the spirit which I possessed—a spirit specially prepared for the purpose.

My eyebrows had to be treated, too, and various other details. Having finished in the bathroom, I rushed into the dormitory and raked out one of my own suits. As D'Albert I had worn tight-fitting garments, which made me appear ridiculous. And I was only too thankful to get back into my own togs.

When I descended into the Triangle once again Algernon Clarence D'Albert had vanished for ever. He was a myth, and he had gone. I was myself once more, and it was a joyous moment for me. I had been longing for the climax for weeks, but its delay in coming only made it all the sweeter now.

I found the Remove collected round the Ancient House steps—almost to a man.

"Three cheers for our skipper!" shouted Pitt, as I appeared.

"Hurrah!"

"It's Nipper—it's Nipper himself!"

"The swindler!"

I was grasped once more and carried in triumph round the Triangle. The fellows could hardly believe it even now. I had been amongst them for weeks, and they had not suspected a thing.

"How the dickens you did it is more than I can imagine!" exclaimed Grey admiringly. "It must have been a terrible strain, Nipper."

"It was a bit trying at times," I agreed. "I want to thank all you chaps for saying such nice things about me. I heard a few home truths while I was D'Albert, and it was decent of a lot of you to stick up for me through thick and thin. I think Handforth was the best of you all."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth, flushing. "What the dickens did I do? Nothing—absolutely nothing!"

"You remained staunch," I said quietly. Handforth glared.

"Well, there's nothing praiseworthy in

that, is there?" he demanded. "Every chap with a grain of sense knew that you were innocent. I knew it from the very start."

"You admit you've got a grain of sense, then?" grinned Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've got more sense than a lot of you, anyhow, especially those who are cackling!" said Handforth tartly. "But Nipper's back again, and that's all that matters. I'm not going to do any prep. to-night—rats to prep! And I don't care a hang what happens in the morning!"

"I suggest we give Nipper a welcome supper," roared De Valerie. "We can hold it in the lecture hall—the masters won't say anything to-night. Come on, you lubbers! Hand out your tin! We'll raid the giddy tuck-shop!"

De Valerie's suggestion was approved by all.

And less than an hour I was the guest of honour at a glorious supper which was held amidst much enthusiasm. Even Morrow and Fenton of the Sixth looked in, and they winked at the terrific disturbance which was being created.

They also winked at the fact that an enormous noise was created in the Remove dormitory that night.

Under ordinary circumstances the Remove would have been gated for a week, but this was a special occasion. It was about the happiest night I could remember. And I must say that the fellows did everything in their power to make up for their earlier jeers and hisses.

And in the morning I awoke cheerful and content.

There was an item of news. Walter Starke, without waiting to go in the ordinary way, had slunk off during the night. His bedroom was found unoccupied.

"Well, thank goodness," said everybody. "Good riddance to bad rubbish!"

But if I thought that I had seen the last of Walter Starke I was mistaken. Starke had not gone far. He was near by, and it was his intention to have a terrible revenge on me for what had occurred.

Starke accused me of all his woes, and his hatred was almost beyond understanding. But it is impossible for me to describe that episode here. Further exciting events took place too.

But that's all I can say at present.

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 set out to find this mysterious house, and on the way come to an Arab camp, of whom the leader is Tib Mohammed, the noted slave-dealer. Here Dick meets Lorna, a girl captive, who tells him that her father was trying to force her against her will to marry a man named Tarerner. Dick rescues this girl, but is himself captured. After a daring escape he rejoins Alan Carne and his party, and they trek north in search of the Hidden Valley. Eventually they reach a range of lofty mountains, at the foot of which, in a Bajanga village, they encounter Tib Mohammed again, who has also travelled north to induce the Bajangas to attack Carne and his party. Greatly outnumbered, the party are pursued by the Bajangas up the steep slopes of the mountains.

(Now read on.)

THE HIDDEN VALLEY.

"WE can't do it!" parted Dick.
"We'll miss the chance!"
"Harder! Harder!" bade Alan.
"Push harder!"

They tugged and strained with all their might. The big stone was moving from its perch now. It was grating and creaking, toppling inch by inch from its balance. A final shove, and over it went. The next instant there was a thunderous crash. Heavy reverberations mingled with shrieks of terror, with rending, shattering sounds, with the noise of showering, pelting debris. There

was another great crash, farther down; then a moment of silence, and then a shrill, ear-splitting clamour.

"It is done, baas!" cried the Hottentot, dancing for joy. "Look, look! It is done!"

It had been well done. In the shelf below yawned a wide gap, four or five yards in width. The huge stone had torn a section of the jutting ledge from the cliff, and had plunged on to the bottom of the mountain, carrying with it to their death half a dozen of the Bajangas and as many of the Arab slavers. Not a man had reached the farther side of the gap. None could cross it, nor could they scale the smooth, sheer face of the precipice to the upper continuation of the path.

"By George, that was fine!" declared Dick. "We've cut the rascals clean off!"

"Yes, we have baffled them," said Alan. "They'll have to turn back. They may know of another way over the range, to the east or the west, but we won't worry about that. I don't believe we have anything more to fear from them."

"We had better put a stiff stretch between them and us, though, before we stop to rest."

"Which won't be until we have crossed the mountains, Selby. Come along!"

Tib Mohammed was, unfortunately, not one of those who had been killed. By the glow of the moon he could be seen below, on the severed ledge, gazing upward. There were yells of rage, and guns were discharged at the fugitives, the bullets pattering harmlessly above their heads, as they hurriedly continued their flight. They were so tired that they could scarcely walk, but they dared not stop. Higher and higher they mounted by the stretches of the zigzag path, now in one direction and now in another, while the clamour of Arabs and Bajangas ebbed to silence, and beneath them swam a dizzy gulf that was shrouded in mist. For hours they held on, fighting against fatigue. They climbed into a belt of clouds, emerged from them, and crossed the lofty crest of the range; and by another narrow and tortuous

path, where a false step would have meant death, they went down and down to the northward base of the mountains. Low hills brought them to a forest as the grey dawn was breaking, and here, too exhausted to go any farther, they threw themselves on the ground and dropped off to sleep.

When they awoke, some hours later, the sun was straight above their heads, and they were soon on the march again, pressing to the north. They were not now afraid of Tib Mohammed and his savage allies, judging that they were tightly shut in behind the great rampart of granite. They had stumbled on a narrow trail, and they followed it because it led in the direction they wanted to go. It was a mere, winding thread, and it was so hard and dry that they could not tell whether it had been made by natives or by wild animals. The forest which they traversed was pleasant, not grim and ferocious like other forests they had crossed. There were no swampy pools, no rotting vegetation. Here and there were glassy glades, steeped in sunshine and spangled with flowers. Instead of the splashing and grunting of reptiles was the cheerful twittering of myriads of birds. Dick and Alan felt a tingling sense of anticipation, that was to some extent shared by the Hottentot. From the many miles they had travelled in the past weeks, and the course they had roughly and steadily held to, they knew that they must be drawing near to the Bana River. They might be almost upon it, or it might be several days' journey distant. But it could not be far, and on the northern bank of that stream, behind the cliff walls, was the valley of mystery—the home of Robert Ferguson and his daughter and the villain Taverner.

"We'll get to the river pretty soon, I am sure," said Dick, who had been talking of nothing else since the start. "And we shall strike it somewhere in the vicinity of the valley, no doubt, since we passed that Bajanga village to the south of us."

Alan nodded.

"I dare say you are right," he replied. "The difficulty will be this, though. Which way are we to turn? To the east or to the west?"

"I have been thinking of that. We'll have to trust to luck."

"Well, I believe the valley will be to the west of us, Selby, if you ask me. But we must find the river first."

They had been travelling for three or four hours now, and the sun was dipping to the horizon. Still the vast forest stretched before them, cleft by the vague, twisting thread of a trail. Presently Jan stopped, and, darting to one side, he picked up from the grass something that had caught his eye. He showed it to his companions.

"Look, baas! See what I have found!"

It was a small pouch of rubber, half filled with coarse black tobacco. It must have been lying on the ground for a considerable time, for there were spots of mildew on it.

"This belonged to a white man!" declared Dick.

"To Ralph Taverner, of course," said Alan, gazing at the pouch with a curious expression. "He must have dropped it the last time he went by here on his way to the Bajanga village. This is an important discovery. It will save us a lot of trouble, I imagine."

"What do you mean, Carne?"

"Don't you see? Taverner made this trail. He has been using it in going to and from the Bajanga village. So it ought to bring us to the river at a point opposite, or nearly opposite, to the cleft that runs into the hidden valley."

"By George, I'll bet it will! You've reasoned that out like a detective. We'll soon be in the valley. We'll warn Mr. Ferguson of the danger that threatens him from Tib Mohammed and the Bajangas, and if there should be a fight we'll have a chance to——" Dick broke off. "Come along, Carne," he added. "Let us try to reach the Bana before it is dark. It must be near."

They pressed rapidly on, in cheerful spirits. For another hour they penetrated the forest, still holding on to the narrow trail; and at length, at the close of the day, they saw through the foliage a gleam of water. It was very near to them. A few more yards, and they burst from the tangled cover on to an open margin of sand and rushes. They were standing on the bank of a broad, swift-flowing stream that was about three hundred yards in width. At last they had arrived at the Bana, and, with feelings which were too deep for words, they perceived that they had also reached the goal that had lured them on and on for weeks, in spite of perils and hardships. There could be no mistake. It was just as John Hammond had described it. On the opposite shore, rising to a height of hundreds of feet, was a barrier of sheer cliffs that extended far to right and left. And at the base of them was a triangular cleft, as dark as a cavern, with rocks jutting from each side of it. The sun was on the horizon, and the western sky was a blaze of gold and purple.

"The hidden valley!" said Alan, half to himself. "Over there it is!"

"Yes, that's the place poor old John told us of, to a dead certainty," Dick replied. "We've got here at last, and in time to warn Mr. Ferguson. He will be glad that we have come when he has learned what we have discovered about Tib Mohammed and the Bajangas. But how the deuce are we to——"

"Look, baas, look!" Jan interrupted eagerly.

He was pointing upward. On the high crest of the granite rampart, etched in black relief against the sunset glow, was a slim figure. A hand was waved at the little group on the opposite bank, and then a handkerchief. Dick whipped his binoculars from their case and put them to his eyes.

"By George, it's Lorna!" he said. "There

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)

she is! She has seen us! Have a look, Carne!"

He gave the glasses to Alan, who gazed through them breathlessly, intently.

"I can't tell," he murmured.

"You have never seen her before?" Dick inquired. "She is a stranger to you?"

"I can't tell," Alan repeated, lowering the glasses.

The girl called something that could not be distinguished. She waved again, turned, and was gone.

"She'll come over for us," said Dick. "I am sure she will, Carne."

"Perhaps she won't," Alan replied. "Remember what she told you the night you were in Tib Mohammed's camp with her. I doubt if she will take us into the valley."

They waited in suspense. All was quiet. There was not a sound except the rippling of the water. Ten minutes elapsed, and then, of a sudden, a canoe slid out from the black cleft in the cliffs. The girl was seated in the stern of it, driving a paddle.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Dick. "I knew it!"

Alan scarcely heard him. He was staring at the approaching craft, watching it as it drew nearer and nearer, swiftly cleaving the current. It nosed amongst the reeds, and as the bow of it ran into the sand Lorna Ferguson jumped up and stepped ashore. Her golden hair was loosely tied at the back with a cherry ribbon. She wore a jacket and a short skirt of tweed, and high brown boots that reached to her knees. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes danced.

"Oh, Dick, so you have really come!" she exclaimed impulsively, shaking hands with him. "I have been wondering if you would!"

"Yes, we have arrived at last," Dick Selby answered. "And a jolly hard time of it we had in getting here, too! This is my friend, Alan Carne, of whom I have spoken."

A slim sunburnt hand was offered to Alan, and as he clasped it he gazed closely at the girl's features. There was a puzzled, uncertain look on his own face.

"I am very glad to meet Miss Ferguson," he said.

There was an awkward pause. Dick glanced at Alan, and turned to the girl. Her eyes were not dancing now. There was a shadow in them.

"Where is your safari?" she asked. "You told me you had a lot of porters. Where are they?"

"Gone," Dick said laconically. "They were a cowardly bunch. They were afraid to trek northward. They deserted us one night weeks and weeks ago, and Carne and I had to come on alone with the Hottentot."

"I am so sorry. I have been hoping that you would come, and that you would bring your armed porters with you. We need them, Dick."

"What's wrong? Has anything happened since you were rescued from Tib Mohammed's camp?"

"Yes. There has been trouble with the Arabs. And there will be more trouble. That is what we fear. It has worried my father greatly, and now he is——" Lorna Ferguson stopped. She grasped the canoe, and set it moving. "Get in," she bade. "I have much to tell you, but I will take you over first."

"Won't your father be angry with you?" Dick demurred. "You said he didn't want strangers in the valley."

"It is different now," the girl replied, shaking her head sadly. "He will welcome your arrival, I think, if—if he is able to talk to you. He may not be."

"I hope he isn't ill, Miss Lorna."

"He is very ill, and he doesn't get any better. Don't ask me about him now. Come, let us go."

Dick and Alan had attained their object. After a journey of weeks in the African wilds they were to be admitted to the mysterious valley. But they had been alarmed by what they had heard, apprehensive of perils which might be worse than they had reason to fear. When they had seated themselves in the bow, with Jan squatted in front of them, Lorna Ferguson swung the slender craft around, and sent it scudding rapidly across the river. It was deep and smooth. There were no sand-bars or reedy islets. The triangular cleft loomed near, and the canoe, darting into it, was

(Continued on page iv.)

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Come on, you Budding Detectives!

The following letter is found by the police:

"I am in a train bound for Llantud. My name is Henry Newfield. As representative of Mr. Lordenbury, of Bond Street, London, I am carrying thirty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery to Madame Juanita Veldos, of Tanfyn Castle. In the next carriage to me are two men who, I think, are going to attack and rob me! (Here follows a description of the men.) . . . If, therefore, anything should happen to me on the journey, the police should look for the two men I have described."

The man disappears.

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shrouded in purple gloom. Having slipped for a number of yards along a winding, subterranean passage, it swerved sharply to the left, and came to an arched opening that was barred by a screen of woven wire.

"Selim!" called the girl.

The screen, which worked like a blind, and was attached to a rope, at once curled upward. The canoe shot through the opening into the waning light of the sun, and rippled across a quiet pool of water. It grated on a pebbly beach, and Alan and his companions stepped ashore with Lorna Ferguson and looked around them in keen curiosity. They were within the valley. In front of them mounted a grassy slope. To one side, where a crystal brook fed the pool, several other canoes lay high and dry on the beach. On the other side half a dozen white-robed Somalis, each armed with a rifle and a brace of revolvers, were seated on the ground. The girl went over to speak to them, and the two lads glanced at each other.

"We had better not tell her about Tib Mohammed and the Bajangas," said Alan.

"No, not for the present," Dick assented. "We'll wait. And what of that scoundrel Taverner? We've got to meet him."

"There will be no getting out of that. We'll simply be as agreeable to him as we can, and pretend that we don't know anything about his villainy."

"I'll bet you we don't deceive him, Carne.

He must be aware that John Hammond told us everything before he died. We'll have to be on our guard against the fellow."

"We will be. Mark my words, Selby, we are going to see some exciting times."

"I don't doubt it. I have that feeling myself. I am anxious to know what has occurred since—"

"Hush! Not another word!"

Lorna Ferguson had finished speaking to the Somalis, and was coming back to the lads and the Hottentot. She bade them follow her, and led them to the top of the grassy slope, where they paused and gazed in rapt surprise and admiration at the scene that met their eyes. The mysterious valley stretched beyond them, more than a mile in width and a couple of miles in length. In the middle of it were clumps of trees, and in open spaces of rich, lush grass were small herds of zebras and gazelle feeding. It was rimmed around to right and left by the lofty rampart of precipitous cliffs, which apparently converged in the distance into an unbroken chain. And within half a mile to the left, nestled amongst foliage, was the strange dwelling that John Hammond had described. It was of rose-coloured stone, with narrow, arched windows, a battlemented roof, and a low tower.

(To be continued.)

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