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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE PUBLIC APOLOGY.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH thoughtfully pulled the salt-cellar towards him, filled his teaspoon with salt, and dropped it into his cup. Considering that the cup contained hot tea, the salt was not calculated to improve the flavour.

But Handforth was thinking.

And when the mighty Handforth was in that condition he was scarcely responsible for his actions. Church and McClure, his faithful study-mates, were fully aware of what had happened.

But they said nothing; they were wise. It was dangerous to disturb Handforth while he was busy with his thoughts.

The trio were partaking of tea in Study D in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. The evening was rather dull, but nobody grumbled. There had been such a lot of fine weather of late that a dull day was only to be expected.

"Yes!" said Handforth suddenly. "That's the very idea!"

"Rather!" declared McClure loyally.

Handforth stared across the table.

"Eh?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean—'rather,' you ~~ass~~?"

"You said something about an idea, and I agreed with you—that's all," explained McClure. "I thought I might as well agree at once, just to save trouble later on. It's all the same, Handy."

Handforth stirred his tea and grunted.

"A fat lot you care!" he said. "It may interest you to know that I've been thinking about something which a good many other fellows ought to have thought of for themselves."

"Then you've been thinking of other people's business?" asked Church.

"Yes, I have," said Handforth. "Just consider the facts. Only yesterday the school discovered that Nipper was amongst us. He'd been in disgrace for weeks, and he

came back to St. Frank's as somebody else—a jolly smart dodge, too! What I can't understand is why I didn't see through his disguise!"

"It's amazing!" said McClure solemnly.

"Well, I suppose it is, in a way," went on Handforth. "But the fact remains that Nipper spoofed the lot of us. He's one of the best chaps breathing, and I stuck to him through thick and thin."

"And so did we!" said Church firmly.

"Not until I knocked it into you," declared Handforth. "You were quite ready to believe that Nipper was guilty of assaulting Starke. But Starke's gone now, thank goodness! And Nipper's back again in his old place. Everything in the garden, in fact, is lovely!"

"Then what are you worrying about?" asked McClure.

"I'm not worrying, you dolt!" said Handforth politely. "I've been thinking about all the chaps who hissed Nipper when he was down—all the chaps who reviled him, and who said he was a cad and a rotter. They ought to have known that Nipper was decent from his little finger to his big toe!"

"Of course they ought!"

"And now they're grinning at one another, and saying nice things about Nipper," continued Handforth sourly. "They don't think of expressing any sorrow—the rotters! And yet they ought to beg his pardon—every one of them."

"I dare say you're right," said McClure.

"It fairly makes me sick," went on Handforth, lifting his cup and taking a gulp of tea. "I—Oooch! Ugh! Great pip!"

Handforth dropped his cup with a clatter, grabbed out his handkerchief, and stuffed it into his mouth. Judging by the expression on his face it was quite probable that he would be sick in reality.

He glared at Church ferociously.

"You—you rotter!" he spluttered.

"Me?" roared Church. "What the dickens—"

"Didn't you make this tea?"

"Yes, but—"

"It ain't fit to give pigs!" bellowed Handforth. "It's horrible! I've never tasted such awful stuff—"

"You silly jesser!" howled Church. "I'm not responsible for what you do, am I? Why can't you put sugar in your tea instead of salt?"

"Salt?" said Handforth dazedly.

"I don't know what your tastes are," snapped Church crossly. "A minute ago you put a spoonful of salt in your tea, so I thought you liked it! It wasn't my place to interfere."

Handforth looked at his chums and breathed hard.

"And you call yourselves faithful!" he exclaimed bitterly. "You see me put salt in my tea—and then let me drink it!"

"What did you put it in for, if you didn't want it?" demanded Church.

"When I'm thinking I don't pay attention to trifling details like salt and sugar!" said Handforth loftily. "What was I talking about? Oh I know! About the chaps who ran Nipper down when they thought he was guilty."

Handforth nodded, and absent-mindedly pulled Church's teacup towards him. It was full, and Handforth had swallowed half of it before Church became aware of his loss.

"Why, you—you rotter!" exclaimed Church. "You've honed my tea—"

"Never mind about your silly tea," said Handforth, thumping the table. "We were talking about those chaps—and I've got an idea. Why shouldn't every fellow who condemned Nipper sign a public apology?"

"Because they wouldn't like the idea, you ass!" said McClure. "Chaps aren't going to sign a thing like that—"

"Ain't they?" interrupted Handforth grimly. "We'll see about that, my sons! I've just got this wheeze, and I'm going to push it through. What's more, you fellows have got to help me."

Church and McClure looked at one another hopelessly.

"But, my dear old Handy, you couldn't get anybody to sign," said Church gently. "What's the apology going to be like, anyhow?"

"I shall write out something like this: 'We, the undersigned, herewith tender our humble and sincere apologies to Nipper for having believed for one second that he could be guilty of any rotten action. We sign this public apology willingly and cheerfully, and we hope that Nipper will forgive us.' That's the idea," said Handforth briskly. "How does it strike you?"

"Don't trouble yourself about how it strikes us," said Church. "I'm wondering how the fellows will strike you when you take that thing round. They'll use cricket-stumps and pokers, I expect!"

Handforth snorted.

"But isn't it right that they should sign an apology?" he roared.

"It may be right," admitted McClure; "but that's not the point. Nobody likes to

make an apology—especially a written one—"

"Likes!" shouted Handforth. "This ain't a question of liking or disliking! It's a duty—a duty towards Nipper. I sha'n't sign, of course—neither will you chaps. We've been loyal all the time. But my idea is to take the thing round and make Owen major and Canham and Armstrong and Hubbard and chaps like them sign."

"But they'll never agree to it—"

"Won't they?" said Handforth fiercely. "We'll see about that, my sons! There's the Fifth, too. Just look at Chambers and Phillips and Bryant! They were among the first to condemn Nipper—and they'll have to sign!"

Church and McClure realised that it was hopeless.

"Oh, well, of course, perhaps you're right," said McClure diplomatically. "It's a fine idea, Handy, and you ought to push it through. When are you going to do it—to-morrow?"

"I don't believe in putting things off," snapped Handforth. "It's got to be done now—this giddy minute! Fetch a piece of foolscap out of the cupboard, Church—one of those double sheets."

Church did so, and Handforth lost no time in writing out the "public apology." He did so laboriously, and in his very best handwriting. By the time he had finished he had produced quite a respectable-looking document. There was not even a blot upon it—and that was remarkable in itself.

Church and McClure, who had finished their tea, rose to their feet. Church carelessly strolled over to the door.

"Coming down to the nets, Clurey?" he asked.

"Right!" said McClure. "We'll go together."

Handforth fairly glowered at them.

"You'll stay where you are!" he declared.

"Do you think I'm going to be deserted at a time like this? We're going round to all the studies, and we're going to make the chaps sign. Understand? And, what's more, we shall start with Chambers and Phillips and Bryant, of the Fifth."

Handforth's chums were aghast.

"But they'll slaughter you!" exclaimed Church.

"How can they slaughter me if you're there to back me up?" asked Handforth irritably. "Talk sense, for goodness' sake! We'll all go together, and we'll make the rotters sign if they refuse!"

"But—but we can't fight three great Fifth-Form chaps!" roared McClure. "Don't be an ass, Handy! We should be wiped up—"

Handforth jumped up.

"Are you coming with me?" he demanded fiercely.

"No!" shouted Church.

"No!" roared McClure.

"Oh, all right!" said Handforth, rolling up his sleeves. "If you're afraid of being wiped up in Chambers' study, I'll wipe you

up here! You traitors! You miserable funks!"

"But, look here, Handy!" gasped Church. "We—— Yaroooooh!"

Handforth's fist landed with surprising suddenness upon Church's nose. McClure attempted to dodge, but he was just a second too late. Handy's left swung round, and McClure caught it on the side of his head. He sprawled over.

"Ow-yow!" he hooted. "Oh, my goodness!"

"Come on!" roared Handforth. "I'm sick of you both! Afraid of being wiped up, eh? I'll show you!"

But Church and McClure had been shown quite enough. They beat a hasty retreat. The door was barred, for Handforth stood before it. But the window stood wide open, and the pair dived through it helter-skelter.

"Cowards!" shouted Handforth contemptuously.

His chums took no notice. They fled, and held a heated and somewhat murderous consultation under the old elms. They were not afraid of their leader; they could have whacked him hollow. But they didn't like to hammer Handy until he was silly; and that was the only effective means of subduing him. It was far safer and far easier to flee.

"The silly fathead!" snapped Church. "Those Fifth-Form chaps will half-slaughter him if he goes into their study with that thing!"

"Let 'em!" said McClure. "It'll do him good!"

Handforth was full of his new idea, however. Nothing short of a terrific hammering would move him from his purpose. And it was quite on the cards that he would receive the hammering before long!

He re-read the document, approved of it, and then sallied out. He was half-inclined to reconsider his decision. Wouldn't it be wiser to try the apology on the Remove, to begin with?

But he had told his chums that Chambers and Co., of the Fifth, were to be approached first. So Handforth, in spite of certain qualms, made his way boldly and grimly to the Fifth-Form quarters.

Arriving at Study No. 10, in the Fifth-Form passage, he tapped heavily on the door, and then opened it. Chambers and Phillips and Bryant were finishing tea. They were big fellows, and it was a famous fact that they considered themselves persons of some importance.

"Hallo!" said Chambers. "What do you want in here, you Remove kid? Scat! Buzz off! We're not receiving visitors this evening!"

Handforth closed the door.

"I've come to tell you fellows what I think of you," he said grimly, and with an amazing lack of tact. "You're all in the same boat, but, if anything, you're the worst, Chambers."

"What?" said Chambers ominously.

"You ought to feel downright ashamed of yourselves," went on Handforth, warming

to his work. "I expect you do, as a matter of fact. And you've got to sign this public apology. It's going to be nailed up in the lobby——"

"Oh, is it?" said Bryant. "And we've got to sign it?"

"Yes!"

"What if we refuse?" asked Phillips.

"Well, in that case, I shall make you," said Handforth. "I don't want it to come to that, of course—but you may as well know that I mean business. I'm not standing any rot, you bounders! Sign it sharply—I'm in a hurry."

Chambers rose to his feet.

"You're in a hurry?" he asked politely.

"Yes!"

"Quite sure of it?"

"Of course I am——"

"Then your quickest way out will be by the window," said Chambers briskly. "We don't want to detain you, Handforth. Lend a hand, you chaps! Pitch him out! He's not standing any rot, remember!"

"Hi! Leggo!" howled Handforth. "What the dickens—— Yaroooooh!"

The mighty Edward Oswald went flying through the open window head first. He alighted in the Triangle with a crash, rolled over, and roared. The window slammed as he sat up, and the catch clicked over.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth looked round rather dazedly.

Church and McClure were standing by the elms, and they were laughing hugely. It gave them great joy to see the discomfiture of their hotheaded leader.

"Is that the way you got it signed, Handy?" yelled Church.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth rose to his feet painfully. He badly wanted to rush at his grinning chums, but it was hardly safe to fight in the open Triangle. He reserved their punishment until later on. Besides, there was his precious document to think about. He had left it in Chambers' study!

"The rotters!" groaned Handforth fiercely.

"The awful cads!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That yell of laughter did not improve Handforth's temper. He dashed into the Ancient House. His destination was Study No. 10, in the Fifth-Form passage. He did not consider the possibility of being hurled through the window again. All he wanted was to get at the bounders.

This time he didn't trouble to knock.

He thundered in violently, and found Chambers and Co. collected round a little desk on the other side of the room. Bryant looked round.

"I thought you were in a hurry," he said blandly.

"You—you rotters!" roared Handforth. "Gimme that paper! Have you torn it up, you cads? I'll make you sit up——"

"Why do you get so excited, Handy?" asked Chambers calmly. "Excitement isn't good for anybody. And you ought to explain

things better, too. This apology, for instance—

"What are you doing with it?" demanded Handforth.

"Signing it!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"We're signing it," explained Chambers.

"It's a fine idea, Handy. If you'd only explained when you first came in—"

"You spoofers!" said Handforth. "I'll bet you've messed the whole thing up!"

Phillips handed it over, and Handy stared at the paper with suspicion, then with astonishment, and finally with delight. For immediately beneath his own writing were the three names "Chambers," "Phillips," "Bryant." The Fifth-Form trio had signed!

"Well, I hardly expected this," said Handforth genially. "I—I mean, it's only right that you should sign—"

"Of course it's right," agreed Chambers—who was decent enough at heart. "We all wronged Nipper rottenly, and we're sorry. All the chaps ought to sign this little document—that is to say, all the chaps who were up against poor old Nipper. We ought to have known better."

Handforth could hardly believe his ears; it was something of a novelty for the mighty Chambers to admit that he had been in the wrong. The Fifth-Former nodded pleasantly to Handforth.

"Well, that's all right," he went on. "You can bunk now, my son."

Handforth nodded in return.

"I was going to do some damage," he said grimly. "But considering that you've climbed down so handsomely, I'll overlook that rotten behaviour of yours. But remember—if you lay fingers on me again there'll be trouble!"

Handforth departed without loss of time. This was just as well, perhaps, for Chambers and Co. might have been tempted to lay fingers on Handy, just to see what the trouble would be like. They had an idea that the trouble would be very one-sided. Perhaps Handforth had that idea, too.

"Now for the Remove," murmured Handforth, as he strode down the passage.

His first visit was to Study H, occupied by Justin B. Farman, Owen major, and Canham. Farman had always been staunch, but the other two were amongst the worst offenders.

"Now then, my sons, sign this!" said Handforth briskly.

The chums of Study H had just finished tea, and were preparing to sally out. Owen major picked up the document and scanned it.

"What's this?" he demanded. "'We, the undersigned, herewith tender our humble and sincere apologies to Nipper—' What the dickens—"

"You've got to sign it," explained Handforth—"you and Canham. The pair of you owe Nipper an apology, you rotters!"

"My hat!" said Canham. "I'm blessed if Chambers and Co. haven't signed! Well, it's only right—they were dead against Nipper all along."

"And so were you!" snapped Handforth.

Canham was compelled to agree, and after a brief hesitation he signed. Owen major followed his example, and Farman remarked that the public apology proposition was surely some stunt.

Handforth's task was far easier than he had expected. The surrender of Chambers and Co. set the example, for everybody else signed willingly and cheerfully. Such fellows as Fullwood and Co., of course, were not even approached. Handforth didn't want their signatures.

The first I knew about it was when I sallied out of Study C with Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West. We were in flannels, and I had a bat tucked under my arm. Cricket practice was more interesting than ever now, for I was once again junior skipper.

De Valerie had been elected captain during my "absence," but, like the sportsman he was, he resigned in my favour at the first opportunity. For weeks I had been under a cloud—my name had been reviled by many—and I had returned to the old school in disguise.

But that was all over now; everything was going on normally. Nelson Lee himself was back in his post as Housemaster of the Ancient House—not that this would last long. For St. Frank's was due to "break up" for the summer holidays within a week.

"Seen the latest?" grinned Pitt, as he met us in the passage.

"No," I replied. "What is it—news about Starke?"

"Rats to Starke!" said Pitt. "There's a big notice put on the board—or, not exactly a notice—Anyhow, go and have a look at it. Personally, I think it's rather decent of the fellows, and Handforth deserves all credit for having mooted the idea."

"Begad! Has Handforth really thought of somethin' good?" asked Sir Montie, with mild astonishment. "Dear fellows, we must certainly go an' have a look at this remarkable exhibition."

I don't mind admitting that I was rather flattered when I saw what the document actually was. As Pitt had said, it was really decent of the juniors to make what amends they could by signing that apology.

I expressed my appreciation in a few well-chosen words, thanked Handforth, and then asked that the whole matter should be dropped.

"It's done with now," I concluded. "That episode is finished, and I'm back again in my old shoes. Let's forget all about that unpleasant business."

And the other fellows were as anxious to forget it as I was.

CHAPTER II.

THE OUTCAST.

WALTER STARKE was not prepared to let me forget that unfortunate episode.

He was no longer a member of the Sixth Form at St. Frank's and a prefect.

He had been exposed as a liar and an utter young rascal. And, after a flogging, he had been ordered to leave the school.

In short, Starke had been expelled.

But he had not waited to face the storm of public indignation which would have broken on the morning after his exposure. Like a thief in the night, Walter Starke had stolen away during the hours of darkness.

But there was a bit of a mystery connected with Starke's flight.

Those exciting events had occurred several days earlier; but, by what I could understand, Starke had not returned to his father's home. That gentleman had already visited St. Frank's, and had heard the whole miserable story.

The Head himself was anxious, for it was unfortunate that Starke should have bolted in such a mysterious manner.

It was assumed that Starke had run away—to some place hundreds of miles from the school; it was supposed that he was afraid to face his father's wrath. He had money, according to what Kenmore and several other Sixth-Formers stated. Starke had had at least twenty pounds on him when he fled.

But the disgraced senior was not very far off, after all.

He was, in fact, skulking in the little coast town of Caistowe—scarcely more than three miles from St. Frank's itself. It was summertime, and Starke did not object to camping out.

For a day or two past he had remained hidden during the daytime, and had made a few purchases after dark. His "home" for the time being was a small farm building in the corner of a field. There was a loft, with plenty of hay. And Starke was fairly comfortable.

But what was his object.

He knew well enough that he could not stay there indefinitely—he would have to return home sooner or later. The actual truth was that Starke had made up his mind to get even—to get even with me!

What kink in his brain caused him to take this attitude was beyond ordinary understanding, for his downfall had not been caused by me, but by his own lying statements and by his own evil doings.

Starke told himself, it seemed, that I was the cause of all his troubles, and it was his aim to have revenge. Naturally, I knew nothing about it at the time—but I knew a great deal later on.

Starke was an outcast; his career was ruined, for no other public school would admit him now, and he would never be able to go up to Oxford. He knew all this well enough, and he was reckless.

He didn't much care what happened. It was quite possible that his own father would send him away from home. Starke senior, fortunately was not like his son; he was a good man, but stern. And the wretched outcast knew that a terrible ordeal was awaiting him.

A few days didn't make much difference to him, however. Disgraced, dishonoured, he had got himself into a state of mind which

almost bordered upon mania. He swore that he would make me suffer.

But how? Rascal though Starke was, he did not consider harming me bodily; he wanted to get hold of some scheme which would result in my suffering some further disgrace. But Starke could think of no idea.

And that evening, after sitting in his little hayloft for hours, he decided to go down to the sea front, with the main object of purchasing a further supply of cigarettes. The shops were closed, but the public-houses would still be open.

And in the dusk of the summer evening Starke walked down by the cliffs, and at length arrived at a small inn known as the Six Bells. Starke was wearing an ordinary lounge suit, and he had discarded his school cap, purchasing a soft felt hat in its place.

He did not look much like a schoolboy then, for he was eighteen and big, and he looked even older than his years.

He entered the public-house and ordered some whisky, for Starke did not like to purchase cigarettes alone. Moreover, whisky was no new beverage to him, and he reckoned that a dose just now would steady his nerves.

He took his glass and the packet of cigarettes over to a small table in one corner. A man was there already, a small, wiry-looking individual in blue reefers and with a rat-like face.

This man was sleeping over his mug of beer, but he stirred as Starke sat down. Having yawned, the man stretched himself and proceeded to fill his pipe.

"I reckon I must have been dozin', mate," he observed, regarding Starke without interest. "I never see you sit down there."

"No," said Starke. "I only just came in."

"Stranger in these here parts?"

"Yes," replied Starke, after a second's hesitation.

"Same here, matey," said the man. "This is the first time I've been in Caistowe—an' I hopes it'll be the last. A bloomin' one-hoss-hole, that's what it is. Not a boy to be found high or low. The old man'll rave like thunder when I go aboard. Not that I can help his blamed troubles!"

"You're from a ship, I suppose?" asked Starke.

"Now, that's a smart piece o' work!" said the man sarcastically. "Young feller, how could you guess I come off a ship? If you want to know who I am, my name's Jim Bartlett, an' I'm the first officer of the Montford, wot's now lyin' just in the bay."

"I saw her as I came along the promenade," said Starke, nodding. "Rather a big ship, isn't she? They don't usually get such big vessels in Caistowe Bay, do they?"

"I don't know anything about that," replied Mr. Bartlett, "and I don't care, neither. We're sailin' soon arter midnight, with the tide. An' thankful I'll be, too. We just come from the River Thames, an' Caistowe seems a one-eyed hole after the Commercial Road an' good old Wappin'!"

Starke lit his cigarette and nodded.

"She ain't a bad old tub, the Montford," went on the mate. "A pretty big ship, as you said, young feller. We're bound for the Argentine to-night, an' there's no tellin' when we'll git back agin. The Montford's a tramp, you see, an' we may git a cargo that'll take us right down to Sydney, or we may only go round the Horn to the Pacific Coast. As I says, there's no tellin'."

"But won't you call anywhere on the outward voyage?" asked Starke.

"We go right from 'ere acrost the South Atlantic," said Mr. Bartlett. "We was goin' to call at Weymouth, but that's off now. We come to this durned place instead. But the old man's a queer card, an' I can just picture 'im lettin' off steam when he hears about that cabin-boy."

"I don't think you mentioned anything about a cabin-boy," said Starke.

"The young hound only signed on two days ago, an' as soon as we get in 'ere he hops off. I reckon we shall 'ave to make the trip without any boy, and that'll make the old man ratty for the whole voyage."

"Can't you find somebody in Caistowe?"

"You 'ave a try, young gent!" said Mr. Bartlett grimly. "I'm sick an' fed up with tryin'. There ain't a boy to be found in this hole for love or money. That's wot I'm worryin' about. The old man's a fair terror when he's upset."

"That's rather awkward," said Starke thoughtfully. "Why couldn't you get hold of a kid and force him to go with you—take him on board to-night? He couldn't escape."

The mate eyed Starke sourly.

"Them games don't pay," he said. "We don't want to git into no trouble with the bloomin' law. Now, if a kid was to go aboard hisself—like a stowaway—we'd be justified in keepin' him. The old man would like that, because he wouldn't 'ave to pay 'im nothin', an' the kid would be forced to work his passage. But who's goin' to stow away aboard the Montford just to oblige us?"

A change had come over Starke during the last few minutes. His expression of bored interest had gone, and he was now intent and alert. His eyes glittered, and there was a decided flush in his cheeks.

"Are you sure you won't call anywhere before you reach the Argentine, Mr. Bartlett?" he asked eagerly.

"Sure? Of course I'm sure!"

"And if you found a stowaway on board you'd make him work?"

"Work like thunder!" declared the mate. "He'd be skin an' bone within a week!"

"Well, look here," went on Starke. "I've got an idea that I might be able to help you—"

"Help me?" said the mate, staring.

"You?"

"Yes," exclaimed Starke. "What time do you get off?"

"Not later than one o'clock."

"Well, what if you find a boy on board soon after you start?" asked Starke. "If possible, I'll have the kid there—"

"Pullin' my leg, ain't you?" snapped Mr.

Bartlett suspiciously. "None o' them games, young shaver!"

Starke drew his chair closer.

"I'm not pulling your leg," he said in a low voice. "I know a kid—a schoolboy—and he's done some rotten things to me. I want to get even—do you understand? If he could cross the Atlantic on your ship as a cabin boy it would be a bigger punishment than anything I can think of. A few weeks of harsh treatment, kicks and cuffs, and all that—would make him wish he'd never been born."

The mate shook his head.

"I can't help to settle your quarrels, young gent," he said firmly. "Not as I'm objectin' to havin' the boy aboard—he'd come in durned handy. But it wouldn't do, my lad. Besides, you couldn't get the kid aboard—"

"Yes, I could," interrupted Starke. "Look here, Mr. Bartlett, I want to come to an understanding with you. If you'll agree to this proposition of mine I'll make it worth your while."

"Five bob, or so, I s'pose?" asked the mate gruffly. "No, young—"

"Not five bob," said Starke—"but two pounds—three pounds, even."

"Where's your money?"

"Here!"

And Starke pulled out a bundle of currency notes.

"You shall have your money now, if you like," he went on, "and I'll see that the kid is put on board. You won't appear in it at all; you won't be asked to do a thing. There can't be any risk."

Mr. Bartlett changed his tone.

"Now you're talkin' business," he said briskly. "I'm your man, Master—Master—"

"My name's Taylor," lied Starke.

"Well, Master Taylor, we might as well talk this over quiet-like," said the mate. "Let's see if I've got it right. You an' some school kid have fallen out, and you've got the wust of it. You want to get even, so your idea is to shove the young shaver on the old Montford, so that we can find him aboard arter we've started an' make him work his passage across the bloomin' Pond. Is that right, my lad?"

"Yes, in the main," said Starke. "It ought to be a good arrangement for you, because you'll be getting a cabin-boy on the cheap—"

"I s'pose you know what it'll mean if you're copped at the game?" interrupted Mr. Bartlett. "It'll be a case o' kidnapping, my son. Not that I care—I shall take darned good care to steer clear of trouble. If the boy's on board after we've sailed, that's his look-out. I sha'n't agree to no monkey tricks in gettin' hold of the young feller."

"I don't want you to," said Starke. "I'll arrange all those details. But you'll have to tell me when I can put the kid on board without being spotted. And how do you think it could be done?"

"Well, young gent., you'd best bring the kid along at about midnight and place him down in the for'ard hold—that's in the front of the ship—an' you can reckon on the deck

bein' deserted just at that time. You've got to bring the kid and stow him away. My part is to find him."

"After you're out at sea," said Starke. "That's the idea."

Mr. Bartlett thought it was a very excellent proposition, for everything was in his favour. A boy was wanted, and here one would be supplied; Mr. Bartlett would receive money for doing absolutely nothing; and if anything went wrong with Starke's scheme, Starke would be the only one to suffer. And the mate would pocket three pounds in advance.

But Starke was satisfied, too, to judge by his expression. He and his companion talked over the affair for at least an hour, and everything was arranged. And then Starke handed over three of the currency notes, bade Mr. Bartlett good-night, and took his departure.

But Starke did not return to his barn. He had remained in the vicinity of St. Frank's for one purpose, and it seemed that that purpose would now be achieved. His chance had come when he had least expected it.

"By George," Starke muttered, "this will make the little cad sit up! Just when the summer holidays are coming on, too! Oh, he'll have a fine holiday—kicked and cursed at in the fore-castle of an old tramp steamer. I couldn't wish for anything better. That little rotter will have an awful time on board the Montford. A voyage to South America as ship's boy will half kill him!"

But Starke had not finished his preparations, by any means; he had other matters to arrange.

And after walking along the sea front for some little time he found what he required. He came upon two ruffianly-looking loungers, who were often to be seen idling their time away on the sea front.

These men were loafers, and did nothing in particular to obtain a living. And they were men who would be willing to take a little risk if the bait was large enough.

"Would you men like to earn a quid each?" asked Starke, as he paused in front of the pair.

"I don't reckon we'd mind, sir," said one of them. "But I reckon you're on the wrong track——"

"I don't think I am," said Starke. "There's a job I want doing, and it's going to be rather a ticklish one. If you fellows will lend a hand I'll give you a quid each now, and another quid each when you've finished."

"Wot's the job, sir?" asked one of the men.

"An' where's your money?" inquired the other.

"I've got the money, and I'll tell you what the job is," said Starke. "There's a seat just along here—suppose we squat down and talk things over? And don't forget that the whole thing is secret."

They walked along the promenade for some little distance in the gloom of the summer's night. Then they sat down, and Starke told his companions what he required of them. They listened attentively, and agreed to the

proposition. It struck them as being quite simple.

"Two quid" did not come their way very often; they generally considered themselves lucky if they got hold of a shilling or two at a time. And Starke assured them repeatedly that there was no danger, and that even if they were caught they wouldn't be punished. Starke was the instigator and he would have to suffer in the event of failure.

So the little plot was arranged, and when Starke parted from his two new friends he was feeling content and easy in mind.

At last he was to get his revenge!

CHAPTER III.

AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

"THERE'S not much time before the end of term, but there's no reason why we shouldn't have a few jolly good matches," I declared, nodding my head. "I'm cricket captain again now, and I mean to finish up the term with a good old bang."

"That's the idea," said De Valerie. "We're booked to meet Bannington Grammar School on Saturday, and we might be able to fix up a match with the River House for next Wednesday."

"We will," I said firmly.

The common-room was fairly full that evening. The fellows had got over their original surprise, and now accepted me back into the fold as though nothing had happened.

Handforth was looking particularly pleased with himself. His "public apology" idea had panned out well, and Handy would have patted himself on the back continuously had I not begged of him to drop the whole subject.

"We've got to have another match with Helmford, too," said Watson. "Don't forget that we lost the game when they came over here last time."

"Yes, because Nipper played against us," growled De Valerie.

I grinned.

"It was your own fault——" I began.

"Of course it was—I admit that," agreed De Valerie. "I was an ass, Nipper. But when you were here as D'Albert you looked such an utter ass that we all thought you'd be hopeless at cricket. We refused to give you a showing, and when the Helmford skipper asked you to play for his side, you agreed. It was the only way of showing your true form. But that doesn't alter the fact that we lost; and it would be rather good if we could beat Helmford again before the vac."

"Why shouldn't we run over one evening——"

I paused as the door of the common-room opened. Tubbs, the page-boy, stood there, smiling at everybody in general.

"You're wanted, Master Nipper," he said.

"Oh, am I?" I replied. "Who by?"

"Mister Lee, sir."

"Well, I'll be along in a minute——"
 "Master Tregellis-West is wanted, too, sir."
 "Begad!"
 "And Master Watson——"
 "Eh?"
 "And Master Pitt——"
 "The deuce I am!"
 "And Master Grey!" grinned Tubbs.
 "You're all wanted, young gentlemen!"
 "That's five of you," remarked De Valerie.
 "Now, what the dickens have you been up to? What awful sins have been discovered? You'd better think things over, my sons, and be prepared for the worst!"
 "It can't be because of that scrap we had with Fullwood and Co. on Little Side," said Watson, rather uneasily. "We rolled the rotters in the grass, and made wrecks of 'em. I know, but they deserved it!"
 "Besides, I wasn't there," said Grey.
 "Must be something else, then," I remarked. "How did Mr. Lee look when he told you to come for us, Tubby?"
 "Oh, smilin', sir."
 "Good!"
 "An' there were two other gents with him, sir," went on Tubbs. "Lord Dorrimore an'——"

"Old Dorrie!" I yelled. "I wondered where he'd got to. Come on, my sons, it's quite safe. We're not goin' to get it in the neck!"

We hurried out into the passage, and Pitt and Grey were still looking rather puzzled.

"We like Lord Dorrimore," said Pitt. "but I don't see why Mr. Lee should have sent for Jack and me. Oh, but there was another gentleman, wasn't there? Well, let's buzz along and see."

We arrived at Nelson Lee's study and tapped on the door. Then we entered, and Jack Grey gave a little gasp of delight and ran forward.

"Father!" he exclaimed.

"Thought I'd give you a bit of a surprise, my boy," chuckled Sir Crawford Grey—Jack's pater. "I didn't tell you I was coming, because I wasn't absolutely sure that I should be able to get here to-night."

Sir Crawford was an exceedingly genial old chap, and we all knew him well. He shook hands all round and beamed upon us with an abundance of good nature. Lord Dorrimore, of course, was just the same as usual.

"Hallo, boys," he yawned. "Too much lag to shake hands all round. Ain't this heat frightful? It's been a shockin' day!"

We all grinned.

"I sent for you, boys, because Sir Crawford has something to tell you," said Nelson Lee pleasantly. "Something which, I hope, which will give you as much pleasure as it has given me."

"By gad! They'll be yellin' soon!" said Dorrie.

I could see that his lordship was not looking quite so bored as usual. There was a sparkle in his eyes, and he was almost flushed.

"Sit down, my boys," said Sir Crawford. "Of course, Jack, my chief aim is to give

you pleasure, but, at the same time, all your friends will be able to participate, and there is no reason why we should not have a really wonderful time."

"A wonderful time, dad?" repeated Jack, puzzled.

"A most enjoyable trip," smiled Sir Crawford.

"But what trip?"

"You don't know, do you?" chuckled his father. "The summer holidays will soon be here, Jack. We shall have a good few weeks of idleness to fill in, and I want to make this holiday the best you ever experienced. In short, we are to go away on a sea voyage."

"Oh, dad!" exclaimed Jack, his eyes sparkling. "But—but Reggie can come with me, can't he?"

"Here, I say——" began Pitt.

"Of course he can come with you. I mean to expressly invite him," said Sir Crawford smiling. "And these other lads, too," he added, indicating Tommy and Montie and me. "They are to be invited, too."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie mildly. "That's rippin', sir!"

"But where shall we go to, dad?" asked Grey eagerly.

Sir Crawford made himself more comfortable in his chair and lit a cigar.

"Do you remember your somewhat trying and exciting adventures when you first came to St. Frank's?" he asked.

"I remember everything, dad," said Jack. "How could I forget in such a short time?"

"You came here under the name of Jack Mason, and you thought that you were fatherless and motherless," went on the baronet. "You believed that your only living relatives were your aunt and uncle—a certain Mr. and Mrs. Grell, who lived in Bermondsey."

"Well, there is no need to go over all that, we all know the story," continued Sir Crawford. "But I wish to refresh your memory on certain other details. That man, Simon Grell, was a bit of a rascal, and he did his utmost to obtain possession of a locket which you had in your possession, Jack, and which, incidentally, was the chief cause of our being brought together."

"That locket with the Arabic writing in it, you mean, sir?" put in Pitt.

"That is right, my boy," said Sir Crawford. "The writing was, briefly, a message from a dying man, and it related to a considerable treasure in diamonds and other precious stones——"

"You—you don't mean——" began Jack excitedly.

"That we're going to search——" gasped Pitt.

"For treasure?" yelled Watson.

The baronet laughed heartily.

"That is exactly what I do mean," he exclaimed. "There is no guarantee that we shall find a farthing. In any case, we are not in need of money, and the whole project is only being undertaken because it is something to do. I would rather leave British shores with a certain mission to accomplish

than to go haphazard, without any particular destination."

"And are we all invited, sir?" asked Watson breathlessly.

"Yes; subject to your parents' consent, of course."

"Oh, I'll get consent all right," said Watson. "How ripping! How tremendously top-hole! A trip to—to Australia to search for treasure!"

"Come, come!" smiled Sir Crawford. "Where is your geography, lad? We are not bound for Australia, but for Northern Africa. This treasure is supposed to be buried in a deserted, isolated oasis, known as El Safra. We may never reach it, and if the journey across the desert is at all risky, we shall not attempt the crossing. As I said before, we are going on holiday, not on a trip where we shall risk our lives."

"It's splendid, sir!" I exclaimed. "And will the gov'nor come?"

"The gov'nor will!" smiled Nelson Lee, nodding.

"To say nothin' of me," observed Dorrie.

"Oh, good!"
"My dear, innocent lad, you don't suppose for a minute that I'd be left out of an affair like this?" drawled Lord Dorrimore. "I've been lookin' forward to it for weeks. I'm fed-up with England. I want to get away where a fellow can breathe—where there ain't any motor-cars or trains. An' I don't think we shall find many of 'em on the Sahara desert!"

"And—and do we start soon, dad?" asked Jack, with sparkling eyes.

"We shall start at the earliest possible moment," said Sir Crawford. "The yacht is in perfect readiness to leave at a moment's notice—it only awaits the arrival of the passengers."

"Of course, my yacht wasn't big enough," put in Dorrie. "I offered it to Sir Crawford, but he turned it down with scorn. An' he's chartered a whackin' great boat big enough to carry a thousand. Besides, my yacht's in dry dock; she biffed into a schooner, an' nearly went down, by gad!"

"The vessel I have obtained is, indeed, quite a large one," said Sir Crawford. "And my chief idea is to accommodate a large number of passengers. Dr. Brett, I may say, has been invited, and he will go with us. You all know Dr. Brett, of Bellton."

"I'm glad he's going, sir," I said.

"You see, he may come in useful. It is just as well to have a doctor on board," said Sir Crawford. "Especially when there are many passengers. My idea, Jack, is for you to invite as many boys as you wish. Two dozen, if it pleases you—or even three dozen. I want you to bring everybody who cares to come."

"Half the school will care to come," I grinned.

"We must discriminate, of course," said the baronet. "Oh, and perhaps it would be just as well if some of the boys brought their sisters with them," added Sir Crawford, with twinkling eyes. "I have no doubt that a few

bright girls will help to make the party more lively and gay. For I want this holiday to be the best one you have ever spent."

Dorrie sat forward in his chair.

"An' there's another old pal you'll meet, too," he observed. "You'll see him when we get to Africa. He's a dark-skinned old boulder—as true as steel, an' one of the best chaps breathing. Guess who I mean!"

"Why, old Umlosi!" I exclaimed.

"You've hit it!" smiled Dorrie.

"Umlosi—the old boulder!" I went on. "We haven't seen him for months! It'll be ripping to hear his rumbling old voice again."

"He went back to his beloved Africa," explained Dorrie. "But I've been spendin' a little fortune in cables, an' I've got into touch with the old beggar. He's goin' to meet the boat when she arrives."

We were all very excited.

"Why, this holiday will be better than the one we spent last year!" I exclaimed.

"We had a fine time in the South Seas, and that was hunting for treasure, too! I never hoped that we should have a chance of joining in another hunt! But we shall miss dear old Captain Burton."

"I don't fancy so, Nipper," put in the gov'nor. "For, you see, Sir Crawford has placed his yacht in command of Captain Burton."

"By Jove!" I said. "It's getting better and better. We shall be the same party over again, practically, but bigger and better. And there's a prospect of some exciting times when we get to Africa."

"There is one little item which might interest you," said Nelson Lee. "Sir Crawford has purchased—at my suggestion—a large aeroplane of the most modern type. It is already housed on board the yacht."

"But—but what is it for, sir?" asked Grey wonderingly.

"Well, it may save us a lot of time," replied Lee. "A journey across the desert on foot would take, say, two or three weeks. The same distance could be covered through the air in six or seven hours. And one never knows when a reliable aeroplane may not come in handy."

"Of course, boys, this is just a preliminary chat," put in Sir Crawford. "But there is not much time at our disposal, and I imagine that a good few letters must be dispatched—letters asking for parents' consent. You can invite whom you please, Jack, and you need not limit yourself as to the number of your friends. The more the merrier. And you must drop a hint to some of the boys who have nice sisters that— Well, you know what to do, Jack."

"Rather, sir!" said Grey warmly. "I—I feel so excited that I hardly know what I'm doing! I—I want to yell!"

"Then perhaps you had better go outside and let off steam!" chuckled Nelson Lee.

"Oh, and by the way, Grey, every boy who is invited must report to me. I shall then hand him a personal letter which he can enclose to his parents. I want them to

thoroughly understand that all the boys will be well cared for on this trip."

We escaped from the study at last, and when we arrived in the lobby we paused and looked at one another with shining eyes and flushed faces.

"A trip to Africa!" I exclaimed, taking a deep breath.

"With a whole crowd of other chaps!" said Watson.

"And some girls, begad!" said Sir Montie, grinning.

"Oh, it's almost too good to be true," panted Jack Grey. "Look here, I'm going to yell! Hurrah!"

We all yelled, in fact, and we kicked up such a noise that Morrow of the Sixth came along, and politely asked if we had taken leave of our senses.

"It's all right, old son, don't you worry," I said. "We're just celebrating—that's all."

"Would you like to come, Morrow?" asked Grey eagerly. "The pater gave me permission to invite anybody, and you're one of the best chaps going!"

"Thanks!" said Morrow, smiling. "But what's the idea?"

"I'm inviting you to come to Africa!" Grey replied.

Morrow stared.

"None of your rot!" he exclaimed. "If you try to pull my leg——"

"But I mean it—really!" exclaimed Jack. "I——"

But he was interrupted by a sudden rush of juniors from the common-room. They had come to see what the excitement was about, and were rather disappointed when they found that no fight was in progress.

"Who made all that row just now?" demanded Handforth.

"We did!" said Pitt calmly—"and we're going to make it again, soon. The summer vac. starts next week, and we're going away on a whacking great steam yacht to Africa. We're going to have the giddy time of our lives!"

"Gammon!" said Handforth.

"Rot!" shouted the others.

But they didn't use those expressions after we had explained matters to them. The excitement was tremendous when it was thoroughly understood that Jack Grey had what literally amounted to carte blanche in the matter of invitations.

"Grey's one of the best!" declared Handforth enthusiastically. "I've always said so, haven't I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Anything funny?" demanded Handforth, glaring round. "When we get out to sea——"

"You haven't been invited yet!" put in Watson.

"Of course, I leave that to Grey," said Edward Oswald. "I'm not a chap to push myself forward—everybody knows that—but it's taken for granted that Grey will invite all the leading chaps in the Remove!"

"At that rate, you'll be left out," said Pitt sweetly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Handforth was not upset. He knew from the start that an invitation would be extended to Study D. It was really amazing, however, to discover how many friends Jack Grey possessed. Fellows who hadn't spoken to him for days hovered round him like a lot of lost brothers. Without a doubt, Jack Grey was the most popular fellow at St. Frank's just then.

The whole school was at his feet!

CHAPTER IV.

PROWLERS OF THE NIGHT.

MR. WALTER BINKS grinned. "All asleep," he whispered. "Are you there, Bill?"

Mr. William Shaw nudged his companion.

"Not so much bloomin' jaw!" he murmured. "Didn't the young gent tell us to keep our mouths closed? This game's a bit risky, don't forget!"

The two men were Starke's paid conspirators, so to speak. The ex-prefect himself was slightly ahead of them, finding out the lie of the land.

The hour was nearly eleven-thirty, and Starke knew that not a moment was to be lost if his scheme was to meet with the success he aimed at. He found the school quiet and still. The June night was quite mild and starlit.

Even the masters were in bed, it appeared, since all the lights in the upper windows were extinguished. Starke's chief interest lay in the direction of the Remove dormitory.

And he saw with great satisfaction that both the windows were open at the bottom. He next transferred his attention to Warren's woodshed, in the corner of the Triangle.

And here he found, as he had expected, a short ladder.

"Lend a hand," he whispered.

Walter Binks and Bill Shaw were just behind, and they crept forward and grasped the ladder.

"You see those two windows up there?" went on Starke.

"Them windows with the ivy hung about 'em?" asked Binks.

"Yes. Hoist the ladder up to one of those."

"Right, sir!"

Silently and stealthily the two men crossed the Triangle, and placed the ladder against one of the windows of the Remove dormitory.

"Wait down here until I wave my hand," breathed Starke. "Then come up—but only you, Binks. Shaw can remain on the ground."

Starke ascended the ladder with extreme care, and made no sound. Arriving at the top, he looked into the dormitory. All was dark, and the regular breathing of the juniors came to the outcast's ears.

Still silent, he entered the room, and then turned, beckoning to the man below. Binks ascended the ladder, and joined Starke. The

pair had succeeded in entering without arousing a soul.

Starke knew what an extremely light sleeper I was, and he had taken extra precautions.

The plan of action was already decided upon. Both Starke and his companion knew exactly what they had to do. And Starke produced from under his coat a big, heavy woollen muffler. Binks, at the same time, brought to light some strong, stout cord. Then the pair moved forward.

They only stood by my bed for a couple of seconds before acting. And even then they were nearly too late. For I awoke at that moment—I don't know why, because I had certainly heard no particular sounds.

And then, before I could even open my eyes, something thick and suffocating descended over my mouth and nostrils. I kicked, but the whole lower part of my body was held secure.

The thought that sprang into my head was that some of the other fellows were playing a practical joke. Christine and Co., of the College House, perhaps. Or even Fullwood and Co. might be the culprits.

Whoever they were, they did their work thoroughly.

Starke bound the muffler round my mouth so tightly that I could scarcely breathe, and the only sound I could make was a rumble in my throat which scarcely penetrated the muffler.

I struggled furiously, but the odds were too heavy.

In spite of my efforts, I felt that my feet and arms were being bound, and in a very few minutes the job was completed. And nobody else in the dormitory had been aroused. Success had attended Starke's efforts.

I was hauled from the bed and carried towards the window. I was only attired in pyjamas, and my clothing, presumably, was left behind. Not that I was capable of thinking about clothing at that time.

Almost suffocated by the muffler, perspiring from every pore, all I wanted was to get some fresh air. My senses were reeling already, for I could scarcely breathe. And in that condition I was lowered down the ladder to the ground.

Dimly and vaguely I resolved to have my own back for this outrage, for it was certainly more than a practical joke. I was sure that Fullwood and Co. were the culprits. Christine and his friends would never have acted in such a way.

I knew that I was being carried along, but I had no idea of my direction. It must be remembered that my eyes were covered by the muffler, and I could see nothing. I had seen nothing since the very first moment of the attack.

And then, after what seemed an age, I was placed upon the ground and the heavy muffler was removed. For the first few moments I could do nothing but gulp in the cool night air.

I soon revived, however, and then found

myself regarding my captors with much surprise and astonishment.

They were men!

Two rough-looking fellows who seemed to smack of the sea. My theory that Fullwood and Co. were concerned in the game was knocked on the head. What on earth could it mean? Why had I been kidnapped?

"Look here," I gasped, "what's the meaning of this?"

"It's no good askin' us, young gent," said Mr. Binks. "We're only a-carryin' out orders."

"Orders which I gave!" came a well-known voice.

I stared in real amazement then, for Walter Starke was standing before me. He bent down, and even in the gloom I could see that his face was alight with gloating triumph.

"Starke!" I panted dazedly.

"Yes—Starke!" exclaimed the ex-prefect softly. "Surprised to see me, eh? You thought I'd gone—you thought you'd done with me? Well, you haven't, you little worm!"

"You must be mad!" I exclaimed. "What's the idea of hiring these men to kidnap me?"

"You'll know the idea soon—because I'm going to tell you about it," replied Starke sneeringly. "You young hound! You're going to pay for what you've done to me—you're going to pay dearly!"

"If you take that view, I can't argue with you," I said quietly. "But you know as well as I do, Starke, that I've done nothing whatever to you—"

"You—you miserable liar!" snarled Starke. "Didn't you lie like a trooper to get me expelled? Didn't you swear foul things against me that weren't true? I was sacked from the school because of your vile tongue!"

Just for a moment I thought that Starke was raving; but then I remembered his two confederates. He had probably told them some wild cock-and-bull story in order to get them to help him, and it was necessary to keep that story up.

"You were sacked because of your own lies—because the truth was too much for you," I said. "You were sacked because you were an absolute rascal, Starke!"

"I knew you'd deny it all, but I don't care if you do," grated Starke. "I've got you now, you cur; and I'm going to make you pay! My revenge will be so complete that you'll wish you'd never been born!"

"If you're thinking of harming me—"

"Oh, no—you won't come to any harm," interrupted Starke. "I might give you a good thrashing, but you deserve a dozen. My punishment will last for weeks, and when it's over you'll be thousands of miles from England."

I stared in amazement.

"Have you gone out of your mind, Starke?" I asked quietly.

"Sounds like it, doesn't it?" exclaimed Starke, with a leer. "But I'm sensible enough, you rotter. Within an hour from

now you'll be stowed away on board an outward-bound steamer——"

"Great Scott!"

"Yes, you can say anything you like—but you're in my hands, and you're helpless," went on Starke. "You're going to be taken straight away to a steamer that will sail at one o'clock. And when you get free you'll be far out to sea. After that, you little brat, you'll be forced to work your passage across—to South America!"

"You—you can't do it!" I panted.

"Can't I?" sneered Starke. "We'll see about that! You won't come to any harm, but you'll suffer as much in those two or three weeks as you'll ever suffer in all your life!"

"I shall be searched for, you madman!" I exclaimed. "I shall be found, too, and then you'll have to pay——"

"You won't be found until you get to South America," interrupted Starke. "You'll escape then, of course, and you'll just be able to get back in time for the next term. You'll spend your summer holidays being kicked and cuffed about on an old tramp steamer. How do you like the idea?"

"You must be insane to think of such a thing," I said quietly. "You can't do it, Starke, and you'd better give up the idea. What ship will you put me on, anyhow? Why don't you abandon the whole thing before you get yourself into trouble?"

Starke laughed harshly.

"Do you think I haven't made my plans?" he asked. "The ship's waiting for you, and once you're on board there'll be no escape. You needn't think that you have a chance, because you haven't—not even a dog's chance!"

For some moments I could not fully realize that there was actually a prospect of Starke's evil plan being put into execution. But it seemed that he was in deadly earnest.

And if he did, indeed, place me on an outward-bound tramp steamer there was no prospect of my getting ashore again until the vessel's destination was reached. And what about Sir Crawford Grey's plan?

I should miss everything—I should be left behind!

I began to feel rather uneasy, although I took good care to show my captors none of my misgivings. I laughed up into Starke's face—for I knew that it would give him extreme pleasure to see me looking scared.

"You young fool!" he snarled savagely. "Yes, you can laugh—you can keep your spirits up all you like! But there's no help for you now. And don't forget that you'll never be able to prove anything; even if you do, there's been no crime committed. The whole thing's only in the nature of a joke—although I don't suppose you'll care for it much!"

Starke was certainly right in what he said. His way of revenge was quite simple, and very effective; yet he would not be committing any really serious crime. If the truth ever came out he would declare that it had been a joke.

"Untie his arms!" ordered Starke sharply.

The two men took the ropes off, and for a moment I began to hope that I should have a chance of escaping yet. For a sudden dash might mean liberty. In any case, I was not afraid of a scrap with those three rascals.

But my ankles were still left bound, and I was helpless.

"Off with his pyjama-coat," said Starke. "Then make him put these rags on."

Then I understood. Starke had a bundle with him, and it proved to contain a collection of ancient clothing which many a tramp would have discarded. A shirt which was more like a mass of rags was forced on to my back, to be followed by an old waistcoat and a tattered jacket.

Having proceeded thus far, my wrists were rebound, and I was held securely by Binks and Shaw. Starke unfastened my ankles, and then forced a pair of ragged trousers over my legs.

The transformation was then complete—except for the grime which was rubbed over my hands, neck and face. I looked awful when everything was completed; anybody would have taken me for a street urchin of the worst type.

And now my fears returned; for it was only too obvious that Starke had made his plans thoroughly. There were no half-measures about this plot. Starke had not acted until every detail was thought out.

I thought about yelling for help—but what would have been the good? After the second yell I should have been smothered; and I was standing in a quiet corner of Bell-ton Wood, far away from any house or cottage.

And there was no prospect of shouting after that, for the muffler was replaced over my face—but not so tightly this time.

Then, once again I was carried along.

But not for a great distance. After a while I was placed upon some wheeled vehicle, and then progress was much faster. The handcart, or whatever it was, rode along quite noiselessly, for it had rubber tyres.

"We shall have to hurry," I heard Starke saying. "We shall be late, if we don't."

I don't think they took me through Bell-ton, but went off down the by-lanes, and joined the Caistowe Road further on. Then they made rapid progress, for they ran down the hills.

Finally, my captors left the road and wheeled me across the downs until, at last, the cliffs were reached. I heard Starke give a little mutter of satisfaction.

"Oh, good!" he exclaimed. "There's a bit of a mist over the bay. You'll be able to row out without being seen by a soul. Luck's with us!"

"It seems like it, sir," said one of the men. "Now, Bill, we'd best hurry ourselves. The boat's down on the beach just 'ere. I s'pose you'll wait till we git back, sir?"

"Yes," said Starke. "You get the kid on board as soon as you can."

"'E'll be stowed away within fifteen minutes from now, sir," said Binks grimly.



1. I was hauled from the bed and carried towards the window.

2. Grey flung open the door. "Anybody in here?" he asked.

"You trust us, young gent; we won't make no bloomer. An' when we come back we'll collect our little bit of rhino!"

And Starke watched the pair as they carried me down to the beach.

CHAPTER V.

STARKE'S SUCCESS.

S WISH!
The oars touched the calm water lightly, and only caused a slight sound as they dipped again and again.

I was in a rowing-boat, and I knew that I was being conveyed out to a ship which was somewhere beyond—hidden by the white mist. And by this time I had become really alarmed.

I was in a tight corner, and I knew it. Once the vessel had started on her voyage I should have no chance of getting back. Had Starke arranged things with the ship's captain, or with one of the officers?

That was the point that worried me. For, if such an arrangement had been arrived at, there was practically no hope. I was in the hands of enemies; and, single-handed, I could do nothing.

"Where is the bloomin' ship?" came a low growl to my ears. "I dunno about this 'ere mist bein' favourable, mate. Looks as if we sha'n't find our blamed way!"

"She's big enough, any'ow," said the other man. "A nice-lookin' craft, too—electric lights an' everythink. We don't often git craft o' that sort in Calstowe Bay—"

"Wot's that ahead?"

"Ah, there she is!" said Binks. "That's 'er, Bill. It can't be no other ship—cos she's the only steamer in the bay."

The mist was thicker here, and as the boat drew closer the men could only see the great bulk of the big steamship looming in a ghostly fashion out of the fog. At last the boat grated against the ship's side.

All was still and quiet—just as Starke had said it would be. There was not a sound to be heard on the ship. There were practically no lights showing, and Binks and Shaw had no particular fear of being seen.

They found some convenient ropes hanging down from the deck. Binks hoisted himself up lightly and scrambled aboard. He looked round, but could see very little in the mist—and there was not a moment to be lost, either.

The boat having been secured, the other man climbed to the deck, too—after passing a rope under my armpits.

Then, from the deck, the pair of them hoisted me up.

Without delay, I was taken down the fore-castle hatch, and right into the bowels of the ship. I was deposited at length in a little cupboard-like storeroom, and the door was closed upon me.

Then the two men crept up to the deck, lowered themselves overside, and once again reached their boat. They rowed steadily to-

wards the shore, directing their course by the sound of the tiny waves breaking on the beach.

Their judgment was good, for they landed at a spot only a few hundred yards from where they had started.

"Well, that job's done," said Binks. "I feel a bit sorry for the little beggar, but I don't s'pose 'e deserves no pity. 'E's a reg'lar little warmint, accordin' to wot the young gent says."

"It don't matter to me wot 'e says," exclaimed the other man. "We 'aven't done the kid no 'arm. A sea voyage'll do 'im good—an' we've earned a bit o' money for ourselves."

As they walked along the beach a figure suddenly loomed up before them, and they saw that it belonged to Starke.

"Well?" he asked anxiously.

"The kid's aboard, sir," said Binks. "Sang an' cosy far below the decks. 'E won't be found until the ship's a day or two out."

"Good!" said Starke, with a sigh of relief. "Look here, I'm going to give you two quid each now—because everything's gone off so well."

"You're a gent, sir!" said Shaw heartily. The money was handed over.

"Didn't you see anybody on board the Montford?" asked Starke.

"Not a soul, sir."

"Didn't you hear anything?"

"Not a sound, sir."

"That's queer, isn't it?" went on Starke. "I understood that she was to set off by one o'clock—and it's a quarter to already."

"I dessay this mist is keepin' 'er back, sir," said Binks. "I don't s'pose she'll haul up her hook until the weather's a bit clearer. Any'ow, we've done our bit—an' we wishes you good-night!"

Starke grunted, and the two men went off.

For half an hour Starke remained in the same position, watching the sea. And then, to his great satisfaction, the mist began to clear perceptibly. A light wind had sprung up, and before long the fog had almost completely vanished.

And there, a little away to the right of the bay, lay the Montford. Steam was issuing from her funnel, and Starke could hear sounds of bustle coming across the still water.

The bay was deserted except for one or two other vessels—mainly fishing craft—lying at anchor. Starke did not shift from his position in the slightest degree. He remained quite still, watching the old tramp steamer.

Then, at last, she began moving out to sea.

And all this time I lay bound and helpless where my captors had placed me. I had had no chance whatever of making my escape. Indeed, I was quite certain that I could do nothing for myself. I could only await events.

Starke, on the shore, watched the Montford go into the night.

"That's the last of the young cad for weeks to come!" he muttered exultantly

"It's cost me a few quid, but I don't care—I'm even with him now! He won't get ashore until he reaches the other side."

Starke waited until the tramp steamer had passed completely out of sight. And then the ex-prefect discovered, for the first time, that he was tired. He turned away, and made for the little farm building—which was situated at least two miles away, on the other side of the village.

Starke had no particular plans for the future.

He didn't know what he would do. And, just now, he didn't care. All he wanted was to lie down and rest. He had performed the task he had set out to accomplish, and he was feeling satisfied.

But he was not to reach his haven of refuge, after all.

For as Starke was thoughtfully walking along one of the quiet outer streets of Caistowe, he suddenly became aware that some other human being was near-by. And the hour was between two and three in the morning!

Starke stared at the other man curiously, and then started.

A police-constable!

For about the first time in his life Starke felt nervous at the sight of a blue uniform; his conscience was already at work. But he was only concerned for his own safety—nothing else.

He walked on carelessly, and the policeman walked with him, on the other side of the lane. Starke walked faster, and still he could not shake the man off. At last, becoming really alarmed, Starke broke into a run.

"Hi, young fellow!" shouted the constable sharply.

He ran swiftly, and caught hold of Starke's shoulder before he could escape. The next second the light from a bull's-eye lantern was flooding into Starke's face. He blinked at the light, and took a deep breath.

"What the thunder do you mean by this?" he demanded roughly.

"It ain't usual for young gents like you to be walking about alone at this hour of the night," said the policeman. "What may your business be, sir?"

"My business has nothing to do with you!" snapped Starke.

The man looked grim.

"I don't like your manner, my lad," he said. "What's your name?"

"I'm not going to answer your confounded questions!" shouted Starke hotly. "You've no right to ask my name—and you can go to the deuce! Just because you're a policeman, you think you can do anything you like!"

"If I've made a mistake, sir, I'll apologise," said the constable. "There's no call for you to get angry—if you're as honest as you make yourself out to be. Are you afraid to tell me your name?"

Starke realised that he had been unwise, and he laughed.

"Well, no," he said. "You gave me a bit

of a start, that's all. My name's Taylor—Edward Taylor."

The policeman nodded slowly.

"Live in Caistowe?" he asked.

"No—er—I come from London," replied Starke. "You see, I'm just spending a short holiday at the seaside. I couldn't sleep, so I just came out for a walk—to get some air. Do you want to know anything else?"

He attempted to move off, but the constable still held him.

"Yes," he said, "I do want to know something else, sir. I want to know the address you're staying at in Caistowe."

"Hang you!" snapped Starke, knowing that he couldn't answer. "I'm not going to tell you all my business! Let me go, confound you! You're exceeding your duty, and if you're not careful, I'll report you—"

"I suppose," said the policeman, "that your name doesn't happen to be Starke?"

"What?" gasped Starke faintly.

"Master Walter Starke?" added the constable.

"No—no!" shouted Starke. "I've never heard the name before!"

"And you don't know anything about St. Frank's?"

"Not a thing!" panted Starke. "I've never seen the school!"

"That's rather queer, for I seem to remember having seen you before, sir," said the policeman. "And when I saw you before, you were wearing a blue-and-red cap—the school colours."

"School colours!" said Starke harshly. "Do I look like a schoolboy, you fool? I didn't know what you were talking about. Is St. Frank's a school? I've never heard of the place until you mentioned it."

The policeman smiled.

"I'll trouble you to come with me, Mr. Starke," he said quietly.

"You—you—you—"

"And it won't help you if you get violent," went on the man. "Just now you said you'd never seen the school—and a few seconds afterwards you said that you didn't know the place was a school! You've been tellin' lies, my lad. And you're Master Walter Starke. You're wanted!"

Starke went all limp.

"W-w-wanted!" he muttered weakly.

"We've had instructions to look out for you, Master Starke," said the policeman. "It seems that you ran away from St. Frank's some days ago, and your father's been mighty anxious. We've got orders to detain you—and you'll be detained, too. Now, come on—be sensible. You can't get away, my lad!"

Starke attempted to, nevertheless. But his captor was a smart man for a country policeman, and he marched Starke to the little police-station, and hauled him up before the station sergeant.

"Oh, so this is the lad?" said the sergeant.

"This man's a fool!" shouted Starke. "My name's Taylor, and I'm simply a seaside visitor from London—What the deuce—"

"Pardon the liberty, sir," said the sergeant,

who had suddenly leaned forward and had taken a letter from Starke's coat pocket. "H'm! What's this? 'Master W. Starke,' an' addressed to St. Frank's College!"

"You you thief!" raved Starke. "Give me that letter!"

It was returned, and the sergeant looked at the constable.

"You'd better put him in that best room. Harrow," he said. "We don't want to displease his father—the poor gentleman will have quite enough worry with a son like this. Take him away!"

Starke let out a roar.

"Am—am I arrested?" he demanded violently.

"No, my lad, you're not arrested," said the sergeant. "But you'll be detained here according to your father's instructions. I'm going to wire to Mr. Starke at once, so I don't suppose you'll have to wait many hours!"

And thus, in that ignominious fashion, Walter Starke was returned to his worrying parents. He was kept under lock and key during the whole night, and early in the morning a big motor-car arrived.

A tall, stern-looking man emerged. Mr. Walter Starke, senior, was of a different calibre to his worthless son. He stepped into the police-station, had a few words with the sergeant, and was then conducted to his son.

"Pater!" exclaimed Starke huskily.

"Well, Walter, I think I shall have something to say to you when we get home," said his father quietly. "You have not only disgraced yourself at St. Frank's, but you bring further dishonour upon my name by getting yourself locked up."

"But—but it was all a faked-up story!" gasped Starke. "I haven't done anything wrong! That little cad, Nipper——"

"Another lie from your lips, Walter, and I will not be answerable for what I do!" said Mr. Starke angrily. "I have heard the whole miserable truth from Dr. Stafford and Mr. Nelson Lee. You have acted the part of a hooligan and a villain, and I may as well tell you that I am ashamed to own such a pitiful specimen of humanity as my son. Come with me!"

And Starke, with bowed head, followed his father out to the waiting car. It was quite certain that the wretched boy was booked for a terribly severe punishment from his angry father.

And that was the last the district ever saw of Walter Starke. But though he went sullen and sulky, there was nevertheless a look of gloating triumph in his eyes. For he had got even with—me!

CHAPTER VI.

MISSING FROM SCHOOL.

C LANG-CLANG!

The rising-bell rang out noisily in the Remove dormitory. The sun was shining in at the windows, and the air

was already warm. Outside, butterflies were flitting about everywhere, and the hum of insects sounded. It was a perfect summer's morning.

"Not many more days of this, thank goodness," remarked Tommy Watson, as he turned out of bed, rubbing his eyes. "My hat! It's a ripping day, you chaps—— Hallo! Where's Nipper?"

"Up long ago, I expect," said De Valerie.

"He's not in bed, anyhow," remarked Handforth. "And the silly ass can't be up, either—or, rather, he can't be down!"

"What do you mean—he can't be up, and he can't be down?" said Watson, with a sniff. "I wish you'd talk sensibly, Handforth."

"If he's gone downstairs without any clothes on he ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself!" said Handforth. "Are you chaps blind? All his clobber's there—and his pyjamas ain't there!"

"Begad! The dear fellow's quite right," said Tregellis-West. "That's rather queer, you know. Where can Nipper have gone to, I wonder? Why has he left the dormitory in his pyjamas?"

"Oh, he can't be far off!" said Watson.

And everybody went on dressing, and the subject was dropped.

But after Watson and Tregellis-West were dressed, they lost no time in hunting for me. It is unnecessary to add that I was not to be found. My chums were rather anxious, for the whole thing was so unusual.

"He's not upstairs anywhere," declared Watson, at last. "We can't find a sign of him downstairs, and nobody seems to have seen him. Where is he? It's absolutely mysterious, Montie."

"Begad! You're right!" said Tregellis-West. "If he had been dressed I shouldn't be worried—he might have gone off for an early mornin' walk. But the dear boy is wearin' nothin' but pyjamas—not even his slippers! It's amazin', Tommy—it is, really!"

It was so amazing, in fact that the pair decided to inform Nelson Lee of the state of affairs immediately breakfast was over—for they gave me until then to show up. But when the meal was finished I was still missing.

Other fellows were beginning to get interested, too. There was much speculation, and it almost amounted to an uproar. For the circumstances were very peculiar indeed.

I had vanished during the night. And it was obvious that I must have gone out wearing nothing but my pyjamas. This is what the facts looked like, at all events. And the juniors could make nothing of it.

Nelson Lee was in his study when Tregellis-West and Watson presented themselves. He saw at once that something was amiss.

"It's about Nipper, sir," said Watson concernedly. "We don't know what's become of him. He's vanished, sir!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"What are you talking about, Watson?" he asked. "Nipper has vanished? How on earth can you make such a statement?"

"Well, it's very queer, sir—that's all I know," declared Tommy.

"Shockin'ly queer, begad!" agreed Montie.

"But, boys, you must explain——"

"I'm going to, sir," said Watson. "Nipper went to bed with the rest of us last night, and we were talking about what we shall do on the trip to Africa until we fell asleep. But when we got up this morning Nipper wasn't there."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I noticed that he was absent from the breakfast-table," he said. "But what is there in that, Watson? Nipper has frequently been absent on these fine summer mornings. He sometimes takes it into his head to go for a long spin, or a walk——"

"But not in his pyjamas, sir!" protested Watson.

"Or with bare feet, begad!" put in Montie.

"Pyjamas—bare feet!" said the school-master-detective. "Dear me! I am afraid I am still somewhat puzzled, boys!"

"We don't know anything, sir—except that all Nipper's clothes are still beside his bed," said Watson. "He must have gone away without wearing a thing. And his bicycle's in the shed. He wasn't even wearing his slippers. His bed's all ruffled up, as though he'd been fighting."

Nelson Lee was interested at last.

"Do you really mean this, Watson?" he asked. "You seriously declare that Nipper is missing, and that his clothing has been left behind?"

"Yes, sir."

"But he may have donned his flannels——"

"We've looked, sir, and all his clothes are there," interrupted Watson. "His money, and watch—and everything. He's gone away without wearing a stitch except his pyjamas!"

"That idea is quite absurd," said Nelson Lee. "Nipper would never have left the school in that manner, Watson. Are you quite sure that he is not playing some trick upon you?"

"It's not like Nipper to play a trick of that sort, sir."

"That's quite right," admitted Nelson Lee. "And there is no possibility of his being still within the school buildings, I presume?"

"We've searched everywhere, sir."

"H'm! It is somewhat curious—but you must not alarm yourselves," said the detective. "The whole thing can possibly be explained in a simple manner. But, to begin with, I will have a look at the dormitory before it is tidied."

Nelson Lee passed out of his study, and Tregellis-West and Watson accompanied him up to the Remove dormitory. Lee looked round keenly, and examined the pile of clothing which lay beside the bed.

Then he walked round, his eyes busy all the time, and finally went to the two windows, and leaned out, one after the other. One window he gave scarcely no attention at all, but the other seemed to be quite attractive.

"This looks rather curious," he observed

absently. "What are these scratches against the paintwork—— And there are marks against the stonework of the sill itself. Quite significant, my boys."

Tregellis-West and Watson leaned out.

"I can't see anything much, sir," said Tommy.

"It is really not necessary to see much," replied Lee. "A little frequently tells more than a lot. Here, for example, we have the marks made by heavy boots scraping on the paintwork—or, at least, large footgear. Nipper could not have caused these marks, since his feet were bare. And these faint scratches on the very edge of the sill surely indicate that something heavy has leaned against it—and what else but a ladder? Indeed, I can distinctly see the indentations caused by the ladder on the ground below."

"That's wonderful, begad!" said Sir Montie. "I shouldn't have thought of that, sir. It's amazin' how you find these things out. But what does it mean?"

"It means that Nipper left this apartment by means of a ladder during the night," said Nelson Lee.

"But how could he have got the ladder when he was up here?"

"He could not have done so, Watson—which proves that somebody else placed the ladder in position," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I am beginning to think that Nipper was forcibly taken from his bed during the night—and carried away from the school in his pyjamas."

"But—but who'd do such a thing, sir?"

"We don't know yet, my lad," said the detective gravely. "This affair is assuming a somewhat serious aspect. By the way, do you remember any disturbance during the night?"

"I slept like a top, sir," said Watson.

"An' so did I," admitted Sir Montie.

"Well, we will have a look at the bed," said Nelson Lee, moving over to it. "I don't pretend to know what has happened—but I intend to find out."

Nelson Lee was about to turn the bedclothes over, when he suddenly stooped down, and picked up a tiny object from the floor. It had been close against one of the castors, and nobody had noticed it hitherto.

"What's that you've got, sir?" asked Watson.

"An ear-ring, my lad. A silver ear-ring with an anchor designed upon it," said Nelson Lee. "That surely smacks of the sea. Many seamen favour ear-rings—especially silver ones, and the anchor upon it is also conclusive. Do you know if this belongs to Nipper?"

"We've never seen it before, sir," said Sir Montie.

"Then we may as well assume that it is the property of one of the men who entered the dormitory during the night," said Lee. "Perhaps it was brushed out of his ear during a slight struggle, and dropped unnoticed. I will keep it, and—— But what's this?"

Lee bent over the bedclothes suddenly, and

the two Removitea saw that he was regarding a blackish-brown mark which was clearly visible on the white sheet. Lee examined it intently, and then suddenly bent down and sniffed.

"Curious!" he murmured.

"What is it, sir?" asked Watson.

"Tar, my boy—most decidedly it is tar," said Lee. "And there, again, we have another smack of the sea. And if you will look, you will see several similar marks on the sheet."

"But what could they have been caused by, sir?"

"Well, the tar isn't wet," said the detective. "It is wrong to suppose that tar itself has been dropped here. The most feasible explanation seems to be that some tarred cord has been used. When pulled along the sheet, it naturally left a mark. And I don't like the thought."

"Begad! You mean that the tarred cord was used for the purpose of bindin' the dear old fellow?" asked Sir Montie.

"What else is there to think?" said Nelson Lee. "Some tarred rope has been used, Montie. Nipper has vanished, and it is clear that he was taken straight from his bed. Well, the inference is obvious. The lad was seized as he lay asleep, prevented from calling out, and bound."

"Then—then he's been kidnapped?" gasped Watson.

"It certainly seems to be so—but we must take nothing for granted," replied Nelson Lee. "The only possible theory to form is that Nipper was taken away by somebody connected with the sea—a rough sailor, or a longshoreman, judging by the ear-ring we have found."

"But how did such a chap know where to find Nipper, sir?"

"That, Watson, is exactly the point," said Lee grimly. "The man could not have done so without information from within the school—or from somebody who is familiar with the school."

"It—it looks serious, sir," said Watson. "And I can't understand why anybody should want to kidnap Nipper—"

"You mustn't worry yourself unduly, my boys," interrupted Nelson Lee. "To begin with, I want you to promise me that you will say nothing of these discoveries to the other boys. It would only cause a sensation, and would probably do more harm than good. I will make a few investigations quietly."

"I hope he turns up soon, sir," said Watson anxiously. "He was coming with us to Caistowe this morning—we've been released from the third lesson so that we can go over to Caistowe with Sir Crawford Grey before dinner. And Nipper was going with us."

Nelson Lee thought for a moment.

"Don't let this interfere with your arrangements," he said. "Go, by all means, and try to enjoy yourselves. Make some excuse for Nipper—but don't tell anybody that he has been kidnapped."

"But the fellows are wonderin' —"

"Let them wonder, Montie," said Nelson

Lee. "By dinner-time I hope to have Nipper back, and we don't want a great fuss made over nothing. Run along, now, and leave me to deal with this alone."

Sir Montie and Tommy departed—but they were not feeling very easy in mind. And Nelson Lee, after another look round, went down to his study and thoughtfully lit a cigarette. He was about to don his straw hat, when the door opened and the Headmaster appeared.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, I have just heard a piece of news," said Dr. Stafford. "Starke has been found—and no further away than Caistowe."

"Caistowe!" exclaimed Nelson Lee in a curious voice.

"Yes. His father took him away this morning—after he had been detained in the police-station for the greater part of the night," said the Head. "The foolish, misguided boy! He has caused his father a terrible amount of worry and trouble. And I really cannot understand why he should have remained so many days in the vicinity of the school."

Nelson Lee was looking very grim.

"Do you know how Starke was found?" he asked.

"A policeman came across him between two and three o'clock in the morning," replied Dr. Stafford. "He was wandering about the streets in an aimless fashion. But earlier than that, it seems, he was seen by another officer in conversation with two disreputable longshoremen—"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Lee abruptly.

It was not necessary for him to hear another word. He knew everything, and when he found himself alone again he reviewed the situation.

"Nipper has vanished," he murmured. "He was taken away by seafaring people, who could not have entered the school without information. Starke has been found in Caistowe; Starke was seen with disreputable characters; and Starke made it known to all that he hated Nipper. There is not the slightest doubt that he caused a plot to be constructed, and Nipper is the victim. I must go to Caistowe at once if I wish to discover anything further."

Nelson Lee lost no time in getting off to Caistowe. He went in his little car, and his first visit was to the police-station. Here he had a conversation with the sergeant, who told him everything that he knew concerning Starke.

"You say that Starke was seen earlier in the evening with two quayside loafers?" asked Nelson Lee. "Can you tell me their names?"

"Well, I don't think I can, Mr. Lee," replied the sergeant—"leastways, not both of them. But one of the men was probably a worthless scamp named Binks. He's always idling about on the front."

"Can you tell me his address?"

The sergeant could, and, armed with this, Nelson Lee took his departure. He found that Mr. Binks lived in a squalid back street of the little town, quite near to the water

front. Binks occupied a single room in a lodging-house—and he was absent when Lee called.

"Mebbe you'll find 'im at the Six Bells, sir," said the woman who had answered the door. "He seems to have a rare amount o' money this mornin'—although I'm sure I don't know where e' got it from honestly. An' when 'e gits a bit o' money 'e generally finds 'is way to the public-house."

"Thank you!" said Nelson Lee, raising his hat.

He moved off, and next visited the Six Bells. So Mr. Binks was unusually flush of money—a very significant fact. Lee entered the public bar of the inn, and at once saw two rough-looking men sitting at a table in the corner. They had mugs of beer before them, and they were obviously in a happy mood. Moreover, it was clear that this was not their first taste of ale that morning.

And one man interested Lee particularly—for, while his right ear was adorned with a silver ear-ring, the other was bare.

"Am I addressing Mr. Binks?" said Nelson Lee, sitting down at the table.

"That's my name, sir," said the man with one ear-ring.

"Well, Mr. Binks, I think you are acquainted with a youth named Starke," said Nelson Lee, deciding to get to the point straight away. "You met him last night—"

"I ain't never heard of a bloke named Starke," said Binks hurriedly.

"Is that so?" said the detective. "Possibly he called himself something else. At all events, Mr. Binks, you accompanied that lad to St. Frank's College last night, and you assisted him in the kidnapping of a junior boy—"

"We didn't, sir—strike me pink if we did!" gasped Binks. "Did we, Bill?"

"We was indoors all last evenin'," declared Mr. Shaw stoutly.

Nelson Lee eyed them grimly.

"Now, look here, my men, I want the exact truth—and nothing else but the truth," he said. "If you attempt to lie to me I shall have you both placed under arrest within five minutes. You helped Starke to get a boy away from St. Frank's College—and I want to know what you did with him. Come now—out with it!"

"We don't know nothin'—"

"Perhaps you recognise this?" interrupted Lee.

"My bloomin' ear-ring!" ejaculated Mr. Binks.

"I found it in the Remove dormitory at St. Frank's," said the detective—"and there were other witnesses also, Mr. Binks. Do you think it is advisable to make an attempt at bluff? I will give you just one minute. Further delay will result in the arrest of you both."

And Nelson Lee lay back in his chair, quite calm and collected. He knew exactly what the two loafers would do. They were very badly scared, and were completely cornered.

"We didn't do the kid no 'arm, sir," said

Shaw huskily. "That young gent told us it was just a practical joke."

"I can quite believe that," said Nelson Lee. "I want to hear the whole story—so begin at the beginning."

The two men very sensibly realised that the truth was their only course. And they proceeded to explain what had happened. Their story was involved and disjointed, but Nelson Lee was able to make sense of it.

"An' that's all we know, sir," concluded Binks anxiously. "You ain't goin' to give us in charge, are you, sir? It wouldn't do no good—an' that young Starke feller was the real cause of it—we only 'elped 'im. The kid won't come to no 'arm—although you won't be able to find 'im. 'E's on board the Montford, an' she's right out at sea by this time. She don't call anywhere till she gits to the Argentine."

Nelson Lee did not reply. He sat back in his chair thinking. His face was very grim when, at last, he rose to his feet.

"I shall do nothing at present," he said. "You may be very thankful that you are not landed in gaol, charged with abduction. You are a pair of worthless rascals, but Starke shall certainly pay!"

And Nelson Lee strode out of the Six Bells in an extremely worried frame of mind. He left two very startled men behind him. But they were surprised as well. Why had they been let off?

The explanation, of course, was simple. By charging the two men no good would come of it, and Lee would only be put to a great amount of trouble and inconvenience. Other witnesses would be called, and the whole programme for the summer holidays would be upset.

"If the arrest of the worthless fellows would have helped Nipper, I would have acted at once," murmured Lee, as he strode along. "But it seems that the lad is on board that tramp steamer—and by this time the vessel is far out to sea. I really don't know what I can do—unless I set the wireless to work."

Nelson Lee, at all events, was by no means beaten. And his first move was to make for the jetty—he had left his car at the police-station. Lee, in fact, meant to visit Sir Crawford Grey's yacht, which was lying out in the bay.

Captain Burton, perhaps, would be able to help.

— — —

CHAPTER VII.

ALL SERENE!

JACK GREY'S eyes sparkled with delight. "Oh, doesn't she look glorious!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "What a fine yacht, dad!"

"You'll pay her many more compliments after you have been aboard," chuckled Sir Crawford Grey. "Come on, my boys. The motor pinnace is already waiting for us, I perceive. We'll go on board at once."

The little party consisted of Sir Crawford, his son, Reginald Pitt, Watson, and Tregellis-West. Needless to say, I was not there; and

Tommy and Montie, in consequence, were not in the best of spirits.

"Pity Nipper couldn't come along," remarked Grey. "I wonder what's happened to the chap? It's queer, his going off in the night like that."

"Oh, he'll turn up," said Watson.

But Tommy did not speak with much confidence. He and Sir Montie, in fact, were not at all happy; their secret weighed upon them. They wanted to be elsewhere. But, for the sake of appearances, it was necessary to keep with the party.

The steam yacht certainly did look glorious, as Jack had said. The sun was causing her brasswork to glitter like masses of diamonds. Her paintwork was scrupulously clean, and the vessel itself was of the most graceful design. She was large, too, as steam yachts go.

The pinnace into which the party got was a neat little craft, and it was soon howling across the sparkling water to the yacht's side. Tregellis-West and Watson were the only ones who did not enjoy the trip; but they would have gloried in it had circumstances been otherwise.

But, once on board, even they forgot their worries for the time being.

There was so much to delight them, and so much to admire, that they gave themselves over to the occupation.

"Isn't she splendid, sir?" said Watson admiringly.

"I think she'll make a nice little home for us during the holidays—eh?" said Sir Crawford genially. "But come below, my boys. I wish to show you what the accommodation is like—although we haven't time for a complete tour of the ship. There are enough state-rooms to accommodate over a hundred."

They passed along the deck. A few members of the crew were lounging about. Or it would be more correct to say they were working. For they were a smart lot, and lounging was not one of their occupations.

All were attired in neat uniforms, and stewards flitted about, up and down the superb stairway which led to the saloon.

This apartment was princely—beautifully appointed, and decorated in the most lavish manner—but wonderfully artistic. And while the party was in the saloon, Captain Burton appeared. Big and bluff as ever, he didn't look a bit changed to the boys.

"Well, here we are again, youngsters," he exclaimed genially. "A different trip, this time—and in a better vessel, too—"

"That's right—run my property down!" put in Lord Dorrimore, strolling in. "Don't mind me, old man. But I must admit that this yacht takes the shine out of my old tub. She's a regular spanker, by gad."

Sir Montie and Tommy still forgot their worries. They went over the state-rooms, and they went into ecstasies of delight. Everything was so splendid—so wonderful. And they were to live on this ship for a good many weeks!

But every now and again they received a jar as they remembered.

"Dear old boy, it ain't right for us to be enjoyin' ourselves like this while poor old Nipper is missin'," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "I wish I knew what is bein' done—Begad!"

"What's up?"

"Look! Mr. Lee's just come on board!"

Watson and Tregellis-West dashed forward together, and they clutched hold of the detective as he approached.

"Any news, sir?" asked Watson eagerly.

"Yes, my lads," said Lee. "But I am afraid that it is not news that will cheer you—although you needn't be alarmed. Nipper, I believe is quite safe, but he is in a most unfortunate predicament."

"Begad! I don't understand, sir," said Tregellis-West.

"I don't suppose you do—but I cannot explain matters fully now," said Nelson Lee. "I must consult with Captain Burton and Lord Dorrimore at once—and you must be patient. That's all I can say."

And the detective bustled off, leaving Montie and Tommy more puzzled than ever. They joined the other juniors—Pitt and Grey—who were standing alone. Grey turned as the pair came up.

"Dad's gone into the captain's cabin with Mr. Lee, Captain Burton and Lord Dorrimore," he said. "They want to talk something over, I believe—and dad's given us permission to have a look through the ship."

"Oh, rot!" said Watson. "We don't want—"

"Eh?"

"I—I mean it'll be ripping," gasped Watson flushing.

"These two chaps are worried about Nipper," said Pitt. "They pretend not to be—but they can't deceive me. I wonder where the ass is? I can't help feeling a bit worried on my own account. Still, he'll turn up all right."

And with that they commenced their tour of exploration. Nobody interfered with them, for all the members of the crew knew that these boys were to be guests of honour during the forthcoming trip—and one of them was the owner's son. All sorts of places were examined with interest.

The engine-room proved a particular source of delight; and after that the little party went for'ard, far down in the ship's interior, examining the store-rooms and similar places.

They met nobody here, for the place was deserted. Only a few members of the crew were on board—stewards and stewardesses, and a few deck hands. There had been no occasion for anybody to go below in that part of the yacht. The juniors were quite to themselves.

"My hat!" said Pitt. "It wouldn't take us long to get lost here, would it? All these passages and rooms are liable to confuse a chap. You'd hardly think that we were on board a ship; we seem miles from any water!"

"I vote we go up that iron ladder and see where it leads us," said Jack, running down the narrow passage. "Come on, my sons!"

"I—I say," panted Watson suddenly, "hold on!"

The others paused, wondering.

"What's the matter?" asked Pitt.

"I—I thought I heard something, that's all," said Tommy. "A sound like somebody calling——"

"Rot!" exclaimed Pitt. "Who'd be calling down here?"

But they all stood still.

And then, clearly and distinctly, they heard a curious sound. It seemed to be coming from behind a locked door just down the passage. The four juniors approached it, and saw that there was a key in the lock.

Grey turned it, and flung open the door.

"Anybody in here?" he asked.

There was certainly somebody in there, to judge by the sounds which came out of the darkness. Grey felt round the doorway, and pressed down an electric light switch. The little store-room was at once flooded with illumination.

"Well, I'm blessed!" ejaculated Watson. "Look there!"

The four juniors found themselves staring at a curious figure which lay huddled on the floor. Of course, it was me—I needn't mention that. I had been trying to attract attention for hours.

"It's some giddy stowaway!" exclaimed Pitt. "Look at his rags and tatters——"

"But it can't be a stowaway, Reggie," put in Grey. "The boy is bound up, and look at that muffler round his face! He must have been put in here by somebody else."

They all came forward, and bent over me. The muffler was loose; it no longer half-suffocated me, although it was causing enormous discomfort.

It was removed, and my face was revealed. At least, the dirt and grime was revealed, for my chums did not seem to recognise me. I was wondering vaguely what they were doing on board the ship.

"We'd better go and tell one of the officers or one of the stewards," suggested Watson. "This chap oughtn't to be here, you know. I'm blessed if I can understand——"

"Good old Tommy!" I broke in huskily. "I didn't expect that you fellows would come along——"

"Why, what—— He—he——" Watson paused, and gulped.

"It's Nipper!" roared Pitt.

"Begad! Impossible!" said Sir Montie. "Pray talk sense, old boys! Look at his face—look at his clothing!"

"They're rather awful, aren't they?" I said calmly. "Well, don't stand staring at me, you asses! You might cut these ropes—I'm horribly cramped. And I want to get the hang of things!"

"It is Nipper, I tell you! Oh, you silly old ass, what are you doing here?" gasped Watson excitedly. "We—we thought—— I'm jiggered if I know what we did think! But we didn't dream that you were here, old son!"

"It's amazing!" said Grey.

"And where do I come in?" I asked.

"What price me for being amazed? How in the name of wonder did you fellows get on this old tramp steamer?"

Grey looked at me indignantly.

"Why, you rotter!" he exclaimed.

"Eh?"

"You insulting bounder!" said Jack warmly.

"Insulting?" I repeated, in astonishment.

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Watson. "Work your arms and legs about, Nipper. We want to know what game you've been up to. How do you feel now?"

"Rotten!" I replied. "I'm all aches and pains, and I'm as thirsty as a fish. My throat's absolutely parched."

But I was certainly feeling much better. The fact that I was rescued had a lot to do with it. Ever since those two rotters had placed me in the store-room I had been helpless.

I had tried to escape, but my efforts were useless. And I had given up all attempts, and had listened anxiously for the beating of the ship's engines. But, to my joy, she had not started on her voyage, and I could only conclude that she still lay in Caistowe Bay.

I imagined that the mist had delayed her departure—although how it came about that my own chums were the first to find me was an extraordinary puzzle which I could not hope to unravel.

"Now, out with the yarn," said Watson. "We'll give you a good long drink of iced lemonade in a minute or two——"

"Oh, lead me to it!" I said pleadingly.

"But you've got to explain——"

"I can explain everything when we've got off this rotten old tub!" I said. "We can have a chat—— What's up with you, Grey? What are you glaring at me like that for?"

Jack Grey looked really angry.

"I don't see why you should talk about this ship in such a rotten way!" he said stiffly. "It's not well-mannered, anyhow."

"What the dickens——" I paused, and stared. "Isn't it an old tub?" I demanded. "You ought to know, you ass! Haven't you just come on board?"

"An old tub!" roared Grey. "Why, you rotter, this is my pater's private yacht! It's one of the finest ships afloat!"

I swallowed hard.

"Your — father's — yacht?" I repeated blankly.

"Of course it is!"

"And not a tramp steamer called the Montford?" I asked.

"I never heard of such a ship," said Grey. "Oh, my hat! Did you think this was some other ship altogether?"

I leaned against Watson for support.

"I think I'm going dotty," I said. "I thought this ship was—— Great Scott! Those silly fools must have made a bloomer in the fog—— Ha, ha, ha! They brought me on this ship in mistake for the Montford! Ha, ha, ha! No wonder we didn't get under way!"

And I roared afresh—partly with great

relief, and partly because I was capable of seeing the joke of the whole affair. My chums stared at me in amazement—but I didn't care. I simply yelled.

The joke was too rich for words.

Starke had planned to have me taken on board the tramp steamer. The bay had been foggy, and perhaps Binks and Shaw did not know that Sir Crawford's yacht had dropped anchor after dark.

And, seeing the bulk of a big ship loom out of the mist, they mistook it for the Montford—quite a natural mistake, under the circumstances. And I had been taken on board and placed below—where I was certain to be discovered by my own friends! Fate had played a capricious trick upon Starke's well-laid scheme.

"Shake the ass!" said Watson. "He must be off his rocker! Make the silly chump explain."

"I—I'll explain!" I gasped. "Just listen!"

And, in as few words as I could manage, I told the amazed four exactly what had occurred during the night.

"Don't you see?" I asked. "Starke's idea was to have me shoved on that rotten tramp, so that I could go to South America as a ship's boy. But those men made a mistake in the fog—and put me aboard this yacht instead. And I didn't know it until you chumps blew in!"

"Begad! What an amazin' state of affairs," said Sir Montie.

"I'm jolly thankful that everything has turned out all right," said Watson fervently. "Just fancy, if you'd been placed on the real ship! Starke ought to be shoved into prison for planning such a rotten, criminal trick!"

"Hasn't there been a sensation at the school?" I asked.

"Not exactly," said Watson. "Your guv'nor kept the thing quiet, and has been searching for you all the morning. Oh, I say! That's jolly good! He's been searching, and yet we've found you!"

"Let's get up on deck," said Pitt briskly.

We ascended, and shocked the head steward, a deck hand, and a stewardess. They looked at me in a dazed kind of way—but dared not say anything because the owner's son himself was with me. And I looked like a street urchin!

The steward was even more scandalised when I was taken into the saloon and refreshed with iced lemonade. And just at

that moment Lord Dorrimore appeared, looking gravely troubled.

"You boys had better— Why, great guns!" he ejaculated. "Who—who is this elegant gentleman?"

"Don't worry, Dorrie," I said calmly. "It's only on the surface!"

His lordship gave a jump.

"Lee!" he roared. "I say, professor! Come an' look what's landed in the saloon!"

Nelson Lee and Sir Crawford appeared.

"Hallo, guv'nor!" I said cheerfully.

He stared at me for one moment, and then came to my side.

"Nipper!" he exclaimed. "How on earth did you appear? According to my investigations you were on a tramp steamer called the Montford, and Captain Burton and I have just planned to chase that vessel——"

"No need to, guv'nor," I interrupted. "You see, the silly asses made a mistake. They put me on the wrong ship—and I didn't know it until five minutes ago! Rather the limit in jokes, isn't it?"

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Nelson Lee.

"The limit in jokes!" exclaimed Dorrie severely. "You awful young bounder! What about you an' your nerve! Ain't that the limit? Here we are, goin' grey because of you, an' you stand there lookin' like a character out of Oliver Twist, an' grin at us!"

"I think you'd better explain, Nipper," said the guv'nor quietly.

Within a quarter of an hour we knew everything, having exchanged yarns. And we could hardly help chuckling afresh, for the whole affair—instead of being dramatic, was really extremely farcical.

"And I don't think I'll do anything about Starke, either," I said. "His plan proved to be a fiasco, and I can afford to forgive him—and I expect his poor old pater's troubled enough already."

Nelson Lee agreed with me and we decided to hush the whole thing up. It would be easy enough for me to make some excuse to the other fellows regarding my absence. I remained on board the yacht while my chums returned for my clothes. And after that everything was all serene indeed.

There was nothing to worry about now. Starke's scheme of vengeance had failed, and the prospect before us was alluring. Within a few days we should be leaving Old England on a ripping holiday adventure.

And it seemed that some exciting times were in store.

THE END.

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By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

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

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

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

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

DICK SELBY and his native servants. Alan and Dick become great pals. They witness the death of an old man named John Hammond, who tells them a wonderful story of a house in the jungle, where an English girl is kept captive. The chums 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 Taverner. 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 mountain. At length they reach the Hidden Valley, where they meet Lorna, who tells them that her father is seriously ill; but she will not say anything about Taverner

(Now read on.)

FERGUSON'S STRANGE ILLNESS.

"MY home," said Lorna, with a sweep of her hand. "It is the only one of which I have a clear memory, for I was a tiny child when my father brought me from England."

"It is a wonderful place for Africa," declared Alan.

"By George, it's like a vision that will fade away," declared Dick. "It doesn't seem

real to me. And now, Miss Lorna, don't you think you had better tell us what has happened, and what you are afraid of, before we go on. I want to know about the Arabs, and your father's illness, and Mr. Ralph Taverner."

"Why have you mentioned him?" Lorna Ferguson asked, her face clouding.

"Because you spoke of him to me weeks ago."

"I had forgotten that I did. I don't care to speak of him now, Dick. But I will tell you everything else, so you and Alan Carne will clearly understand what the situation is. The trouble began when the Arab slavers carried me off and took me down the River Bana to Tib Mohammed's camp. They must have heard of the Hidden Valley, and they had seen me come out from the opening in the cliff. And when Tib Mohammed snatched the necklace of diamonds from me, of course he supposed that there were many more diamonds in the valley, and he determined to get in there if he could. That awful night at the camp, Dick! It terrifies me to think of it. You were to have been killed, and what my fate would have been I don't know. But I was rescued, and you escaped—at least, I was inclined to believe that you had. I told my father all while we were on the way up the river, and when we got home he took precautions. He was in fear of an attack, so he had Chanka, the Zulu, and twenty of our Somalis keep watch by day and night at the pool by the cliff. More than a month passed, and nothing happened. And then, early one morning, Tib Mohammed and his men came in canoes through the water cavern. There were many of them—nearly a hundred. But none of them got ashore. There was a big fight with guns and revolvers, and the Arabs were driven off with heavy loss by the brave Somalis, three of whom were killed.

"After that my father was sure that they would not make another attempt by water," the girl continued. "But he had the wire screen put up to protect the cleft, and the six Somalis you saw have been keeping watch

there as before ever since. And a dozen of the other Somalis, and Chanka as well, have been guarding an exit that is at the farther end of the valley. My father sent them there because he feared that Tib Mohammed and his band might discover the place, and try to get in by it. The entrance is very narrow, only a steep and winding passage between the cliffs. It would be difficult for the Arabs to break through. But they may do so if they should find the path. I have been afraid of that, and have been hoping that some day you would come with your safari, and be here to help us if there should be another attack. Every day I have climbed to the top of the cliffs by a rugged path and looked to the south, and I was there this evening when you appeared from the forest. I was glad to see you, though it was a disappointment that you didn't have your armed porters with you. And now I will tell you of my father, Dick. It was two weeks ago, soon after the fight at the pool, that he was taken ill. It came on gradually, and he hasn't improved a bit. He is worse, if anything. He has been growing weaker and weaker. He has been lying in a sort of a stupor most of the time, and now and again his mind wanders. It is a strange illness. I have no idea what is the matter with him. He doesn't know himself, and neither does Mr. Taverner. I am so worried. Oh, if— if he should—"

Lorna Ferguson's voice faltered. Her lip quivered, and her blue eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, if he should die!" she half sobbed. "It would break my heart!"

"I guess he won't," said Dick. "It must be a low fever of some kind that's wrong with him. Haven't you a supply of drugs in the house?"

"Yes, there is a medicine-case. Mr. Taverner has tried most of the remedies, but they haven't done any good."

"Well, Miss Lorna, I'm a bit of a doctor myself, as it happens. I have studied medicine, and I haven't forgotten what I learned. Perhaps I can do something for your father."

"I wonder if you can, Dick! Oh, I hope so! You must try. Come, you shall see him."

It was cheering to the girl to know that the young American had a knowledge of medicine. She was in brighter spirits, the shadow gone from her face, as she led her companions on. As they were striking diagonally across the valley, amongst the trees and through the grassy glades, the gleam of the sun faded from the horizon, and darkness fell swiftly, as it does in the tropics. They had not far to go. The house loomed nearer to them out of the purple dusk, bulking against the high precipice at the rear of it, and as they approached lights shone at several of the windows.

"Eas, this is indeed a very fine kraal!" said the Hottentot.

It was like a dream to Alan, and Dick had the same feeling. By a gate they entered a trimly-kept garden, where beds of flowers

were in bloom, and went up a gravelled path to the open door of the red dwelling. With its crude but attractive architecture, and its window-slits set back in embrasures of the masonry, it bore a resemblance to Tudor buildings that have survived in England.

"I can almost believe I'm in America," Dick remarked. "Some of our New York millionaires have erected places like this along the Hudson."

"It's wonderful, considering that we're in the heart of Africa," Alan replied. "I am quite prepared to see a garage, and a couple of cars, and a chauffeur in livery."

The garden, stretching round to both sides, was flanked right and left by outbuildings and quarters for the Somalis; and beyond them were patches of cultivated ground, where grew fruits, and vegetables, and grains. Having passed into a wide hall, furnished with benches and rugs, the lads had glimpses of adjoining rooms, in which were teakwood chairs and tables, a couch, shelves filled with books, and some framed engravings. Lorna Ferguson disappeared, and came back with a Somali servant.

"Macuma will take care of your Hottentot," she said. "He will show him where he is to sleep, and will give him food and drink."

Jan went off with the native, somewhat reluctantly, and Dick put a hesitating question:

"Is Mr. Taverner with your father, Miss Lorna?"

"No; I have inquired," the girl answered. "He is at the other end of the valley, at the camp where Chanka and the Somalis are guarding the secret entrance."

With that, bidding the lads follow her, she quietly ascended the staircase that rose from the hall, and at the top of it led the way into a bedchamber that was comfortably furnished and lighted by a shaded lamp. The floor was covered with matting, and there were white curtains and mosquito-netting at the windows. On a table were magazines and English illustrated journals, and on a shelf and in a small cabinet that hung from the wall close to it were a number of bottles of drugs. Stretched on the bed, beneath a quilt, lay Robert Ferguson, a handsome man of middle age, with a yellow beard and moustache. His features were pale and drawn, and in his eyes, which were half closed, was a dull, vacant stare. It was a fateful moment for Alan. His heart was beating fast. Stepping ahead of his companions, he stood by the bedside, and for a few seconds looked intently down at the sick man. Then he suddenly stiffened as if to a shock, and by a hard effort he stifled an exclamation on his lips. The colour ebbed from his cheeks, and he drew a deep breath. It was only for an instant that he could not control his emotion. He moved back a little, and glanced calmly at Dick and Lorna, who had not observed his brief agitation.

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"Father!" the girl said, in a low tone. Robert Ferguson turned his head. His fingers plucked nervously at the coverlet, and his lips twitched. There was but a feeble glimmer of intelligence in his eyes. They rested on his daughter, and wandered to the two lads.

"Who are they?" he asked in a whisper.

"The young American I told you of," Lorna replied, "and his English friend, Alan Carne."

"Yes, I remember. What name was that? Carne—Carne?"

"Alan Carne and Richard Selby, father. They have come to the valley. Won't you speak to them?"

"They—they are welcome, dear. Tell them that—"

Robert Ferguson's voice faltered. His eyelids drooped, and he sank into a stupor again, with a weary sigh.

The girl shook her head sadly.

"He is usually like that," she said. "It is very seldom that he has lucid intervals, and they don't last long. I fear he is a little weaker to-day. Oh, Dick, do you think you can—" She stopped abruptly at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. "It is Mr. Taverner. He has returned."

A tall, lean man, with bronzed features and a black moustache, came into the bed-chamber. He gazed steadily at the young strangers, who were as cool and self-possessed as he was, though they knew that they were in the presence of the villain who had hounded John Hammond to death, and had instigated the Bajangas to attack their safari. He showed no apprehension, not a trace of discomposure.

"So your friends have arrived, Lorna," he said. "I heard from Macuma that they were here. It must have been difficult for them to find their way to the—". He paused to shake hands with the lads. "I am glad to see you, and I trust you will enjoy your stay. I doubt if you will, though. Danger threatens us from the Arab slavers, as Miss Ferguson may have told you. And her father's illness is another source of anxiety."

All trace of veiled enmity was concealed. By hard efforts Dick and Alan conversed calmly with Ralph Taverner, who questioned them about their journey, and was curious to know how they had got safely through the country of the ferocious Bajangas; and then, with a glance at the sick man, he left the room. His departure was an obvious relief to Lorna. Dick looked after him, and when he had seen him descend the stairs he examined the bottles that were in the cabinet and on the shelf.

"There is a good assortment here, Miss Lorna," he said. "I suppose Mr. Taverner has been giving your father plenty of quinine?"

"Yes, in large and regular doses," the girl replied.

"And other drugs as well?"

"Several others, Dick. He has been using the remedies which my father mentioned himself before he got worse and lost interest in

everything. But Mr. Taverner isn't a doctor, and you are. I shall have more faith in your treatment."

"I'm not a qualified doctor, Miss Lorna. I know a lot about medicine, however. I haven't forgotten what I learned."

Alan had turned to a window to hide a wave of emotion that had gripped him again, and with dim eyes, and a choking lump in his throat, he was staring out into the darkness of the night.

Lorna was talking to Dick.

"I'll have more faith in you," she repeated. "I have felt so helpless, so lonely. It has always been a lonely life for me, with no friend except my father—no companion of nearly my own age. I have often wished that I had a brother to care for."

Alan swung half round, his arms quivering, impetuous words on his lips. He checked them, and turned again to the window. Dick was at the bedside, closely scrutinising Robert Ferguson, testing his heart and his pulse. He lifted one of his eyelids and gazed at the pupil.

"Dilation?" he muttered. "I can't be sure."

The girl glided over to him, and touched his shoulder. "What do you think?" she whispered. "Is he very bad?"

Dick drew her away from the bed.

"Oh, no; I guess there isn't much to worry about," he said. "But it's a queer sort of a case. It isn't an ordinary fever, and it isn't beri-beri, as the natives call the sleeping-sickness disease. There are symptoms which—" He broke off, and opened a magazine that was on the table, then looked the girl straight in the eyes. "You told me that night in Tib Mohammed's camp that you were afraid Ralph Taverner was going to ask you to be his wife. Has he done so?"

"Yes, he did," Lorna replied, flushing hotly. "And I refused, of course. I said I could never, never think of marrying him. At that moment my father came into the room, and when Mr. Taverner appealed to him, he told him that I was old enough to choose for myself, and that he would not try to influence me in one way or the other."

"How did Ralph Taverner take it? Was he hard hit?"

"He seemed to be angry, Dick, but he didn't say anything. He gave me an ugly look, and walked off."

"Was that after your father was taken ill? Or was it before?"

"It was about a week before, I remember."

"Has Taverner spoken to you about marriage since, Miss Lorna?"

"No, not a word."

Alan had been listening to the conversation, and the girl appeared to be puzzled by the questions that had been put to her. Dick was reflectively scanning the collection of drugs. The suspicion that had crept into his mind was fading. He nodded cheerfully.

"You leave it to me, Miss Lorna, and don't worry," he said. "I guess Dr. Selby will soon have your father on his feet again."

(Continued overleaf.)

"Oh, Dick, I'll be grateful to you as long as you live if you'll cure him!" Lorna exclaimed, her face brightening. "And you make me believe you will!" She glanced at a clock that was on the mantel. "It won't be long until supper is ready. Come, I will take you to your room. You will find hot water there. I told Macuma to see to that."

It was a large apartment at one end of the house, furnished like Mr. Ferguson's chamber and containing two small beds, to which the lads followed the girl. She left them there, and with curious emotions they gazed around them by the light of a pink-shaded lamp. Dick pointed to a table.

"It's wonderful!" he declared. "The Illustrated London News, McClure's Magazine, and a copy of The Times! Brought up from the coast! And only a few months old, I dare say! By George, Carne, I can't believe that we are in the wild heart of—"

"Listen!" Alan interrupted.

Through an open window-slit floated the sounds of a Central African night. A hyena howled. From the forest beyond the Bana the roar of a lion boomed on the night air. The white African stars burned in a violet sky. The breeze that swam into the room was laden with the heavy scent of tropical flowers. The illusion was shattered. The lads were in wildest Africa, encompassed by perils, under the same roof as a man they knew to be an atrocious scoundrel. Alan looked in perplexity at his friend.

"I say, Selby, what do you think is wrong with Robert Ferguson?" he asked.

"I don't know," Dick gravely replied. "I wish I did."

"You've got a queer idea of some sort in your head, I am sure."

"Perhaps I have, Carne. I'll wait and see. We're in the thick of things here, what with Mr. Ferguson's illness and the danger from Tib Mohammed and the Bajangas, and that villain Taverner in love with pretty Lorna. But I dare say all will come right in the end."

"Ralph Taverner had better be careful, Selby, or he'll have me to reckon with. If he says another word to that girl about marriage I'll—"

Alan paused, his eyes wrathful, and Dick glanced at him in surprise. They washed in hot water, made themselves as presentable as possible, and descended the stairs. And again the sense of illusion laid hold of them when they sat down to supper, with Lorna and Ralph Taverner, in a dining-room that might have been in a London dwelling. The table shone with creamy linen, sparkled with silver and glass, and was decorated with flowers. And a Somali, in a white cap and apron, like a Hindoo chef, was in attendance.

"Clear soup or thick, Carne?" whispered Dick, nudging him in the ribs.

The girl heard him, and laughed.

"You can have either," she said.

They had their choice, with fish from the Bana to follow, and antelope steaks, and black coffee and cigarettes. And while they ate and drank and chatted, the lions roared at intervals in the distant forest.

(To be continued.)

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