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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

NEWS OF THE LOST ONES!

"**R**OTTEN!" said Jack Grey despondently.

"That's not the word for it," declared Owon major.

"Whacked to the wide by the River House chaps! Why, last season they couldn't hold a candle to us—our cricket was absolutely top-hole."

"And this year we're simply overwhelmed," said Clapson. "First, Bannington Grammar School, then Holmford, then the River House! We haven't won a match yet—or come within miles of winning one!"

The little group of juniors was collected about the gateway which led from the playing fields into the Triangle at St. Frank's. It was a delightful May evening—warm, sunny, and thoroughly enjoyable, and it was clear, from the juniors' conversation, that a cricket match had just come to an end. It was also clear that the match had not been extremely successful.

St. Frank's was looking very picturesque and charming in the bright evening sunlight, and with the trees proud in their glorious green summer mantles of foliage. From Big Side came the "clack" of bat meeting ball. The Sixth Formers were busy at practice, in readiness for an important fixture at the week-end.

The Triangle did not seem quite so well populated as usual. And the Remove fellows who were knocking about

were rather quiet, and certainly much better behaved than had been general during the last term.

"Yes, whacked to the wide!" said Armstrong disgustedly. "As skipper of the Remove, you ought to do something, Grey. You can't let the eleven go all to pieces. We shan't win a match—"

"My dear chap, it's no good talking like that," interrupted Grey. "I've done my best, but I can't do impossibilities. Everybody in the eleven is trying to do well, but they're not up to the old standard. I know I'm Remove skipper, and the responsibility rests with me, I suppose."

"Of course it does!" declared Griffith. "The fact is, you ain't half such a good skipper as Nipper used to be—"

"Don't talk about Nipper!" interrupted Grey quietly. "I'm absolutely no good compared to Nipper. He seemed to have a knack of leadership which no other chap can get hold of. But it always makes me feel rotten when we talk about Nipper and those other poor chaps."

"All our best fellows!" muttered Somerton gravely. "Nipper, Tregellis-West, Pitt, De Valerie, Christy—all of them, in fact. I can't believe that they'll never come back again. It's—it's too awful!"

A silence fell upon the juniors.

They were always saying that they would not refer to the subject—that they

would taboo it completely; but every day somebody or other would refer to the matter, and then the fellows would go over all the facts once more, for the thousandth time. It had an irresistible attraction.

"It's no good talking," said Clapson. "They're gone, and we shall never see them again. That's as certain as the sun's shining."

"Of course it is," agreed Jack Grey gruffly. "For goodness' sake chuck it! I can't stand it."

"Oh, I don't see that it matters," said Armstrong. "It can't do any harm, can it? Sixteen of 'em—just think of it! All the best chaps out of the Remove—and Nelson Lee as well!"

"It's simply ghastly," said Griffith. "And here have we been all this term without a Housemaster. Old Crowell's been doing his best, but he's not like Mr. Lee. How we shall get on next term is more than I can imagine."

"But can you realise that all those chaps are dead?" asked Clapson. "Doesn't it seem horrible——"

"Oh, we all know it's horrible, and it won't do any good talking about it," interrupted Grey. "The best fellows in the Remove; most decent chaps. The best footballers, the best cricketers, the best everything! The Remove is simply a skeleton now, and a kind of gloom has settled over the whole school."

"You're just about right," said Griffith. "Wouldn't it be ripping if one or two of 'em turned up——"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" snapped Somerton gruffly. "How can they turn up? We know for a fact that they were all lost in that airship. We saw it start, and we saw the accident, too. The last glimpse we had was when the airship shot upwards into the clouds."

"And then it drifted right across Europe to the Adriatic," said Owen major. "All sorts of reports came in that the wreckage had been found——"

"That's just my argument," interrupted Griffith. "The wreckage was found, but no bodies! And isn't it possible that two or three of the poor chaps were saved?"

"No, it's not possible!"

"Of course it isn't!"

"Dry up, Griffy!"

"Rats!" said Griffith. "I was reading a book only last week. Some chaps were shipwrecked, and everybody thought they'd gone down. But they

turned up years afterwards, after having been on an uninhabited island all the time. How do we know that some of our chaps didn't get on an island——"

"Oh, do be sensible!" put in Armstrong. "I read that book, too. The scene was in the Pacific, where there are tons of islands. But the Adriatic is in Europe; there ain't any uninhabited islands there! No, my son, it's no good hoping like that. The poor chaps have gone, and they'll never come back."

"Good old Handy!" said Jack Grey. "What a ripping chap he was—a bit of a fathead, sometimes, but one of the very best!"

"And Trogellis-West, too!" said Doyle. "For all his dandy ways, he was as good as gold. And Nipper! We only realise what a ripping leader he was now. Things have been as dead as doornails this term!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake shut up!" said Somerton. "There's no need to continue the subject any longer."

Once again the juniors fell silent. Weeks had passed without a word of news coming about the missing members of the Remove. What news could come?

Just after the Easter holidays St. Frank's had reassembled, minus the sixteen fellows who were missing, and minus Nelson Lee. They were dead—all of them. They had gone down to the bottom of the sea, in the cabins of the ill-fated airship, Suffolk Queen. Of this there was not the slightest doubt.

And now it was getting on towards Whitsuntide; the short term, in fact, was coming to an end. If any of the fellows had had any hope to begin with, that hope had died completely away.

It was simply ridiculous to think of anything of that nature. The airship had dropped into the sea, and not a single member of its crew had been seen since.

The juniors broke off after a while, and strolled towards the Ancient House and College House. Jack Grey and Somerton went together, for they had chummed up a great deal just recently. Somerton had lost his study mate, De Valerie, and Grey had lost his own bosom chum, Reginald Pitt.

They were now both in Study M, leaving Study E in the sole possession of Timothy Tucker. And the two juniors were silent and thoughtful as

they mounted the steps of the Ancient House.

And just then there came the tinkle of a bicycle bell from the gateway. The two juniors looked round, and saw a telegraph boy dismounting. The boy was looking rather excited, and he was grinning.

"What's the matter with him, I wonder?" said Grey.

They turned and went down the steps once more. And they found the telegraph boy pulling out of his wallet a gigantic sheaf of telegrams. There must have been at least twenty or more.

"Great Scott!" said Grey. "What's all this?"

"Blessed if I know, young gent," grinned the messenger. "They all come at once, and there was strict instructions to deliver them all at once. There's one for you, Master Grey, and one for you, Master Somerton."

"By Jingo!" said Somerton. "One for me?"

"Yes, young gent; and they're furrin telegrams, too," said the messenger boy. "I never seed such a lot in all my life—and all come from the same place."

"You seem to know a lot about it," said Grey. "Let's have a look at mine!"

A crowd of juniors had collected round now, and Grey took his telegram quickly as it was handed to him. Somerton waited impatiently for his. Grey tore open the flap, and removed the flimsy sheet of pinky white paper.

Then he commenced to read. As he did so his face went pale, the other juniors regarding him with alarm and concern. The colour flooded back into Grey's cheeks until they were red and flaming, and his eyes literally blazed with excitement.

"It's—it's impossible!" he shouted hoarsely. "It can't be true!"

"What can't be true, you ass?"

"What does the telegram say?"

"Let's hear it, you fathead!"

"But—but it must be a hoax—a cruel, rotten hoax!" shouted Grey furiously.

"Oh, what a contemptible trick! But—but I wonder if—if it's really true? There's more news coming later——"

"Grab him!" snorted Clapson. "We ain't going to stand this! He's suddenly gone off his rocker!"

"Where's that blessed wire of mine?" demanded Somerton.

"I'm a-looking for it, young gent!" gasped the messenger.

Grey gazed round him, his eyes blazing.

"I don't know whether it's true, you chaps, but if it is I think I shall go dotty!" he said huskily. "This wire is—is from Nipper——"

"What?"

"From—from Nipper!"

"Good heavens!"

"But—but it can't be!"

"Impossible!"

"It's from Nipper—at least, so it says!" shouted Grey, above the excited turmoil. "Just listen—I'll read it out: 'Hotel Metropole, Trieste. Just breaking news gently. Every one of us all serene and coming home fastest route. Expect us at St. Frank's within week. Whole party intact and merry.—Nipper.'"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"It—it must be a hoax!"

"They're all dead—we know it——"

"Rot!" roared Griffiths excitedly. "What did I tell you? They must have been saved, or something of that kind——"

"My wire's just the same!" shouted Somerton. "The same words exactly. Who are the other telegrams for?"

"Oh, for a lot o' you young gents, sir," said the telegraph boy. "And there's one for the 'Eadmaster, and one for Mr. Crowell——"

"Why, you young ass, buzz off and deliver them!" interrupted Grey. "Fancy waiting here and giving us our wires before the Head gets his!"

The telegraph messenger disappeared, but not before he had hastily delivered a good many telegrams for other Remove fellows. And every one proved to be the same—they had all been dispatched from Trieste, and they all had the same wording.

"Hurrah—hurrah!"

"They're saved! They're coming home!"

The juniors simply yelled themselves hoarse; they had never been so excited in all their lives. It was almost more than they could believe. But how could these telegrams be a hoax? Who would go to the great expense of such a thing? And who would perform such a cruel, inhuman act?

No, it must be true; that was the only possible explanation.

And the news spread like wildfire.

Very soon the Triangle became a roaring, yelling mass of juniors—dancing, shouting, singing, and generally behaving as though they had taken leave of their senses.

In the midst of it all, Fenton, of the Sixth, came running over from Big Side. His face was blank with amazement as he surveyed the scene. Fenton was captain of the school, and he had never before witnessed such an affair as this.

"What's the matter, boys?" he shouted. "Steady on—steady on! Have you kids all gone mad?"

A number of juniors came dancing round Fenton. They swept him up and bore him away with them across the Triangle. They were so excited that they hardly knew what they were doing.

"Good heavens!" gasped Fenton, struggling in vain. "What the—what the deuce! Confound it! What's the idea of— Let me down, you young idiots!"

But the juniors took no heed of his words; the school captain was rushed right across the Triangle and then deposited on the Ancient House steps. He was somewhat dishevelled, and decidedly red in the face.

"You young sweeps!" he panted. "You'll all take fifty lines for this—"

"Rats!" shouted Owen major. "Haven't you heard the news, Fenton?"

"We're not taking any lines to-day!"

"Rather not!"

"Why don't you cheer, Fenny?" demanded Grey. "It's the finest news we've heard in all our lives!"

"When you youngsters can control yourselves, perhaps you will explain what all this means?" demanded Fenton grimly. "What's the excitement about? What on earth is the reason for all this shouting and tomfoolery?"

"They're saved, Fenny!"

"They're all coming home!"

"Nipper and all the rest!"

Fenton started.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply. "Nipper—all the rest? What rubbish are you talking now? Who's been spreading this ridiculous story? You know as well as I do that all those poor chaps were killed—"

"By Jingo, he doesn't know!" interrupted Singleton. "We all thought the same, Fenny; but we've had telegrams—cablegrams. Nipper and the rest and

Mr. Lee are all safe and sound, and they're coming home as fast as they can travel!"

Edgar Fenton flushed deeply with excitement.

"Is this true?" he asked huskily.

"Yes—honour bright!"

"But—but I can hardly believe it!" said the school captain. "If it is true, I don't wonder at you kids making all this noise; in fact, you can yell to your heart's content, and I'll join you. But how do you know for certain that—"

"Look at this!" shouted Grey, thrusting his telegram in front of Fenton.

Fenton took the slip of paper with fingers that shook a trifle, and he read through the message with eager interest. And when he looked up there was a light of keen relief and delight in his face.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "It's the most amazing thing I've ever heard of! And we thought they were all dead! Weeks and weeks ago it happened, and we didn't hear a word—there wasn't a trace. And now we learn that they're coming home—the whole party, intact!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Nipper!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hurrah!"

The juniors were so excited they simply let themselves go, and by this time the news had spread throughout the school. Dr. Stafford, in his study, was pacing up and down with glittering eyes. Mr. Stockdale was there, Mr. Crowell, and one or two other masters. They were all looking flushed.

"Amazing—positively amazing!" exclaimed the Head. "I need not tell you, gentlemen, how thankful I am. What wonderful news! What glorious pictures it opens up. All these boys are safe, and their parents and relatives by this time have learned the truth. Where there was sadness and sorrow yesterday, there will be joy to-day. It is the most momentous day that I can remember."

Mr. Stockdale nodded.

"The whole thing is so extraordinary, sir, that I find it difficult to believe that the news can be true!" he exclaimed. "I cannot help thinking that there must be some mistake—"

"That is impossible, Mr. Stockdale," interrupted the Head. "I have here a long telegram from Mr. Lee—quite a detailed statement. It appears that the whole party was detained in Mordania

—a country which, as you know, has been the scene of much strife in recent weeks. Mr. Lee and his party were captured by brigands, and had no opportunity of communicating with England. That which was inexplicable to us has now become clear. No, my dear sir, there is no need to doubt the accuracy of this information—it is true, thank Heaven!”

“I shall find it difficult to consume my impatience for further news,” said Mr. Crowell. “I am anxious to hear further details—to know more. Dear me! The boys must be going mad, I think. They are creating an appalling din outside.”

The Head smiled.

“Let them shout,” he said. “I like to hear it. With such news as this to hand it would be impossible to keep the boys quiet. Indeed, I have already come to a decision. Later on this evening I shall address the school, and I shall inform the boys that to-morrow will be a full day’s holiday, in honour of this wonderful occasion.”

“An excellent suggestion, sir,” said Mr. Stockdale approvingly. “I had something of the same kind in mind, but I was somewhat afraid to mention it. The boys will be very excited to-morrow, and work, I fear, would be something of a farce. It will be far better to let them exhaust their high spirits.”

In the servants’ quarters the same excitement was noticeable. It had been taken for granted that all the missing boys were dead, and now this news, coming so suddenly, sent the wave of excitement surging throughout the entire school.

Even the Sixth Form, usually so staid and sedate, completely forgot its dignity, and the unusual spectacle of lordly Sixth Formers yelling in the Triangle, and dancing about like wild dervishes, was presented.

And then came something fresh.

Two seniors arrived from Bannington—they were Chambers and Bryant, of the Fifth, and they came on their bicycles. They had been away from St. Frank’s at the time of the disclosure, and they fondly imagined that the school knew nothing. And they rode from Bannington as they had never ridden before, bringing the great news with them.

For, just before leaving the town, they

had been attracted by an excited newsboy dashing down the High Street with a great bundle of evening papers, which he had just collected from the guard’s van of the London express.

It was a six-thirty edition of the “Evening News.” Chambers and Bryant did not usually buy newspapers, but this boy was yelling so much, and he was selling so many copies, that it became clear that something unusual was in the wind. The two Fifth Formers stopped just as they were about to mount their bicycles.

“What’s the excitement about?” said Chambers wondering.

“Oh, nothing much—racing, perhaps,” replied Bryant. “Or perhaps the Sinn Feiners have been up to more of their tricks——”

“Listen!” interrupted the other senior sharply.

“Late news—London paper!” the boy was yelling. “St. Frank’s party saved! Great sensation! Late news!”

Chambers and Bryant looked at one another, but spoke no word. Simultaneously they flung their bicycles down in the gutter, and dashed up the High Street to the newsboy. They bought two papers, scanned the front pages eagerly, and their startled gaze beheld the glaring headlines:

“MR. NELSON LEE AND LORD DORRIMORE SAVED!”

“SIXTEEN LOST SCHOOLBOYS COMING HOME!”

“EXTRAORDINARY STORY.”

Chambers and Bryant stared at one another with startled eyes, and with faces which were deeply flushed with excitement.

“Good heavens!” gasped Chambers. “We—we must be dreaming! Mr. Lee saved—all those chaps coming back! It’s impossible.”

Their hands shook so much that they could hardly read the reports; but, when they had read them, they were quite convinced as to the authenticity of the news, and they were fairly off their heads with excitement.

Bannington was in a very similar condition.

People were standing at shop doors in groups, and they were all talking excitedly together. St. Frank’s was near at hand, and the whole town had been horror-struck when the news first arrived

that sixteen junior schoolboys had perished in the wreck of the Suffolk Queen.

And this news, coming so unexpectedly, took the breath out of everybody. It was hardly surprising that a sensation was caused—a sensation not merely confined to the local district, but which spread throughout England.

Chambers and Bryant pedalled for St. Frank's as they had never pedalled before. They fairly made their bicycles hum. They wanted to be first in with the startling news. They hardly had time for conversation as they rode along, but they managed to have a word or two while gliding down a long hill.

"What do you think of it, eh?" said Chambers, with gleaming eyes. "What price this for a stunner? After we'd given them all up, too! My dear chap, this is about the biggest sensation I've ever heard of!"

"You bet!" panted Bryant. "Remember that affair when Hawker was picked up in mid-Atlantic?"

"Rather!"

"Well, this is something of the same sort," said Bryant. "Hawker was given up for lost when he tried the Atlantic flight, and because nothing was heard of him for about a week it was taken for granted that he'd pegged out. Then he turned up without warning, and London went mad. Remember how he was mobbed, and all the rest of it?"

"Of course, you ass!" said Chambers. "This case is even more exciting. There were about twenty-five souls on board that airship, and it was believed that they all perished. That was weeks ago; and now, without any warning, we get the news that they have all been saved and are coming home! If London went mad over Hawker, what will it do when the St. Frank's chaps turn up?"

"Goodness knows!" said Bryant.

They pedalled on again, and were soon shooting through Belton, and up the long slope to the school. They were pretty nearly winded when they turned their bicycles into the Triangle, and they literally fell off their machines.

But then they experienced pangs of great disappointment.

The Triangle was like a madhouse. Juniors were dancing about, yelling, and everything was in a hopeless state of excited confusion. Even a great many seniors were throwing dignity to the

winds and joining in the general lapse from sanity.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" gasped Chambers. "We're late; they know already!"

It was the only conclusion that the seniors could come to; nothing else could have caused such intense excitement at the school. Chambers and Bryant had been spotted, and the surging crowd came round them.

"Heard the news, you chaps?" roared Phillips, of the Fifth. "You've missed something, I can tell you. All those chaps with Mr. Lee——"

"Oh, dry up!" panted Chambers. "We know all about it. Did you get a paper, too?"

"Paper?" said Phillips. "Why, is it in the papers already?"

The two copies of the "Evening News" were dragged from the new arrivals, and there was a bit of a fight for the possession of them. At last, when the fellows had partially recovered their senses, it was decided that somebody should read aloud the reports so that the others could hear.

It was a most excellent arrangement, but, unfortunately, it was a farce. Chambers read out the news, but he was about the only fellow who heard his own voice. It was positively impossible to keep the crowd quiet. However, Chambers did his best.

"The reports aren't very long!" he shouted. "But they give a lot of information, and most of them come from Trieste. Listen to this one: 'Considerable interest has been occasioned here by the sudden arrival of a party of Englishmen and boys. They number twenty-five, including Mr. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore. It is understood that they are the survivors of the ill-fated airship, Suffolk Queen, which was wrecked in the Adriatic Sea some weeks ago. All on board were supposed to have perished. Happily, however, the entire party has now turned up, intact and unharmed. It is believed that they managed to get ashore on the coast of Mordania, where, after penetrating into the hills, they were captured by Kol Palak's brigand band, and held prisoners. Further details are not yet to hand, but it is expected that the full story will be available within a day or two.'"

Chambers ceased reading.

"What do you think of that?" he ex-

claimed excitedly. "Captured by brigands, and held prisoners! It seems almost too queer to be true! Down below here there's an interview with Mr. Lee—only a short one, but I'll read it out. Listen!"

Chambers was so excited that he was quite unaware of the fact that nobody was paying any attention, and he proceeded to read the interview with Mr. Nelson Lee, which ran in the following strain:

"This is how it goes," shouted Chambers. "Our representative was fortunate enough to secure a brief interview with Mr. Nelson Lee, the world-famous crime investigator, who is also a Housemaster at St. Frank's College. Mr. Lee was quite cheerful, and apparently in the best of health. Our representative asked him to tell the story of what had actually occurred, but Mr. Lee was disinclined to go into a lengthy statement. However, he gave us the following information: 'I can only say that our whole party is intact,' said Mr. Nelson Lee. 'We have been through many extraordinary adventures in Mordania, and it is my intention to give the details in full when I have everything prepared. But, at the moment, I am afraid I cannot say much more, beyond the fact that the schoolboys in our party have met with no mishaps, and have come through their trying ordeal unscathed and in perfect health. It is our intention to take the direct route overland to Paris, and thence we shall travel without delay straight to London.' Our correspondent, unfortunately, could not induce Mr. Lee to say anything further."

Chambers, by this time, was just beginning to realise that he was talking for his own benefit. He could scarcely hear his own voice, so it dawned upon him that his efforts were quite in vain. He suddenly jerked the paper down, and glared round him.

"You noisy young asses!" he roared. "Haven't you been listening to me?"

"Gimme that paper, Chambers!" shouted Owen major, seizing his opportunity, and snatching the newspaper out of the Fifth Form's hand. "Thanks awfully, old son!"

Chambers bellowed.

"You—you young rotter!" he howled. "Who told you to—"

But the rest of his sentence was drowned. Owen major dashed across the

Triangle with the newspaper, and was soon the centre of an excited throng. By this time, of course, there was no longer any doubt in anybody's mind. The news was true—amazing and wonderful, but quite true.

It was not until nearly supper-time that the first part of the excitement was over and a kind of suppressed peace existed at St. Frank's. It was only with difficulty that the juniors could keep themselves calm.

And before bed-time arrived, the Headmaster addressed the whole school. His speech was not a very long one, but he expressed in a few well-chosen sentences the gratitude they all felt that Providence had enabled the missing ones to come through their astonishing adventures unharmed.

"I may tell you, boys, that I have had a long telegram from Mr. Lee," went on the Head.

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

It was some moments before the din subsided.

"Mr. Lee informs me that he is bringing all the boys back to England by the quickest possible route," went on the Head. "They will, of course, go to their own homes at first, but I think we may be quite certain that they will all be here, at St. Frank's, within a week."

"Hurrah!"

"We'll give them a ripping welcome, sir."

"Rather!"

"I can go into no close details just now," went on the Head, "but it appears that the long silence has been due to the fact that Mr. Lee and his party were captured by Mordanian brigands. Of course, you will hear the full story when the boys return. And I have decided that to-morrow shall be a whole holiday—"

The rest of the Head's sentence was completely drowned. The cheering was deafening, and all the fellows streamed out of the big hall, hardly knowing whether they were on their heads or their heels. This was certainly the most wonderful day they had ever experienced.

But there would be a more wonderful day when the missing ones returned!

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN WITH THE BANDAGE.

THE cross-Channel boat was steaming along serenely.

Overhead the sun was shining with the full warmth of summer, although

the month was May. The sea was perfectly calm and smooth, and the steamer had practically no motion whatever. A more perfect day for the crossing could not be imagined.

On one of the decks I was leaning against the rail, with Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West near by. We were rather bronzed, in perfect health, and somewhat excited. For there, away in the distance, we could clearly see the white cliffs of Dover.

"My hat!" said Watson. "Isn't it ripping to see England again?"

"Rather, begad!" said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "It gives a chap quite a thrill—it does, really! After all our adventures and thrillin' escapes, it's frightfully buckin' to see the Old Country again. Not many days ago I was beginnin' to think that we should never come home any more."

I grinned.

"It's rather wonderful the way we scraped through everything—eh?" I said. "There were certainly times when it seemed likely that we should end our innocent young lives up in the mountains of Mordania. But here we are, nearly on British shores, safe and sound, and as fit as fiddles."

"But I must say that our appearance is truly shockin'!" exclaimed Sir Montie, sadly shaking his head. "I really don't know how I shall have the nerve to show myself on the quay at Dover. My first task will certainly be to visit an outfitter's in the town—"

"Rats!" I interrupted. "We shall get straight in the train, my son, and you'll have to wait until we get to London before thinking about clobber."

"But, my dear old fellow, I vigorously protest!" interrupted Sir Montie. "I positively refuse to travel to London in these frightful things!"

Tommy Watson and I chuckled.

"They aren't exactly what we require, but they're not so bad," I said. "And we've lasted so long, we can easily wait until we get to London."

The clothing we were wearing, as a matter of fact, had been purchased in Trieste. We had arrived there, after a somewhat trying journey through the Balkans from Ludari, in a decidedly ragged condition, and our first thought had been to procure ourselves complete new outfits.

We had done so, and most of the fellows were quite satisfied. The fit was not all

that could be desired, and the styles were simply atrocious. The noble Sir Montie nearly cried when he arrayed himself in his own suit. But it was certainly an improvement upon the rags and tatters which he had discarded.

And, after all, what did it matter? When we arrived in London we could easily supply ourselves with good clothing. For the moment we did not care. We were just about to set foot on British shores again, and we should not care much if we were dressed in Mordanian national costume.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were strolling together on the deck, chatting. Dorrie was in high spirits, but rather regretful that our adventures were at an end. He thrived on adventures and perils, and the prospect of returning to England did not please him as it pleased us.

Our trip across Europe had been one that we should long remember. For news travelled a great deal faster than we did, and all along the route we were inspected with much curiosity, and heartily welcomed, for the story of our adventures was known everywhere, and we knew what it was like to be famous.

Handforth, of course, revelled in it all. He was extremely fond of the limelight, and suddenly to find himself a person of renown was just the kind of experience he enjoyed. He was particularly hot upon granting interviews. Already he had told the story to a dozen foreign reporters, and, consequently, extremely flowery accounts of our adventures were being circulated throughout Europe. Handforth was not very particular in regard to accurate details.

At the present moment he was having a little argument with Church and McClure, some little way up the deck. This, of course, was not surprising. For Handforth and Co. to be at peace with one another for a solid hour was quite out of the common. They were generally arguing from morning till night, and the subjects of their arguments were trifles which would not have worried any other juniors.

"Well, guv'nor, we're not far off now!" I said cheerfully, as Nelson Lee smilingly strolled by. "I wonder what our reception will be like?"

"I tremble to think of it, my lad," laughed Nelson Lee. "It is quite certain that we shall meet with much excitement

in London, and, probably, we shall be mobbed."

"Mobbed!" echoed Handforth, coming near. "What the dickens for, sir? We've done nothing wrong."

"You mistake my meaning, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "We shall be mobbed by the excited crowds. I can assure you that it is no great pleasure to be the heroes of the hour in London. If things are as I anticipate, it is quite likely that we shall need police protection. Our admirers will be so numerous that progress will be very difficult."

"Oh, that's all right, sir!" said Handforth. "After all, we deserve to be feted a bit, don't we? We've been through some wonderful adventures, and it's only right that we should be recognised as people of importance."

While Handforth was speaking I was looking down the promenade deck at two men who had attracted my attention before. They had kept constantly together ever since embarking at Calais. They were very well dressed, tall and scrupulously immaculate. Both men were dark-skinned, with neat, well-trimmed beards and bushy eyebrows. They appeared to be Italians, for I heard them speaking in that language as I happened to pass them. The taller of the pair was evidently suffering from some facial injury, for he wore a bandage which almost completely concealed his countenance. One eye was covered, and the bandage extended downwards to his mouth. On his head he wore a wide-brimmed soft hat.

"I can't quite make those two chaps out, sir," I said, addressing Nelson Lee in a low voice. "Have you noticed them?"

"Yes, my lad, I have," replied Lee. "Italian, apparently, and I see no reason why you should have any suspicions. They have as much right to cross to England as we have. But I think I can imagine what is in your mind."

"Oh, I'm not exactly suspicious, sir—"

"But you think, perhaps, that these men come from Mordania," broke in Nelson Lee. "Such a thing is possible, I will admit; but, on the other hand, there is no reason at all why we should concern ourselves, Nipper."

The gov'nor knew well enough that I was thinking of the Tagossa—that deadly secret society which was now no more, which had been completely smashed up when Kol Palak, the brigand chief, led his

disastrous attack upon the Mordanian capital, Ludari. King Boris and his men had wiped the Tagossa out of existence, Kol Palak had perished, and it seemed that Mordania was destined to be peaceful.

But some of the men of the Tagossa had escaped across the borders, and I knew well enough that these men were filled with hate and bitterness towards those who had brought about Kol Palak's downfall. Without the slightest doubt, we had turned the tide in favour of King Boris. The Tagossa men knew this, and their hatred, accordingly, would be directed against us rather than against King Boris. Whether these brigands would seek revenge remained to be seen, but, somehow, I had an idea in my head that we should not escape their attentions.

I realised that it was most improbable that the two men on the Channel boat were agents of the Tagossa. They were well dressed, well groomed, and apparently gentlemen. The men of the Tagossa we had seen in Mordania were of a very different type. But smart clothes and a general grooming-up effects quite a transformation. Perhaps these two men were not what they seemed.

Handforth and Co. were becoming somewhat heated in their argument, and it seemed that they would shortly be coming to blows. Not far from where they were standing the two foreigners were sitting down in deck-chairs, talking together in low tones.

"For goodness' sake, dry up, Handy!" said Church at last. "What's the good of making all this fuss? Everybody's staring at us—"

"I can't help that!" snorted Handforth. "Do you think I'm going to have you chaps dictating to me? Not likely! Why, you fatheads, if you dare to criticise my methods, I'll knock your giddy heads together!"

"You'd better try it, that's all!" said McClure warmly.

"On second thoughts, I don't think I will!" exclaimed Handforth, with heavy sarcasm. "We don't want the decks littered with splinters!"

Church and McClure glared.

"You—you rotter!" muttered Church. "And I'll repeat what I said before—the way you strut before these reporters is absolutely sickening! And if you try the same game on in London, Handy, we'll jolly well squash you!"

"Hear, hear!" said McClure. "We're not going to have you swanking about, disgracing Study D. Boasting all over the place, and trying to make out that we're super-human beings!"

"All right, you asked for it!" roared Handforth. "Now you'll get it!"

He lunged out at his chums, thoroughly exasperated. One reason for his exasperation was that he realised, in a dim kind of way, that he had actually been swanking. He realised that now, and he did not like being reminded of it.

Church and McClure knew what was coming, and they dodged. McClure escaped, but Church, unfortunately, was a shade too late. Handforth's fist caught him fairly in the chest, and the unfortunate junior sprawled over backwards, and collapsed into an empty deck-chair.

Church and the deck-chair went over together in inextricable confusion. Crash! Almost before Church knew what had happened he collided with one of the chairs upon which sat the bandaged foreigner.

Church clutched helplessly at the air—at anything—in order to save himself from further disaster.

And, as luck would have it, his fingers collided with the foreign gentleman's head with great force. He clutched at the bandage quite unintentionally, and the next second it was jerked off.

At that very moment I was rushing up in order to see what the trouble was about. Nelson Lee and Dorrie were bent upon the same mission.

And then I stopped dead.

The foreigner was picking himself up, his face black with rage. And I saw, to my surprise, that his face was not marred by any injury. His reason for wearing a bandage was quite obvious; he had used it as a hasty disguise!

Shouting out in Italian, he snatched the bandage from the deck and hastily put it in position again. Then he and his companion retreated along the deck, without waiting to receive Church's apologies.

Church picked himself up, gasping.

"You silly ass!" exclaimed Handforth grimly. "What did you want to do that for?"

Church tried to speak, but words failed him; they choked in his throat. It was quite characteristic of Handforth to ask such a question.

Everybody around was chuckling, but I noticed that Nelson Lee's expression

was grim and serious. I touched his sleeve, and he looked round.

"Did you notice that, sir?" I asked softly. "That bandage?"

"Yes, my lad, I did notice it," said Lee. "And, what is more, your suspicions were perfectly justified."

I stared.

"Why, did you recognise the man?" I asked, with intense interest.

"He is Ivan Grezzi," said Nelson Lee, in a low voice. "You have heard the name, Nipper. Kol Palak's principal general. That is the man who was on this deck a moment ago."

"Great Scott!" I muttered.

For some moments neither Nelson Lee nor I spoke. We were thinking of this fresh development, and the revelation which had come about by sheer accident. The removal of that bandage had enabled Nelson Lee to discover that one of the two men was no less a person than Ivan Grezzi.

I had never met this man before, and, consequently, I had not recognised him. But Nelson Lee, as it turned out later, had come face to face with Grezzi during the fighting at Ludari, when Kol Palak had attempted to take the city by storm.

I had not taken part in that battle, the gov'nor considering it advisable for me to remain in safety within the king's palace. I did not see the necessity for this at all, but I had not been able to argue on the point.

Grezzi had not been very prominent during our sojourn in Mordania. But, as a matter of fact, he had played a very important part behind the scenes, so to speak. Kol Palak had been the chief, and he ruled. Grezzi, the chief's right-hand man, generally remained in the background, but he had been a grim force, nevertheless. And now that Kol Palak was dead, Grezzi was apparently determined to make his power felt. He had been compelled to flee from Ludari—from Mordania. His life would not have been worth a cent. there.

"This looks pretty serious, gov'nor," I said. "Why is Grezzi coming over to England? Do you think he is just escaping from his enemies, or do you think there is any significance to be attached to his presence on this boat?"

"It is rather a difficult question to answer, Nipper," replied Lee thoughtfully. "As you say, Grezzi may be simply coming to England for safety. The Tagossa is dead, to all intents and

purposes, and it hardly seems feasible that the few scattered members who have escaped would attempt revenge."

"Of course not!" put in Dorrie easily. "There's nothing to worry about at all. Why, man alive, do you think that I am scared of these ruffians? They may have been all powerful in Mordania, but in England their wings will be clipped. In a land of law and order, they'll find themselves handicapped. And, personally, I don't attach any importance to the matter at all. The very fact that they were on this boat—with us—proves that there's nothin' in the wind."

"I don't quite agree with you, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "Grezzi and his companion may have embarked on this steamer unknowingly—that is to say, they were unaware of our presence on board when they booked their own passages. Seeing us, however, Grezzi thought it advisable to adopt a hasty form of disguise. That fact alone is somewhat ominous, and I shall be strictly on my guard."

None of the other juniors knew anything about the little incident. Even Handforth and Co. did not realise that it had any special significance, and, before long, we were not allowed to think of hardly anything.

For in a very short time the boat arrived at Dover. We half suspected that a lively scene would result, and we were not disappointed. There were cheering crowds on the quay, excited waving of hands and all that kind of thing. We were heroes in the eyes of the general public, and they were giving us a royal welcome.

It was rather a quaint experience for us. On our trip through Europe we had heard a good few details, and we knew that the general public in England had been tremendously interested in our supposed fate. The newspapers had made the very most of the story, and boomed it up, and a big sensation had been caused.

And now that we were returning alive and well, the excitement was ten times greater. We had no time to enjoy the sensation of setting foot on British shores, for we were surrounded and hustled, and nearly mobbed. It was as much as we could do to fight our way to the waiting train.

But we managed it at last, and took our seats, hot, exhausted, and rather flustered. Matters were not greatly im-

proved by the heat of the day, for it was sweltering, and the railway carriages were baking hot.

"Phew!" breathed Pitt. "Such is fame!"

"Begad! I'd rather remain in obscurity!" said Tregellis-West, removing his pince-nez and mopping his brow. "I haven't been able to obtain that new suit I wanted, or—or anything. It's frightfully awkward, you know."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm rather enjoying it, personally. Don't we deserve to be treated like heroes? Haven't we been through startling adventures? It's a pity if the public can't recognise that we're better than they are."

"Oh, don't get swelled head!" growled Church. "After all, what have we done?"

"We've restored King Boris to his throne!" retorted Handforth.

"Why, you silly ass——"

"I'm not going to argue!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "And if you chaps start giving me any of your rot, I'll pitch you out of the train! Didn't we get to Mordania and upset Kol Palak's apple-cart? Didn't we destroy the Tagossa——"

"No, we didn't!" interrupted Church. "Mr. Lee and Lord Dorrimore helped a bit—helped a good deal, in fact. But we chaps were spectators all the time. Nipper did a lot, and without him and Mr. Lee, I don't suppose we should have escaped. But I don't see any reason for you to collar all the glory, Handy."

Handforth glared.

"We were all in this together," he grunted. "Therefore, we share the honours."

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Pitt. "And now the argument's settled, I suppose?"

Our journey up to London was a triumphant one. The newspaper men had everything in hand—they had wired the time of our arrival, and all sorts of details. Consequently, at every stopping place there were crowds of curious people waiting to catch a glimpse of us, as though we were little gods.

And when we arrived at Charing Cross the scene rather staggered us. Tremendous crowds had gathered, and there were hundreds of police doing their best to control the excited throngs. And as our train steamed in, the great station fairly boomed with cheers.

Fortunately the platform was clear, and no members of the public were allowed to pass the barriers, which were strongly guarded. The platform, to be more exact, was clear of strangers, but it was fairly crowded with parents and relatives of the juniors. As we steamed in, I recognised Sir Edward and Lady Handforth, Lady Helen Tregellis-West, and numerous other important people.

The juniors simply fell into the arms of their fathers and mothers and other relatives. It was a wonderful home-coming. It had been believed that they were all dead, and now it seemed that we had returned to the land of the living.

Nelson Lee and I were delighted to find three old friends of ours to meet us—these friends being none other than Sexton Blake and Tinker, and Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

The excitement was intense, and we were all rather bewildered. We were home at last, back in dear old London, and the welcome we received was one which lived in our memories for many a long day.

CHAPTER III.

THE WARNINGS OF DREAD!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST strolled elegantly across the entrance of Victoria Station. He was in full glory, being arrayed in an immaculate Eton suit, spotless linen, and with a shine on his boots which only compared with the super gloss of his topper. Sir Montie was spick and span from head to toe.

"Good old Montie!" I chuckled, as he came up. "Feeling better now, I suppose? More like your old self—eh?"

Tregellis-West beamed.

"Dear old boys, I haven't felt so comfortable for weeks!" he declared, as he shook hands. "At last I am wearing decent clothes again, an' I feel rippin'. Begad! We're goin' back to St. Frank's to-day—"

"Yes, and you were a silly ass to put such clothes on!" interrupted Tommy Watson. "We shall be mobbed no end by the fellows, and you'll look like a scarecrow before we get to school. You mark my words!"

Sir Montie stared at us in dismay.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated. "You don't think that, dear old boys, surely? What a frightful prospect!"

"Well, never mind," I grinned. "I dare say we shall survive."

Two days had elapsed since our arrival in London, and they were days which had been crammed with interest. We had all stayed in London, most of the juniors at their various homes, and Nelson Lee and I at Grays Inn Road.

We had been bombarded with visits from newspaper interviewers and gentlemen of a like character.

The story of our adventures had been told again and again, and the newspapers had been full up with these accounts. We had never credited that we should cause such a huge sensation.

And it was with a feeling of great relief that we now stood upon Victoria Station, waiting for the train which would take us down to St. Frank's. We had plenty of time yet, for the train was not due to start for another half-hour, and it had been arranged that we should all go down together. It would be better, we decided, to arrive at St. Frank's in one bunch.

Half the fellows were on hand, but Handforth and Co., Fatty Little, Christine, and two or three others, had not yet turned up. And even now we were causing a great deal of interest among the general public, for we found ourselves stared at and subjected to a great deal of attention. But we had grown quite accustomed to this sort of thing by now.

"Of course, it's not much good going down to St. Frank's to settle seriously to work," I said. "The Whitsuntide holidays will be here in a week or two, and as soon as we get down we shall come home again. We've practically missed a whole term."

"But I don't think we've forgotten much," said Reginald Pitt. "Dorrie reckoned that we should all be shoved into the Second Form, but that was just his fun. We may be a bit stale, but we shall soon pick up. And next term we shall go on just the same as usual."

"There's the cricket, too," I said. "I got a letter from Grey this morning, and he's full of woes. He's been Remove skipper, you know, but he says that he'll be only too glad to resign in my favour. The Remove has lost every cricket match since the opening of the season, and poor old Grey has been worried out of his life. We've got to alter things, my sons!"

"Rather!" agreed Pitt. "I expect things have been pretty dull at St.

Frank's during our absence; but we'll make up for that. We're going down now to get things ship-shape, so that we shall be all ready for the summer term. Hallo! I think I can spot Handy and two or three others coming along."

Half a dozen juniors appeared, including Handforth and Co., and, after another five minutes had elapsed, the whole party was complete. It was a Wednesday, and we should arrive at St. Frank's during the afternoon. Being a half-holiday, the fellows would not be at work, and it was most probable that we should find a considerable number of juniors waiting at the station.

When we did arrive at Bellton, after a pleasant journey down, we received something like a shock. We had imagined that a fairly large number of fellows would be waiting, but, instead, we found practically the whole school collected on the little platform and outside in the station yard.

And, not only the school, but seventy-five per cent. of the population of Bellton itself. Such an enormous crowd had never before been seen at the tiny station. The St. Frank's boys were not confined to the junior school, but included large numbers of Fifth-Formers and Sixth-Formers.

To add to the crowd, most of the chaps from the River House School were on the scene, as eager and as excited as anybody, and as the train came to a stop we were positively deafened by the rousing cheers which arose.

"My only hat!" muttered Watson. "This has just about done it! If we get in the hands of this mob we shall be in rags and tatters within five minutes."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, aghast.

"Oh, well, we can't help it!" I grinned. "It's the price of fame, my sons. The crowd is enormously enthusiastic, and we can't blame the chaps for giving us a huge welcome. If we get mauled about a bit——"

I could not say anything further, for the train was now at a standstill, and the carriage door had been wrenched open. We were simply hauled on to the platform, and our fists were seized and shaken until we scarcely had any breath left. Our backs were thumped, our collars crumpled, and our toppers completely vanished in the excitement.

Sir Montie managed to keep a smiling face, but inwardly he was filled with

dismay and horror. Two minutes before he had looked like a tailor's model. Now he closely resembled a scarecrow.

We were carried in triumph out of the station shoulder-high. In spite of our protests, we were all seized and "chaired." Nelson Lee did not escape, for he, of course, had come down by the same train. Before he could emerge from his first-class compartment, he was hauled out, and set upon the shoulders of two burly Sixth-Formers.

"You awful bounders!" gasped Grey, when he found a moment to address me. "We thought you'd pegged out—we thought you'd all gone to the bottom with the wreck of that airship. I say, it's ripping to see you again, and to know that you're all safe. We've been as miserable as sin down here this term."

"Sorry, old man!" I gasped. "I'll have a chat with you later on, when the crowd has finished with us. It's quite likely we shall all find it necessary to go to hospital before we get to St. Frank's, but we'll hope for the best."

"Good old Fatty!" roared Owen major. "I'm blessed if he doesn't look bigger than ever!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Fatty Little had just collapsed—or, to be more exact, the juniors who had chaired him had collapsed. They had carried his weight valiantly at first, but it was really more than they could stand, and before the station yard was reached the whole structure, so to speak, tumbled to pieces.

Fatty Little found himself lying on his back, with two or three gasping juniors sprawling over him.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Fatty!"

"Give them a cheer, you chaps!" yelled Grey.

"Hurrah!"

Our progress through the village was riotous. Such a noise had never before been heard in the quiet old High Street of Bellton. And thus we progressed up to the school, accompanied not only by our own fellows, but by half the village, and nearly the whole personnel of the River House School. It was indeed a triumphant return, and we were rather fagged out.

But at last the excitement died down. It had to, sooner or later. And it was with great relief that I found myself entering Study C, in the Remove passage of the Ancient House. Tregellis-

West and Watson were with me, and they both looked thoroughly worn out. Tommy Watson sank into a chair with a sigh.

"My hat!" he muttered. "It's all very well to be a popular hero, but I rather think I'd prefer to be obscure. This is a bit too much of a good thing. Poor old Montie! You look a frightful wreck!"

Sir Montie groaned.

"Dear old boy, I feel one," he said. "But it ain't my way to grumble, and, thank goodness, I can go upstairs and change as soon as I like. I've got heaps of spare things in my box. It was a rippin' idea to send the luggage down in advance."

I looked round the study with a fond eye.

"Same old place!" I said. "It seems ages since we were here, but, as a matter of fact, only a few weeks have elapsed. But what weeks! Enough happened during that short time to fill as many years."

Scarcely a thing had been altered in the study. It had not been occupied during our absence, and all our little articles of personal property were still in their old positions.

Tommy Watson and I were content just to brush ourselves down, and wait until later on before going upstairs for a wash and a change. Sir Montie, however, could not think of remaining for another minute in his present condition, so he went off to make drastic alterations in his appearance.

The door had hardly closed after him before it opened again—this time to admit Jack Grey and Somerton.

"Everything quiet?" inquired Grey.

"I fancy so," I replied. "Come in; I'd like a chat. Perhaps we can manage to have a few words now. You're the Remove skipper, I believe?"

Jack Grey smilingly shook his head.

"You believe wrong!" he replied.

"But you told me——"

"During your absence I was skipper," said Grey. "But you're back now, Nipper, and I'm only too glad to give up the leadership in your favour."

"That's very decent of you," I said. "But I rather think it's for the Remove to decide. If I am re-elected——"

"It's no question of that at all," broke in Grey. "The Remove has already decided that everything shall be as it was before. I'm going back into

Study E, with Pitt, and from this minute onwards the Remove will be just the same as of old. You're captain of the Remove, Nipper, and I'm rather ashamed to hand affairs over to you in such a condition as they are. We've made an unholy mess of things, and the cricket has simply gone to pot."

"Oh, we'll soon pull round," I said. "It's rather wonderful to me that you got a team together at all. Nearly all the fellows of the eleven were away, including the reserves, so it's not very surprising that you didn't meet with much success. But now that we're back we shall go into things whole-heartedly."

"Good!" said Grey. "We've got a return match with Helmford on Saturday, and they think they're going to knock us to bits. It would be rather ripping if we could win."

I shook my head.

"We can hardly hope for that," I said. "But we'll put in all the practice we can, and do our level best to give Helmford a good game. When the new term starts we shall be just the same as over, and then things will hum."

By the evening the intense excitement had completely died down, and we were allowed to move about just as we liked, without being surrounded by crowds of excited juniors. But, of course, we were simply pestered with all sorts of inquiries regarding our adventures in Mordania.

Some of the fellows—Handforth in particular—made themselves positively hoarse in recounting our numerous perils and excitements. And when we went to bed we were thoroughly tired out and ready for sleep.

It was really astonishing how easily we got back into the old routine. Before the end of the next day things were going along in their normal fashion. Lessons, of course, had been something of a farce, but we had all done our best.

Mr. Crowell was easy and in the best of tempers. He punished nobody for talking, and everything was free and easy in the class-rooms. But the Remove master found, to his satisfaction, that we were very little behind in our knowledge. The majority of the fellows had forgotten very little, and Mr. Crowell was certain that within a few days everybody would have caught up.

In the evening we put in as much time as possible at the nets. This was the first taste of cricket we had had this year,

and, to begin with, the fellows were rather ragged. But I felt confident that I could get things ship-shape before many days had elapsed. And although it was almost certain that we should succumb to Helmford, we should not suffer a humiliating defeat. We would give Helmford a good game.

Friday was not a busy day, and by this time things were going along just the same as usual, and it was hard to imagine that only a week or so before we had been captives in Kol Palak's hands, in the heart of the Mordanian mountains. The whole episode seemed to be like some nightmare of the past. When we looked back upon those adventures they seemed fantastic and unreal.

But, if we had only known, we were not to be allowed to forget our Mordanian trip, and our adventures with the Tagossa.

Every spare minute on Friday was given up to cricket practice. And it was noticed that the most serene good humour prevailed throughout the school. Even Fullwood and Co., the cads of the Remove, had had the decency to express pleasure at our return, and they even seemed to have improved in their general behaviour.

When darkness came I was more satisfied than ever with my men. They had done wonders at the practice match, and I was even beginning to hope that they might be able to give Helmford a defeat on the morrow. De Valerio and Pitt had worked like Trojans, and were finding their old form with amazing speed. As a bowler, Pitt was deadly, and I knew that he would be a very valuable man in the match. And De Valerio stood up to his bowling in a masterful way, sending the leather all over the field with perfect ease. Personally, I was feeling in good form, too.

And then, on the Saturday morning, came a surprise. We awoke to find the sun gleaming brilliantly through the dormitory windows. A cloudless sky met our gaze, and we dressed with much haste and in high spirits.

"Buck up, you chaps!" I said briskly. "It's Saturday to-day, and we're going over to Helmford this afternoon. We can put in an hour's practice before breakfast, if we hurry up—and every minute is of importance."

The juniors needed no urging, and very shortly afterwards we hurried down, attired in our flannels, with the

intention of snatching a short time at the nets before the breakfast bell went.

As I was about to cross the lobby, I noticed that Pitt was standing by the letter rack. He beckoned to me as I glanced at him.

"Letter for you, Nipper," he said briefly.

"Thanks."

I went to his side and took the letter from his hand. There were also letters for Tregellis-West and Watson, for Handforth and Co., and for many others. I tore mine open hastily, wondering who it could be from. The writing was unfamiliar, and I could see by the postmark that it had been dispatched from London.

"Rather queer," said Pitt. "This letter of mine is addressed in the same handwriting as yours, Nipper. Why, what on earth—"

Pitt had removed a gilt-edged correspondence card from the envelope, and he was now staring at it in a bewildered kind of way. But I gave him very little attention, for I was staring at a card of my own.

This was gilt-edged, too, and I regarded the thing with astonishment and wonder. For it contained simply one word—"Beware!" And beneath this word there was a very neatly executed drawing, representing a flaming torch, and red ink had been used. I caught my breath in sharply.

"The flaming torch!" ejaculated Pitt, in a startled voice. "Why, you've got the same thing, Nipper—"

"Begad! And so have I, dear old boys!" exclaimed Sir Montie mildly.

Just then an ejaculation came from Handforth, who was some distance away.

"Great pip!" he exclaimed. "Who's been playing this fatheaded game? Beware!" And a flaming torch drawn under it! Of all the potty ideas!"

Church and McClure joined in the chorus, for they, too, had received letters of exactly the same character. We all collected in a group, looking rather puzzled, and it was not long before Christine and Co. arrived from the College House. They carried gilt-edged correspondence cards in their hands.

In all, sixteen juniors had received the cards, and these sixteen, as I need not explain, were those fellows who had journeyed to Mordania.

"But what on earth can it mean?"

asked Christine blankly. "Do you think there's anything serious in it?"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Do you think I'm going to take any notice of this rot? Some humourist in London is trying to have a joke—that's all. Everybody knows the yarn, and I expect the ass thought he'd give us a scare. We know the Tagossa had nothing to do with it, anyhow."

"How do we know?" asked Pitt.

"Because the Tagossa's dead—smashed up to bits," replied Handforth. "It's simply a practical joke."

I took the opportunity to slip away, and while the juniors were all talking in a group, I hurried off to Nelson Lee's study. I found the guv'nor sitting at his desk, gazing at a gilt-edged card through a magnifying lens.

"My hat! So you've got one too, sir?" I said grimly. "It looks rather serious, eh?"

Nelson Lee looked up.

"What do you mean, Nipper?" he asked sharply.

I placed my own card upon his desk, and he picked it up and examined it at once.

"I found that waiting for me in the rack, sir," I said. "Watson has got one, and Tregellis-West, and Pitt—and, in fact, all the sixteen fellows who went to Mordania. Do you think it's a joke, or the real thing?"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"So we have all got one of these interesting cards!" he said. "I certainly did not anticipate that, Nipper. Apparently these cards were sent to us by the Tagossa—and we know that vengeance is a common enough occurrence in Mordania."

"In Mordania—yes," I agreed. "But is it usual for these brigands to carry their vendettas out of their own country?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, it is," said Nelson Lee grimly. "But the Tagossa, as a secret society, has ceased to exist. I did not imagine for a moment that we should be troubled by anything of this nature. But, to be frank, Nipper, I am somewhat uneasy."

"You believe it's really serious, guv'nor?"

"In a way, yes," replied Nelson Lee. "You must not forget that we saw Ivan Grezzi on board the Channel boat. He had a companion with him,

and I believe that those two Mordanians have come across to England for the sole purpose of exacting vengeance. They had no opportunity of getting us earlier, and so they have taken this melodramatic method."

"Then you think that we might be shot at, or something of that sort, sir?" I asked. "In that case we'd better be pretty careful, although I don't fancy hiding myself away because of these confounded fellows."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"Well, Nipper, I don't think there is any necessity to become alarmed," he said. "In spite of these sensational cards of warning, there is no reason why we should fear this man, Grezzi. There is certainly no organised band at work in England. Probably these two men are the only members of the Tagossa who have taken up this matter, and you can rely upon me to do my very utmost to have them laid by the heels."

"That's good enough, sir," I said briskly. "I sha'n't worry myself, and I'll tell the other chaps to put the whole thing out of their minds. They already believe that it might be a practical joke, and I think we'd better let them keep on believing it. What do you say?"

"For the moment, yes," agreed Nelson Lee. "If there is any indication that the matter may become worse, or the danger real, I will take necessary steps. It may interest you to know, Nipper, that I have not been altogether idle. I have taken certain measures which may bring forth excellent results."

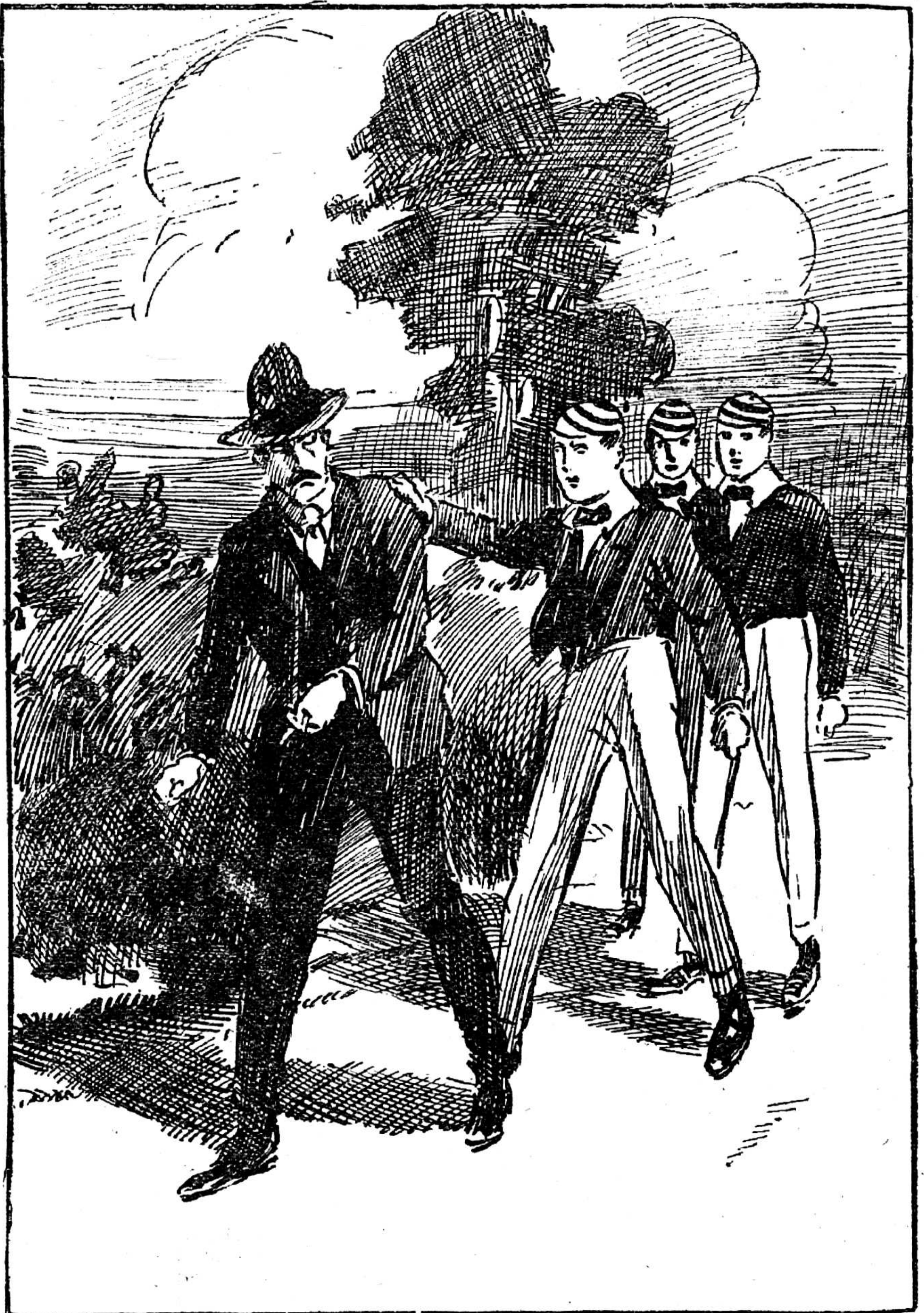
I could not get Nelson Lee to explain further, so, after a word or two more, I left the study and went back to the lobby. All the fellows had gone, and I found them on Little Side, practising hard. They had apparently forgotten all about the warning cards, and I did not remind them.

But the matter was not to rest there, as we should soon find.

CHAPTER IV.

DEVELOPMENTS!

NELSON LEE lit a cigarette, and lay back thoughtfully in his chair. Before him, on the desk, one of the gilt-edged cards was propped up against the inkstand, and it had just been put through a very careful examination



"What's the game?" demanded Handforth, reaching out and seizing the man by the shoulder. "Don't you know you are on private property?"

Breakfast was over, and all the fellows were at morning lessons. The school was quiet and orderly.

Outside, the Triangle was deserted, and the hot sun shone down from a cloudless sky. It was really a glorious day, and it seemed a sin and a shame to the juniors that they should be hemmed in the class-rooms.

Nelson Lee, in the privacy of his own study, had been sitting in a very thoughtful mood for some time past. His face was grave and serious, for he knew, better than anybody else, that these warnings from the Tagossa were not to be dismissed lightly. They were, on the contrary, of a deadly character.

Occasionally Lee turned and glanced out through the window across the Triangle to the gateway. It almost seemed as though he expected somebody—a telegram, perhaps, or something of that nature.

Lee's examination of the card had not pleased him greatly. There were no finger-prints to be found, and, to tell the truth, he had drawn a blank. There was nothing whatever on the cards to serve as a clue. It was just possible that they were, indeed, a hoax.

Everybody knew the story of the Tagossa—the newspaper reporters had seen to that. And it was just possible that some humorously inclined individual had dispatched all these cards from London. On the other hand, Nelson Lee did not overlook the probability that Ivan Grezzi himself was the responsible party.

The telephone bell rang sharply.

Nelson Lee reached across the desk, pulled the instrument towards him, and lifted the receiver from its hook. He placed it to his ear.

"Hallo!" he said. "Who is that, please?"

"That you, Lee, old man?" came a cheerful voice over the wires. "Dorrie speaking. I want to be put through to Mr. Lee——"

"You were right first time, Dorrie," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Lee speaking now. Is this a trunk call, or are you somewhere in the neighbourhood?"

"My dear man, I'm in London," came Dorrie's voice.

"The line must be singularly clear to-day, because your voice is most distinct," said Nelson Lee. "Anything important?"

"Well, that's what I want to know," replied his lordship. "I'm speaking

from the club, to tell the truth. I received a card by post this morning——"

"Gilt-edged, with the word 'Beware' in red ink, and with the design of a flaming torch," said Nelson Lee. "I had one myself, Dorrie."

"The deuce you did!" said Lord Dorrimore. "I thought I was going to tell you a piece of news. I ran across Mason an hour ago, and he's got one too. What's in the wind, Lee? Are we going to be done to death by the agents of the Tagossa? Rather excitin' if they start that sort of game, what?"

"I am concerned over this news, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee into the transmitter. "You must not take it too lightly, for it is really serious. All the boys who went to Mordania received a similar card; it is therefore obvious that this is to be an organised vendetta."

"By gad!"

"So I want you to be very careful, old man," went on Lee. "Don't expose yourself in the open more than is absolutely necessary——"

"I say, hang it all!" protested Dorrie. "I'm not going to hide myself in a corner, Lee! Personally, I don't think there's much to worry about. Barking dogs don't generally bite!"

"But there are exceptions, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee grimly. "And it is the way of the Tagossa to send their victims a warning beforehand——"

"Very kind of them, I'm sure," interrupted Dorrie. "But you've had warnings of this sort scores of times, haven't you?"

"My dear fellow, that is quite different," said the famous detective. "It was quite a commonplace some time ago for me to receive all sorts of threatening letters and warnings—generally from criminals whom I had laid by the heels. But Grezzi is a different proposition. He has come to England for the sole purpose of exacting vengeance. And, if I know anything of the Mordanian character, this man will pursue his object grimly and tenaciously. These are no idle threats—they are genuine; and I urge you, Dorrie, to be strictly on your guard. Without actually hiding yourself away, you must expose yourself as little as possible until the peril is over. Do you promise?"

"No, I'm hanged if I do!" replied Dorrie promptly. "I shall go about just the same as usual, and if these Mordanian fellows got busy—well, I'll take

my chance. Of course, I won't go about asking for trouble, but I can't consent to go into hiding."

Nelson Lee frowned at the instrument. "You are very foolish, Dorrie," he said. "There is no sense whatever in taking unnecessary risks. I am speaking in this way because you will probably be the first man to receive the Tagossa's attentions."

"How frightfully interestin'!" said Dorrie calmly. "That's quite bucked me up, old man. I shall have somethin' to look forward to for the rest of the day. Do you think they'll take a pot shot at me, or stab me in the back, or poison my grub?"

"Confound you, Dorrie, I wish you'd be serious!" snapped Lee. "You treat this matter lightly, but I can assure you that it is quite the opposite. If my advice is any use at all, I suggest that you remain in your club all-day long. I shall probably join you in the evening —"

"Sorry," interrupted his lordship. "but I can't promise that, Lee. I don't fancy the idea. But if it'll please you at all I'll give you my word that I won't go about with my eyes shut. I'll keep a sharp look-out, and be well on my guard. And, if it comes to that, what about you? Isn't it just as likely that you'll get it in the neck?"

"I hardly think that Grezzi will commence operations down here," replied Nelson Lee. "In any case, I shall take drastic steps to protect the boys. If you hear of any fresh developments in town, please ring me up at once."

"Right!" said Dorrie.

Almost immediately afterwards he rang off, and Nelson Lee hung up his own receiver and sat back once more in his chair. He smoked thoughtfully for some time.

Lee was satisfied in his own mind that Ivan Grezzi would not cause any trouble at St. Frank's that day—and, quite possibly, no trouble at all. For, before he could commence operations in the neighbourhood, he would be placed under arrest. Lee was fully determined to capture the man at the earliest possible moment.

Morning lessons were nearly over now, and Nelson Lee was still sitting thoughtfully in his chair when a commotion from the Triangle told him that the fellows had been released from the classrooms. There was no time for any more

cricket practice, for the members of the Remove eleven had only just time to go up to the dormitories to change into their flannels. Then dinner would come, and immediately afterwards the cricketers would start off for Helmford.

A charabanc had been hired for the occasion, for a number of other fellows had decided to go over with the eleven to support them. Thirty fellows were going altogether, and the cost of the vehicle's hire, divided up, amounted to merely a few shillings individually. It was, indeed, the cheapest method of travel, and better than the railway.

Dinner over, everything was bustle in the Remove. Some of the fellows, of course, were going over to Helmford on their bicycles, and they started off at once, for they would travel much slower than the charabanc.

Nelson Lee went back to his study. From the window he could see the big motor-coach in the Triangle, all ready for departure as soon as the fellows were ready. Lee knew that all the sixteen juniors who had gone to Mordania would be in the charabanc when it left. He wondered whether it would be wise to let the boys go. Upon due consideration, he concluded that there would be no danger—not to-day, at all events. And he did not like to spoil their enjoyment—it would be cruelly hard luck to forbid them to go to this cricket match.

And then Nelson Lee's attention was diverted. A tap came at the door, and Tubbs, the pageboy, appeared.

"A gent to see you, sir," he said, passing over a card.

Nelson Lee glanced at it, and read the name. "James Bradshaw." Then he looked up at once, and nodded to the pageboy.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Show Mr. Bradshaw in at once, Tubbs."

"Yesir!"

A minute passed, and then Tubbs reappeared, ushering into the study a small gentleman attired in a blue reefer suit with brass buttons, and a peaked cap. He was about forty years of age, weather-beaten, and small, slim and wiry. He saluted as he entered.

"Good afternoon, sir!" he said respectfully.

"Come in, Bradshaw—sit down," said Nelson Lee. "I hardly expected to see you come in to-day. What brings you?"

The visitor took a seat, nursing his cap in his hands.

"Well, to tell the truth, I didn't expect to be down here, neither," he said. "I carried out your instructions as best I could. And it wasn't such a difficult matter for me to keep an eye on those two beauties. I've been doing it ever since."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully. This man, Bradshaw, was a keen fellow, and Lee was quite certain that he was capable. He had first become acquainted with the man shortly after that incident on board the cross-Channel steamer—the incident when Church had pulled the bandage from Ivan Grezzi's face.

Nelson Lee knew who Grezzi was, and he believed that Grezzi was labouring under the delusion that he had not been recognised. It was an opportunity that could not be missed, and Nelson Lee had decided, then and there, to have the two Mordanians followed and watched.

He could not very well follow them himself, so he had interviewed the ship's captain, and the latter had agreed to Mr. Bradshaw being put upon this special work. Mr. Bradshaw was one of the boat's officers.

He had already reported once to the detective, at Gray's Inn Road. He had explained how he had kept Grezzi and his companion in sight after the landing at Dover. The two Mordanians had travelled up to London by a later train, and Bradshaw had followed them to some lodgings in Soho. These lodgings, in fact, were over a smolly Italian restaurant.

This much Nelson Lee knew, and he had been distinctly pleased with Bradshaw's work—so pleased, in fact, that he had told the man to continue his task of watching.

Lee did not wish to give the Mordanians any hint that their presence in England was known. He had, therefore, come down to St. Frank's as though everything were in order; but Bradshaw was watching, and keeping his eyes open. He had been told to report if anything fresh took place.

Lee himself had decided to travel up to London that afternoon, and he had further decided to interview Mr. Grezzi, and quietly to advise him to leave the country while he was safe.

But this visit of Bradshaw's made him alter his plans.

"The fact of the matter is, sir, I'd

no idea I was coming to this part of the country when I started out," said Bradshaw. "I was watching as usual this morning when one of the men came out—Grezzi, I think you call him. But he looked different. He was got up something like one of these organ-grinders. He went straight to Victoria, and got in a train for Bannington—it was easy enough for me to find out where he'd booked to."

"For Bannington, eh?" said Nelson Lee. "And you followed him to Bannington?"

Mr. Bradshaw looked rather sheepish.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "We got in the town about two hours ago, and the fellow made straight for a little restaurant at the bottom of the High Street. That was Italian, too, I believe. Queer how these dagoes open up in the food line in all our towns!"

"Well, Bradshaw, what happened then?" asked Lee keenly. "I can see by your attitude that everything is not as it should be."

"Well, that's just the truth, sir," admitted the man. "I watched that little restaurant until I got tired. Then I thought I'd go in, have a cup of coffee, and look round. But Grezzi wasn't there, and I discovered that there was another door, leading out into a side street. He must have gone that way, and I lost him. Knowing that St. Frank's was only a mile or two away, I thought it would be better for me to report to you personally."

"You did quite right," said Nelson Lee. "I don't blame you for losing Grezzi; under the circumstances, you could hardly help doing so. But you ought to have rung me up, Bradshaw; it would have saved time. Grezzi is in this district, and there is not the slightest doubt that he intends mischief."

"To you, sir?"

"To me, and to a good many boys of this school, too," said Nelson Lee. "We must lose no time in picking up the trail once more. I don't mind telling you, Bradshaw, that I'm rather worried. There is more in this than we can see at the moment. Grezzi would never come down here unless he had some urgent reason."

"He don't look a very dangerous sort, sir," said Bradshaw. "I wouldn't be afraid of him, anyway. I'm not suggesting that you're afraid, sir," he added.

"You're thinking of the boys, I suppose?"

"I am," said Nelson Lee. "And I don't altogether like the way in which things are developing. Grezzi is in this district, and— Upon my soul! That charabanc is nearly on the point of starting off! Under no circumstances must I allow the juniors to make this trip to Helmford!"

And Nelson Lee rose to his feet, with an expression of grim determination on his face.

CHAPTER V.

THE VENGEANCE OF THE TAGOSSA!

MEANWHILE, other events were happening outside in the sunlight—events of a somewhat curious character.

The big charabanc was ready, and some of the juniors were already in their places. I was there, and I looked at my watch once or twice with some impatience. We could not afford to waste many more minutes.

"I wish the chaps would buck up!" I exclaimed irritably. "We ought to have started five minutes ago. We can't keep the Helmford chaps waiting—and a charabanc, after all, isn't exactly a rapid conveyance."

"Oh, they'll turn up in a minute or two," said Tommy Watson. "Montie will be late, of course. I left him trying on some new neckties, and goodness only knows when he'll appear. We shall have to drag him out in the end, I suppose."

"Buzz along, and give him a jabb or two," I said. "If he won't come, haul him out by his hair!"

Watson hurried off, grinning. Several other juniors came up and took their places in the charabanc. Handforth and Co. were arguing on the Ancient House steps.

Handforth was in the eleven, for, although he was a bit of an ass in many ways, he certainly could play cricket. He was not much good at bowling, but with a bat he could do great things if he liked. Towards the end of the previous season he had shown excellent headway, and I had been gratified to find that he was now even better.

He was a first-class slogger—reckless and perfectly confident. He would face a bowler, and swipe away for all he was worth. If the bowling happened to suit him, he would knock the leather to the

boundary every time. On the other hand, he was just as likely to be bowled out first ball. He didn't know the meaning of the word caution. But I thought it would be quite safe to play him, because, once set, he was capable of knocking up a good score.

And he was now arguing heatedly with Church and McClure.

"I tell you I left that bat in the study!" said Handforth firmly. "Don't you think I know? I left it in the study this morning—"

"Well, what's it matter?" asked Church patiently. "Nipper's taking plenty of bats, and you can choose one —"

"If I can't use my own bat, I won't play at all!" declared Handforth. "I've searched the study all over, and the thing isn't there. One of you idiots must have used it—that's the only explanation!"

"Rot!" said McClure. "We haven't touched the silly bat. You couldn't have put it in the study, Handy——"

"I tell you I did!"

"But——"

"If you keep arguing like this, I'll punch you on the nose," said Handforth. "I distinctly remember coming in this morning, and putting it in the corner, behind the door."

"When you came in from the pavilion?" asked Church.

"Yes."

"Then you're offside," said Church. "When we came in from the pavilion you went straight up to the dormitory —"

"You—you silly ass!" snorted Handforth. "Why didn't you say that before? I remember now—I left that bat in the pavilion, just behind the door. Of course, it's there all the time!"

"And you were saying that you took it to the study!" growled Church. "A fine memory you've got!"

"Well, if you chaps had had any sense, you'd have reminded me before!" retorted Handforth, striding off towards the playing field.

"Reminded you!" shouted Church. "How could we remind you when we didn't know——"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Handforth. "You keep on cackling like a couple of old hens!"

This was decidedly unkind, after Church had succeeded in reminding Handforth—quite innocently—of the

whereabouts of the missing bat. The three juniors hurried away to the pavilion.

It did not take them long to get the bat from behind the door, and then, with the precious article tucked under Handforth's arm, they hurried back to the Triangle, for by this time all the other fellows were in the charabanc, impatiently waiting. Handforth and Co. were the only juniors who were missing.

"Better buck up!" suggested Church. "We shall be late."

"Hold on!" said McClure. "Who's that chap over by the hedge there? Can't you see him, crouching against the ditch, looking through into the Triangle? He seems to be jolly interested in something."

Handforth and Church paused, and gazed into the hedge which McClure indicated. They saw the rear view of a man who apparently thought that he was unobserved. He was close against the hedge, getting through a small gap. He appeared to be somewhat roughly attired, but the juniors could not see his face.

"We can't bother about him now!" said Church. "Nipper will be frightfully ratty as it is——"

"Let him be ratty!" interrupted Handforth. "We're going to see what this fellow's doing. Like his nerve, to trespass on the school property!"

McClure felt rather sorry that he had drawn Handforth's attention to the stranger, for he had not wanted the impulsive Edward Oswald to make any investigations. McClure knew well enough that if Handforth started anything of that sort, they would probably be delayed a great deal longer.

But it was too late to stop him now, for Handforth was already running across the grass in the direction of the crouching man. Church and McClure, naturally, hurried along in the rear, in case their leader required any assistance.

The man did not turn his head until Handforth was nearly upon him, for the juniors made no sound on the soft, springy turf. And when the stranger did turn his face, Handforth saw at once that he was a foreigner. He was dressed rather untidily, and he wore a neckerchief in place of a collar. His face was dark, and his eyes piercing. He sprang to his feet as Handforth came upon him.

"What's the game?" demanded the

junior, reaching out and seizing the man by the shoulder. "Don't you know that you're on private property?"

The man uttered an exclamation which Handforth did not understand. His eyes blazed with a sudden intense fury. Then, in a flash, before Handforth could divine his intention, he whipped a wicked looking dagger from his belt, and raised it aloft.

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth.

He released the man on the instant—not because he was afraid, but because he was so startled that his fingers lost their grip. And the stranger, without a word, turned away and ran like a hare towards Bellton Wood.

Church and McClure came up at that moment, and they found Handforth standing there, rather shaken, but highly indignant.

"The murderous rotter!" he exclaimed hotly.

"What the dickens——"

"Didn't you see?" roared Handforth. "He pulled out a dagger—a whacking great thing with a curved blade! I thought he was going to stab me for a second!"

"My goodness!" said McClure. "A dagger, eh? But—but he couldn't have meant it seriously, Handy——"

"I tell you he did," insisted Handforth. "His eyes were blazing, and he brought out that knife in his fury—he couldn't help himself. You know these foreign chaps can kill a chap in two seconds when they're in a temper."

"But who was he?" asked Church breathlessly.

"How the dickens do I know who he was, you prize dummy?" asked Handforth impatiently. "But I'll tell you one thing—he looked like an Italian, and—— By George! I'll tell you what," added Handforth excitedly. "Perhaps the chap was a Mordanian! You remember those cards we got this morning? It might have been an attempt to murder me, in revenge. They'd naturally go for me first!"

"Why?" demanded Church.

"Because I did such a lot to bring about their downfall!" said Handforth, as though he fully believed it. "Anyhow, it's a pretty startling incident——"

"Well, we can't stop here any longer—those chaps in the charabanc will be tearing their hair!" broke in McClure. "Come on—let's buzz as hard as we can!"

They ran towards the gate, reached it, and then tore across the Triangle to the spot where the charabanc was waiting—with the engine already running, and with the driver ready to start off at once.

A howl went up as Handforth and Co. appeared.

"Come on, you asses!"

"You've kept us waiting for hours!"

"All right, driver—start her up!"

Handforth and Co. arrived, breathless.

"About time, too!" I said, opening the door. "Here you are—pile in! We shall be awfully late——"

"I can't help that!" gasped Handforth. "Something happened! Some chap with a knife was squinting through the hedge——"

"Never mind that now," I interrupted. "Climb in, you ass! We can talk about that as we're going along. Some exaggerated yarn, I expect, anyhow!"

Handforth again attempted to make himself heard, but his voice was drowned in the yells of the other fellows. And the heroes of Study D climbed into their seats, and the charabanc started off.

Even now we had not learned of the man who had been watching us—the man who had raised a knife to Handforth when the latter took him by surprise. Neither did Handforth have any opportunity of telling the story at once.

The driver slipped in the clutch, and the big vehicle moved slowly forward and then gathered speed as it turned into the lane. It disappeared down the slight incline towards Bellton in a cloud of dust.

And it was just at this moment that Nelson Lee appeared on the Ancient House steps, having hurried out to stop us from commencing our trip. Nelson Lee had known that the charabanc was just about to start, and he was just in time to see the dust hanging about the gateway.

He ran quickly across the Triangle and gazed down the lane.

The charabanc had vanished.

"Confound it!" muttered Lee. "One minute before, and I should have been in time. But they must not go—under no circumstances must they undertake this trip."

And the Housemaster-detective hurried back to the bicycle shed, with the full intention of seizing the first machine that came to his hand, in order to go

in pursuit of the charabanc. He knew that he would overtake it by the time it arrived in the village.

Meanwhile, the huge motor-coach was gliding smoothly along the dusty lane towards the village. Handforth was still doing his utmost to explain to his immediate companions what had occurred. But, as they would pay no attention whatever, it was a somewhat thankless task.

"I tell you the thing was serious!" roared Handforth. "We were just coming over from the pavilion, and we saw the chap crouching in the hedge——"

"Oh, do dry up, Handy!"

"Give it a rest, old man!"

Handforth glared.

"You—you rotters!" he roared.

"Don't you understand? Haven't you got sense enough to realise that I'm talking——"

"Rot?" said Pitt. "Yes, we can see that, Handy."

"I'm telling you what happened!" howled Handforth, in sheer exasperation. "The chap was in the hedge, and he was a Mordanian——"

"Eh?"

"A which?"

"A Mordanian!" repeated Handforth grimly, glad to find that he had gained some attention at last. "He was watching you all, and I'll bet my boots that he's up to some sort of mischief."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Pitt. "Always on the track of something dramatic! You ought to do first class as a story writer, Handy! You've got a wonderful imagination, and the way you piece things together is simply astounding. When you grow up you'll become famous as a writer of penny dreadfuls!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth nearly choked.

"You—you babbling idiots!" he belated. "What's the good of trying to be funny? This chap was a Mordanian, I tell you, and when I touched him on the shoulder he drew out a dagger!"

"A what?"

"A dagger——"

"Rubbish!"

"All right, if you won't believe me. I won't say another word!" snorted Handforth hotly. "But I know what I'm talking about, although I'm a silly ass to waste my breath in addressing you fellows. The chap had a dagger,

I tell you, and he whipped it out as though he were about to stab me——"

"My only hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"Is this right, Handy?" I asked grimly. "Or is it just your spoof?"

"Oh, it's just my spoof!" said Handforth, with sarcastic bitterness. "It's all a yarn of mine. I didn't see any foreigner at all, and that bit about the dagger was simply one of my inventions. Anything else? You can jolly well go and boil your faces! I'm fed up with the lot of you!"

And Handforth lay back in his seat in sullen silence.

"Oh, don't act the goat, Handy!" I said. "Let's hear about this dagger incident."

No reply from Handforth.

"But I want to hear——"

"It's no good—he won't speak now," put in Church. "He wouldn't speak if you offered him five hundred quid. He's the most obstinate, pig-headed lunatic that ever escaped from an asylum."

Handforth went purple, but, by a superhuman effort, he kept himself in check. But he grimly told himself that he would avenge the insult before long.

And just then the attention of the juniors was diverted by a somewhat surprising incident which took place. The charabanc was gliding along the lane, and very soon the village would come within sight. On one side lay Bellton Wood, and on the other the open meadows.

Just ahead, at a turn in the lane, the bridge over the River Stowe would be revealed, and then the charabanc would be in the little village High Street. At the present moment it was still in the quiet country lane, without a soul in sight.

Overhead the branches of the trees overhung the lane in a kind of natural arbour, for high trees lined the hedge on the other side, their branches spreading out to join those on the opposite side. It was a most delightful piece of road, particularly at this time of day, when the sun was at its height, and when any shade was grateful.

Jack Grey and De Valerie were sitting in the front seat, next to the driver. They had, therefore, a clear view of the road just ahead. And they both noticed a man standing in the ditch by the side of the road, with his back to Bellton Wood.

He was a queer, foreign-looking man, and he held a somewhat curious object in his hand. It was square, and looked very much like a metal box.

The man was moving a lever on this, and then, just as the charabanc was ten yards distant, the stranger looked up. And De Valerie, who was watching him, was quite startled by the expression of triumphant hatred in his eyes.

The man's arm swung round, and the square metal box left his grasp, and rose high. It soared through the air accurately.

The fellow's aim was splendid.

The metal box, according to all laws of gravity, ought to have fallen right into the very centre of the moving charabanc. But something interfered with the stranger's plans—something which he had never reckoned upon.

His aim was accurate, and his judgment equally so; but the metal box rose just a trifle too high in its flight. It caught against a slight, overhanging bough, hovered for a second, and became wedged between a tiny cluster of leafy twigs.

The charabanc thundered underneath the branch, and glided smoothly on its way. The man who had flung the tin box was even now crashing his way through the wood—fleeing as hard as he could run.

The driver and De Valerie and Grey all turned their heads. And almost every other junior in the charabanc had seen that square metal box coming, and had wondered what on earth it could be.

I stood up in my seat, turned round, and stared behind me at the tree branch. We were now about thirty yards distant.

"What the dickens was that?" asked Sir Montie.

"Goodness knows!"

"The chap was dotty, I think——"

"He had an awful look in his eyes!" shouted Grey. "I say, I think we'd better stop! I've never seen a chap look so demoniacal!"

Just at that moment a breeze caught the tree branch, and it wavered. The metal box became dislodged, and fell to the ground and lay there. Only a few brief seconds had elapsed, of course, since the box should have fallen into the charabanc. It lay on the ground for a fraction of a moment, and then——

Boom!

A stunning, shattering explosion took place. It was like the report of a huge

naval gun. A blinding glare dazzled my eyes for a second, for I had been gazing at the box at the moment of the explosion. A gigantic cloud of stones and earth rose skywards.

And then, while my ears were still paining me badly, an enormous gust of wind struck the charabanc—a great and all-powerful blast caused by the stunning explosion. The vehicle simply staggered to the side of the road, and its two offside wheels ran down into the ditch, and the charabanc came to a sudden stop, hurling some of the juniors out, and the others into hopeless confusion.

CHAPTER VI.

PACKED OFF HOME!

"BEGAD!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West picked himself up from the road, and stared about him in a bewildered kind of way. He had been flung out when the charabanc pitched into the ditch. Montie was quite unhurt, but rather dazed, and certainly dusty. His pinco-nez lay on the ground, smashed to a thousand fragments.

"Good heavens!" gasped Watson. "What—what was it?"

This was a most unnecessary question, for it was quite obvious what had happened. The square metal object which had been flung at the charabanc had been nothing less than a bomb—a terribly deadly bomb at that!

Without the slightest doubt, if the thing had exploded in the motor-coach, not one occupant would have escaped instant and horrible death. The explosion would have blown every one of us to atoms.

Personally, I was filled with horror, and a feeling of sickness came over me. The narrowness of our escape positively made me feel bad. Only by a mere fluke had we escaped—by a trick of fate which could not possibly have been foreseen.

The man who had flung the bomb had done so with the full knowledge of what he was doing, and his judgment had been surprisingly good, for, by all the rules, the bomb should have fallen right amongst us.

But for the chance of it catching on that cluster of twigs, it would have descended into the very middle of the charabanc. It was not a contact bomb, but one timed to explode a few seconds

after it had been flung. This, of course, was the most deadly bomb of all, since it could not fail to act.

I gazed up the road, still feeling very shaky, and with my eardrums beating in a most painful way. I could hear nothing, since, for the moment, my hearing was completely useless.

Up the road a dense cloud of dust still hung about, hiding the scene from view. I jumped down from the charabanc, and ran back up the lane. Other juniors followed me, startled into activity by my movements. They, too, had been stunned by the shock of the awful explosion.

I soon found myself running through a fog of dust, which entered my throat and made me cough and sneeze. But then I came to a sudden halt, and stared at the scene.

There, in the very centre of the lane, lay a great, yawning hole—a deep, jagged crater which extended for quite a distance. The hedge on one side was blown down flat, and four or five massive trees were now lying shattered to atoms. The explosion had indeed been an appalling one.

Of the man who had caused this disaster there was not the slightest sign, for he, of course, had made off into the wood before the explosion took place. It was quite likely that he did not know of his failure. Perhaps he did not see the bomb catch up on the tree branch; perhaps he did not see the charabanc glide safely and harmlessly beneath.

"My goodness!" muttered Pitt, his face pale, and his lips trembling. "We—we only missed that by inches!"

"No—by about fifty yards, to be exact," I said quietly. "It was meant for us, Pitt—no doubt about that. This is a narrower escape than any we experienced in Mordania!"

"Here, in England, within sight of St. Frank's!" ejaculated Christine. "Oh, my only hat! I don't think I've ever been so scared in all my life! Half the windows in Bellton must be broken!"

"That's quite likely," I said. "But windows can be replaced. Just think of it! We might have been blown to smithereens!"

"The awful rotter! The murderous brute!" shouted Handforth. "Where is he? We'd better rush after him——"

"Steady on—steady on!" I interrupted. "We couldn't catch the man now. He went into the wood, and by this time he's a mile away. It would be

like looking for a needle in a haystack!"

"Well, thank Heaven we're all right," said Grey fervently. "But—but what can it mean? Who tried to murder us like that—and why?"

"The Tagossa!" I said grimly.

"What?"

"Great pip!"

"It's the only possible explanation," I went on. "All sixteen of us are here—every one. And that scoundrel meant to wipe us all out in one swoop."

"But—but what about us?" asked Somerton, aghast. "We haven't aroused the enmity of this secret society, and we should have been killed just the same!"

"Yes, I know that," I said. "But it makes no difference. Do you think a man who would murder sixteen fellows cares a jot about fourteen more? His enemies were here, and that was enough for him. He couldn't pick the sixteen out, and put them in a group, and blow them to bits, so he went the whole hog. His idea was to blow the charabanc to atoms, and make absolutely sure."

"Good heavens!"

"It—it's too awful to think about," muttered Grey.

"And I know who the chap was, too!" shouted Handforth suddenly. "By George! If I'd only known, I could have put a stop to the fellow's game! He was the chap I saw looking through the hedge in the playing fields—the chap who raised a dagger at me. My goodness! He might have stuck that knife into my ribs. He was capable of murder, anyhow. This proves it!"

"It does," I agreed grimly. "And now I can understand. That man was watching, Handy. He knows us all by sight, and he saw us get into the charabanc. He knew, therefore, that if he dropped his little prize-packet into the charabanc we should all be sent skywards. Don't you see? Before the coach started he dodged down the lane, through the wood, and took up his position."

"Begad! The cunnin' bounder!" said Sir Montie. "And to think that he nearly succeeded in his object. It's a mercy we're still alive, dear old boys—it is, really!"

Somehow we didn't feel much like speaking. The narrowness of our escape appalled us, and held us almost tongue-tied. And we all stood there, staring

fascinatedly at the gaping hole in the road.

The air had not quite cleared, and everything was peaceful once more. It hardly seemed possible that a grim and diabolical attempt to murder us had taken place only a few minutes earlier.

And as we stood there, silent, one fact was brought home to me with stunning force. The Tagossa was in earnest. Those threats had been no idle ones. Ivan Grezzi had not come to England to seek refuge. He had come to execute his vendetta against the entire party which had visited Mordania.

And, as a commencement, he had attempted to blow sixteen of us to Eternity. This was clear indication that the warnings we had received were not to be taken lightly. And I felt horrified when I thought of the position.

With such a murderous maniac at large there was no telling when we should be safe. At any time of the day or night this scoundrel might attempt to kill us—or some of us. The vengeance of the Tagossa was indeed something to take grimly. The sign of the flaming torch was the sign of death!

And then I was not allowed to think much further, for people began to appear. They all seemed to come at once—people from the village, and seniors, masters, and juniors from St. Frank's.

They came rushing along the road in both directions. From the village, shopkeepers with their aprons still on, women, children, farm labourers, and all sorts and conditions of humanity.

At the school the explosion had been heard with tremendous force. Indeed, some of the fellows afterwards declared that it sounded louder to them than it did to us. It sounded at St. Frank's as a booming, shattering roar.

Every window in the great building shook, some were shattered, and the whole place seemed to shudder and shake, as though an earthquake had occurred.

Just for one second everybody had been struck dumb and motionless. And then the Triangle became thronged with fellows—servants and masters. The Head came hurrying out of his own doorway, with his gown only half on.

And all sorts of inquiries were made—one asked the other what had happened, and nobody could reply. It was only known that the explosion had occurred

somewhere down in the village, and not at St. Frank's.

Consequently, a rush was made for the lane. Everybody went hurrying and scurrying down towards Bellton. Nelson Lee had not found a bicycle in the shed, owing to the fact that it was a half-holiday and a fine afternoon. And so, on second thoughts, he had hurried indoors with the intention of 'phoning to Bannington, to have the charabanc stopped and sent back at once.

He was in the act of sending this message when the explosion came. It shook Nelson Lee's study, the windows rattled, and he dropped the telephone instrument as though it had become red-hot. For Nelson Lee knew instinctively what that dreadful explosion meant.

With his face pale and drawn, and with grimly set lips, he rushed out of the study and hastened as fast as his legs could carry him towards the gates. But others were going before him, and he was not able to arrive on the scene as soon as he could have done.

But Nelson Lee was dreading the sight he expected to see. He firmly believed that half of us would be killed, and the other half mortally wounded. For he knew that bomb-throwing was a favourite method of dealing deaths by the Tagossa. And Bradshaw's story clearly proved that Ivan Grezzi was in the neighbourhood.

Nelson Lee felt almost like jumping in the air with joy when he saw the crowd of juniors near the gaping hole in the road, with the charabanc, unharmed, slightly further along. It only took Lee one moment to see that we were all intact.

"Thank Heaven!" he muttered fervently.

Then, with a light heart, he hurried forward faster than ever. But by this time we were hemmed in by an over-increasing crowd. The villagers were asking a thousand questions at once.

At the same time, they were telling us all sorts of things that had happened. The big window in the butcher's shop, for example, had been splintered to atoms, and one or two customers had narrowly escaped being cut by the falling glass. Cottage windows had been broken by the dozen; at least a thousand chimney pots had fallen down—if the statement of one witness could be believed. But as there weren't five hundred chimneys in the whole of Bellton,

and as only about five per cent. of these had become dislodged, the story could not be described as absolutely accurate.

However, it was obvious that a considerable amount of minor damage had been caused. It was very fortunate that the bomb had exploded in a section of the road where there were no houses immediately adjacent. The nearest building was the River House School; but this had been well protected by a belt of high trees. Consequently, the River House had suffered very little.

"Thank goodness, here's the guv'nor!" I exclaimed suddenly, as I saw Nelson Lee elbowing his way through the crowd. "Here you are, sir!"

Nelson Lee heard my hail, and he came at once to my side.

"Anybody hurt?" he asked sharply.

"No, sir—not a scratch," I said. "We're a bit deaf, but that'll go off, I suppose. What did it sound like at St. Frank's?"

"Never mind that now," said Lee. "I tried to stop you going, but I was just a shade too late. Thank Heaven you're all safe, Nipper! How did it happen? Tell me as quickly as you can."

I briefly described the incident.

"Dear me!" said Lee. "So you owe your lives to the fact that the bomb happened to catch upon a clump of twigs? Astonishing, Nipper—most remarkable! It really seems that you boys are not destined to suffer injury at the hands of the Tagossa."

"Yes, it does seem a bit like that, sir," I said. "But it's a bit too close to please me. This is about the narrowest escape we've ever had. Who do you think the man was who flung the bomb?"

"Ivan Grezzi—without a doubt," replied the guv'nor. "Just before you left I happened to learn that Grezzi was in this neighbourhood, and I did my utmost to stop you. Perhaps it's just as well that I did not, for now this bomb is exploded. Grezzi might have used it against the school itself if the charabanc had been held back."

"Yes, that's quite possible, sir," I admitted. "Well, the murderous brute has failed, and now I suppose we'd better make haste and get to Helmsford—we're late enough as it is—"

"You'll make haste and return to the school, my lad," interrupted Lee

grimly. "There'll be no going to Helmsford to-day!"

"You'll all get back to the school at once," said Lee. "Mr. Crowell is here, and he will escort you. Don't waste a moment. Grezzi may still be in the wood, and it is just likely—although not probable—that he has another bomb with him. But we can't afford to take any chances."

"And what are you going to do, sir?" I asked quickly.

"I shall lose no time in communicating with the police," replied Nelson Lee. "This is a far more serious matter than I supposed at the outset, and I rather fancy that Scotland Yard will be put on the case at once. So far as my present knowledge goes, there are only two Tagossa men in the country. But they are at liberty, and the whole of England must be scoured until they are placed under lock and key. In the meantime, you boys will do everything I tell you."

I knew better than to argue. Nelson Lee was quite right—this matter was deadly serious, and the juniors were in greater peril than they had ever dreamed of. And while they were going back to school, Nelson Lee hurried off into the village, and 'phoned to Bannington.

Not long afterwards he came up to the school, and went immediately to Dr. Stafford's study. He found the Head pale and agitated, and quite haggard with worry. Dr. Stafford looked up with eagerness as Nelson Lee entered.

"This is dreadful, Mr. Lee—positively dreadful!" he exclaimed. "What can we do? To think that so many boys were nearly sent to their deaths! It is so terribly appalling that my brain positively fails to perform its normal functions. I am quite prostrated with horror."

"I'm not surprised, Dr. Stafford," said Nelson Lee. "But we must look upon this matter calmly, and without any exaggerated fears. The peril is real, I will admit, but not so great as you seem to imagine."

"But I am thinking of the boys, Mr. Lee," said the Head. "What can we do? This terrible scoundrel may make further attempts upon their lives!"

"It is possible, but I do not think there will be any further danger to-day," said Lee. "The Whitsuntide holidays are near at hand, and I think the wisest course we could adopt would be to send these sixteen boys home."

"To-day?"

"Yes, to-day!"

"But, my dear Mr. Lee——"

"Here, these sixteen boys are together, under one roof," went on Lee. "If we dispatch them to their various homes, they will be scattered. I have every reason to believe that there are only two members of the Tagossa in this country. It will be rather a difficult matter for them to murder all these sixteen boys, one by one—and with every home under police protection, as it certainly will be. I can assure you, Dr. Stafford, that it is your plain duty to send these boys away. By the time the new term commences the danger will be completely passed—there is no doubt about that."

The Head nodded.

"You are quite right, Mr. Lee—quite right!" he said decisively.

And so, before the afternoon was over, we were once more on the train—Watson, Tregellis-West, myself, and the thirteen other fellows who had been with the party. We were travelling up to London with a strong police escort on the train, and, at Victoria, adequate steps would be taken to see that every fellow reached his home in perfect safety.

It didn't matter much, for St. Frank's would disband within a day or two for the Whitsun holidays. And when the new term commenced, everything, we hoped, would be settled.

But, during the coming holidays, some very exciting incidents were to take place—before Ivan Grezzi was rendered helpless, and before the Tagossa had concluded its murderous vendetta.

THE END.

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TOM ANSON, a young Australian, befriends the two Englishmen, and with his assistance they discover the professor.

SNAPLUS is the faithful black tracker who accompanies the adventurers.

They have just killed a huge stegosaur and discovered a quantity of turquoises, when they are faced with the problem of getting back to civilisation. The professor, however, has hit on a scheme.

(Now read on.)

Getting the Eird.

THE three young men were keen to aid the professor in collecting everything and anything, though it must be confessed that they were amused by his injunction not to run any risks, since it was impossible to go far from the ledge without chancing an encounter with something lively and dangerous.

However, for a few days they confined their activities to catching specimens of butterflies and certain strange fishes which wore bony plates of armour instead of scales. These latter they photographed, for they would have been too large to carry away.

The Bheels who accompanied them on these expeditions were astounded. They could not comprehend why men should take the trouble to catch butterflies, a sackful of which would not have provided a satisfactory meal for a child.

But, seeing that these new masters who treated them so kindly desired new game, one of them, whom they had dubbed Pom-pom, which was as near as they could get to the sound of his name, approached them mysteriously as they were setting forth one morning.

He carried a long, strong rope, plaited from

the fibres of a plant somewhat like flax, and wore, in addition to his scanty clothing, an air of the deepest mystery. Dismissing the others of his tribe, he beckoned the three to follow him, and led them away along the ledge, past the place where they had first ascended it, then, by a rugged path, high along the cliff face.

"Have you any notion what we're going after?" asked Anson.

"Not the remotest," replied Jack. "But, judging by Pom-pom's manner, it must be something fearful and wonderful. By jove, the little beggar can climb! I don't see how we are to follow up there."

Pom-pom was clambering up the steep face of the rock as swiftly as a fly; but evidently he had gauged the white men's powers, for when he reached another ledge, thirty feet above, he made the rope he carried fast to a projecting rock, and let it down.

With this to aid, they soon stood beside him on a broad ledge, behind which was a deep recess in the rock face and one or two shallow caves. They were blackened with smoke, as though many generations had camped there. Perhaps the spot was the first home of the tribe, which had later moved down to the more convenient lower ledge.

Pom-pom gazed at the place indifferently, however, and passed on round a cornice of rock, pausing at the turn, to enjoin silence by holding a finger to his lips. A hundred yards further brought them to a narrow cleft which ran between perpendicular walls for some distance further, then opened out. Presently they saw and understood. This gully led to another valley, or canon, very much smaller than the main one and different in character.

It was deeper, and very narrow, not more than a long stone's throw from wall to wall. A still, deep pool lay between big boulders in the midst of it, but vegetation was scantier than in the other valley. This was easily explained. Only for a short while, about mid-day, could the sun's rays reach the bottom of the canon.

Still making signs that they should be on their guard, Pom-pom led the way, down a precipitous path, to the floor of the valley.

Oppressive silence brooded over the place, though every movement waked the echoes.

"No one at home," said Harding.

"Home—ome—ome—ome!" repeated the echoes disconcertingly.

"Whisper!" murmured Jack. "Pompom looks scared. Are those tracks over by the water? Phew! What in wonder made them?"

They all stooped to examine the imprints in the mud, three-toed prints, a good foot long, and resembling nothing they knew of.

"Another beastly reptile," muttered Harding. "And a thundering big one. Let's be careful."

With their weapons ready, they advanced at the heels of Pompom, who, following the tracks as easily over stone as his companions did in the mud, led them from one covert of log vegetation to another. In this way they had traversed nearly a mile of canon, noting with interest that the lower branches of all the trees which they now encountered were cut off in a straight line, just as are the trees in a park of deer. Something had browsed there for a long time, only it was something taller than a deer, for none of the branches were within leaping distance of a man.

Some of the trunks were curiously scarred, too, and one partly decayed tree had a deep hole driven half way through. Suddenly Pompom stiffened. In the midst of a thicket ahead something moved. Pompom pointed to the rocks, and, scuttling up a jagged boulder, esconced himself on a jag some twenty feet from the ground.

A rock, dislodged by his hasty flight, rattled down and thundered across the canon, and instantly a head, poised at the end of a long neck, shot up from the midst of the thicket and turned towards them.

Such a head! It was not unlike a cassowary's, and the neck was covered with the same hair-like feathers—only it must have measured nearly thirty inches in length, and the eyes turned on the intruders were fierce and malignant.

It uttered a terrific crowing squawk, which was at once answered from several points further along the gorge, and at once began to move down on the invaders.

"Up, boys!" yelled Jack.

The others needed no telling. There was something so grotesquely terrible in the aspect of this enormous bird kicking its way through the underbrush that they had already moved for Pompom's refuge. In hottest haste, they scrambled up, and only just in time reached safety. With a wild whoop, the bird extricated itself from the bush, and dashed towards them at a pace which would have left a Derby winner beaten to a frazzle.

Others, somewhat smaller, came thudding down the canon, and, further off, a group of mother-birds called distractedly to chickens, which scurried from all directions.

Meantime, the old cock paused, measured his distance, and, leaping up, pecked ferociously at the men, missing by a few

inches. They moved up as many feet. A bird with the peck of a pile-driver was no joke.

"What a sight! We must bring my uncle to see these beauties," said Jack. "I don't wonder that there are no other creatures in the valley. Why, one kick from those legs would about settle a lion. It's jolly comforting to know they can't fly."

"And equally so to know that we can't," grunted Anson sarcastically. "How do we get back? Where do we go from here? We're as high as we can get. We daren't go lower, and there's no working round out of reach. The path's on the other side. We'll have to do some shooting, I'm afraid."

"We'll put that off as long as possible," said Jack, taking out the little camera. "Now, then, you beauties! Look pleasant!"

He made a couple of exposures, and replaced the instrument in an upper pocket. Then, there being nothing more to do, they sat still, waiting, and hoping that the birds would lose interest and move away. After half an hour of fruitless hops and pecks, several of them did, but the monster cock refused to move from his post.

Evidently he thought these newcomers were some species of bird. Perhaps they wanted to oust him from his place. He would take no risks. He would fight to the death in defence of his rights. From time to time he repeated his strange crowing challenge.

It was frightfully hot. Little air stirred in these depths. Even Anson, who was used to high temperatures from childhood, wilted under the heat reflected from the rocky cliffs. But the great bird seemed only to grow more ferocious.

They tried throwing stones at him, but there were none of any size within reach. He dodged, or disregarded, these paltry missiles. Noon came and passed. They ate, and emptied their water-bottles; then grew thirsty again. Their patience began to wane.

"This is all jolly fine, Jack! I know it's a pity to pot such a fine fellow, but what on earth are we to do? We can't stay here much longer. I'm baked to a turn. I'm going to waste one round. I'll shoot near him. Perhaps the racket will scare him."

"Go ahead, then," replied Jack.

Harding fired. At the report, the great bird started convulsively, danced back a few feet, then, pulling himself together, uttered his defiant crow. The rest of the birds were not so courageous, however, for at the shot they bolted wildly into the coverts, and there stayed.

"If this beggar were only out of the way there'd be no trouble," said Anson impatiently. "I'm tired of waiting for him to go to bye-byes. Here's a chunk of loose rock. I think I can get it out and stun him with it, and then we'll—"

He finished with a gasp and a howl of dismay, for, as he tugged, the whole of the rock on which he stood gave way. Down he fell, gave a sort of side leap as he lost his balance, and dropped fairly on top of the huge bird.

Lithe as a cat, he clutched its neck, and, by some miracle, retained his hold as the creature threw its head back. His legs gripped its back, and in a jiffy he was settled, one hand holding firmly to the bird's neck, so that it could not strike at him.

"Coo-ee!" All the devil-may-care spirit of his native land rang in the cry. "Don't shoot! See me ride him!"

And, with the words, Anson kicked his heels into the bird's ribs, and away they went down the valley at a terrific pace.

Pompom yelled his surprise and consternation, Harding and Jack cheered, and, since the other birds were up and away at sight of the wondrous apparition speeding past them, the three slid to the ground and crossed the canon, where they stood beneath a promising bench of rocks waiting what should happen.

There was nothing else to do. Anson had gone with the speed of a runaway aeroplane. They could not follow him. Therefore, they waited. The valley was filled with noise. A thunder of flying feet drew nearer. They saw Anson returning. He was hanging forward on the great bird's neck, one arm drawing it close to his chest.

"Coo-ee! Meet you at the bottom!" he yelled, and swept past.

All the other birds had disappeared, for they had had the fright of their lives.

"He's throttling it into submission!" cried Jack. "Come on!"

He ran after the disappearing bird, Harding and the bemused Pompom at his heels. Before they had gone far they met the pair returning. But the big bird no longer ran fast. He was fighting, striving to release the terrible grip on his throttle. Anson had both hands at work.

"Fire two or three as I jump off!" he yelled, and threw himself to the ground.

Harding and Jack fired in the air. The big bird, jumped, spluttered, and thundered away, shaking his head from side to side, to make certain that it was still in working order. But it cast never a look back. It was too glad to get away.

"What a ride!" ejaculated Anson. "I'm glad I had it, but I never want another. I had to hold on to his neck like grim death, for I knew that if he could get one peck at me I'd be done for. And choking him was like hugging a schooner's mast. I thought he'd never weaken. And the worst of it is that I'll never be able to tell about it, for no one but you two will ever believe me."

"Well, we've seen, and that's something," answered Harding consolingly. "And now let's get out of this. I don't want another scramble in a hurry."

The big birds did not approach, and they traversed the rest of the way at their ease. When they had gained the ledge and paused to look again into that strange place where birds reigned, undisputed monarchs, Pompom threw himself at Anson's feet in humble adoration. He had ridden on the back of the terror of the valley and lived. He was something far transcending all that the little

savage could imagine, and he showed his reverence.

"You will become a legend. If these people have got memories, you will be a god," said Jack, laughing, whereupon Anson pulled Pompom to his legs by his ears, and patted him.

Nothing more was needed. Pompom led the way home in a dream of glory. As for Professor Maxwell, he was delighted by the news, and next day left his mysterious labours, that he might spend some hours in admiring and taking notes of these wondrous survivals of past ages.

"If we could but get that amazing bird which you rode up out of the valley, and harnessed him to a car, the problem of desert travel would be solved," he said. "As that is impossible, I will return to my own solution."

With which he dived into his cave, and was seen no more till supper.

The Way Out.

N EARLY a month had passed, an interesting and lively month for the young men and one of mysterious activities on the part of the professor. Under his kindly handling, the Bheele had developed a quite unexpected intelligence. They did his bidding at the trot, and made all sorts of excursions at his heels, some of them into the caves below the ledge. Anson, too, had been below, and brought up more opals and turquoises than the party could ever hope to carry away. With the other couple, he had made many sallies from the ledge, none without incident, and the collection of new specimens of insects and various other small and portable creatures had grown to such dimensions that the professor was assured of world-wide celebrity if only he could succeed in carrying a quarter of them to civilisation.

"The photographs alone will give us all the notoriety we crave," said he. "I am not a vain man, but we have certainly done well. In addition, we have put the little people on their feet. They will live the better for our visit. It was a good idea to teach them the use of bows and arrows."

Jack nodded.

"Little Kafoozlum was out with Snaplus yesterday. They were surprised by a pack of dogs, and Kafoozlum shot three of them. Snaplus thinks him quite a wonder. How goes the great idea?"

Professor Maxwell rubbed his hands, then wiped his mouth, for the conversation had taken place over breakfast. Evidently he had been waiting for the question.

"I was about to invite your particular attention," said he blandly. "Have you all finished? Then if you will be good enough to accompany me to my workshop—"

He had no need to say more, for they were already hurrying towards the door of the big cave. They crowded through the doorway, and stood staring at a strange huge thing

that hung midway between the floor and the high rock roof, a thing like nothing they had ever seen before, but which they instantly recognised none the less.

It was a balloon—but surely the oddest ever seen, for it looked like a huge sausage twisted to and fro and confined by a net of finely twisted grass string. A long, shallow car of light, strong cane hung beneath it, suspended from the netting. Ropes held the whole thing in position, and many stones were piled in the car.

"I have succeeded, I think," purred the professor. "I calculate that this will carry us well on our way towards the northern coast. There we will soon—"

"But how? What's that? What's it made of? How did you make the gas?"

The questions burst out from all three in a rush. His smile broadened; he chuckled with satisfaction.

"Simple, my lads! To the scientist, everything is simple when approached in the right way. The intestines of that Stegosaur, the getting of which so sorely tried your patience, provided the necessary envelope for the balloon. The industry of the Bheels, under my supervision, provided the netting and car, together with certain gums which I used to varnish the envelope. As for the gas, kindly Mother Nature has furnished a supply. Anson, in his treasure-seeking, tapped it, and, though perhaps it has not the lifting power of pure hydrogen, it will suffice."

"So that was why you cleared me out of the caves below?" cried Anson.

"Precisely. Your habit of smoking was not conducive to your safety. Besides, you might have wasted the whole supply in one grand explosion. I stopped the vent till I had contrived a pipe of varnished reeds, which I led up through a hole pierced in the floor of this place—and here you are! We can start as soon as there is a favourable breeze."

They overwhelmed him with congratulations, and began to substitute stores and the various things they had acquired during their stay for the rock ballast, so as to be ready for a start.

Snaplus, however, seemed anything but joyous. When he understood that they proposed to rise into the air and sail away in this weird-looking contrivance, he absolutely refused to go. Anyhow, he would rather stay in the valley. He liked the place. Never before had he found so much game, and, besides, he liked the Bheels.

"Snaplus not going along all same one fellow bird!" he declared. "Stay here. Take one fellow, two fellow, three fellow gin along same Bheel. Picanin—picaninnies. Snaplus boss fellow along Bheel."

From this project of taking wives and settling down among the little people there was no moving him, and Maxwell, having ascertained that the Bheels were ready to receive him with open arms, made no further objection. He promised to try and return at some future date, when he would bring along tobacco-seed, that being the one

luxury the valley lacked for Snaplus's perfect content.

Several days passed, during which they completed their preparations. At last came a morning when the few light clouds overhead were seen to be moving northwards. With great precaution, the balloon was filled to capacity and drawn out through the door, which had been heightened to allow of easy passage.

The Bheels assembled, Snaplus—now their blood brother—at their head. Maxwell presented him with his gun and all the cartridges they could spare, and bade him farewell. The four got aboard, the rocks were thrown out, and, amidst a mournful chorus of dismal howling, the balloon shot aloft.

Higher and higher it soared, till it reached the northward current, when it began to drift away at a rapid pace. Swiftly, they saw the valley slide away beneath them. Soon they had passed above its head, and were crossing the arid sands that everywhere surrounded it. Within half an hour of their start they had lost sight of the place where they had had such strange experiences.

For a long while no one spoke. Professor Maxwell busied himself with compass and watch, trying to estimate the speed at which they were travelling. The others occupied themselves with their thoughts.

At last the elder man spoke.

"My sextant got smashed beyond repair when the mule fell as we came into the valley," he said. "But I calculate we are not more than some three hundred miles from the coast in a direct line as we travel. I estimate that we are moving at something like thirty or forty miles an hour. If the wind holds, we should see the sea before sunset, perhaps have made a landing; but I cannot be certain."

"It's a desolate coast, isn't it?" asked Jack.

"There are a few settlements, and a certain amount of coastal traffic. We shall doubtless do well enough," replied Maxwell. "There are beche-de-mer fisheries, I believe—the big sea-slug, you know, so much esteemed by Chinese epicures. There are plenty along the coast. We might possibly supplement our supplies with them."

Anson shuddered. He was a true Australian, and despised Oriental luxuries.

"I think I'd rather stick to bully," he muttered. "We seem to be going slower."

It was true. The breeze was beginning to fail. But, no! Overhead they could see the clouds still scudding merrily along. The truth flashed across Maxwell as he glanced at the ground. The balloon was sinking, very slowly, but very surely.

"We must keep up," he said, and threw over a handful of the small gravel with which the balloon was ballasted, in addition to several larger chunks.

It rose again as he continued, and for a while they sped on. When they began to sink again he repeated the process, and so

(Continued on page iv of cover.)



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