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The Treachery of Study A



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*By the Author of "The Bullies' League," "The
Council of Eight," "The Secret Combine," etc.*

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

SOMETHING FOR FULLWOOD.

"IT'S a fact," said Gulliver.

"Well, I can't quite believe it—that's all," observed Fullwood languidly. "These fags are always talkin' out of their hats, you know. You mustn't believe all you hear, Gully."

"You silly ass!" snapped Gulliver. "I saw the money with my own eyes—and so did Bell. Didn't you, Bell?"

Bell nodded.

"Five quid," he agreed. "Lemon's got three, and Jones two. The little fatheads don't know what to do with such a lot of money. It's a fortune to 'em; the Third-Form kids only get a few bob at a time, as a rule."

Ralph Leslie Fullwood looked thoughtful. He and his two chums—the Nuts of the Ancient House Remove at St. Frank's—were lounging under the elms, in the shade. The April afternoon was unusually sunny, and it was a half-holiday.

The bulk of the Remove fellows were on Little Side, taking advantage of the glorious weather. I and my chums were there, of course. We were playing cricket—a practice match, in preparation for the coming season. Football was almost a thing of the past until the autumn, and King Cricket was coming into his own.

But Fullwood and Co. took no interest in manly sports; they preferred to study the racing papers; they preferred to back horses, and to play billiards down at the White Harp, in Belton. In short, they were "goers"—to use their own term—and cricket was of no interest to them. The only time they displayed any active concern was during a big match, and then they would make bets as to the result of the match. As likely as not they would lay odds in favour of the visiting eleven.

Just at present the Nuts were rather hard up. Several horses had disappointed them, and their available cash had passed into the possession of Mr. Jonas Porlock, the landlord

of the White Harp, who also dabbled in bookmaking.

"Five quid!" said Gulliver, almost sadly. "Just fancy those fags havin' all that tin! An' I've got just two-an'-sevenpence in the wide! How are you chaps fixed up?"

"I'm stony!" grunted Bell. "I was goin' to ask Fullwood to lend me——"

"Then don't ask," interrupted Fullwood. "I haven't got five bob to my name! Those fags ought to be watched, you know. Five quid! Why, they'll only go an' blue it on tuck. If they'd only let me handle the cash I could double it."

"The same as you doubled my quid yesterday?" suggested Bell bitterly.

Fullwood scowled.

"How was I to know the horse would let us down like that?" he asked. "I lost two quid over that race—so you needn't growl. I had the straight tip—right from the stable-door, so to speak—but somethin' went wrong. We shall make up for it before long. Bound to back a loser occasionally. But about Lemon and Jones, of the Third. I'd like to have a word with the kids."

Gulliver shook his head.

"They wouldn't part with a cent," he said firmly.

"There's no tellin'," said Fullwood. "Leave it to me—I can talk to 'em. I wouldn't trouble, only I'm short of cash. If we can get that fiver from the kids it'll be easy to double the money, and then say that the horse didn't run, or somethin'. We can give the fiver back, an' keep a fiver for ourselves."

"Sounds rippin'," yawned Bell. "But it can't be done, old man."

It was a blackguardly scheme, but Fullwood and Co. didn't regard it in that light. And at that moment they spotted Lemon and Jones, of the Third, emerging from the Ancient House. The two fags were looking highly pleased with themselves, and they set off in a bee-line for Mrs. Hake's tuck-shop, in the corner of the Triangle.

Fullwood lounged forward languidly.

"Hold on, kids," he said, in his best manner. "Just a word."

The fags halted, not at all averse to a little conversation. Their great wealth gave them a feeling of importance, and for once in a way they considered themselves to be more than the equal of any mere Removite.

"Well?" said Lemon carelessly. "What is it?"

"We can't stop long, you know," added Jones, with an indifferent air. "Still, if it's anything important——"

"I hear you've come into a fortune," said Fullwood calmly. "What are you going to do with it—buy a motor-car?"

The fags grinned.

"We've got a fiver," explained Lemon. "I've got three quid, and Jones has got two. But I should think you ought to know that by this time—all the fellows are talking about it, and we've had a dickens of a time."

"Why, have you spent it?" asked Bell.

"I mean we've had a dickens of a time escaping from the other kids," said Lemon. "We've been dodging them ever since dinner; they've been round us like a swarm of bees. So we can't waste any further time here. Come on, Dicky!"

"Don't be in such a hurry," said Fullwood. "Where did you get the money from, anyhow? Which bank have you been robbing—or how many horses have you backed?"

"Huh!" snorted Jones. "We'd get a fat lot of money backing horses, wouldn't we? It was just a coincidence, I suppose. It was Lemon's birthday yesterday, and he had two or three tips from his people. And I got a couple of quid from an uncle who's staying in London for a week or two. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Fullwood shook his head.

"No; but I'll do my best to remove a wrong impression," he replied smoothly. "You intimated, Jones, that you wouldn't make much money by backing horses. That's sheer rot, of course."

"Of course," agreed Jones. "Utter rot!"

"Eh?"

"Backing horses is a fool's game——"

"You little idiot, I meant it's sheer rot to have such an idea in your mind," growled Fullwood. "If you only had a little sense you could double that fiver by to-morrow afternoon. Double it, my infants! But if you'd rather have five quid than ten—well, that's your look-out."

Lemon grinned.

"I suppose you mean we should put the money on a horse?" he asked.

"Exactly!"

"Nothing doing!" said Lemon. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, Fullwood. That saying has got whiskers on it, but it's true. And this fiver in our hands is worth two fivers in the pocket of a beastly bookmaker."

"Hear, hear!" said Jones heartily.

"But, my dear little ass, the two fivers would be in your pocket—not in the bookmaker's," said Fullwood. "I'm not interested, of course, but I thought you might be glad of a tip. I know of an absolute cer-

tainty—something that can't possibly go wrong. Why, I'm backing five quid of my own money—practically all I've got; and you wouldn't catch me doing that unless I was on a cert."

Gulliver and Bell grinned. Fullwood's facility for telling lies was nothing new to them, but he seemed to be particularly glib this afternoon.

"What's more," he went on, "it's all rot for people to say there's anything wrong in backing gee-gees. Isn't your pater on the Stock Exchange, Jones?"

"Yes," said the fag. "What about it?"

"Well, what's the difference?" asked Fullwood. "There's a lot more gambling on the Stock Exchange than on any racecourse——"

"Gambling!" echoed Jones. "Rats! That's business!"

"What's the difference?" asked Fullwood. "When you speculate on the Stock Exchange—when you juggle with fortunes—it's called business. But if you speculate over a horse it's called gambling. Sheer bosh, my dear kids! It's just as much business as punting on the Stock Exchange is. If you backed a horse, Jones, you'd simply be copying your pater on a smaller scale. And there's nothing wrong in that, I suppose? Can't you be sporty for once?"

The two fags glanced at one another.

"Of course, that's one way of putting it," said Jones doubtfully.

"It's the only way of putting it," went on Fullwood, following up his advantage. "And if you kids would only trust me with your money, I'd guarantee to double it by to-morrow afternoon. No doubt about that at all—you needn't be afraid. I know about a horse that's running in the Helmsford races that simply can't lose. Well, what do you say?"

"Supposing the horse loses?" asked Lemon.

"It won't lose."

"Yes, but supposing it does?" persisted the fag. "I expect we should lose our money, eh? We should lose the fiver altogether!"

Fullwood grinned.

"It doesn't matter to me," he said carelessly. "I thought I was doing you a favour—that's all. I'd rather not be troubled, as a matter of fact. If you've got any doubts, you'd better stick to your money. But you'll be silly young fatheads if you lose such an opportunity."

The fags held a whispered consultation. They did not fully realise the serious nature of the proposal which Fullwood had put forward; they did not realise that it was a disgraceful plan in every detail. And Fullwood had suggested it in such a manner that the idea seemed quite honest and straightforward.

"Well?" said Fullwood, as the fags faced him.

"We don't mind risking a quid each," said Jones slowly.

"Risking!" echoed Fullwood. "There's no risk about it, you little idiot! This is a cert., and I should advise you to put every penny you own on it. Hand me the cash, and

"I'll see that it's doubled by this time to-morrow."

Lemon shook his head.

"Only a quid," he said firmly.

"Same here," agreed Jones.

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"Please yourselves," he said. "Hand over the money."

The lags were somewhat reluctant to part with it, but their young minds were not fully capable of grasping the fact that they were probably parting with the cash for good. Two currency notes disappeared into Fullwood's pocket.

"That's all right," said Ralph Leslie. "Just leave it to me."

And he strolled away with Gulliver and Bell. The two Third-Formers continued their way to the tuck-shop, still in possession of three pounds. And they were feeling confident that they would have another two pounds each on the morrow.

"Not so bad," remarked Gulliver, as he and his two companions turned into Study A, in the Remove passage. "That two quid will tide us over for the present, anyhow. You're not going to risk it on a horse, are you, Fully?"

"No, I don't think I'd better," replied the unscrupulous Fullwood. "There's nothing much doing this week, anyhow. An' I can easily tell those silly kids to-morrow that the horse didn't win, an' that they've lost their money."

Bell shook his head.

"It's a bit steep, you know," he observed. "Hang it all, Fullwood; I think you ought to take the money to old Porlock. If it's lost—well, we can't help it. But it's just as likely that it'll be doubled. If so, we shall get our two quid, just the same."

"It's not worth it," said Fullwood. "We'll stick to the cash."

Fullwood's rascality would have never come to light, probably, had it not been for the inquisitive ears of Teddy Long, of the Remove. But Long happened to overhear Lemon and Jones chatting near the pavilion on Little Side. And Long very soon set the story going round.

After the cricket I was chatting with a crowd of fellows when Jack Grey happened to come up. He was looking unusually thoughtful, and I slapped him on the back cheerily.

"Thinking about the century you're going to make in the first big match?" I asked.

"Or have you lost something?"

Grey smiled.

"No, I was just thinking about Fullwood," he replied.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie Treggill-West. "It doesn't do a fellow good to think about unpleasant subjects, old boy. An' Fullwood is a frightfully unpleasant subject."

"He seems to have been fairly unpleasant this afternoon, judging from what I hear," replied Grey. "It may be a tale, of course, so I'm not going to spread it any further—"

"Yes, you are," I interrupted. "You're going to spread it among this select circle, at all events. What's the yarn?"

"Well, it seems that Fullwood has been

persuading some of the lags to trust him with money," said Grey. "Fullwood's promised to double it, or something. I don't know exactly, but it strikes me that he has been trying to lead the lags into gambling habits."

"I wish you could be sure of it," I said grimly. "I didn't think Fullwood would be such a fool to try that game on. Do you know who the lags are, Grey?"

"I think Jones is one of them—Jones, of the Third."

I nodded.

"I'll have a word with Jones," I said quietly. "I'll get at the truth of this, Grey—although I won't mention your name, of course. If Fullwood has been really persuading the lags to gamble, I'll slaughter the rotter."

And I marched off, fully determined to probe the matter to the bottom. It was none of my business to interfere with Fullwood as long as he kept his disreputable habits to himself. But if he had drawn one or two simple lags into his cunning scheme well, it was time for me to step in. As captain of the Remove, it was really a matter of duty. And the first thing was to find out if there was any truth in the story.

This didn't take me long.

I ran across Jones, of the Third, surrounded by several other lags, including Lemon. The whole crowd seemed to be rather excited, and Owen minor was particularly violent. Owen minor was the self-constituted leader of the lags, and he was a junior with rather more common-sense than the bulk of the Third.

"Why, you silly asses!" he was shouting. "You babbling lunatics! You've simply chucked two quid away! You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourselves! And if you lose that money it'll serve you right! That's all I've got to say."

"Oh, rats!" said Lemon uneasily. "It's going to be doubled."

"Going to be lost, you mean!" snapped Owen minor.

I pushed through the crowd.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"Why, these two idiots——" began Owen minor.

"Shut up, Owen, you beast!" shrieked Jones. "There's no need to tell this Remove fathead! Why can't he mind his own business?"

"Nipper's one of the best," said Owen minor. "He's come just at the right moment. Look here, Nipper, these two lunatics—Jones and Lemon—have given Fullwood a quid each, to shove on a horse!"

"So it's true, then?" I asked grimly. "Look here, Jones, you'd better tell me the truth. Why did you give Fullwood the money?"

"He promised to double it for us," growled Jones defiantly. "And so he will, too!"

"You little donkey!" I said sternly. "Don't you know it's a fool's game to back horses—or to gamble in any kind of way? Don't you know that you'd be sacked from St. Frank's if the Head got to hear about it?"

And don't you know that Fullwood was spoofing you?"

"Sp-spoofing us?" gasped Lemon.

"Of course he was," I went on. "You'll never see that money again, I don't suppose. You'll be lucky if you do— But I mean to get it back, you little asses. Leave it to me. I'll have a chat with Fullwood, and make him disgorge. And if ever you break out like this again I'll tan you until you can't sit down!"

I pushed through the crowd again, and strode towards the Ancient House. I was feeling rather furious. Fullwood had deliberately enticed the fags into giving him money, and I was practically certain that Fullwood had no intention of paying it back. He was utterly unscrupulous.

Arriving at the door of Study A, I knocked and entered.

The room was occupied by Fullwood, Gulliver, and Bell.

"You cut across to the tuck-shop, and lay in a pile of grub," Fullwood was saying.

"You can spend one of those quids— Hallo! What do you want in this study? You're not persona grata here, you know—"

"And I don't want to be," I interrupted. "Hold on, Gulliver. I want a word with you—with all three of you. I think you've got two pounds belonging to Lemon and Jones, of the Third?"

Fullwood stared at me.

"Think again!" he said sourly. "And think outside in the passage!"

"Yes, clear out, you interferin' rotter!" said Bell.

"You've got two pounds belonging to Lemon and Jones," I repeated. "I'll give you just thirty seconds to hand it over—"

"You silly fool!" snapped Fullwood. "If you think you can throw your weight about in this study, you're thunderin' well mistaken. You can clear—you can buzz off! Scat! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," I replied grimly. "But I'm not going to clear until you hand me the money you deliberately stole from Lemon and Jones—"

"Stole!" roared Fullwood, jumping up.

"Yes!"

"Why, you—you insultin' rotter—"

"Oh, don't waste time," I interrupted curtly. "You induced those Third-Formers to part with two pounds, Fullwood, pretending that you would shove the money on a horse. You've really shoved it into your own pocket—"

"I'm goin' to book the bets after tea," snapped Fullwood fiercely.

I shook my head.

"You can book as many bets as you like with your own money, but you're not going to use the two quid belonging to Lemon and Jones," I replied. "Besides, I don't believe you, Fullwood. I suspect that you mean to deliberately swindle the young asses."

Ralph Leslie nearly choked. But I could see by the expression upon Bell's face that my surmise was right on the mark.

"Clear out, confound you!" shouted Fullwood, pointing to the door. "We're fed up

with your interference in the Remove, you—you outsider! You rotten street urchin! It's a pity you ever came to St. Frank's, with that shady, blackmailin' detective—"

"I'd better warn you, Fullwood, that if you say a word against Mr. Nelson Lee I'll smash you on the spot!" I cut in angrily. "And if you don't hand that money over now, I'll take it by force. It makes me rather sick to breathe the atmosphere of this study!"

Fullwood glanced at his two chums.

"All together!" he muttered. "Out with him!"

The Nuts threw themselves at me in a combined rush. I wasn't at all unprepared, for I had been expecting something of the sort; in fact I had half believed that a scrap of some kind would be necessary.

Crash!

My fist landed beautifully upon Gulliver's nose, and Gulliver staggered back, sat down on the table, and rolled to the floor, roaring. Incidentally, he dragged the tablecloth and a considerable amount of crockery with him.

"Ow-yow-ow!" he howled. "Yaroooooh!"

"Out with him!" gasped Fullwood. "We'll show— Ooooooop!"

Fullwood made that lucid remark as my left smote him upon the jaw. He wasn't hurt much, but he was surprised. Bell, who had been looking fierce, decided that the other side of the table was safer, and he dodged round.

"Well, I'm waiting to be chucked out," I said grimly. "You haven't started yet—so I think I'll start!"

And I assumed the offensive without a second's delay. I rushed forward and grasped Fullwood by the scruff of his neck and swung him round. He struggled and yelled, but he was helpless in my grip.

"That money!" I rapped out. "Hand it over!"

"You—you—you—"

"I don't want any more argument," I went on. "I can see that force is necessary. I'm going to shake you until you dub up. Now then—"

"I'll see you hanged first!" snarled Fullwood.

"Then don't blame me for what happens!" I exclaimed. "I don't like to do this"—shake!—"but you make it necessary"—shake!—"and it doesn't improve your appearance, Fullwood"—shake! "Still, I'm ready to go on—"

"Lemme go!" howled Fullwood desperately. He was in a very ruffled condition, for I had been shaking him with great violence. Gulliver was still on the floor, groaning. He wasn't hurt much, but it was more discreet to remain inactive. Bell stood looking on nervously.

"Better hand over the money, Fullwood," he muttered.

"You—you dashed funk!" panted Fullwood fiercely. "Why can't you help me—"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Bell. "Hand over the tin, Fully! I told you all along that it was a rotten idea!"

Shake!

"Feeling more determined, or will you give in?" I demanded calmly. "Don't mind me, you know. I can keep this up until further orders. Take your time, Fullwood. Still, a few punches might aid the treatment!"

And I proceeded to deliver them. Fullwood, of course, struggled violently, and I had my hands full. But he was comparatively easy to deal with, and before thirty seconds had elapsed he was looking rather a wreck.

"I—I'll pay up!" he gasped huskily. "Lemme go, hang you!"

I released the cad, and held up my hand.

"Hurry up!" I said curtly.

Fullwood, with an expression which was positively homicidal, produced two currency notes and threw them at me. I was half inclined to make him pick them up and hand them across in a polite manner. But it really wasn't worth the trouble, for I had made him pay up.

I recovered the money from the floor, and went out of Study A without even giving the Nuts a glance. Bell was unhurt, Gulliver only slightly hurt, and Fullwood was hurt very considerably.

He raved almost incoherently for several minutes, and there was not the slightest doubt that he would seek an opportunity to secure revenge. Not that I was at all scared of that.

But Ralph Leslie Fullwood was in grim earnest.

CHAPTER II.

STARKE'S OPPORTUNITY.

TEA in Study A was a decidedly frugal meal that day. This was most unusual, for Fullwood and Co. generally enjoyed luxuries and dainties. It was very seldom that they ran short of money, and when they did they felt the pinch all the more.

After having anticipated a highly festive board for that evening, it was not surprising that their tempers were somewhat short. But Fullwood partook of very little, and then he sallied out into the Triangle, and munched about with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

Ralph Leslie, to be exact, was in a very sulky temper. He was like a bear with a sore head, and anybody who ventured to speak to him was quickly snapped up for his pains.

It did not improve Fullwood's feelings when a crowd of Third-Formers drew near and proceeded to hold a conversation in unnecessarily loud tones. The fags appeared to be unaware of Fullwood's proximity, and the subject of the conversation was connected with swindlers and rogues and people who extracted money from others with evil intent.

Fullwood stood it for about half a minute, and then strode towards the group.

"You little worms!" he shouted angrily. "If you don't dry up——"

"Hallo! You here, Fullwood?" said Owen minor innocently. "Anything wrong, old son?"

You look a bit thundery—the result of having no tea, I suppose. It's jolly hard lines, being forced to give up a lot of tin after——"

"I—I'll smash you!" snarled Fullwood.

Owen minor dodged neatly aside, and the other fags dodged with him.

"Yah! Swindler!" roared Heath.

"Booh!"

"Who tried to steal Lemon's money?" yelled Jones.

"Who tried to steal Jones's?" shrieked Lemon.

"Fullwood!" roared the whole crowd.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood simply glared in vain.

"Who had to fork out to Nipper?" roared Jones.

"Fullwood!"

"Who was shaken like a giddy rat?"

"Fullwood!"

"And who's the biggest cad in the Remove?"

"FULLWOOD!" roared the juniors, in a perfect outburst.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ralph Leslie fled. It was really impossible to stand any more. He met Gulliver and Bell in the Ancient House lobby, and his face was as black as night. He stood for a moment or two, panting heavily.

"I'd give ten quid to get my own back on Nipper!" he snarled at last.

"No, you wouldn't!" said Bell. "You haven't got ten quid!"

Fullwood snorted, and strode away. He strode right into the arms of Starke, of the Fifth. Walter Starke had been standing in the lobby, and he grasped Fullwood, and regarded him curiously.

"Hold on, kid!" he said.

"Oh, rats!" snapped Fullwood. "Let me go, Starke."

"Not just yet," said the bully of the Sixth. "You seem to be rather wild with Nipper—eh? Come along to my study and have a chat. It's quite possible that we can come to an arrangement."

Fullwood stared, but as Starke had turned on his heel the elegant Removite followed him to the Sixth-Form passage. They both entered Starke's study, and the prefect closed the door.

"Squat down, Fullwood," he said pleasantly.

"No, thanks," replied the junior. "Look here, Starke, what's the idea of this? I don't feel like jawin' now. I've had a bit of trouble with Nipper; the interferin' cad——"

"Yes, I heard something about it," interrupted Starke, with a grin. "You tried to bone some money from a couple of fags, eh?"

"I didn't bone it!" snapped Fullwood.

"Well, you were going to back a horse with it," said Starke calmly. "Of course, being a prefect, I ought to report you to the Housemaster. But we understand one another, Fullwood—what? And, in strict confidence, I'll admit that it was like Nipper's internal cheek to butt in. You have my sympathy, youngster."

Fullwood grunted.

"I'm going to make the cad pay," he said darkly.

"How?"

"Eh?" said Fullwood. "How? I don't know—yet."

"Well, I can suggest a way," observed Starke, producing a packet of cigarettes, and handing it over. "Take one—they're good. Now sit down and listen to me. I'm just as bitter against Nipper as you are. There's no reason why we shouldn't work together."

Fullwood sat down, and lit his cigarette.

"Well?" he growled.

"For some weeks past I have been gaining power," said Starke. "With Kenmore and Frinton and several other prefects I've been showing the Remove that I'm master. Of course, you've been excepted, Fullwood—I've got no quarrel with you. I've been mainly up against Nipper and his gang."

"And they've been up against you," said Fullwood. "In fact, they've whacked you, Starke. There's no sense in blinkin' the fact. Kenmore's broken away from your set already. Nipper an' his crowd have got the upper hand."

Starke scowled.

"Have they?" he snapped. "We'll see about that! The whole trouble is connected with this Secret Combine rot. That's the stumbling-block. The Remove has organised a kind of secret society, called the Secret Combine——"

"Exactly," said Fullwood. "They've got a Punishment Chamber, and a Select Committee, an' all sorts of rot. There's no tellin' where it will end; but it's pretty certain that you're whacked, Starke."

Walter Starke's eyes glittered.

"You don't like Nipper, do you?" he inquired.

"Oh, I love him," said Fullwood—"like poison!"

"And you'd like to see him beaten?"

"I'd give quids to!"

"Well, why shouldn't we beat him together?" suggested Starke. "If we can only muck up this Secret Combine it will be good for us both—you'll have your revenge, and I shall be able to snap my fingers at the little outsider!"

"Very nice," said Fullwood. "But how do we begin?"

"I want you to find out everything," explained Starke. "I want you to spy out the secrets of the Combine. In return, I'll give you a solemn promise that Study A will be exempt from all restrictions and punishments. You'll be able to lead a life of ease and comfort; you'll be favoured at every turn."

"That's very nice, too," said Fullwood. "But I don't see how——"

"Let me finish," went on Starke. "Last week I tried to get Teddy Long on the job; I gave him money. But Long is a little fool, and he messed up the whole thing. Now I'm going to enlist your help—and you're not a fool, Fullwood. You're a keen fellow, and your brains are of the right quality."

"Do you want to borrow anything?" asked Fullwood sarcastically.

"Oh, don't be an ass—I'm not flattering you," said Starke. "I want you to tell me who leads the Secret Combine——"

"That's easy," said Fullwood. "Nipper is the chief."

"And who are the others?"

"Why, Tregellis-West an' Watson an' Pitt an' De Valerie an' that crowd."

"Are you sure?" asked Starke eagerly.

"Sure? Of course I'm sure."

"But can you supply proof—absolute proof?" demanded the prefect.

"Well, I don't know about that," replied the Removeite. "Proof? How can I get proof, Starke? The rotters never breathe a word, you know—an' nobody knows where the Punishment Chamber is. That's a secret only known to the Council of Eight."

Starke nodded and stroked his chin.

"Exactly," he said. "That's the trouble. Can't you find out where the Punishment Chamber is situated?"

"I don't see how," replied Fullwood, shaking his head. "I'd give quids to discover the secret an' hand it over to you—because that would knock a good few spots off Nipper, eh?"

"Exactly," said Starke again. "That's my idea, Fullwood. You want to get your own back on Nipper. Well, here's an easy way to do it. Find out the facts about this Secret Combine, and hand 'em to me. I'll do the rest, and you won't have cause to be dissatisfied. There's no risk on your side at all, and you'll have the pleasure of seeing Nipper and his pals beaten to the wide. I mean to beat them so thoroughly, in fact, that they'll be squashed for all time."

Fullwood nodded feelingly.

"I've heard something like that before," he observed. "I tried to squash Nipper once; but he's a fellow who can't be squashed, Starke. There's no sense in ignorin' the fact. I hate the chap, but he's a thunderin' tough proposition to tackle. If you beat him, good luck!"

"I can beat him if you help me," replied Starke. "Is it a go?"

Fullwood considered a moment.

"Must I keep this mum?" he asked.

"Mum? Of course!"

"I was thinkin' of gettin' Gulliver and Bell to help——"

"Oh, they're all right—you all belong to Study A," interrupted Starke. "And the three of you have the same feelings about Nipper. Yes, that'll be an improvement. Get them to help you."

"Done!" said Fullwood.

They shook hands, senior and junior, on the bargain.

"All you've got to do is to find out the facts," said Starke. "Just get to know where the Punishment Chamber is, and all the rest of it. Report to me, and Nipper will soon be finished."

Ten minutes later Ralph Leslie Fullwood sauntered into Study A. He was feeling far better than when he had left, and Gulliver and Bell noticed the difference at once. When they had parted from him in the lobby he had

been in a vile temper; but now he was smiling quite cheerfully.

"Had a remittance?" inquired Bell, seeking for an explanation.

"No," replied Fullwood. "I want to have a jaw with you chaps."

And he told them of his arrangement with Walter Starke. Gulliver and Bell listened with no particular interest. And when their leader had finished, Gulliver shook his head and pursed his lips.

"It won't work," he declared.

"En?"

"My dear chap, it won't work," repeated Gulliver. "We shall never be able to find out those hally secrets. An' if we do poke our noses too far—well, they'll probably get punched."

"Rot!" said Fullwood. "We've simply got to go about the work cautiously, that's all. To begin with, we'll observe."

"We'll do what?" asked Bell.

"Observe—that is to say, we'll go on exactly as usual, but take particular notice of things," explained Fullwood. "That's clear, isn't it?"

"About as clear as mud," growled Gulliver. "Take notice of what things?"

"Why, the movements of Nipper and his gang, for example," replied Ralph Leslie. "The only chance we have of finding out the truth is to follow the cads to this Punishment Chamber—we can't find it without."

"An' I suppose we've got to hang about, keeping our eye on Nipper all the time—just on the chance that he'll visit the rotten place?" asked Bell, with a sniff. "That's a fine idea—I don't think! You can do it if you like—"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Fullwood sourly. "You've got no sense!"

"How are you goin' to do it, then?" snapped Bell.

"For some time past the Secret Combine has been collarin' fellows who indulge in bullyin'," said Fullwood. "Well, my sons, I've noticed that Jesson, of the College House, has been goin' it a bit thick to-day. In fact he's been askin' for trouble. An' very likely he'll find it!"

"Where?"

"Isn't it probable that Nipper's lot will begin to act?" went on Fullwood, with cunning shrewdness. "Isn't it likely that they'll collar Jesson this very evenin'—as soon as it's dark? Isn't it on the cards that they'll take him to the Punishment Chamber an' give him a birchin'?"

Gulliver and Bell were interested at last.

"By gad!" said Gulliver. "There's somethin' in that, you know! Come to think of it, I did notice that Nipper an' Pitt an' several others were jawin' together in a secret kind of way."

"When?" asked Fullwood eagerly.

"Not half an hour ago," said Gulliver.

"They all went out—"

"Then it's too late—"

"It may not be," went on Gulliver. "They came back again, and pretended to be unconcerned. Besides, it's not dark yet. If there is

anythin' planned for to-night, it'll occur later on."

"Then the best thing we can do is to lounge about the Triangle and keep our eyes skinned," said Fullwood. "We'll station ourselves at different points—an' remain hidden. If Nipper can be smart, so can we!"

The Nuts discussed the matter for some little time, and sallied out into the Triangle when the dusk had almost deepened into night. It was quite fine, and the air was mild and pleasant.

The three traitors—for that is exactly what they were—posted themselves in advantageous positions. They were able to see the Triangle and the entrances of both Houses quite distinctly.

It had been agreed that, in the event of anything happening, Fullwood was to follow the members of the Secret Combine alone. If the three Nuts undertook the task, they would probably betray themselves. One shadower would have more chance of being undetected.

Fullwood and Co. had good reason for being suspicious. Jesson, of the Sixth—the bully of the College house—had certainly been extremely active during the day. Not only the lags, but several Removites, had complained of his conduct.

Jesson had been heard to express the utmost contempt for the Secret Combine, and had declared that he would act as he liked. He was not going to be intimidated. And it was just possible that Jesson had been putting matters to the test. He would certainly see the result!

For, as a matter of fact, the Secret Combine was about to act.

CHAPTER III.

FULLWOOD'S SUCCESS.

"By gad!"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood murmured that exclamation under his breath. The Triangle was very gloomy, and Fullwood had become somewhat impatient and irritable during the last twenty minutes or so.

Gulliver and Bell were not only impatient, but on the point of rebellion. They had decided—quite individually—that being on the watch was a fool's game. After standing still in the gloom for half an hour the atmosphere did not seem nearly so mild and pleasant. In fact the Nuts became quite chilled.

Fullwood had just been thinking of giving up the game as hopeless, when he observed several dim and indistinct forms moving beneath the old elms. Fullwood himself was behind a tree near the school wall, and quite hidden.

"By gad!" repeated Fullwood. "So there is somethin' doin', after all!"

It was not possible for him to see who the forms were, or what was being done. He only knew that several figures were quietly moving about. And this was an indication that something unusual was afoot.

Fullwood's impatience left him, and he watched intently.

Nothing occurred for at least five minutes. And then two tall figures emerged from the College House. It was impossible to recognise their faces at that distance, but Fullwood had no difficulty in recognising the figures. One fellow was Jesson, and the other was Carlile—both of the Sixth.

Would anything occur? Carlile was not a bully, he was a very decent fellow, and it was hardly likely that the Secret Combine would touch him. But how could they get hold of Jesson without Carlile being affected?

Fullwood soon saw how.

A junior ran across the Triangle from the direction of the gymnasium, and drew up in front of the two prefects.

"I say, Carlile," Fullwood heard the junior say, "can you come into the gym. for half a tick? I want to speak to you—alone?"

"Alone?" said Carlile. "What the deuce for?"

Fullwood recognised the junior's voice as that of Reginald Pitt. And Pitt's reply was lost to him, for he spoke quietly. A second later, however, Carlile went off with Pitt towards the gymnasium.

"I'll join you later, Jesson," he called out.

"Just as you like," said Jesson, walking away.

He did not get far. Even as Carlile and Pitt entered the gym. several indistinct forms surrounded Jesson from the rear and sprang at him simultaneously. He was borne to the ground on the instant.

"Why, what—Grooooh!"

Jesson said no more. Something had evidently been placed over his mouth, for Fullwood only heard one or two faint grunts. The attackers made no sounds whatever, and it was clearly obvious that the Secret Combine was engaged upon one of its dark deeds.

"Better than I hoped for," murmured Fullwood. "I've only got to keep my eye on the crowd now, an' I shall find out the whole game! Why, it's as easy as rollin' off a bally form!"

It certainly did seem extremely easy. Fullwood watched very closely, for he had no intention of being left behind. And it was necessary to be alert, too, for the darkness was rather thick.

Only just in time did Fullwood realise that the dim figures were fading away. They worked so silently that it was only possible to detect their movements by the sense of vision. Listening was quite useless.

Fullwood crept from his place of concealment and slowly edged his way along the school wall in the direction of the old monastery ruins. There was a thick belt of trees just there, and the Combine had vanished into them with their victim. Fullwood followed.

For one awful moment he thought that he had wasted too much time—that he had lost his quarry. But then he caught sight of some figures just within the ruins. Like a shadow,

he climbed a mass of boulders and peered over the top.

Quite near to him the members of the Combine were at work.

Jesson was being carried up and down in a clear space. Six fellows had got hold of him, and they marched regularly, as though they were carrying their prisoner in a direct line.

"Oh, so that's the idea," murmured Fullwood, grinning with triumph. "I've heard that the victims are carried about a mile—an' now I know how it's done. They ain't carried at all—except like this. By gad! An' Nipper thinks he's smart! This'll take a rise out of him—when I've done!"

Fullwood was anxious to identify the fellows who were carrying the prefect. But this was quite out of the question. Not because of the gloom, but because the members of the Combine were curiously attired in a garb which completely enveloped their heads and shoulders.

In broad daylight even it would have been impossible to tell who the fellows were. Neither could Fullwood make use of his ears, for the mysterious figures said nothing.

However, Fullwood had met with great success, and he saw no reason why he should not score a complete triumph. And it would indeed be a triumph if he probed the Combine's secrets at the very first attempt.

At last the helpless prefect was set down. Fullwood had rather expected Jesson to protest or to threaten. But he soon found out why the Sixth-Former was so weak and submissive.

His hands were bound behind his back, his ankles were secured, and a black bag enveloped his head and shoulders. Jesson was utterly helpless, and was compelled to go precisely whither he was taken.

And the next move was to place him upon a hand-cart, which Fullwood recognised as the property of Warren, the school porter. In this vehicle Jesson was wheeled about for fully ten minutes, backwards and forwards continually, without even a pause.

Fullwood grinned as he watched.

"I'll bet he thinks he's miles away from St. Frank's by this time," he murmured. "It's a rippin' idea, I must admit. But where's the Punishment Chamber? That's the main thing."

Jesson's ride in the hand-cart came to an end at last, and he was then lifted out and firmly grasped once more. Again he was carried up and down, but only for about a minute.

It seemed a very long operation to Fullwood, but actually it was not so. Barely fifteen minutes had elapsed since Jesson had been first collared. And now he was carried straight down into the ruins.

Fullwood whistled.

"Down in the old vault!" he told himself. "Well, I'm hanged! Is that the Punishment Chamber?"

Two minutes later Fullwood was in sole possession of the ruins. Everybody else had vanished, and he knew that the only means of vanishing in that spot was to descend the

old stone stairway into the vault beneath the monastery.

The spy went to the head of the steps and stood listening. It was rather a long descent, and he judged that Jesson's captors were about half way down. Listening, he could faintly hear the shuffle of feet on the stonework.

Fullwood commenced the descent.

He went slowly, and when he arrived in the vault he found it empty. Again he imagined that he had been too cautious—that he had left it until too late. But a few moments afterwards he found that everything was quite all right.

The party had plunged into the tunnel.

This tunnel led from the vault right into the old quarry workings, the other exit of which was on Bannington Moor. It was rarely explored by a living soul, and the old tunnels were left alone for fifty weeks out of the year.

Only a few visitors, during the summer months, ventured to explore the deserted quarry workings. At the present time of the year they were utterly deserted—and, for that matter, they were always deserted at night.

It was now quite clear to Fullwood that the mysterious Punishment Chamber was situated somewhere in the workings. Fullwood could understand why the victims were wheeled about as a preliminary. Jesson probably had not the slightest suspicion that he was now somewhere underground.

But Fullwood, the traitor of the Remove, was finding out everything.

He was certainly on the right track—and he knew it. His quarry was some distance ahead of him, right along the tunnel. He could tell this by the fact that a glow of light showed in the distance.

This served as a splendid guide. Fullwood himself was quite unseen, being in pitchy darkness. He felt no nervousness—as he might have felt had he been in the tunnel alone.

"Oh, this is rippin'—perfectly rippin'!" Fullwood told himself joyously.

He crept on, and hurried his footsteps somewhat when the light disappeared. Jesson's guardians had turned a corner, and Fullwood had no intention of being left behind at this stage.

He walked quickly, and when he turned the bend he found that the party had come to a halt, and that they were much nearer to him than he had suspected. He received quite a shock, for he almost gave himself away.

Hardly had he turned the bend when he saw the cloaked figures not ten paces away. He gave a quick gasp, and backed. Fortunately the members of the Combine were facing in the opposite direction—otherwise the spy would have been seen.

He crouched down, and peered round the corner.

There were six cowed figures, and two of them held electric torches. Jesson was being held by the other four. And not a sound was being uttered. Fullwood wondered why a halt had been called.

He soon found out the truth.

A grating noise came to his ear, and to his astonishment he saw that a part of the tunnel wall was sliding backwards out of sight. A secret door! Fullwood was now quivering with excitement and triumph.

The party entered the black cavity which was revealed. But several moments elapsed before Fullwood plucked up enough courage to move. Then he noiselessly walked along and peeped into the opening.

At first he could see nothing, but he became aware that there was another short passage, with a sharp turning a few paces within. And here Fullwood proved that he was capable of being very keen when he liked.

For he felt very carefully over the surface of the open door—his object being to discover the secret catch. Several minutes had passed before he was successful. Had the door been closed he would have failed.

But, being open, he was able to feel behind, and located the iron rod which operated the catch. On the front of the door, exactly opposite the end of the iron rod, there was a corresponding knob of stonework. And this was the secret of the door. Fullwood made sure of that first.

Then he ventured to creep within.

Having turned the corner, he saw that he was standing just in the entrance of a low cavern. There was only a weak, subdued light, and he understood why. For the centre of the cavern was hung with curtains, and the light gleamed within. If Fullwood had had any doubts before, they were now dispelled.

Former victims had described the Punishment Chamber as a room surrounded with curtains. Here it was—but with a difference which nobody would have suspected. For there was a space all round, making it possible for anybody to walk completely round the place on the outside of the curtains.

Jesson was within—this became apparent from the fact that Jesson was talking. His bonds had been removed.

"You—you confounded little rotters!" the prefect gasped furiously. "If you don't release me from these infernal stocks, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing!" came a deep voice, which Fullwood could not possibly recognise. "O bullying fool, your punishment is near! Prepare to receive the biggest swishing of your life!"

"If—if you touch me——"

"You have been found guilty of base and brutal conduct," went on the accusing voice. "In spite of repeated warnings you have ignored the vengeance of the Secret Combine. Other rash cads have been taught their lesson within these curtained walls. You, too, will receive a lesson. Enough!"

Fullwood thought so, too.

There was really no reason why he should remain. Jesson was about to be punished. It would be folly for Fullwood to stay on the spot a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

He was in constant danger of being spotted; even now it was not certain that he

would get away undetected. And the best course for him to pursue was to find his way back to the vault, and so into the open air.

And this Fullwood proceeded to do.

Before he left he heard yells and shouts from Jesson—accompanied by a swishing noise which could not be mistaken. Fullwood grinned unfeelingly as he took his departure.

It was impossible for him to aid the unfortunate Jesson in any way. He could not bring help to the spot in time. Before he could return Jesson's punishment would be over.

Exactly ten minutes later Fullwood emerged into the comparative brilliance of the Triangle. It seemed almost light to him after the intense blackness of the tunnel. And he took a deep, deep breath.

"I've nailed 'em!" he muttered, his eyes gleaming. "Talk about luck! I never dreamed I should find out things so jolly quickly!"

He ran across to the Ancient House, and was not surprised when he ran into the arms of Gulliver and Bell. His two study-mates grabbed hold of him and demanded to know the truth.

"Victory!" said Fullwood calmly. "I know everything, my sons!"

"We've been hangin' about here for half an hour past!" growled Bell irritably. "Where the deuce have you been, you rotter?"

"On the track of the Combine!"

"Eh?"

"I tell you I've found out everythin'," said Fullwood. "I know where the Punishment Chamber is, an' all the rest of it. Don't breathe a word—don't let another soul know."

"Not likely!" said Gulliver. "But tell us—"

"Can't stop now—I'm going indoors."

"Well, we can come with you," said Bell.

"Yes, but I'm goin' to Starke," said Fullwood. "You chaps go straight to Study A, an' stop there. I don't suppose I shall be long with Starke anyhow—it wouldn't look well for us all to go. I'll tell you about it afterwards."

And Gulliver and Bell had to be satisfied with that—although, as a matter of fact, they were not satisfied at all. Fullwood hastened away to Starke's study in the Sixth-Form passage.

Luckily Starke was alone, and he looked round impatiently.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded. "I can't bother with you now, Fullwood—"

"Oh, yes, you can," said the Removite coolly. "It may interest you to know that Jesson is bein' birched at this very moment by the Secret Combine. They're givin' him a fearful swishin'!"

Starke stared.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I've just come from the Punishment Chamber," explained Fullwood calmly.

"You—you've just—"

Starke paused, and stared hard at his visitor.

"Trying to pull my leg?" he asked sourly.

"Don't try that game on—"

"My dear chap, I've just come from the Punishment Chamber," repeated Fullwood, sitting down. "You asked me to find out the truth—an' I've done it. That's all. When I take a thing on I don't waste time."

Starke flushed with sudden excitement.

"By gad! Do you mean to tell me you've discovered the truth?" he asked.

"I've been tellin' you so for a minute past," replied Fullwood. "It's true—honest injun! I've done my part, Starke, an' now it's up to you to do the rest. An' I shall expect you to make it as hot as fire for those beastly cads."

"You know for certain that it's Nipper and Co.?"

"Well, no," admitted the junior. "But that's only a detail now. The main point is discovered—an' all the rest will follow. Just listen!"

Starke did listen—and Fullwood gave details of what had occurred. By the time he had finished the Sixth-Former was upon his feet, striding up and down, and his eyes were gleaming with tense joy.

"You've done wonders, Fullwood," he declared. "Why, this means the complete defeat of those little worms!"

"Of course it does," said Fullwood. "But how can you make 'em pay?"

"Leave that to me," replied Starke. "Long, of the Remove, brought me a yarn last week—he thought he'd discovered the secret meeting-place. But this is different, Fullwood. You actually saw the capture—you saw Jesson being carried away—you saw him taken into the underground cavern!"

"In fact," said Fullwood, "I didn't miss a giddy thing."

"And all we have to do is to wait our opportunity," continued Starke—"or, better still, make an opportunity for ourselves. You're absolutely sure that you weren't spotted?"

"Positive."

"The other fellows have no suspicion that they were seen?"

"How the deuce could they have a suspicion when they were ignorant of my little game?" asked Fullwood. "My dear chap, you needn't worry at all. Owing to my efforts you know where the birchin's take place an' where the Combine meets. I suggest that we wreck the place—"

"I can do without your suggestion, thanks," interrupted Starke briskly. "Leave this to me, Fullwood. You've done well, and I won't forget it. The Sixth takes a hand now, and you'll see the result to-morrow."

"Not to-night?" asked the Removite.

"Certainly not—there's no hurry," said Starke. "I'm going to call a meeting almost at once—Kenmore and Wilson and Frinton, and all the others. We'll talk over the matter, and decide the best thing to be done. But you can bet your life that we've got those kids—we've got 'em properly!"

Ralph Lealie Fullwood grinned.

"Owin' to my smartness—don't forget that!" he observed.

"No, I'm not likely to forget it while you're about," said Starke sourly. "But if you want this affair to turn out well—don't brag. Don't say a thing. Don't even discuss the matter with your study chums."

"Trust me," said Fullwood, nodding. "An' now I'll trot along to my own study for a little recreation. By the way, Starke, I suppose you couldn't lend me a quid for a day or two?"

"You suppose quite right!" replied Starke promptly.

Fullwood grinned.

"I'm hard up," he went on—"only temporary, of course. I might get talkin' a bit rash if I'm worried about money, you know. It would be a lot safer if you obliged."

Starke regarded his visitor fixedly.

"So that's the game?" he exclaimed, his lip curling. "All right—here you are! And now you can clear out!"

Fullwood seized the Treasury note which Starke passed across the table, and he cleared out quite amiably. Starke mentally bade good-bye to that pound, for there was little chance of his seeing it again.

Curiously enough, Ralph Leslie Fullwood thought so too!

CHAPTER IV.

FRINTON'S ASTONISHING JOKE.

"A.L. serene!"

Cecil De Valerie made that remark, and he chuckled as he did so. The chuckle sounded hollow in the confined space of the tunnel which led into the vault beneath the monastery ruins.

"Another 'victim' dealt with," grinned Tommy Watson. "My hat! I'll bet Jesson is feeling pretty sore just now. You laid it on beautifully, Nipper."

"I didn't give the cad any more than he deserved," I replied grimly. "He was let off lightly, in my opinion."

"Begad! I have been wonderin' what Jesson's opinion can be," remarked Tregellis-West. "There is not the slightest doubt, dear old boys, that Jesson will be reminded of this little episode every time he sits down. He must be frightfully sore in that region, begad!"

We all chuckled as we hurried along the tunnel.

"Yet these bullies never seem to learn their lesson," observed Trotwood major, of the Remove. "It is really astonishing, my good friends. However, I think we have taken their measure, in a way of speaking. They must assuredly realise that their game is not worth the candle. I am only regretful that we have not yet had an opportunity of convincing the arch-bully—Starke—that brutality and caddishness will not pay."

"Don't you worry your head, Trotty," I said. "Starke's beginning to realise it, even now—and he'll soon be convinced. Kenmore is convinced, and so is Grayson—and so is Jesson. I don't mind betting that Christine and Co. will find a wonderful improvement in Jesson's conduct to-morrow. There's nothing

like a good, sound birching to convince a fellow that he's a rotter."

"These Sixth-Form cads haven't been birched—or even caned—since they were juniors," remarked Jack Grey. "Naturally, it comes harder to them now. And they must be almost mad with rage—because they can't discover who's responsible."

I nodded and grinned.

"My dear chap, that's the very object of the whole game," I said. "The bullies can't discover anything—they're absolutely in the dark."

As a matter of fact, I was in the dark, too—unfortunately. At that time I knew nothing of Fullwood's activities. I discovered it all later on, of course, but not until a few exciting incidents had occurred.

We had just finished with Jesson, and that sore youth was now finding his way back to St. Frank's, after having been deposited on the moor. We, of course, were making our way back to the school by means of the tunnel—a short cut.

Our object was to get in before Jesson could arrive back. In this way he would have no opportunity of learning who his captors had been. In a big school like St. Frank's, with so many hundreds of fellows at liberty in the evening hours, it was almost impossible to discover where a certain number of juniors had been, or what they had been doing, at any particular time.

And when Jesson returned he would find the actual culprits in the Remove common-room, as though they had been there for hours. Inquiries would be useless, for he could not force us to answer his questions. And suspicions were quite useless. Starke and Co. had suspected us ever since the Secret Combine had been formed; but the bullies had been helpless.

On this occasion there were only six of us engaged in the actual work—Watson, Tregellis-West, Nicodemus Trotwood, Jack Grey, Cecil De Valerie, and myself. Pitt and one or two others had been acting as scouts at the commencement, but they were not included in the punishment party.

We arrived in the vault, and I extinguished my electric torch. There was no necessity for us have a light here, since we all knew the ground by heart; moreover, it was most important that we should not allow a single glimmer of light to escape into the open air as we ascended the stone stairway.

"Look here, my children, we'd better decide what to do," I said. "It wouldn't look well for us all to crowd out at once. I'll go first with Montie and Tommy, and we'll slip into the gym."

"Grey and I will go straight indoors," said De Valerie.

"As for myself," said Trotwood, "I will stroll round the Triangle for five or ten minutes. Pray lead the way, my good Nipper."

But our plan was not to work out so smoothly as we had imagined. For a diversion occurred which was totally unexpected.

I was the first to emerge into the starlight with my chums close behind me. I paused

before venturing out far, in case any seniors happened to be strolling in the Triangle.

And it was just as well that I did pause, for I instantly became aware of a figure moving in a curiously stealthy manner amongst the old, ivy-covered ruins. I turned my head quickly.

"Hist!" I muttered. "Stand still, you asses!"

"Great pip!" gasped Watson. "Are we trapped?"

"Rats!" I replied briefly.

I stood watching, and saw the figure moving away in the direction of the playing-fields. In order to reach the hedge the fellow—whoever he was—would find it necessary to pass comparatively close to the spot where I was standing.

He evidently had no idea that he was being watched, for he continued his way without once looking in my direction—although he several times glanced behind at the dark space of the Triangle.

As he came nearer I watched him more closely, wondering who the fellow was, and why his movements were so suggestive of secrecy. I was quite sure that he was no spy, deliberately watching for us.

And then, in a flash, I realised the truth. For I had caught a glimpse of a straggling beard, to say nothing of a slouch hat and a flowing cloak. I caught my breath in sharply.

"The Mysterious X!" I gasped.

"Eh?" murmured Watson. "What's that you mumbled?"

"Shurrup!" I whispered. "Watch!"

I required a moment to collect my thoughts. The figure so near to us was none other than the Mysterious X, the daring thief who had perpetrated many minor burglaries in the district of late.

Nobody had ever actually seen the man, and nobody knew who he was. The police were just as puzzled as the simple country folk. For that matter, Nelson Lee himself was in the dark—as far as I knew, at least I suspected, however, that the gov'nor knew rather more about the Mysterious X than he would tell me. He was keeping his eyes open, and something would probably happen before long.

But here was a chance for me to distinguish myself! What a piece of luck if we could capture the Mysterious X ourselves! What a victory for the Remove! I went quite hot at the thought.

The Mysterious X had eluded capture every time. Only a few days previously we had seen the rascal at work in an old barn on the Bannington Road; but we had not had an opportunity of getting hold of him, although we had recovered the loot which he had stolen from a local jeweller's.

But now the case was different.

The man was here, within fifteen yards of us. It was only necessary for us to spring out, and we should take him completely by surprise. I generally come to a decision quickly, and I did so now.

"Are all you chaps there?" I whispered, turning again.

"Yes!" came De Valeric's voice. "What's wrong?"

"Spring out when I give the order," I breathed tensely. "The Mysterious X is here—creeping along a few paces away. We're going to collar him."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

I knew the fellows were ready, and I rose quickly over a mass of broken stonework and jumped down.

"Now!" I roared. "On him!"

The others came pouring out in the most satisfactory manner, and before the Mysterious X could even realise what was in the wind we were bearing down upon him. He gave one gasp and tried to flee.

But by that time I was practically at arm's length, and I reached out. As it happened, the fellow stumbled over a hidden chunk of stone, and was on the ground in a heap before I could stop.

I sprawled over him, and Sir Montie came charging at the two of us. Watson was close behind, and by the time the others arrived on the spot the Mysterious X was buried beneath a pile of youthful humanity.

"Got him!" exclaimed Watson excitedly.

"Begad! Are you referrin' to me, old boy?" gasped Sir Montie. "Somebody's boot is scrapin' my ear—it is, really!"

We managed to sort ourselves out, but the prisoner was held down. Watson sat upon his feet, and he was spreadeagled upon the grass, De Valeric holding one arm down and Grey taking charge of the other.

The Mysterious X was utterly helpless.

"You—you little brutes!" he panted hoarsely. "Release me!"

"Certainly—after we've had a look at your dial," I exclaimed. "Off with that mask, you chaps!"

"And the beard," said Grey—"it's false, you know."

The Mysterious X gave a husky shout.

"Don't!" he implored. "Don't touch my mask!"

"Rot!" said Watson. "We're going to see——"

"I beg of you not to expose my features to the night air," went on the Mysterious X, in a strained voice. "I have a particular reason for asking this; you will be shocked if you see what lies beneath the mask. Please allow me to go, and I will be ever grateful."

The fellows hardly knew what to make of it.

"Don't believe that rot!" I said grimly. "He's only trying to scare us—and it won't work, Mr. X! Yes, we know you all right, and within an hour you will be handed over to the police!"

"Let me go, hang you!" snarled the prisoner.

"A change of tone, eh?" I exclaimed. "We'll soon see who you are!"

I reached out and jerked off the black cloth mask which covered the upper portion of our captive's face. At the same time Watson pulled at the beard, which was quite obviously false. It came away easily, and the Mysterious X was exposed as his true self.

A pale face stared up at us as we bent forward.



Fullwood chuckled with glee, for below him, in the Punishment Chamber, he could plainly see the hooded forms of the Combine!



**Nipper pulled the black cloth from the fellow's face.
"Great Scott!" shouted Grey, "It's Frinton of the Sixth!"**

"Great Scott!" shouted Grey. "It's—it's Frinton! Frinton, of the Sixth!"

"My only Aunt Jane!"

"Impossible!"

"Begad! It can't be Frinton, you know!"

"But it is Frinton," I exclaimed grimly.

"What's the meaning of this, Frinton? We've collared you red-handed, you know. And all this time—for weeks past—everybody has been puzzled——"

"You little fool!" snapped Frinton harshly. "Let me get up!"

"Not likely!" said Watson. "You're the Mysterious X——"

"Don't be a mad idiot!" roared Frinton.

"I can have a joke, I suppose?"

"A—a joke?"

"Of course," went on the prefect. "I was going to give some of the Sixth-Form fellows a scare, that's all. I got dressed up like this purposely. Do you think I'm that beastly thief?"

Sir Montie rose and coughed.

"We are really frightfully sorry, Frinton, old boy," he said mildly. "But how were we to guess? You didn't say who you were until we pulled the mask off, you know. You only said some rot about us bein' shocked. Why didn't you say you were Frinton——"

"Because I wanted to get away without allowing you prattling kids to know the truth," snapped Frinton. "It'll be over the whole school now—and that's just what I didn't want. I suppose you were spying on me?"

Watson and the others had risen to their feet, too. Frinton scrambled up, dusted himself, and marched away towards the Ancient House without another word. We stood watching him curiously.

"Silly ass!" remarked Grey. "What a dotty notion!"

"Off his rocker, I reckon," said Watson.

"If it had been somebody else I could have understood it," I said thoughtfully. "But Frinton isn't the kind of fellow to play practical jokes. I'm not at all sure that we ought to have let him go."

"Begad! You don't suspect——"

"The fact is, Montie, I hardly know what to believe," I interrupted. "But I can tell you that I'm not exactly satisfied. It's a bit steep to suppose that a St. Frank's chap is really the Mysterious X, but——"

"Oh, rot!" put in De Valerie. "Steep! Why, it's impossible, Nipper! Frinton was going to frighten some kids, I suppose—that would just be his idea of a joke. And I'm not altogether pleased with the incident."

"Well, nobody expected you to be pleased," smiled Grey.

"That's not what I mean," said De Valerie. "Frinton saw the lot of us coming out of the ruins—and Frinton is one of Starke's pals, and a bully himself. I hope the rotter won't smell a rat when he hears about Jesson."

"And we'd better get indoors, too," I exclaimed briskly.

It was quite possible that Jesson had already arrived, and it would be far better if we were all within the Ancient House. So,

without delaying further, we hastened across the Triangle in two groups and passed indoors.

Tregellis-West and Watson went to Study C, but I hurried along to Nelson Lee's study—the guv'nor being our Housemaster. I found him busily at work upon some mathematical calculations—this being the guv'nor's somewhat humorous idea of recreation. The very look of him was enough to turn my hair grey.

"Busy, sir?" I inquired, closing the door.

"Eh?" Nelson Lee turned his head.

"Don't bother me now, Nipper——"

"But I want a word with you, sir."

"You can have a word with me later on," snapped the guv'nor. "You will oblige me by opening that door, and closing it again—after you have made your exit."

I grinned.

"A polite way of saying 'Clear out,' eh?" I said calmly. "That's all very well, sir, but I want to tell you something about the Mysterious X. Barely ten minutes ago we collared him in the Triangle."

Nelson Lee turned in his chair and stared at me.

"You—er—collared the Mysterious X?" he repeated.

"Well, we thought it was him," I said.

"And, what's more, we pulled his beard and mask off—and found that the fellow was Frinton, of the Sixth. I thought I'd better tell you about it at once."

The guv'nor did not look very pleased.

"What did Frinton say?" he asked.

"Why, he told us that he was playing a practical joke——"

"Exactly," interjected Lee. "You would have done far better, Nipper, to have allowed Frinton to pass unmolested."

"But I didn't know he was Frinton at the time," I protested.

"Well, you should have refrained from stopping the Mysterious X, if that will please you better," said the schoolmaster-detective.

"I think I have told you before, young 'un, that you are liable to upset my own plans by this unasked-for interference——"

"In-in-interference!" I stuttered.

"That is what I said!" exclaimed Lee curtly. "My plans for the capture of the Mysterious X are all made—but I do not like to be hurried. You will please me, Nipper, by allowing me to make my plans as I please."

"But—but I thought I was helping, sir!" I ejaculated indignantly. "In any case, this affair was unexpected. When I saw the Mysterious X I naturally felt inclined to collar him. How was I to know the fellow was Frinton? All the other chaps believe that Frinton really was playing a joke, but I'm not so sure about it."

"No?" said the guv'nor. "And what are you sure about, pray?"

"Well, I hardly know——"

"Then the best thing you can do is to leave matters as they stand for the moment," said Lee. "I don't accuse you of deliberate interference, Nipper," but it will really be far better if you leave this thing to me."

"Oh, just as you like," I said gruffly. "I don't care. But will you tell me one thing, sir?"

"It all depends what that one thing is." "Well—is Frinton the Mysterious X?" I asked keenly.

The gov'nor eyed me curiously.

"Wait until two or three days have passed, Nipper, and then you'll know for certain," he replied. "I only advise you to refrain from jumping to a hasty conclusion. The whole mystery will be explained very shortly now."

I tried several other questions, but they wouldn't work, and after five minutes of it I left Nelson Lee's study feeling rather cross and decidedly unsatisfied. When he likes the gov'nor can be jolly aggravating!

CHAPTER V.

STARKE'S LITTLE SCHEME.

STARKE tossed his cigarette-end into the fireplace and lounged back in his chair. "So there you are," he said comfortably. "The whole thing will be dead easy. We can squash this Secret Combine with absolute ease and comfort. They don't stand an earthly chance—not an earthly!"

Kenmore nodded.

"It certainly seems the real goods," he observed. "But are you sure that Fullwood can be relied on?"

"Fullwood isn't a fellow I'd trust very far," replied Starke; "but in this business he's reliable enough. More by luck than anything else he found out where the Combine meets. Why, my dear chaps, he actually saw Jesson being walloped! It's absolutely the straight tip."

Starke was feeling very pleased with himself, and his manner was genial. He had several other seniors in his study—Kenmore, Wilson, Mills, and Grayson. The latter was a Fifth-Former, but "in" with the bullies. They were all birds of a feather.

For some little time past Kenmore had been in bad odour with his study mate, Starke. This was because Kenmore had tasted the power of the Secret Combine—in the shape of a severe birching. And Kenmore had refused to participate in any more bullying.

But other fellows had followed his example, and Starke had realised that it was only possible to maintain power by unity. And just now there was every indication that the bullies would successfully squash the secret society which the Remove had organised as a retaliatory measure.

"We've got them perfectly fixed," declared Starke. "I've just outlined my plan to you, and if any fellow can pick a hole in it—well, pick it at once. We've got to have the thing settled this evening."

"My dear man, it's a great idea," said Wilson. "So far as I can see, you're the only one who'll stand any real risk—"

"That's just where you're wrong," interrupted Starke. "There'll be no risk about it at all—for me or for anybody else. Nipper

and his crowd will be finally put out of the running by this hour to-morrow evening. They'll be squashed—they'll be obliterated."

"Sounds all right," remarked Mills. "But I can't help thinking that a hitch might occur. And if it does, Starke, we shall look the biggest fools in existence—you particularly."

Starke frowned.

"I don't know how much more convincing you require," he exclaimed. "I'll explain the whole thing again, if you like. We know fairly well what the Combine will do if one of us indulges in bullying—What the thunder—"

Starke broke off as the door burst open with a crash.

"It's only Jesson," grinned Kenmore. "Hallo, old man!"

"Feeling fit?" inquired Mills.

"You look a bit worn out, I must say," put in Grayson, with a chuckle.

Jesson, of the Sixth, was looking not only a bit worn out, but in a towering rage. His brow was black with wrath, and the rest of his face was black with something else. His collar was crumpled, and his tie was unfastened. And the remainder of his clothing matched.

"Those—those little demons have been assaulting me!" he snarled.

"So it seems," said Kenmore, with a certain amount of relish. "You're one of the fellows who didn't believe me, Jesson. I was just like that, you know. Why don't you sit down?"

Jesson looked like choking.

"You—you unfeeling rotters!" he shouted. "Can't you do anything else but grin? I've been half murdered! Those Combine worms carried me off and birched me—birched me until I'm bleeding!"

"Rot!" said Starke.

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

"No, I don't," replied Starke. "I dare say you're sore, but you're not bleeding. The kids would draw the line before that. Hard luck, old man! But you'll be the last of us to be touched—that's one comfort."

It did not seem much comfort to Jesson. He sat down, jumped up again, and leaned against the mantelpiece. He pretended to set his tie straight, but twisted round suddenly in the middle of the operation.

"They collared me as I was crossing the Triangle," he went on fiercely. "Piled on to me before I knew where I was. Then I was carried about and taken to that infernal Punishment Chamber."

"Didn't you recognise anybody?" asked Mills.

Jesson snorted with disgust.

"How the thunder could I recognise anybody with a sack over my head?" he growled.

"Well, didn't you hear any voices?"

"Only one—the fellow who does the jawing in that curtained room," replied the victim.

"Two or three of you know all about it, so there's no need for me to explain. The fact is, I've been too rash. I didn't think the Combine was so powerful."

"Everybody learns by experience," said Kenmore sapiently.

"What's more," continued Jesson, "I've decided to go easy—I'm not going to pass through another affair like this. It's all very well to talk, but this Combine had whacked us, Starke."

"It's whacked you, anyhow!" chuckled Starke.

"You needn't sneer," said Jesson crossly. "Your turn will come jolly soon, Starke. If you don't come up you'll be collared again. And they'll give it to you even hotter than they gave it to me."

The treatment had been very effective with Jesson—as it had been with the others. A bully generally is the first to crumple up when he finds that his victims are capable of retaliating.

Jesson could not quite understand the cheery atmosphere of Starke's study. He had expected to see his friends with black looks when he told them of what had occurred. But they were actually smiling, and seemed contented.

"You're looking confoundedly pleased over it!" snapped Jesson.

"Well, you see, things aren't so bad as you imagine," observed Starke. "To-morrow, old man, I'm going to show the Removees just what I think of 'em. I'm going to knock them about from morning till night, and impose punishments right and left—just to prove how little I care for their silly Combine!"

Jesson brightened up.

"That's what I did," he said. "To-morrow evening, Starke, you'll be collared just the same as I was."

"Exactly," said Starke.

"Eh?"

"That's just what I want."

Jesson stared.

"Just what you want?" he repeated in astonishment.

"Yes; I'm quite anxious to be collared," grinned Starke.

"Well, there's no accounting for tastes," said the other prefect sourly. "If you feel anxious to receive a birching—"

"I didn't say that," interrupted Starke. "It won't get to that stage, old man. After I'm collared the Combine's programme will go wrong. The little bounders themselves will be birched—not me. And you'll be on hand to help with the swishing. I should think you'd enjoy it."

"I'd like to half kill the young cubs," exclaimed Jesson.

"Well, you'll have your chance to-morrow evening—"

"Oh, don't talk rot," interrupted the other. "This big talk sounds all right, Starke, but what's the good of it? We're helpless—and the sooner we realise that the better."

Walter Starke smiled.

"An hour ago I might have agreed with you," he said. "But, as it happens, we're top-dogs, Jesson. You'll be rather surprised to hear that Fullwood of the Remove saw you collared; he followed you to your destination, and was on hand when your birching commenced."

"And haven't you half-skinned the little brute?" demanded Jesson. "Fullwood! I thought he was on our side——"

"And so he is," interrupted Starke. "Fullwood has been acting as a spy, according to my instructions. And by a piece of luck he got on the track straight away. He followed you to the Punishment Chamber—and we know exactly where it is situated, and how to get to it. But the Combine knows nothing. If you think that out, you'll soon realise that we hold the trump cards."

Jesson almost forgot his aches and pains.

"And are you sure of this?" he asked. "Is Fullwood to be trusted?"

"Yes—but in any case I mean to verify his information after the Remove's gone to bed," said Starke. "Now, Jesson, where do you imagine the Punishment Chamber is situated?"

"How the dickens do I know?"

"But you must have some kind of impression."

"Well, it's my belief that I was taken to a cottage or a small house on the edge of the moor after the little brutes had finished with me."

The other prefects chuckled.

"You were nearly a hundred feet underground," said Starke. "You know those old quarry-workings? Well, that's where you were, Jesson—in a cavern leading off one of the tunnels."

Jesson was incredulous.

"You catch me believing that," he said firmly.

But he did believe it very shortly afterwards, when Starke had explained everything to him. And Jesson was greatly comforted. The knowledge that the juniors were to be swiftly punished was extremely soothing to Jesson's nerves.

"And how can we set to work?" he asked.

"We may know where this place is, but even Fullwood couldn't give you the names of the fellows."

"We don't need them," said Starke. "When you came in, Jesson, I was just explaining to these others how I shall set to work. My plan is to bully everybody I can lay hands on to-morrow. I'll make myself conspicuous—I'll get myself marked down for attention."

"So that the Combine will drop on you?"

"Exactly."

"But how can you get yourself collared—and why?"

"I shall stroll out into the Triangle after dark, alone," said Starke. "That ought to tempt them, eh? And while I'm doing that all you fellows will go down into the tunnel and wait."

"For you to be brought down?" inquired Jesson.

"You've hit it," grinned Starke. "Not bad, eh? I shall be carried down there a prisoner, and the Combine will think that I'm helpless in their power. But things will go wrong then. Without any warning you'll spring out, collar the young brats, and release me. After that we'll birch 'em with

their own birch! And the Punishment Chamber will be wrecked to bits."

Jesson's eyes gleamed.

"Top-hole!" he declared. "But suppose a hitch occurs?"

"We won't suppose anything of the sort," said Starke. "A hitch can't occur. We shall make sure Fullwood's information is correct, and then we shall have nothing to fear. The Combine suspect nothing, and they'll fondly believe that I'm playing into their hands. As a matter of fact they'll be playing into ours. And after we've birched the whole crowd, and after their meeting-place has been wrecked, they'll be squashed for good."

"Besides, we can report them for laying hands on a prefect—" began Mills.

But Starke shook his head.

"No need to report anything," he said.

"We don't want any masters in this—it might not be good for us. No; we can deal with the whole matter off our own bat. And the Secret Combine will be a thing of the past by this time to-morrow evening."

"Nothing is quite certain in this life," said Kenmore wisely. "There's just a faint chance that something might go wrong, Starke. We shall do our part all right—you can rely on us. But if there is a hitch you'll find yourself in a rotten hole."

"There can't be a hitch," declared Starke. "And I'm willing to take the risk, anyhow. And that ought to convince you enough."

Kenmore grinned.

"Well, I can't imagine you taking much of a risk unless you were fairly confident," he remarked. "It's a great scheme, and it's bound to work. And the whole beauty of it lies in the fact that the kids will think they're winning until the very last moment. Then they'll get a fifty-horse-power shock."

All the other seniors were in agreement; they voted the scheme to be excellent. And after the Remove had retired for the night Starke and Kenmore paid a visit to the vault and went along the passage to the spot where Fullwood had indicated.

It was a lonely journey, and the bullies were by no means pleased with it. The dark, silent tunnel got on their nerves, and their only light was a candle. However, they had no difficulty in locating the spot.

But once there, the task of finding the door was another matter. Fullwood had described the knob of rock which operated the secret catch. But ten minutes had elapsed before Kenmore touched it—and then by accident.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed huskily. "What's this?"

The pair had been almost out of patience, and had been mentally planning all sorts of unpleasant fates for Ralph Leslie Fullwood. But they soon discovered that the knob was the real thing, for the door opened before their eyes.

And, plunging in, they found themselves within the Punishment Chamber. A little electric battery was placed upon a ledge, with a switch beside it. Pressing this, the interior of the curtained portion became illuminated.

And inside there were the stocks—massive

wooden contrivances which Jesson and Kenmore and others had good reason to know. The arrangement held the victims secure while the birching proceeded.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Starke, with glittering eyes. "Fullwood was right, after all. I shall be brought here to-morrow evening—but you fellows will be waiting outside, just along the tunnel. Before the kids can start on the game, you'll spring out and—well, you can guess the rest."

"Rather!" grinned Kenmore. "Fine! Great!"

They passed out and closed the place up exactly as they had found it—taking care to leave no trace of their visit. Then they hurried along the tunnel, and got back into the Ancient House just in time for their ordinary retiring hour—which, of course, was later than that of the juniors.

And on the morrow Starke put his programme into execution.

Before breakfast, even, he commenced operations. Doyle, of the Remove, happened to descend into the lobby by means of the balustrade—which method, if undignified, was certainly swift.

Doyle landed perfectly, and did not become aware of Starke's presence until the prefect suddenly dodged out of the cloak-room. Sliding down the balustrade was common enough, and was usually winked at by masters and prefects alike.

"Take five hundred lines, Doyle!" said Starke curtly.

"Eh?" gasped Doyle. "Fi-five hundred lines? What for?"

"For coming downstairs the wrong way," replied Starke. "If I catch you at it again I'll cane you!"

Doyle was rebellious—although a meek junior usually.

"Mr. Lee caught me at it last week, and he only told me not to do it again, and he wouldn't have said a word only I happened to bump into him!" exclaimed Doyle indignantly. "He didn't even give me lines."

"Well, I've given you five hundred," said Starke pleasantly. "I shall expect you to bring them to my study by seven o'clock this evening. Five hundred, don't forget, and they've got to be clean."

"But, look here, Starke—"

"Another word, and I'll box your ears!"

"I don't see why— Yow—ow—ow!"

Starke was as good as his word, for he boxed Doyle's ears with tremendous violence. The junior staggered, crashed against the wall, and sank dizzily to the floor. Starke's action had been brutal, and Doyle's ears were as red as beetroots when he swayed to his feet a minute later. His head was singing and aching.

"Oh, the cad—the Lullyng brute!" he moaned.

"Hallo! Anything wrong?" I inquired cheerily.

I had been having a run round the Triangle with Sir Montie and Tommy, and we entered the lobby fresh and bright.

"Dear fellow, your ears are lookin' shock-in'ly red," said Traggellis-West severely.

"Have you been fightin' so early in the mornin'?" It's bad form to commence the day by indulgin' in a scrap——"

"Starke did this," groaned Doyle weakly.

He told us what had occurred, and we were filled with indignation. And before we parted with Doyle, Heath and Owen minor, of the Third, came running up, both of them blubbing profusely. This, in itself, was astonishing, for Heath and Owen were the leaders of the Third, and considered it babyish to resort to tears.

"Hallo! Who's been turning on the water-works?" asked Watson, staring. "Your nose has been bleeding, Heath!"

"St-St-Starke shoved his elbow in my face!" howled Heath painfully.

"Your lip is cut, Owen minor," I exclaimed.

"Starke did it, Nipper," wailed the fag.

"He—he punched me in the mouth and knocked me right over. The cad—the beast! I've a good mind to go to the Housemaster! My—my front teeth are all loose!"

I frowned.

"Starke seems to be getting worse," I said. "Why did he punch you in the mouth, kid? And you, Heath—why did Starke put his elbow——"

"How—how do I know?" sobbed the Third-Former. "Owen and I were chasing one another from the Form-room, and Starke deliberately got in our way. We couldn't stop in time, and we bumped into him."

"The beast could have moved if he wanted to!" exclaimed Owen minor fiercely. "But he wanted to make an excuse for bullying. The way he knocked me about was something frightful! He—he even kicked me, the cad! Look at this!"

Owen minor pulled down his stocking, and displayed an ugly graze upon his left shin. Sir Montie and Tommy were both furious, and I shared their feelings—only I kept my head.

"This has got to be reported," said Watson firmly.

"No, it hasn't!" I exclaimed. "That wouldn't improve matters a bit. We'll deal with Starke ourselves—or, rather, the Secret Combine will deal with him. Have patience, my sons, and Starke will be sorry for himself. He's going to receive the biggest hiding of his life for this!"

I meant what I said, and was even more determined later on in the day. For Starke kept to his original programme, and bullied right and left. By tea-time over a dozen juniors had felt the weight of his cowardly fist, and a dozen others had been ordered to do heavy impositions.

With regard to the latter, I sent out word that no lines were to be written at all. The unjust impots were to be ignored—and I accepted full responsibility. Starke himself would never dare to report the delinquents to the housemaster. His power relied solely upon terrorism. Once it was proved to him that he was not feared, his power vanished.

The position at tea-time was precisely as Starke and Co. had arranged. Starke himself was marked down for attention—and he

knew it. The very attitude of the Remove proved that.

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, the traitors of Study A, enjoyed their tea enormously—because they were quite certain that the Secret Combine were on the point of coming a truly terrific cropper!

CHAPTER VI.

NOT ACCORDING TO PLAN.

WALTER STARKE strolled out of the Ancient House into the gloom of the Triangle. He was accompanied by Kenmore, and the two were chatting animatedly. The evening was somewhat windy, and the Triangle was deserted—or, at least, it appeared to be deserted.

"No need for you to come, Kenmore," said Starke, in unnecessarily loud tones. "I can go by myself all right. You get back and be waiting for me in the study. I sha'n't be more than twenty minutes."

"All right," said Kenmore. "Don't forget that paper for me. And bring some stamps from the post-office."

Starke nodded, and walked into the darkness. Kenmore turned back into the Ancient House. The whole thing was quite natural, and had no appearance of being especially planned.

Any chance observer would have said that Starke was going to the village—alone. Starke had his own ideas with regard to the deserted condition of the Triangle. He had been bullying all day, and he suspected that the Secret Combine had made plans for his benefit.

These plans really relied upon Starke himself—whether he would provide the Combine with an opportunity of seizing him. Starke very obligingly provided the opportunity—in the most public manner possible.

He did not altogether relish being seized and half-smothered by the Combine; but that discomfort was necessary in order to carry out the full programme. After all, that part of the treatment was not particularly trying. Before he could be birched he would be rescued.

It was a distinct comfort to Starke to know that a strong force was already stationed just beyond the secret cavern in the old quarry tunnel—out of sight, but ready to spring out as soon as the party arrived.

Starke had enlisted the aid of a number of fellows who were not exactly bullies—seniors who were up against the Secret Combine movement simply because it was directed in opposition to the seniors themselves. It was like the juniors' cheek to get up a scheme of that sort—and many Fifth and Sixth Formers were quite willing to see it squashed.

Starke, therefore, was quite comfortable. His bodyguard, so to speak, consisted of his own particular pals—Jesson, Mills, Wilson, Frinton, and Grayson—and other

seniors, such as Hodder and Goodchild and Shaw. There were about a dozen all told. In fact quite a formidable force.

So, Starke reflected, even if the Combine numbered eight members, they would be utterly helpless in the hands of the twelve seniors. And the programme was to capture the Combine, expose them, and birch them with their own birch.

No hitch was possible. The seniors were there already—waiting. Before Starke could be taken into the Punishment Chamber he would be rescued. And the ordeal of being carried about beforehand was not so very alarming, after all. Starke felt that he would quite enjoy it, under the circumstances.

He felt like grinning as he strode across towards the gates, but he kept a straight face, in case some keen eyes were watching too closely. Starke had no intention of betraying himself so early.

"By Jove!" he murmured, under his breath.

He had caught sight of movements against the wall in proximity to the gates. And a moment later he became aware of three shadowy figures preparing to spring. At the same second there was a rush of feet from behind him—soft, padded feet, as though the attackers were wearing felt shoes.

"What the thunder——"

Starke did it well. He struggled violently, and his voice was filled with fury as he was borne to the ground. He made a pretence of yelling, but a thick muffler was quickly clapped over his mouth and pulled tight. Then a kind of bag was pulled right over his head and secured round his shoulders, pinioning his arms very effectively.

He felt his feet being bound, and then he was lifted bodily and carried swiftly away. Not a word was spoken during the whole process. And the victim was not at all displeased.

He had been captured by the Secret Combine!

That fearsome organisation, in short, had fallen neatly into the trap which had been prepared for it. Starke was not at all comfortable, but he didn't mind. He even grinned beneath his bonds, and found that the muffler was not exceedingly awkward.

Being captured by consent, as it were, was a different matter from being captured by force. And there was always the glorious knowledge that his captors would have the tables turned upon them when they least expected it.

Starke tried to follow his movements. He knew exactly where he was being taken this time; he knew that he would be placed upon Warren's handcart and wheeled round in circles for a time.

It was rather interesting to see whether he would detect the various moves and manoeuvres executed by the Combine. He had been captured before, but he had never known that he had been taken down the stairway into the vault. Being muffled and

bound, it was extremely difficult to have the faintest idea of direction.

And it was just the same on this occasion, although Starke was in possession of the facts concerning the route. He was carried about, certainly; he was also placed upon the cart and wheeled for some considerable time. But, unless he had known it, he would never have guessed that he was in the vicinity of the monastery ruins all the time. Indeed, he would have been willing to swear that he was conveyed a mile or two from the school.

The ordeal began to get irksome after a time, and Starke was impatient. However, his release would soon come now, for he was taken from the handcart and once more carried along bodily.

He tried to find out when the descent into the vault commenced, but could not do so. It seemed to him that he was being carried straight along all the time. But then he grinned to himself. He was being jerked about, sideways, up and down, in a most confusing way.

This, of course, was to muddle him—he realised that. And he actually became quite lost with regard to direction; he hardly knew whether he was upright or horizontal. But he did know that he was still being carried. There was a kind of swaying motion, too, which could only be accounted for by the stairway. And the soft footfalls of his captors were uneven and jerky.

At last it was over, however, and Starke was placed upon the ground, and left alone for a second or two. He judged that the Combine was having a rest, for the Punishment Chamber could not have been reached yet, or he would have been rescued by his waiting bodyguard.

Yet something seemed to be wrong, for Starke felt his feet being unbound. Then something thudded, and there was a click. After that the bag was partially removed, so that his arms were free. His wrists were placed between——

Starke gasped. Not between the stocks! Yet it was sure this was the case. The stocks! That meant that he was within the Punishment Chamber! What were his pals doing? Why had they allowed him to be taken right into the cavern instead of releasing him in the tunnel?

Starke's feeling of contentment began to change; he was not exactly feeling alarmed, but he was certainly angry. Jesson was in charge of the rescue party, and Starke resolved to give Jesson a piece of his mind.

"Sheer rot, waiting until I'm actually inside!" Starke muttered fiercely.

He expected to be released at any second. And it was better, perhaps, that the seniors should wait until the Combine was in the Punishment Chamber, for then they would be trapped, with no escape possible.

Possibly Jesson had determined to capture the Council of Eight red-handed—actually at their work. Starke wouldn't mind if rescue came before the birching commenced. But he would mind very considerably if he received so much as one cut

The bag was removed and the muffer unfastened. Then the faint sounds caused by his captors died away. Starke was now free to speak and free to see. But he could not move, for his hands and feet were secured in the patent "stocks", which the Combine had invented. There was a padded hump in the middle, across which Starke was lying. He was thus in a most inviting attitude for a fellow with a birch.

The utter blackness suddenly changed to light. A small electric bulb had glowed into life above Starke's head. All around him were thick black curtains, above and on every hand. Beneath him lay a dull drab carpet. Yes, he was in the Punishment Chamber—and rescue had not yet come.

"Prepare to receive the biggest hiding of your life, vile bully!"

The voice was hollow, and it seemed to speak right into Starke's ear; yet not a soul was visible. Indeed, not a single member of the Combine had ever been seen by any victim.

"All right, my beauties!" exclaimed Starke pleasantly. "You needn't think you've got the upper hand, because you haven't." He raised his voice. "Hi! Jesson! Come on, you fellows! Hurry up!"

His voice sounded dull within the curtains, and no reply came. But after a short silence the mysterious voice recommenced.

"Pitiful fool!" it exclaimed. "Do you imagine for one vain moment that rescue is within call? You are in the hands of the Secret Combine, and the Secret Combine performs its work thoroughly. Make no mistake, O brutal Starke! You are absolutely in the power of your masters!"

And a hollow chuckle sounded within the weird apartment.

"Help!" yelled Starke, in sudden panic.

"You may well appeal for help," came the voice, in contemptuous tones. "But none will come. You are here to answer for a long list of crimes which have been committed, this day. The sentence of the Combine is that you shall receive five full-powered swishes for every act of bullying perpetrated since the rising hour. A simple mental calculation will allow you to know that your full sentence is therefore fifty-five swishes!"

This appalling pronouncement nearly caused Starke's heart to stop beating. If the sentence was carried out he would be literally skinned, for nobody could stand fifty-five swishes with the birch.

And where were the others—Jesson, Wilson, and the rest?

What was wrong? Starke was not only nervous, but wildly alarmed. He began to feel like a rat in a trap. There had been no sign of the rescue party, no sign whatever! And yet it had been on the spot—in great force—waiting!

"Jesson—Pinton—Grayson—Mills!" roared Starke violently. "Come and rescue me, you idiots! Hi! Help—help! This way!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a soft, gentle chuckle.

"Shout to your heart's content," said the

mystic voice. "You are far from the assistance you seek. You are within the secret and sacred walls of the Punishment Chamber of the Combine. And within these walls there is no rescue. Vile bully! Cowardly wretch! Brutal cad! Your hour has come!"

A swish sounded somewhere, as though a birch was being tested.

Starke went cold all over, and he almost choked with fright.

"Help!" he screamed huskily. "You—you little fools! If—if you touch me——"

"Silence, you dog!" commanded the voice. "Commence the punishment, O Wielder of the Birch! Lay it on with power and precision!"

Starke shivered. He listened for a moment, trying to ascertain if there was any movement out in the tunnel. But not a sound came to his ears except the hissing of the deadly birch.

"Help!" bellowed Starke again. "This way, Jess— Yaroooh! Ow-yow! Ooooh!"

Slash!

The first cut descended upon the most prominent portion of Starke's anatomy with terrific force. Starke nearly fainted with fright and rage. He howled like the coward he was.

Slash! Slash! Slash! Slash!

"Oh! Ooooh! Ow-ooop!" shrieked Starke incoherently.

"Five!" exclaimed the voice. "Five for bullying Heath of the Third. The next five will be the punishment for punching Owen minor in the mouth and kicking him on the shin. You ought to be slaughtered, you frightful rotter!"

Swish! Swish!

"Stop!" howled Starke. "I—I'll never touch a kid again—— Yaroooh!"

Swish! Swish! Swish!

"You'll kill me, you little fools!" moaned the prefect. "Oh! You'll have to pay—ow-oooh—for this! Lemme go, hang you!"

But the punishment proceeded.

Starke did not receive fifty-five slashes, certainly, but he was birched in the most thorough manner. He was birched until he was sore, until he ached in almost every limb. And his punishment, even then, was light in comparison with the sins he had to answer for. But it was the worst hiding he had ever received in all his life; or perhaps it would be as well to say the best hiding.

By the time it was over Starke had almost ceased to take any further interest in life. He simply wanted to lie down somewhere and moan. Being a fellow who delighted in inflicting pain, he had an absolute horror of pain himself.

He was bound down again, muffled, and carried away.

The whole process was repeated—the carrying, the riding in the handcart. And when Walter Starke found it possible to wrench the bag from his head he found himself on the bare expanse of Bannington Moor—alone! He had been treated in exactly the same manner as the other victims.

Rescue had not come.

Starke of the Sixth had fallen into his own trap!

CHAPTER VII.

A CHANGE OF ADDRESS.

THE fools, the muddling, infernal fools!

This was Starke's private opinion of his faithful pals. It might have been his public opinion, for he said the words in a loud, harsh voice. They floated away across the moor, unheeded and unheard, save by himself.

In spite of all his precautions, in spite of all his preparations and plans, the Secret Combine had birched him. And, to make the thing infinitely worse, he had deliberately allowed them to capture him!

All day long he had been asking for trouble; he had set himself out to be captured. And the Secret Combine had captured him—as he had planned. But his own supporters had failed, they had left him in the lurch, they had left him to his fate.

Why? Was it possible that they had been captured—a dozen seniors? Or had they deliberately allowed him to suffer?

Starke had seldom been in such a fury as he was at that moment. Racked with pain, humiliated, and beaten, he managed to get to his feet. The moor was deserted; he was close against Bellton Wood, and not very far from St. Frank's. Contrary to his belief, he was quite a long distance from the old deserted quarry, where there was an exit from the workings.

"By gad!" muttered Starke, his eyes glittering. "I'll make the cads pay for this!"

He decided that it would be quicker to make his way through the wood, and enter the tunnel by means of the monastery ruin and the vault. Not that he expected to find his pals there. He just meant to make sure of things.

And he would pay a visit to the Ancient House first, in case the Sixth-Formers were in their studies. It would only take a minute or two longer, for it was necessary to enter the Triangle in order to get to the vault.

When Starke arrived he found everything quiet. It was nearly bed-time for the juniors, and Starke heard a noisy chatter of voices from the direction of the junior common-room as he slunk through the lobby.

Under ordinary circumstances he would have made every effort to discover the identity of the perpetrators of the outrage. But now his sole idea was to discover why his own friends had failed to accomplish their part of the scheme.

He pulled himself together somewhat as he entered the Sixth-Form passage and strode into his own study. It was dark and empty. Other studies were dark and empty also.

"By Jove!" muttered Starke. "Are they still down there, then?"

He decided to waste no further time, but

to go and see. He was sore, and badly wanted to rest. The thrashing he had received had made him feel rather faint, and his chief desire was to get to bed, although he mentally resolved that comfort could only be obtained by lying on his face.

He left the Ancient House without being stopped by anybody, although several fellows glanced at him curiously as he walked past. There was something different about Starke's walk, somehow.

The Triangle was deserted, and Starke was very glad of this. When he reached the old ruins he picked his way through the rugged masses of masonry and found the entrance to the stone stairway, which led down into the historic crypt.

Striking matches, he made his way down, and when he arrived in the vault he was fortunate enough to spot a stump of candle which stood upon a ledge. He lit this and proceeded on his way.

The tunnel was wide and the going was quite easy, for the floor was smooth and dry. The air was perfectly pure, a perceptible current blowing through continuously. Starke had no fear of meeting the Combine. The members of that powerful organisation had vanished long since.

At last the prefect arrived at the section of the tunnel where the secret door was situated. It was closed, and he held the candle aloft as he gazed into the dense blackness of the tunnel ahead. A kind of nervousness had come over him. It was not very pleasant being alone in those deserted workings.

"Anybody there!" asked Starke hesitatingly.

"By George!"

The exclamation rather startled the Sixth-Former, for he had not expected any reply. But the next moment several figures loomed up into the radius of the candle-light.

There were ten or twelve of them crowding forward, and Starke recognised the group as his faithless bodyguard.

"A fine idea, isn't it?" exclaimed Jesson angrily. "What the thunder's the meaning of this, Starke?"

"I thought you were going to let yourself be collared?" sneered Grayson.

"And why didn't you come sooner?" Wilson wanted to know. "This is the last time I'll play a fool's game of this sort! We've been hanging about this rotten tunnel for hours—"

"You—you miserable muddlers!" snarled Starke.

"Eh?"

"You faithless cads!"

"What!"

"You set of brainless noodles!" roared Starke. "You deserted me, you left me in the lurch! And those infernal kids brought me here—right to this spot—without you interfering! Where were you—eh? Exploring the tunnels, or were you afraid to butt in?"

Jesson started.

"You seem to be jolly wild, Starke," he said. "There must be a misunderstanding

somewhere. We've been here all the time; we've been waiting to carry out the programme as you suggested. But we couldn't very well rescue you when you didn't arrive, could we?"

"Didn't you see those chaps bring me here?" demanded Starke.

"No!"

"Didn't you hear me yell for help?"

"No!"

"Didn't you see the little beasts take me away?"

"No, we didn't!"

"Starke must be dotty," declared Jerson. "There's been nobody here at all—not a soul. And we've had our eyes on the door of the place for an hour past. You must have been dreaming, Starke."

Starke gritted his teeth.

"Do I look as if I've been dreaming?" he shouted.

"You look as if you've had a nightmare," grinned Wilson unfeelingly. "Why can't you stand up straight. Are you in pain?"

"Pain!" roared Starke. "I'm half killed!"

"You sound like it!"

"I've been birched frightfully," snarled Starke. "The Combine collared me—just as we arranged—and brought me here. Instead of releasing me, you stood by and did nothing. And now you pretend to know nothing about the affair! I was beaten until I couldn't see straight. I'm sore all over. It's the biggest assault the Combine's ever committed."

The other seniors were amazed.

"Poor old Starke!" said Mills. "Something must have gone wrong, that's all. But you weren't brought here, old man. The Punishment Chamber must be in another part of the tunnel."

"Rot!" shouted Starke. "It's here, three yards away."

"Well, I'm hanged if I can understand it," said Jerson. "You needn't look so fierce, Starke. We haven't let you down, we've been on the watch the whole time, and not a soul has been near until you came."

"You've been here all the time?" asked Starke incredulously.

"Yes."

"Watching?"

"Of course," said Mills. "Did you think we would go to sleep?"

"But—but I know I was brought here!" exclaimed Starke, holding his brow. "I was taken into the Punishment Chamber—with the curtains, and the stocks, and the electric light! It's—it's uncanny!"

There was a short silence.

"It seems to me," said Jerson, at last. "that we've been dished!"

"Dished!"

"Exactly," said Jerson. "The Combine's hoodwinked us. They must have known that we were on the watch, and they took Starke somewhere else."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Starke. "I tell you the place was exactly the same as I saw it last night, curtains and everything.

And I was whacked until I couldn't think clearly."

"You told us that before," interrupted Goodchild, with a grin. "I'm not altogether sure that you didn't deserve it, Starke——"

"Wha-a-t?"

"Well, I don't agree with bullying," said Goodchild. "I only helped in this business because it isn't good for juniors to organise against the seniors. A decent thrashing ought to do you good, Starke."

"You—you——"

Starke gulped and said no more. Goodchild was a champion boxer, and he was quite capable of landing out if Starke insulted him, particularly in a spot like this, where the seniors could indulge in a scrap without being spotted.

"I'm going into the place," said Starke fiercely. "I don't believe you were here when I was brought along; either that, or you've deliberately tricked me. By gad! Somebody's got to pay, anyhow!"

He turned, candle in hand, and operated the knob of rock which released the catch of the secret door. The door opened at once, without difficulty, and Starke strode in, closely followed by the others.

A moment later there were several ejaculations.

"Great—great goodness!" gasped Starke.

He stared round him almost dazedly. The Punishment Chamber was quite different; it was nothing but a bare cavern. The carpet, the curtains—everything, in fact—had disappeared!

And fixed on the opposite wall was a big sheet of cardboard, with this message daubed upon it in black ink:

"Try again? Our new address is quite as handy as this one."

"Spying is liable to lead to trouble—so be warned."

"THE SECRET COMBINE."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Several seniors roared as they read the message. But Starke and Co. scowled, and they roared to a different tune.

"Jolly good!" said Hodder, of the College House. "I don't know who these kids are, but they're smart! This is one of the jokes of the term!"

"You cackling idiots!" snarled Starke. "We've been done, we've been dished all along the line! If you can see something funny in it, I can't! The Combine must have taken me to some place altogether different."

"Exactly," grinned Goodchild. "That's why we couldn't rescue you. Smart, I call it, deuced smart. You're in a worse position than you were before, Starke. I hope it'll be a lesson to you to stop bullying."

Walter Starke made no reply, he only muttered something violent under his breath and strode out of the cavern. The others followed him. They had delayed long enough; it was past nine-thirty already.

Starke and Co. had been beaten, completely defeated.

And meanwhile, in the Remove dormitory,

eight juniors were chuckling to themselves, although not a word was uttered. There were traitors in the Remove, and it was just as well to be cautious.

I was feeling particularly happy, for the bullies had been dished as beautifully as one could wish for. Of course, we had been aware of Starke's little plot almost from the first.

Pitt, who had been acting as a scout on the evening when Jesson had been captured, had become aware of Ralph Leslie Fullwood's activities. Pitt had made the discovery too late to prevent Fullwood finding out the secret of the Punishment Chamber.

And to punish Fullwood on the spot would have been a mistake, for we should have shown our hand. A quick decision had to be arrived at, and we had transferred the Punishment Chamber from the cavern to the curious old building situated upon Willard's Island, half a mile from the school.

It had been rather a task, getting Starke across the water without giving him a hint. But a punt had been used, and it had been

drawn noiselessly across by means of a rope; Starke being carried by four of us at the time. We were marking time on the flat bottom of the punt during the short trip, thus causing Starke to believe that he was being carried over grassland. At all events, he had had no suspicion.

The Remove had won another victory, and it seemed to me that the Secret Combine would very soon be able to disband, its work being accomplished. But this, of course, depended upon how events shaped in the immediate future.

As for Fullwood and Co., they were marked down as traitors, and the Council of Eight had already decided that they, too, would benefit by a short visit to the Punishment Chamber. Fullwood and Co. needed correction.

But some other events were destined to occur in the very near future which somewhat dwarfed our own campaign against the bullies. What these events were will be duly recorded by my humble self at the right time.

THE END.

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READ THIS FIRST.

ALAN CARNE is a young Britisher captured by the Germans during the fighting in German East Africa. He is kept a prisoner in a little camp far in the north-west when the news of Germany's defeat comes to his captors. Full of rage, they pretend to give him his freedom, and cast him out alone, without food, in the African jungle, knowing that he must either starve or be killed by some wild beast. Bravely the lad sets out. Before he has gone far he is surprised to hear footsteps coming along the trail behind him. It is **JAN SWART**, a Hottentot servant of the Germans. He has brought food, and Alan is glad of his company. The next morning they find the northward trail of a safari, with which they eventually come up, and Alan makes the acquaintance of Dick Selby. They swap yarns, when they are suddenly interrupted by a voice coming from a swamp. On investigating, they find a man on the point of dying. He is able, however, to tell his story. His name is John Hammond, the man whom, by a strange coincidence, Dick is seeking. He tells them of a mysterious valley, and they set out to seek it. One afternoon a black messenger comes. He tells them that if they do not immediately march to the south, his master, a white man, will strip them out. They indignantly tell the black to clear out. In the evening their camp is stormed by a party of warlike Bajangas. A fierce fight rages, but the white men's marksmanship prevails. The chums set out once more. They come to a river, which they have to ford. Dick slips, and the next moment is being carried swiftly towards the rapids.

(Now read on.)

A PERILOUS JOURNEY.

THAT he would be drowned was the first thought that flashed to Dick Selby's mind after he was swept off his feet and thrown into the depths below the rapids. The tide was whirling him along with the speed of a mill-race, and he knew that any attempt to rescue him must be futile. But it was only for a moment that the feeling of despair gripped him. He was a powerful swimmer, and, encumbered though he was by his clothes and boots, he was fairly confident that he would be able to get to the western bank of the river.

As he swam in that direction, breasting the current with lusty strokes, a clamour of voices floated to his ears, and he saw above him the halted figures of his companions crouched in black against the red glow from the fire that was raging in the forest to the east and the south.

"I'm all right, Carne!" he cried, as loudly as he could. "Don't you worry!"

A shout answered him, and he did not waste any more breath. He swam on, gaining very little in comparison with the pace he was carried down the stream.

He was now drawing near to a sharp bend of the channel. He swung around it, swimming with ease; and he was making steady headway, and maintaining his strength in

spite of the weight of his clothes, when he struck his knee with considerable force against a submerged rock. The blow caused him torturing agony, and paralysed his limbs. He was helpless now, dizzy and weak with pain, at the mercy of the seething tide.

He drifted along for a few yards, keeping himself afloat by feeble, relaxed efforts; and then, as he was about to sink, he felt a heavy, jarring thud. He had been flung half out of water, and was resting on the sloping margin of a small sandbar that was two or three yards in width. But for this timely haven of refuge he would have been drowned. Realising what a narrow escape he had had, he crawled with difficulty to the low crest of the bar, and dropped flat from exhaustion.

"Thank Heaven!" he panted. "If it hadn't been for this I should have gone to the bottom!"

The clamour above had ceased. There was no sound except the strident, hissing roar of the swollen river. A jutting promontory hid from view the rapids by which the safari had been crossing. The shore to westward was shrouded in impenetrable gloom, and to the east the glow of the flames was ebbing beyond the stretch of forest on that bank which had not been in the path of the wind-blown conflagration.

(Continued on v. 1 i of cover.)

Dick's knee was only badly bruised, but sufficiently so to cripple him as far as swimming was concerned. He lay there for a short interval, while his pain somewhat abated. And when at length he got to his feet, scarcely able to stand on his injured limb, he perceived a dim object approaching him from upstream, gliding on the surface of the current. It came swiftly closer, and, to the lad's surprise and joy, the little Hottentot splashed out upon the sandbar like a black, dripping otter, stripped to his waist-cloth. Before he had uttered a word he shouted at the top of his voice, and at once a faint shout rang in reply.

"Now they know that I have found you, baas, and that you are not drowned," he said breathlessly. "They have all gone to the other shore, where they will wait for us. Baas Carne would have come after you, but I made him let me come instead. And now I will help you to swim over there, baas."

"I can't swim, not even with your help," Dick answered ruefully. "It is impossible, Jan. I have hurt my knee. I hit it on a rock."

"That is very bad," muttered Jan. "What are you to do?"

"You will have to leave me. I dare say my knee will be better in an hour or so, and I will be able to get across. Go back and tell Alan Carne."

"It might not be safe for you to stay here. There are crocodiles to be feared. If I leave you I will soon return, baas, for I have thought of something. There is a big coil of rope in your safari. I will have them fasten one end to a tree, straight across from this island, and I will take the other end, and go up the stream with it, and swim down and over to you. Then I will sit here and hold the rope tightly while you cross by it, and when you have reached the shore I will tie the rope around my waist and swim back."

It was a feasible plan that had occurred to the Hottentot. The rope was a stout one, such as is carried by every safari to be used in fording rivers, and there could be no doubt that it would stretch to at least the required length.

"That's a fine idea!" declared Dick, his face brightening. "I can't even kick with my crippled leg, but I guess it will be easy for me to get over by hauling myself along the——" He paused abruptly. "Look! The water is rising!" he exclaimed in dismay.

He was right. During the brief interval that had elapsed since Dick had landed here the water had crept so much higher that the width of the sandbar was a third less than it had been. And a further rise might be expected. The full force of the heavy rain which had fallen in some distant locality to the south, and had flooded the river, was probably yet to come. It was a disheartening discovery. Jan and the lad stared at each other in silence for a few seconds.

"I don't like this," said Dick. "I reckon you'll have to be quick if you're going to save me, else I'll be washed off."

"I'll be very quick, baas," the Hottentot

replied. "It won't be long until I am back with the rope. I will go now."

"You must be tired, Jan. Are you sure you can swim across?"

"Oh, yes, baas, I can swim like a fish! I will show you!"

"Well, do your best. If I shouldn't be here when you return, save yourself by sticking to the rope, and tell Alan Carne from me that he's to march the safari southward, and not try to reach the hidden valley."

"Don't talk like that, baas, for I shall save you. There will be time enough. I will find you waiting here."

With that Jan was gone. He waded above the little islet of sand for several yards, until only his head and shoulders were visible; and then, waving his hand, he struck out with muscular strokes, swimming diagonally up and across the brimming flood.

"When you hear me shout, baas," he called back, "you will know that I have got ashore."

His lean, lithe body cleft the water like an eel, slipping easily through it, and he gained on the fierce current as rapidly as he was swept down with it. Now he dived, now reappeared on the surface, now leapt from the river as a fish jumps at a fly; and thus he fought on, making good headway, until he was lost to sight in the darkness that cloaked the western bank of the stream.

"There's a chance for me," Dick reflected. "It's a mighty slim one, though."

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

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for



**THE
GREAT
DANCING SERIAL**

The sandbar was dwindling in size, shrinking inch by inch. It was submerged except for a circular patch that was no more than a yard in diameter, when, five minutes after the Hottentot had gone, a shout rang faintly above the roar of the flood.

Jan had safely reached the shore; but how long would it be before he would return with the rope? He had landed somewhere below the little island, and he would have to go a considerable distance up the stream to join his companions, who must be waiting for him near the rapids.

Presently a light glimmered in that direction, over on the bank. It was the glow of a lantern, and the dusky figures of Alan Carne and the natives could be seen moving to and fro in front of it, doubtless engaged in securing the rope to a tree.

The sight of the winking flame cheered Dick, but his heart sank as he observed that the bar was almost entirely covered. The tide was lapping his feet, and it crept higher and higher, mounting gradually from his ankles to his knees. He was in a desperate plight, and his courage was ebbing. He knew that it would be impossible for him to swim across, for the least movement of his injured leg gave him excruciating pain.

"I guess I'll have to be prepared for the worst," he said to himself. "It looks as if I were going to be washed away before the Hottentot gets here!"

It was fully a quarter of an hour since Jan had got ashore, and there was no sign of him yet. Had he started on his return journey, or was he still on the bank? There was no shouting. The distant lantern gleamed brightly, no longer obscured by the black forms of the safari men. For a few more minutes Dick waited in keen suspense, while the prospects of his being rescued faded to despair. The flood was at his waist now, and it became increasingly difficult for him to withstand its surging force.

It rose a little higher, and he had lost all hope, when a splashing noise attracted his attention, and he caught a glimpse of Jan's bobbing black head above the submerged

sandbar, and the slack rope trailing behind. And as he was watching the Hottentot, and calling to him to hurry, he failed to see a big log that was drifting towards him until it was too late to avoid it.

The end of it lunged heavily against him, knocking him off his feet. In a trice he was down and under, the hissing water closing over him; and when he shot to the surface, throwing out his arms wildly, the log was alongside of him. It was the trunk of a dead tree, and by a frantic effort, in spite of the agonising wrench to his crippled knee, the lad got astride of it, and with both hands clutched the stump of a broken limb that was within his reach.

He glanced over his shoulder at Jan, who was half a dozen yards from him, and moving rapidly with the noosed end of the rope in his grasp. He slid nearer, gaining on the log, and then he was checked with a jerk as the rope suddenly tautened.

"Shall I let go and come to you, baas?" he cried.

"No, no! Swim back to the shore!" Dick shouted to him. "I'll be all right! I am not in any danger!"

"But Baas Carne will be angry if I—"

"Never mind about that, Jan! The current will sweep me in! I'll land somewhere on the west bank. Tell Alan Carne to push to the north, along the edge of the river, until he finds me! I'll be coming towards him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, baas." "Back and tell him to—"

The Hottentot's voice was drowned by the gurgling sound of the water. He had meanwhile been swinging over to the shore, holding tightly to the taut rope and struggling to keep his head above the surface. He now melted into the gloom, and Dick, astride of his precarious perch, was carried swiftly on with the racing tide. He was leaving his companions behind him, and was adrift in the middle of a river that was bearing him to remote and unknown wilds.

(To be continued.)

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