

Rebels of St. Frank's!

by
E. S. Brooks



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Rebels of St. Frank's!



They've caused a few stirs in their time, have **WILLY HANDFORTH & Co.**, of **St. Frank's**, but for sheer daring their latest exploits take the cake! Read what happens in this absorbing new long complete school story.

By **EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.**

CHAPTER I.

Easy for the Third!

WILLY HANDFORTH, skipper of the Third Form, walked briskly towards the School House at **St. Frank's College**. Afternoon lessons were just due to start, and all the other juniors had already gone into their various Form-rooms, which were situate in the five Houses of which **St. Frank's** was comprised—School, Modern, Ancient, East and West Houses.

Willy, who had just come from the pets' quarters, where fellows kept their pet animals, had been delayed by a slight

peevishness on the part of **Priscilla**, his parrot. She had gnawed off her food a bit, too, and Willy was rather concerned. However, he had satisfied himself that the parrot was not really ill.

He rather suspected that **Marmaduke**, another of his pets, was responsible. The little monkey had lately developed a habit of climbing to the top of his cage, clinging to the bars, and making rude faces at **Priscilla**. She had displayed a lofty indifference to **Marmaduke's** ungentlemanly behaviour at the start; but now apparently it was beginning to get on her nerves. Willy had banished **Marmaduke** to a corner, where he could only make faces at

Rupert, the rat, and Septimus, the snake, two more of his pets, and these creatures were not at all likely to be offended.

As Willy approached the School House he suddenly abandoned his brisk step. Without any apparent reason he gave four or five wild leaps into the air, and then settled down again into his former method of progress. Schoolboys of Willy's tender age are always liable to give vent to these spasms of exuberance.

A boy in the Remove Form, having regard for his dignity, would have ascended the School House steps in an ordinary, commonplace fashion. But Willy went up the steps sideways, after the manner of a crab, and when he arrived at the top he whizzed through the open doorway like a cart-wheel. In the process he shed a pocket-knife, a packet of toffee, and a Jew's harp.

Having retrieved these trifles, he stowed them away again, and marched into the Third-Form class-room. The rest of the fags were already in their places, and Mr. Austin Suncliffe, whose duty it was to preside over the Third, was sitting at his desk, polishing his glasses.

Willy Handforth went to his place and sat down. He expected to hear a command from "old Sunny." He knew that he was a minute or two late, but he felt that he had an excellent excuse. Rather to his surprise, Mr. Suncliffe took no notice of him whatsoever, but continued to polish his glasses with a far-away expression in his eyes.

"You're safe enough!" whispered Chubby Heath, one of Willy's chums. "Sunny's miles away this afternoon."

"We're going to have an easy time," grinned Christopher Lemon, otherwise known as "Juicy."

Fags were whispering together in every part of the Form-room, and some of them were kicking up quite a din. But Mr. Suncliffe still remained indifferent, and he had apparently forgotten that the fags were here for work. As long as he remained absent-minded, the fags were perfectly satisfied.

"Must be that legacy of his," said Chubby Heath. "Suddenly coming into five thousand quid is enough to make anybody dreamy!"

"I'm not so sure," said Willy, as he closely watched Mr. Suncliffe. "I don't be-

lieve he's thinking about that legacy at all."

"Then what's the matter with him?" asked Juicy Lemon.

Willy made no reply. It was common knowledge in the Third Form that Mr. Suncliffe had recently inherited the comfortable sum of five thousand pounds from some wealthy relative. Curiously enough, however, he had not seemed excited about it, but had continued his duties as usual.

"It's a wonder he doesn't retire," murmured Owen minor. "Silly idea, to stick on at St. Frank's when he's got five thousand quid in the bank."

"You're dotty," said Willy, with a sniff. "Five thousand quid isn't sufficient to provide him with a decent income. It only means about five pounds a week if it's safely invested."

"Well, five quid a week isn't so daisy," said Chubby.

"It's hardly enough, though," said Willy. "He could live on it, of course, but he wouldn't have much of a life. He's sensible to stick to his job."

"What rot!" said Juicy Lemon, disappointed. "I was hoping that old Sunny would leave, and that we should have a new Form-master. We could have ragged the new man no end!"

"Sunny's all right, and we don't want to lose him," replied Willy coldly. "We might get a lot worse. I don't believe he's thinking about that legacy at all. Until to-day he hasn't been a bit different, so there must be something else on his mind."

"Worrying about the money, I dare say," suggested Chubby. "Wondering how he can invest it."

"He's not worrying at all!" retorted Willy. "Look at his face! Look at that dreamy look in his eyes! He's as happy as a sand-boy—that, that means only one thing. His mind's on cricket!"

The other fags within hearing grinned. Mr. Suncliffe's passion in life was cricket.

"Cricket! In November?" said Juicy Lemon, with a sniff. "Draw it mild, Willy!"

"All right—we'll test it!" said Willy promptly.

He rose to his feet, and went across to the Form-master's desk.

"I think our men will have all their work cut out next summer, sir," he said casually.

Mr. Suncliffe started,

"They will, indeed," he replied. "The Australians will strain every muscle and fling in order to regain the Ashes."

"According to what we've heard, sir, we shan't have Hobbs," remarked Willy solemnly.

"A pity—a great pity!" said Mr. Suncliffe. "Of course, there is Hammond. I regard Hammond as a very great batsman. But it is in the bowling that we shall require to look to our laurels. Larwood is a splendid man, but I doubt if he has sufficient stamina to carry him through the Tests satisfactorily. Let us hope that my fears are ill-founded."

"Did you see that article by Warwick Armstrong in the paper this morning, sir?" asked Willy.

"Warwick Armstrong? An article?" said Mr. Suncliffe, with a start. "In which paper? Good gracious! How on earth did I come to miss it?"

Willy mentioned the name of the newspaper. The other fags grinned and chuckled, for, as usual, Willy had been right. Mr. Suncliffe's preoccupation was not caused by any thoughts of his legacy, but because he was deeply immersed in the all-engrossing subject of cricket.

Mr. Suncliffe only really lived for the summer months. He merely existed during the winter—during the period when cricket held no sway. But he was always comforted by the knowledge that cricket was in full swing in Australia during our winter months, and he eagerly devoured every item of news that came from "down under."

And Mr. Suncliffe was already getting excited about the next series of Test matches between England and Australia, when the Australians would be entertained in the Homeland.

"I must read that article by Warwick Armstrong," said Mr. Suncliffe. "An able writer, and a man who is keenly interested in the game. Indeed, as one of Australia's most brilliant cricketers claims, Mr. Armstrong is naturally qualified—"

He broke off, and gave himself a little shake.

"This won't do!" he said hastily. "Handforth minor! What are you doing here, in front of my desk? Upon my word! Look at the time! Why haven't we started lessons?"

"We were talking about cricket, sir," said Willy.

"Ridiculous!" said Mr. Suncliffe. "This is no time for talking about cricket! Go back to your place, Handforth minor! Now, let me see; we must devote ourselves to geography this afternoon."

"Can't we learn something about Australia, sir?" suggested Willy, as he went back to his seat. "I'm sure you can teach us a lot of interesting geographical facts about Australia."

"Certainly—certainly," he said. "There is really no reason why we should not select Australia for this geography lesson. A very splendid idea of yours, Handforth minor. Get out your books and turn to Australia."

"But you were teaching us about Bulgaria last, sir," put in Gates.

Somebody biffed him for making that remark. Eric Gates was so simple—indeed, so imbecile—that the other Third-Formers had nicknamed him "Soppy." For him to remind Mr. Suncliffe of Bulgaria at this moment was sheer madness in the eyes of the boys.

"Australia, sir," said Willy firmly. "We can't do better than learn about Australia."

"Isn't that the place where they are playing cricket now, sir?" asked Chubby Heath innocently.

Mr. Suncliffe glanced out into the misty atmosphere and sighed.

"It is unfortunate," he said, "that Australia is so very far away."

"If we could get there easily, sir, we could watch cricket in England all the summer, and then go over to Australia for cricket in the winter," said Willy brightly. "That would be ripping, wouldn't it?"

"I cannot imagine anything more—er—ripping," agreed Mr. Suncliffe enthusiastically. "One day, perhaps—but scarcely in our lifetime—travel facilities will be such that Australia will be within a week's journey."

"Oh, I don't know, sir!" said Willy. "They're doing some marvellous things with aeroplanes and airships nowadays. It oughtn't to be more than five or ten years before they have a regular service of speed machines between here and Australia. They say that they'll do the trip in about three days, later on."

"What about the Schneider Cup seaplanes?" asked Chubby Heath, joining in the discussion with gusto. "Don't you remember, sir? They travelled at nearly three hundred and thirty miles an hour."

If they can get machines to do that this year, what will they do in ten years' time?"

"Why, if those Schneider Cup seaplanes could go all the way to Australia nonstop, they'd do the trip in about forty hours," said Willy. "That's under two days and two nights. We shall be having people going to Australia just on purpose to watch the cricket."

"The fares would cost too much," objected Juicy Lemon.

"Rich people could afford it, wouldn't they?" argued Willy.

"And cricket, after all, is worth any amount of money," said Chubby Heath.

Mr. Suncliffe did not realise it, but he was being gently ragged. And as long as the fags could keep it up they would carry on. Unfortunately for them, Mr. Suncliffe had a sense of duty.

"Come, come!" he said sharply, after about five minutes. "We are learning geography, boys, not discussing cricket. I think, after all, that we had better not talk about Australia."

"But aren't you going to teach us about Australia, sir?" asked Willy innocently.

"I should like to, but I fear that I should unconsciously drift off into the subject of cricket," replied Mr. Suncliffe, with engaging candour. "No, boys. We must select some other country—as far from Australia as possible."

Much to the Third's disappointment Mr. Suncliffe insisted upon getting on with the work, and any fag who reintroduced the subject of cricket was quickly silenced.

It was noticed, however, that as the afternoon wore on to Mr. Suncliffe grew more and more excited. The fags were intrigued by this. It was true that Mr. Suncliffe was an excitable man, but the Third-Formers could not see any reason for his present animation. He kept glancing at the clock—a habit which he strongly censured in his boys—and he was so restless that he found it difficult to sit still at his desk. Occasionally he went to the window and glanced out. Once there was the sound of a car, and Mr. Suncliffe fairly bounced to the window and gazed out with eager, expectant eyes.

After this had happened three times, Willy thought it as well to create a diversion.

"Somebody coming to see you this afternoon, sir?" he asked casually.

"Yes, indeed, Handforth minor," replied Mr. Suncliffe, nodding. "Somebody of very great importance is coming to see me this afternoon—in fact, two gentlemen! They are to have tea with me."

"Well, it's hardly tea-time yet, sir."

"Mr. Steve Bainbridge and Mr. J. W. G. Talbot," went on Mr. Suncliffe, his voice throbbing with satisfaction.

"By Jove! The cricketers, sir?" asked Willy.

"Ah! Then you have heard of them?"

"They're bound to be famous cricketers if they're coming to tea with you, sir," replied Willy, who had never heard the names of those two gentlemen in his life, but who had taken a chance shot.

Mr. Suncliffe swelled out his chest somewhat.

"Mr. Steve Bainbridge and Mr. J. W. G. Talbot are two of Australia's most celebrated cricketers," he declared proudly. "I take it as a great honour that they are coming to spend a few hours with me at St. Frank's. But we must not discuss such matters now, boys. Let us get on with our work— Good gracious!"

He ran to the window as the sound of another car came to his ears. But after a few moments he returned to his desk and he coughed.

"It is early yet," he said. "My friends are not likely to turn up until at least four-thirty. Come! Let us continue our work. Dexter, what have you got in your mouth? Blythe, cease shuffling your feet!"

The Third Form reluctantly continued with lessons.

But the secret was out now. It wasn't Mr. Suncliffe's legacy which was exciting him this afternoon, but the fact that two famous Australian cricketers were to have tea with him.

CHAPTER 2. (Suspicious)

"NEVER heard of them!" said Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Ramona Form, and Willy's elder brother.

"Not Steve Bainbridge and J. W. G. Talbot?" asked Willy. "According to Mr. Suncliffe, they're famous men in Australia."

"They can't be very famous," retorted

his major, who was somewhat hot-headed. "Don't I tell you that I've never heard of them? I've made a study of the Australian cricketers, and—"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't heard of them, either," put in Willy thoughtfully. "Now, I wonder if old Sunny has been spooked by these chaps? They're Australian cricketers, of course, but I dare say they're only club players or something like that. Anyhow, we'll keep our eyes open, and when they arrive we'll give them a royal welcome."

Lessons were over, and a large crowd of fags had collected in the Triangle, after seeing Mr. Suncliffe dash off to the East House, where he had his private rooms.

The fags had gathered in such numbers that Handforth had become curious, and he had naturally made inquiries. Nipper, otherwise Richard Hamilton, captain of the Junior School, and Bernard Travers, Reggie Pitt and Ralph Fullwood and most of the other fellows of the Remove Form were not particularly interested in the doings of the Third.

"If these chaps are real Australian cricketing heroes, we ought to give them a rousing welcome," said Handforth. "No good leaving a thing like that in the hands of you fags. In fact, Willy, my son, you'd better put the whole affair into my hands."

Willy sniffed. He was a clever, level-headed youngster, and he was contemptuous of his brother's blundering ways.

"You can keep out of it, Ted," he said coldly.

"You cheeky rotting ass—"

"These men are friends of Mr. Suncliffe, and Mr. Suncliffe is our Form-master," continued Willy. "In other words, you can jolly well mind your own business!"

"Why, you young idiot—"

"Still, as you're here, I might as well make use of you," continued Willy. "I suppose you haven't got five bob knocking about?"

Edward Oswald started.

"Five bob!" he repeated. "No, I haven't!"

"You might as well whack it out, old son," said Willy gently. "I need the cash rather badly—Hallo, he's gone!"

His major was striding off into the Ancient House, grimly telling himself that for once he would not succumb to his

minor's demands. Not that Willy minded; he grinned cheerfully.

"Thought that would get rid of him, my lad," he said, as he glanced at Chubby Heath and Juicy Lomon. "Now we can get on with the business. Old Sunny's friends are due at any minute, and we must prepare something special."

"There's no time!" ejaculated Owen minor, running up. "They're here!"

Two men, both strangers, had just strolled through the gateway, and they now stood looking at the grey pile of St. Frank's.

They were tall, youngish men, dressed in great woolly overcoats. They were clean-shaven, bronzed, and wholesome-looking. They somehow seemed to smack of the sunshine and great open spaces.

"Oh, well," said Willy, "we can give them a cheer, anyway!"

And the fags, with one accord, raced towards the gates, yelling at the tops of their voices.

"Hurrah!"

"Welcome to St. Frank's!"

"Good old Australia!"

"Hurrah!"

The strangers looked surprised at first, and then they grinned.

"What's the idea, kids?" asked one of them good-naturedly. "How do you know that we're from Australia?"

"You're Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot, aren't you?" asked Willy.

"Sure we are!" replied the stranger. "My name's Steve Bainbridge. Pleased to make the acquaintance of you St. Frank's boys. But we didn't know that our names were so familiar to you."

The fags crowded round, full of enthusiasm. They liked the looks of these two Australians. Steve Bainbridge was fair-haired and upright, and his eyes contained a merry twinkle. J. W. G. Talbot was an inch shorter, but he made up for this by being a trifle broader; he was a fine, sturdy figure of a man.

"I suppose you'd like us to take you to Mr. Suncliffe?" asked Owen minor briskly.

"Or, if you like, we'll show you round the school."

"That would be bonzer, but I fancy that Mr. Suncliffe would rather take it as a slight," smiled Mr. Talbot. "I think you'd better take us straight to him, boys."

Just then Jerry Dodd and Charlie Bangs, of Study F, in the Ancient House, came along. These two Removites were naturally interested, since they were both Australians. "Boomerang" Bangs was thin and lanky, while Dodd was a broad, well-built youngster.

"Awfully pleased to know you, Mr. Bainbridge—and you, Mr. Talbot," said Jerry eagerly. "I hear that you're both from New South Wales?"

"That's right," smiled Mr. Bainbridge.

"I'm from New South Wales, sir," said Jerry. "Bathurst is my home town."

"Good old Bathurst," chuckled Mr. Talbot. "Can't say that I know it very well. I'm a native of Sydney. How would you like to get a look at Woollamooloo Bay, eh? And Farm Cove? Pitt Street was looking fine when I left—and so was George Street."

Jerry Dodd sighed.

"You make me feel homesick, sir," he said.

"And Port Macquarie, eh?" went on Steve Bainbridge reminiscently. "How about the old Botanical Garden and Hyde Park? There's not an inch of Sydney that I don't know by heart, sonny."

"We hear that you're going to play for Australia in the next series of Test matches?" said Boomerang Bangs.

"Well, it isn't wise to say too much just now," replied Mr. Talbot cautiously. "It all depends upon the Selection Committee's decision. Steve and I are hoping that we'll be selected, but maybe we shan't have such luck."

Just then Mr. Suncliffe came dashing up, excited and flushed.

"My dear fellows—my dear fellows!" he said breathlessly. "I hope these boys haven't been bothering you? Boys, move aside. How dare you press round like this?"

"You don't need to worry, Mr. Suncliffe," chuckled Steve Bainbridge. "These youngsters have been entertaining us. You've got a fine school here, sir—better than anything we've got in Australia, although I don't like to admit it."

"It's magnificent," said Mr. Talbot, nodding.

"You must let me show you round," declared Mr. Suncliffe. "Ten isn't ready yet, so it would be a good idea, I think, for us to stroll round the buildings at

once—while the daylight is good. What do you say, gentlemen?"

"It's up to you, of course," replied Steve Bainbridge.

They went off, and Jerry Dodd and Charlie Bangs exchanged glances.

"They're Australians all right—but it's funny that we've never heard of them before," remarked Jerry, in a puzzled voice. "If they're such big cricketers—I mean, if they're in the running for playing in the Test matches—why haven't we seen their names in the papers? Steve Bainbridge and J. W. G. Talbot. Never heard of either of them before to-day."

"It's queer," admitted Boomerang.

"Thundering queer!" said Willy, with a grin on his face.

He said no more, and the two Australian juniors went off into the Ancient House. Handforth came not just then, with Walter Church and Arnold McClure, his chums—Handforth intending to introduce himself to the Australian visitors. But he was too late, for by this time Mr. Suncliffe was proudly showing them round.

He looked very much like a peacock, as he strutted about, pointing out the various interesting details of the St. Frank's architecture.

Willy Handforth, in the meantime, drew Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon aside. There was a thoughtful frown on the Third Form skipper's brow, and his chums wondered what was wrong.

"There's something fishy about those two men," said Willy bluntly.

"Fishy!" repeated Chubby, staring. "About those Australian cricketers?"

"Yes."

"You're dotty!" put in Juicy Lemon. "I've never seen two nicer-looking chaps in my life!"

Willy nodded.

"When you first look at them, they seem all right," he agreed. "They're well-set-up; they're genial, and they're 'half fellow well met' sort of chaps. Yet, somehow I feel suspicious of them."

"Well, I'm figured," said Chubby, scratching his head. "I thought they were rather decent fellows."

"So did I," said Juicy.

Neither of them doubted Willy's judgment. They knew him too well. If Willy said there was something wrong about these strangers, then they were prepared to believe that there was some-

thing wrong. Their faith in Willy was unshaken.

"All the same," said Chubby. "I can't see that you've got anything to go on. Jerry Dodd and Boomerang Bangs are satisfied that these men are Australians."

"I'm not saying that they're not Australians," interrupted Willy. "But Australians can be wrong 'uns, can't they? It's queer that we've never heard of Bainbridge and Talbot. Not that that would make it suspicious. There are all sorts of cricketers in Australia who haven't come into the limelight. They suddenly spring up, you know, and then the newspapers are full of their names. These two men may come in that category."

"In that which?" asked Chubby.

"But I don't believe it," added Willy, ignoring the query. "There's something about Bainbridge's eyes that I don't like. They're not shifty, but in a vague sort of way they don't look honest."

"What about Mr. Talbot?" asked Juicy Lemon. "There's nothing wrong with him, is there?"

"Not outwardly—but he struck me as being too genial and too loquacious," said Willy. "Anyhow, I'm going to put them to the test."

Chubby and Juicy were rather excited. The mere possibility that Messrs. Bainbridge and Talbot were not what they pretended to be excited the lads. And Willy's judgment was generally sound. He was an extraordinarily keen judge of character.

"It's all very well to talk about putting these chaps to the test, but how are you going to do it?" asked Chubby. "You can't go up to them and ask if they're honest, can you? You can't tell them to their faces that they're impostors."

"No, I suppose not," replied Willy thoughtfully. "But I'll soon know if they're to the right sort or not."

"How?"

"Marmaduke," said Willy briefly.

"Your monkey?" asked Chubby, staring.

"Yes."

"How the dickens can you tell anything through Marmaduke?"

"Wait and see," replied Willy briskly. "Now's our chance, my sons. Old Sunny is taking those men round the school, and we can meet them quite casually—occasionally-for-the-purpose, as it were. See?"

And if Marmaduke gives them the O. K., then I'll be perfectly satisfied."

Mr. Sandcliffe stood near the old monastery ruins, behind the shrubbery. Steve Bainbridge and J. W. G. Talbot were with him, and they were inspecting the ruins with keen interest.

"There can be no doubt," said Mr. Sandcliffe, "that these ruins are of remarkable age. Many hundreds of years ago a flourishing monastery stood here, and, indeed, it was the monks who first founded the school—"

He proceeded to give his friends a brief history of St. Frank's, and if they failed to take any interest in that account, they showed no sign of it. They appeared to be thoroughly engrossed by Mr. Sandcliffe's discourse.

"Well, of course, we've got nothing like this in Australia," said Steve Bainbridge, at length. "You can always hear us in the Homeland when it comes to historical buildings."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Sandcliffe, "the real history of St. Frank's did not begin until— Good gracious! What an earth—"

Suddenly, unexpectcdly, a crashing of bushes had sounded from the shrubbery, and the next moment a little little object came shooting through the air, and it alighted with a plop upon Steve Bainbridge's shoulder.

The Australian was so surprised that he let out an oath, and he whirled round. He was amazed to find a tiny face close to his own—a face that gave him a considerable start. Marmaduke, the monkey, was not exactly handsome—particularly now, when he was chattering furiously, and showing his teeth in a manner which was distinctly unfriendly.

"Sorry, sir," said Willy cheerfully, as he came into view. "Marmy's inclined to jump on people's shoulders. Quite harmless, though."

Willy had deliberately thrown Marmaduke on to Mr. Bainbridge's shoulder—but he thought it unnecessary to mention this fact. And now he was watching the monkey's behaviour very closely. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon stood by, rather scared.

"You infernal young donkey!" snapped

Bainbridge. "Keep your monkey to yourself! Get off, hang you!"

He attempted to shake Marmaduke off, but the monkey clung there, still showing every sign of animosity.

"Do you mind taking him off, sir?" asked Willy, turning to Mr. Talbot. "He won't hurt you."

"A pet monkey, eh?" asked J. W. G. Talbot, with a laugh. "I wonder what you youngsters will be up to next!"

He reached out for Marmaduke, but the little monkey pulled himself back, spitting and chattering.

"Sure he won't hurt!" asked Mr. Talbot doubtfully.

"Well, perhaps I'd better take him, sir," said Willy. "Come on, Marmy, my son."

But at that moment Marmaduke leapt to the ground of his own accord, and Steve Bainbridge succeeded in delivering a kick which caught Marmaduke in the rear. The little monkey wobbled off, chattering more loudly than ever.

"If you allow that beast to come near me again, I'll hurt him!" said Bainbridge harshly.

Mr. Sumcliffe intervened.

"How dare you, Handforth minor?" he demanded, with heat. "Unless you can keep that pet of yours in order, I shall advise your Housemaster to have him removed from the school. It is outrageous if I cannot show my friends round without being pestered with your monkey!"

"Sorry, sir," said Willy quietly. "It won't happen again."

CHAPTER 2.

Willy Makes Inquiries!

FIVE minutes later Willy & Co. were in the pets' quarters, and Marmaduke was back in his comfortable little home. Willy was looking grim and thoughtful.

"That chap kicked Marmy," said Chubby Heath. "Didn't hurt him much, did he?"

"Didn't hurt him at all," replied Willy. "If he had hurt him, I should have made things uncomfortable for him. But, as it was, I kept my temper. I've said! Kicking a harmless creature like old Marmy!"

"You've got to admit that he didn't look harmless," put in Juicy. "I thought he was going to bite Mr. Bainbridge."

"I was right about those men," said Willy grimly. "They're wrong 'uns."

"Oh, draw it mild!"

"They're wrong 'uns!" insisted Willy. "Marmaduke knows. I'd accept his judgment anywhere, at any time. He hated those two men as soon as he spotted them, and that proves to me that they're both no good."

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were not so satisfied.

"You mustn't forget that they're both strangers to Marmaduke," said Chubby gently. "And he was a bit flustered, too, because you threat him—"

"I don't care about that," interrupted Willy. "I've tested other people in the same way. When they're all right, Marmy takes to them on the spot. He chatters a bit, but he's friendly. He wasn't friendly with Bainbridge and Talbot, was he? He gave them the bird during the first second."

"But what's the idea, anyhow?" asked Chubby, in a puzzled voice. "What does it matter to you?"

"Nothing—only that Marmaduke has satisfied me that my own judgment was right," replied Willy. "Those two Australians aren't on the square. They look as nice as any two men you could wish to meet. But there's something about them that gives me a pain."

His chums were not so keen, and they could not see it. As far as they were concerned, Steve Bainbridge and J. W. G. Talbot were perfectly bona fide visitors, and they weren't in the least interested in their characters. Besides, they were Mr. Sumcliffe's friends—not theirs.

"Everything together, the whole thing looks squiffy," said Willy slowly. "First of all, those two men, Sunny thinks that they are famous cricketers, and they as good as said that they're in the running for the big Test matches. The question is, are they just fooling old Sunny? And, if so, for what reason? Why should they come to the school like this, and accept Sunny's hospitality, and listen to his giddy lectures about the school's architecture? In my opinion, my sons, there's something deep behind all this."

"Oh, cheese it!" said Juicy. "Let's go indoors, and see about some tea. Bother old Sunny and his Australian pals! What do we care!"

"He's our Formmaster, and he's one of

the best," replied Willy sternly. "It's our duty to look after him."

"Our duty to do what?" said Chubby, staring.

"Old Suncliffe is a harmless chap—and he's as simple as they make 'em," continued Willy. "Anybody can fool him—and it seems to me that these two Australians have twisted him round their fingers. And you're not going to tell me they're doing it just for the fun of the thing."

"What are they doing it for, then?"

"You haven't forgotten that legacy of old Sunny's, I suppose?" retorted Willy shrewdly.

Chubby and Jucey looked startled.

"Great Scott!" gasped Chubby. "You—you don't think—"

"I don't think anything at present—but before long I'm going to know," replied Willy. "It's a jolly funny thing that these Australian merchants should be so friendly with Sunny—just after Sunny has come into a legacy of five thousand quid! I wasn't here yesterday, my lad!"

Indoors, Willy warned his chums to say nothing regarding his suspicions. They were startled by the theory that he had propounded, and they were anxious to discuss it with some of the other juniors. But Willy put the stopper on this.

"Wait until we've got something definite to go on," he said. "I'm no detective, but I can't get the idea out of my head that old Sunny has got mixed up with a couple of wrong 'uns. If I've made a mistake, I'll apologise to them. Anyhow, for the time being we'd better keep mum."

After tea Willy took a stroll over to the East House, and he soon found that Steve Bainbridge and J. W. G. Talbot were being entertained by Mr. Suncliffe in the latter's sitting-room. Willy made a point of getting into conversation with Payne, of the Sixth Form.

Payne was a prefect, and he was one of the few East House seniors who had a liking for Willy. Payne was fat and happy, and he was, indeed, one of the most popular prefects in the school. He was generally regarded as the one bright spot in the East House.

"Well, what's the trouble, kid?" asked Payne, who was reading a yellow-jacketed novel when Willy presented himself in his study.

"Have you seen old Sunny's visitors?" asked Willy, coming to the point straight away.

"I caught a glimpse of them—why?" asked Payne.

"What do you think of them?"

"They seem all right," said the senior. "But why should I care? What's it got to do with me? Suncliffe can have visitors if he likes, can't he? They're Australian cricketers, and you know that he's as mad as a March hare on the subject of cricket."

"Well, we're all naturally interested," replied Willy. "We gave those two chaps a splendid welcome when they arrived. I hear that they're going to play for Australia against England in the big Test matches."

"I must confess," said Payne, "that I'm not crazy about cricket. And at this time of the year, when football is in full swing, I'm lacking in enthusiasm. I'd like to remind you, also, that this book I'm reading is jolly interesting, and that you've interrupted me just at the point where the detective is measuring some very important footprints. Clear out!"

"I shan't be a minute—"

"You won't!" agreed Payne. "I want to find out if the murderer is Chinatown Sam or—"

"Do you happen to know how Mr. Suncliffe got acquainted with those Australian cricketers?" asked Willy.

Payne asked his book.

"Met 'em in London," he replied briefly. "Anything else you want we know?"

"How did he meet them in London?"

"Why ask me?" complained the prefect. "Am I supposed to know all Suncliffe's business?"

"Well, he lives in this House, and there's generally a good deal of talk going round the Senior Day-room," replied Willy. "I expect you know how Sunny happened to meet those two men, don't you?"

"Got acquainted with them in a hotel," replied Payne impatiently. "Are you going to let me read this book now? Or do you want me to chuck you out on your neck? Just say the word!"

"So Sunny met those two men in a hotel, did he?" mused Willy, ignoring the good-natured threat. "Two or three days ago, I suppose—when he popped up to London for a week-end."

"He went up to see his lawyers. I believe," replied Payne. "About that legacy of his."

"Oh!" said Willy.

And there was a world of understanding

in his voice, although Charles Payne did not detect it. He was already back in his book, discovering whether Chinatown Sam was the murderer or not.

Willy went out, and, as luck would have it, he ran into Mr. Suncliffe and his two visitors in the corridor. All three were wearing their overcoats and hats, and they were pulling their gloves on.

"Well, it's been a most interesting visit, Mr. Suncliffe," Steve Bainbridge was saying. "We've always wanted to have a look round one of England's greatest public schools."

"It's been an education!" declared Mr. Talbot. "We shall have something to tell the boys back in Sydney—eh, Steve?"

"I am hoping to see you playing—when you come over for the Test Matches," said Mr. Suncliffe. "There's no doubt that you will be with us!"

"Well, strictly in confidence, there's no doubt at all," said Steve Bainbridge, lowering his voice. "Nothing official will be announced for some months, but I happen to know that Talbot and myself will be selected—H'm! Well, it doesn't matter."

He had just caught sight of Willy.

"We must be going," said Mr. Suncliffe briskly. "I have certain business to attend to in Bannington, and I am sure you will not object to my accompanying you—"

"We'd very much like you to come," interrupted J. W. G. Talbot. "Perhaps you'll drop into our hotel for a spell! We're staying in Bannington for some days. We're at the Grapes."

"Yes, this tour of ours is proving very interesting," said Steve Bainbridge. "We're taking in the whole of England, Mr. Suncliffe, and I can assure you that we're leaving our eyes opened. Never thought the old country was so full of interest."

They passed out, and Willy had learned two more trifles of information.

"So they're staying at the Grapes, are they?" he muttered, as he stood in the lobby. "Well, the Grapes is Bannington's classiest hotel—so that fits in all right. Yet I can't help thinking that there's something wonky about it all. Queer, too, that these Australians should be touring England in November. Not a particularly nice month for seeing England."

Willy went back to his chums in the Ancient House, and he had now appar-

ently dismissed all thoughts of "old Sunny's" new friends. They had left the school, so there was really nothing more that he could do.

"You chaps ready?" he asked crisply. "We've got a lot of work to do this evening. It'll take us all our time to put the flashing touches on to the bus."

"Haden't we better leave it until to-morrow?" suggested Chubby casually. "It's a half-holiday to-morrow, and we can spend all the afternoon—"

"You're coming now," interrupted Willy. "To-morrow afternoon we want to go out for a trial run."

"I'm not so sure that the thing will be a success," said Juicy, in a gloomy voice. "It's all very well for you, sitting in front, just steering, but it won't be so soft for Chubby and me."

"You ungrateful rotters!" said Willy indignantly. "I'm going to let you be the first to ride in my new bus, and all you can do is to grumble! You don't seem to realise that this car of mine is a triumph. It'll be something different from everything else on the road—a regular sensation."

"Yes, but we've got to work it, haven't we?" asked Chubby. "You'd be nothing without us!"

Willy regarded them coldly.

"All right—clear out!" he said. "If you think you're indispensable, you've made a giddy blunder! I'll get two other chaps to take your places—and they'll fall over themselves in their eagerness to be selected."

"Oh, I say, cheese it!" protested Chubby in alarm. "We didn't mean it, Willy! We're gamol!"

"Oh, rather!" said Juicy Leman. "We wouldn't dream of letting you down, old son!"

And the heroes of the Third put on their overcoats, and vanished into the darkness of the November evening.

CHAPTER 4.

The Chummy Twelve!

"WELL, well! What have we here?" said Vivian Travers, of the Remove, wonderingly. "What on earth is it?"

It was the next day, and Travers was

standing on the Ancient House steps, chatting about football with Handforth and Nipper and Fullwood and several other Removites. It was a bright, windy November afternoon, and the junior eleven would soon be setting off for the River House School.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth. "What is it?"

"Looks a rakish little bus, whatever it is," said Nipper. "Well, I'm hanged! Isn't that your minor sitting at the wheel, Handy?"

"My minor? What rot!" said Edward Oswald. "He couldn't drive a car like that even if he had such a car—and even if he could drive!"

The juniors had first been attracted by the throbbing of an approaching car, and when it came into view round the end of the Modern House—having apparently journeyed from one of the rear sheds or garages—they regarded it with undisguised curiosity.

It was a tow-built, racy-looking saloon. The body was crimson, and the wings were black. The wire wheels were crimson, to match the body-work. It was a closed car, and so small that any ordinary fellow standing beside it would have looked over the roof. The windscreen was quite narrow, and so were the side windows, and this added to the general effect of rakishness.

Surprisingly enough, the four wheels were bicycle wheels—as the watching juniors could see when the vehicle came nearer. But they were fitted with oversized tyres, which gave them a dignity of their own.

The engine was giving forth a musical purr, eloquent of suppressed energy. Sticking out from the car's rear was a big exhaust pipe, with a wide, flanged end. The throbbing noise from this exhaust pipe was reminiscent of a well-tuned motor-car.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly. "It's my minor!"

"There's never any telling what that young beggar will get up to," said Nipper. "But this beats everything!"

Handforth went running across the Triangle, and he stood full in the path of the approaching car, and held up both his arms.

"Hi! Stop!" he bellowed. "What the dickens do you think you're doing, Willy?"

The throbbing grew quieter, and the racy-looking car came to a standstill. Willy Handforth coolly opened one of the windows, and nodded to his major.

"Hallo, Ted," he said cheerfully. "Sorry there isn't room for you. We're just going for a run."

Handforth stared in amazement. This car of Willy's was curiously shaped. There was only sufficient room in the front seat for the driver, but the body tapered out towards the rear, and there, sitting in state, were Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon.

"What's this?" burst out Handforth.

"This," replied Willy, "is my new Chummy Twelve!"

"Your new what?"

"Chummy Twelve."

"Where did you get it from?" asked Handforth suspiciously.

"Made it."

Willy looked cool and calm as the other juniors collected round, the engine throbbing gently in the meantime.

"You made it?" repeated Handforth incredulously. "Don't be a young ass! You couldn't make a car like this!"

"All right, if you don't believe it, you needn't," said Willy agreeably. "Well, so long!"

"Wait a minute!" said Edward Oswald. "You can't go out on to these roads in this car."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd be a danger to the public, for one thing," replied Handforth. "And what about your licence?"

"My only sainted aunt!" said Willy, with a start.

"You'll get pinched if you go out without a licence," continued Handforth.

"Why, you're not fourteen yet. You can't even hold a licence for riding a motor-bike!"

"That's a bit rotten," said Willy regretfully. "I was going to take Chubby and Juicy into Bannington—to hear a talkin'."

"You'd better put this thing away, and go on the bus, my lad!"

"I don't think I will," replied Willy. "I dare say it'll be safe enough. I'll chance it."

"You're off your rocker," said Fullwood. "Why, the car hasn't even got any number-plates on!"

"No number-plates!" shouted Handforth,

looking down. "By George! That's right! What do you think you're doing, Willy! No number-plates and no license! You'll get a year's hard labour if you're caught!"

"They've got to catch me first," replied Willy smugly.

He rushed forward, pulled the gear lever over, and the Chummy Twelve glided forward. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemmon were grinning with enjoyment, and the Removites were staring amazedly. The car purred towards the gates, the noise from the exhaust sounding more powerful from the rear.

"Here, hold on!" yelled Handforth. "You'll get locked up, I tell you! I forbid you to go out!"

The car vanished.

"That's the worst of young Willy," said Travers, shaking his head. "So wilful—and so disobedient. Handy, old fellow, I'm afraid that your minor treats you with contempt."

"Wait till he comes back!" said Handforth thickly.

"It'll be a long time, won't it?" asked McClure. "A year, at least."

"What do you mean, now—a year!"

"Didn't you say that if he went out he'd get twelve months' hard labour?"

"Idiot!" said Handforth, breathing hard.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the other Removites were left in a condition of mystification concerning Willy's new Chummy Twelve.

Meanwhile, down the lane towards Bell-ton village the red little car sped along at fifteen miles an hour or more. It glided down the slope smoothly, with an absence of rattling, and with an increased purr. Now that the car was really going, the purr was louder. One gained the impression that the engine was only slightly unleashed.

"Not so bad, eh?" grinned Willy, glancing round.

"My only hat! She's a corker!" said Chubby enthusiastically.

"Rather!" agreed Juicy. "Easy going, too."

"We gave those Removites a bit of a surprise, didn't we?" chuckled Willy. "And did you see the expression on my major's face? I knew we should surprise him, my sons!"

All went well until they were half-way

through the village High Street. It was here they perceived the tall figure of the village policeman, Constable Sparrow, who knew the St. Frank's fellows only too well. And Sparrow was watching the oncoming car with interest and wonder. It was something new in Belton—something different.

But it wasn't until the car was nearly opposite him that he noticed, with a rude shock, that it bore no number-plates!

The constable went red, he started forward, and he yelled at the top of his voice.

"Hit Stop, there!" he bellowed.

"What next? Stop that car!"

Willy obediently stopped.

"Don't want to get on the wrong side of the law as soon as we get out," he murmured, glancing at his chums. "If a policeman tells us to stop, we've got to stop. I hope old Sparrow will be quick, though; his face always makes me feel tired."

He obligingly opened the window and glanced up into the village constable's red countenance.

"Hallo, Dicky-bird!" he said cheerily.

"You'd best mind what you're calling me, young gent!" growled the policeman. "I don't want none o' your sauce, Master Handforth. I've had more than enough from you, one time and another. What are you doin' in this 'ere car?"

"Driving it," replied Willy. "Or, at least, I was until you stopped me. Just at the moment I'm sitting still looking at you. You're getting handsomer every day, Dicky-bird!"

The constable grunted.

"This is goin' to be serious for you, my lad," he said grimly. "Do you know that this car ain't got any number-plates on it?"

"Number-plates?" repeated Willy, as though he had never heard of the thing.

"Yes, number-plates!"

"But why? Why should I need any number-plates?"

"It's an offence against the law for any car to be on the public highway without number-plates," replied the constable, fishing out his note-book. "You're goin' to be fined 'eavily for this, Master Handforth, make no mistake about it! Where's your licence?"

"Crumba! I haven't got one!"

"No licence!" ejaculated P.-c. Sparrow, aghast.

"I'm too young," said Willy demurely.

"By gosh! And so ye are!" said the constable. "I'd forgot that for the minute. You ain't fourteen yet, are you?"

"Oh, constable, don't be hard on me!" pleaded Willy, finding it difficult not to smile. "Remember that I'm but a child."

"You've spoken the truth, my lad—you're only a child!" said P.-c. Sparrow outly. "And 'ere I find you on the public highway drivin' a car! No number-plates—no licence! This is goin' to be a serious case, I ain't sure but what I ought to arrest you on the spot."

Willy remained unmoved.

"You'd better think again, Dicky-bird," he said patiently. "You're making an awful mistake, you know, and all these good people will yell with laughter at you before long. You'd far better let me go."

Quite a number of villagers had collected round the car, and they were eyeing it with interest, and they were wondering, too, what P.-c. Sparrow would do with his captives.

In the meantime, the engine was purring away with that same even throb.

"Come along—you'll have to get this car off the road!" said the policeman. "Better run 'er into the yard of the George."

"But why should I?" asked Willy obstinately. "I'm taking my chums to Bannington."

"Not in this car you ain't!" said Sparrow.

"But you've made a bloomer," said Willy. "There's no reason why I shouldn't have this car on the road. I don't need a licence or any number-plates either. That's where you've made a mistake, Dicky-bird."

"I ain't made any mistake," replied the constable. "There's an engine in this car, ain't there?"

"Well, I suppose you'd call it one—of sorts," replied Willy. "I'll show it to you, if you like."

He opened the neat side-door, got out, and raised a flap of the bonnet.

"There you are!" he said, waving a hand. "Take a look, superintendent, and I hope you'll be satisfied!"

The constable looked, and his eyes grew larger.

He had expected to see a powerful petrol-engine beneath that bonnet. Instead,

he saw nothing but a big fan just behind what looked like a radiator. It was whizzing round, driven apparently by the wind, which was shooting blusteringly down the village street. The fan, in turn, was driving a weird kind of ratchet arrangement, and this ratchet was giving off the throbbing noise which sounded so astonishingly like the pulsating of an internal-combustion engine. Most of the sound was being carried through a big metal arrangement which dwindled down and became an exhaust-pipe. It was for this reason that the throbbing sounded louder at the rear.

"Why, there ain't no engine!" ejaculated Sparrow blankly.

"Exactly!" grinned Willy. "And as there's no engine, we don't need any number-plates or any driving licence. This jigger of mine comes under the heading of a bicycle. Satisfied?"

"No, I ain't!" said the constable promptly. "You can't tell me that there's no engine in 'er."

"Chubby and Juicy provide all the power by pedals," said Willy coolly. "It's a special arrangement of my own. You may not know it, but there are three bicycles incorporated in this machine. I call it my Chummy Twelve."

"Oh, you do, do you?" growled the constable, as the spectators began to laugh. "And what's the idea of callin' it that?"

"Well, it's chummy, and it does about twelve miles an hour on the average," replied Willy. "At times I can get twenty out of her, but going up-hill she's liable to be a bit slow. So I reckon twelve miles an hour as the average."

P.-c. Sparrow put his note-book away reluctantly.

"All the same, you'd best be careful what you do," he said darkly. "If I see you drivin' about to the danger of the public, I shall 'ave to 'ave a summons issued against you!"

There was a good deal of amusement in the village as Willy & Co. started off again. Willy put the car into low gear in the orthodox fashion, using a proper lever. As a matter of fact, that machine was fitted with a three-speed gearbox from a small motor-cycle, and Willy naturally started off in low. Chubby and Juicy in the rear seats pedalling away with comparative ease. After the car had gained a little speed,

Willy would change into second, and then into top.

At the beginning of the term Willy had "got round" his father for the necessary capital with which to construct the machine, and he and his chums had been working on it for weeks.

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were quite satisfied on the whole. It was far more comfortable in this little saloon than ordinary cycling would have been, and propelling it was easier, too. On the level or gliding down-hill the car went along with surprising smoothness.

Willy, in front, sat at the controls. He had an ordinary steering-wheel and a clutch pedal and a brake pedal. The clutch merely neutralized the gears so that the car could glide down-hill in "free." The brakes were powerful and effective, and the car was even provided with electric lamps and an electric horn—a small motor-cycle dynamo being driven by a belt, the dynamo charging an accumulator in the approved fashion.

The little car caused quite a sensation in Bannington, the nearest big town to St. Frank's, but there was no repetition of the delay in Bellton High Street, for when a police inspector came along Willy promptly told him that there was no engine in this car, and that it was, to all intents and purposes, a glorified bicycle.

"I was wondering if we should run along to the Grapes Hotel," said Willy thoughtfully.

"What for?" asked Chubby. "I thought we were going to the pictures!"

"Plenty of time for that," said Willy. "We might be able to see something of those two Australians."

"Blow the Australians!" said Chubby. "We want to hear a talkie. There's a ripping film on this week, and they give a long show at the Palladium, too. Unless we go in now, we shan't have time to see the programme through."

"Oh, all right," said Willy. "Perhaps it'll be just as well."

They went to the Palladium, and put their car up in the free parking space. Then they went inside and thoroughly enjoyed the talkies.

A surprise awaited them when they came out—in fact, a double surprise.

Firstly, it was raining in torrents. When they had gone in the sky had been clear,

and there had been no immediate sign of rain. Now complete darkness had descended, and Bannington High Street was running with rivers of water, and the rain was pouring down as though it never intended to stop.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Chubby Heath. "Who'd have thought it? I'd no idea that it was going to rain like this!"

"It's never any good grumbling about the rain," said Willy practically. "All the grumbling in the world won't make it any different. Besides, what have you got to kick about? We shall be dry enough in our Chummy Twelve, shan't we? Better than all your bikes!"

"By jingo, you're right!" said Juicy Lemon eagerly. "We can ride home in comfort. I say, this is going to be jolly, you know!"

They looked forward with keen interest to that ride home. It would be a novelty. They were thrilled at the thought of speeding along the wet, rain-swept road, comfortable in their saloon, with the electric head-lamps glowing in front of them.

The second surprise came soon afterwards, and it was even more unpleasant than the first.

CHAPTER 2.

An Unexpected Ride!

HAVING got the Chummy Twelve out, Willy switched on the lights, and the little car glided off into the High Street, the rain beating fiercely against the windows. But inside the three fags were perfectly dry and comfortable. Willy decided to stop at the garage to obtain a supply of distilled water, so that he could always keep his battery in good condition.

There was nothing much in this delay. It would only take a minute or two at the most. Unfortunately, in pulling up against the kerb, Willy happened to step immediately in the rear of a tradesman's bicycle that was leaning there. And a gust of wind came along just at that moment, and the bicycle crashed over.

"Here, what's the big idea?" demanded a raw, rough-looking youth, running up. "Trying to smash my jigger, are you?"

Willy opened his window.

"I didn't touch your jigger," he replied. "The wind blew it over."

"None of your lies, kid!" said the youth. "Why, I saw you! Come up right behind my bike and knocked it over! You St. Frank's fellows are too jolly big for your leens. Think you can do anything!"

"If you had left your machine more securely the wind wouldn't have blown it over," said Willy, as he got out. "Anyhow, you needn't blame me for your own carelessness."

He walked past and went into the garage, having no desire to enter into an unpleasant argument with this ill-natured fellow.

But a minute later, before he had got his bottle of distilled water, he heard wild yells from Chubby and Juicy. He ran out, and found them scrambling out of the car. The youth with the tradesman's cycle was riding off into the rain.

"Quick!" yelled Chubby. "The car's punctured our tyres!"

"What?" ejaculated Willy, startled.

He ran forward, and one glance told him that the two near-side tyres were flat on their rims.

"They're all done—all four!" gasped Chubby. "We saw the chap moving round, but we didn't know what he was having a game at. Never dreamed that he was playing a rotten trick like that. We couldn't hear anything because the 'engine' was making a noise."

"I'm not blaming you, my sons," grunted Willy. "I'm blaming myself—for not being on my guard. I could see that that chap was a vindictive brute. Oh, my only sainted aunt! What are we going to do now?"

An examination proved that the tyres were hopelessly punctured. They had been ruthlessly stabbed with a penknife, and it would not be such an easy matter to repair them.

"We can't do the job ourselves in the rain," said Willy. "As far as I can see, the only thing we can do is to let the garage repair those tyres. By jingo! When I meet that rascal again I'll slaughter him—and you chaps'll help me!"

"Let's try and find him now," said Chubby aggressively. "We heard him laughing to himself as he went round the car, but we thought he was just jeering at the old 'bus. Never dreamed that he was doing anything rotten like that!"

"Well, it's no good crying over spilt milk," said Willy philosophically. "We'll

see what we can do. Lend a hand, my lads."

The car was pushed into the garage, and the man on duty shook his head dubiously when he saw the damage.

"Can't repair them tyres to-night, young gentls," he said. "I've got my 'ands full with car washin'. Shan't have a minute until the night man comes on at eleven o'clock. He'll 'ave 'em done by the mornin', though."

"What's the good of that to us?" asked Juicy. "We want to get home to-night, and we shall be late for calling-over as it is."

"Well, young gentls, if you're in any trouble, ask your master to ring me up," said the garage attendant. "I'll explain what 'appened, and I don't think you'll get punished."

"Thanks," said Willy. "We'd better go along and wait for the next 'bus."

It was a disappointing end to their first ride, and they knew that they would be chipped when they got back to St. Frank's.

However, luck seemed to be with them a minute later. For, just as they were making a dash across the road in order to get to the 'bus stop, they espied an imposing-looking Morris-Oxford saloon car standing unattended outside the brilliant window of the Japanese Café.

"I say!" grinned Willy. "That's old Browne's car!"

"Thought it was," nodded Chubby Heath. "Any chance for us, do you think, if we ask him for a lift?"

"I'm not so sure," said Willy thoughtfully. "It's only two days ago that we ragged old Browne, and he might be a bit down on us."

William Napoleon Browne, the janky skipper of the Fifth Form, was one of the best. But even he might regard Willy & Co. with a jaundiced eye just now. They had recently played a jape on him, and one of his best suits had got slightly soiled with jam and treacle and soot. At least, Willy & Co. considered that the suit was slightly soiled. Browne had thrown it away.

"Better take French leave," murmured Willy. "There's no sense in taking a risk. We can pop in the back and crouch down, and he'll never know we're there."

"Suggesting he's got four or five chaps with him?" asked Juicy. "They're bound to spot us then."

"The chances are that he's only got Stevens with him," replied Willy. "He always goes about with Stevens. They'll be off soon, so that they can get back in time for colling-over. Come on—we'll chance it, anyhow!"

They didn't risk going round to the pavement, where they might have been seen. They slipped across the road, opened the rear door and slipped in. Then they crouched down low, and closed the door and waited.

"We'll never be seen," whispered Willy. "And we shall get a free ride home, and—"

"Look out! He's coming!" breathed Chubby Heath.

"We were only just in time!" panted Juicy.

The two front doors of the car opened simultaneously, and Willy & Co. felt the car heave on its springs. Browne and Stevens were evidently getting in. There came two clanks as the doors closed, and then the whirr of the electric starter. The car gave a jerk and moved off.

"Easy!" grinned Willy. "They didn't trouble to look behind."

It was the strong, pungent odour of cigar smoke that first roused a suspicion in Willy's mind. However, before Willy could look up, a voice came to his ears.

"How long do you think it'll take, Steve?" it asked.

"To Helmsford!" said the driver. "Oh, not more than forty minutes. Perhaps a bit under."

Willy felt Chubby and Juicy wriggling. They were trying to sit up—and Chubby, at least, was on the point of yelling out. For those voices were not the voices of Browne and Stevens—but the voices of men!

And now it was too late Willy realised how he had made the mistake. Browne's Morris-Oxford was a standard car, and, as everybody knows, one Morris-Oxford looks very much like another Morris-Oxford. Yet Browne's car was finished in rather a distinctive colour scheme, and it was amusing that there should be another car of precisely the same type in Bannington. Willy had not seen one before, and it was because of this that he had immediately mistaken this particular car for Browne's.

It was just like Browne's, but it wasn't Browne's!

"Shush!" he hissed warningly. "Not a sound, you chaps!"

He was bending low, his face close to those of his chums.

"But we're in somebody else's car!" breathed Chubby. "We shall get into awful trouble when we're found. Besides, we're going in the wrong direction!"

"Can't be helped!" muttered Willy. "If we reveal ourselves now we shall only get kicked out, and these men might get nasty. For goodness' sake be quiet! Leave everything to me."

Willy raised himself slightly, although he did not dare to project his head above the level of the seat back.

"Filthy night for motoring, Jim," said one of the men. "Pity we couldn't leave this until to-morrow."

"That would be cutting it too fine," said the other. "We've got to see Morton to-night. He's come down to Helmsford especially; besides, these details have got to be settled. We've got Sundcliffe on the go, and he may decide to take the trip to London to-morrow. We simply must have everything in readiness."

"You're right there, of course," said the other.

"Morton couldn't come to Bannington—too risky," said the first man. "We've nearly got this bird where we want him."

"He's a sucker all right."

"Easiest guy we've tackled for months," chuckled the other man. "He'll come across with that dough, and like it!"

They travelled on for some little time without further conversation. And Willy Handforth fairly quivered with excitement as he crouched there behind the seat. He doubted if Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon had heard any of that conversation. It didn't matter, anyhow.

More than ever Willy realised the importance of keeping quiet. It would be fatal if he and his chums were found by Steve Bainbridge and J. W. G. Taihot! These were the two men who were in the front of the car—these alleged Australian cricketers, who had become so friendly with the simple, innocent Mr. Austin Sundcliffe, of the Third Form at St. Frank's.

Willy had recognised Bainbridge's voice at once, and now he was immensely pleased that he had kept Chubby and Juicy quiet. For Marmadoke's dislike of Mr. Sundcliffe's new friends was justified. Willy had

already heard sufficient to convince him that Meers, Bainbridge and Talbot were rogues of the worst type.

Presently Bainbridge began talking again.

"This Suncliffe bird scares me sometimes," he admitted. "He's so dog-gone simple that I wonder if he's putting it on. Think it's likely, Jim? Think he's trying to frame us?"

Talbot laughed.

"Don't you believe it!" he replied. "Suncliffe is just a plain boob. We've got him on a piece of string all right, and by the time we're through with him we'll have skinned him so clean that he won't have a nickel left. And he's the kind of guy who'll take it sitting down, too. He'll be too darned ashamed of himself to make any fuss. Afraid of the schoolboys' jeering at him."

Willy burned with fury. Australian cricketers. He was fairly convinced by this time that Bainbridge and Talbot were American confidence men. No doubt they had lived for some years in Australia—sufficiently long to pass as genuine Australian subjects.

They were "con" men—crooks of the trickiest type. The mere fact that they looked so frank and open and honest meant nothing. Such outward signs of geniality and honesty are the stock-in-trade of the confidence men. Without them he could never hope to gull his victims.

And it was easy enough for Willy Handforth to see how Mr. Suncliffe had been duped.

While in London recently, seeing his lawyers, he had stayed at a hotel. Probably a good class West End hotel. There he had met the two plausible strangers. And naturally Mr. Suncliffe had very quickly shown that he was partial to Australians. Bainbridge and Talbot had lost no time in describing themselves as cricketers. They made themselves out to be "dark horses" for the coming Test Matches. And poor old Suncliffe, of course, had swallowed the yarn whole.

As for the rest, Willy needed very little imagination to know what had happened. Mr. Suncliffe, in his innocent way, had let out that he had come to London to see about a five thousand pounds legacy. And

these confidence men had marked him down at once as a likely sucker. They were always on the look out for such "suckers."

"Think he'll buy those shares, Jim?" asked Bainbridge, after another silent spell.

"That bird has as good as bought them already," replied Talbot with a laugh. "He's crazy about Australia. We've got him good and going with this yarn about the Australian oil-wells. He'll buy those shares to-morrow, or you can call me a failure at this game."

"He's a cautious baby, though."

"You make me tired," said Talbot. "Didn't he say that he's anxious to speculate, so that he can increase his money sufficiently to enable him to retire? I tell you we've got him good. We'll clinch this deal to-morrow."

"You think Morton will be willing to do his bit for a hundred?" asked Bainbridge.

"I know him—he'll do it all right," said the other man. "Why, it's soft. We just take Suncliffe to his office, and Marion prepares the deed, and the shares are handed over. Suncliffe's a nutt at the game, and he'll never know that he isn't in a real lawyer's office. It's jam for Morton—a hundred pounds for doing practically nothing. I tell you, it's cream in the can for him."

"And us, too, eh?"

They chuckled, and Willy dodged down as one of them struck a match to light a fresh cigar.

A more enlightening conversation could not have taken place. Yet it was perfectly natural that these men should discuss their plans while on this brief trip to Holford. Little did they know that Willy Handforth was so close at hand, listening to all they said. And Willy did not regard himself as an eavesdropper. He and his chums had entered this car in pure error, and it had turned out a blessing in disguise. For now they would be able to warn their Form-master of the plot that was being prepared so that he should be roused and swindled.

It is strange how things turn out. That ill-natured errand-boy had punctured the tyres of the Chummy Twelve out of malicious spite; but that action of his was proving all for the good, for Willy, because of it, had now definitely proved that his first distrust of Bainbridge and Talbot was thoroughly justified.

CHAPTER 6. Nothing Doing!

THE Morris-Oxford gulled up suddenly and unexpectedly, and Willy Handforth gripped his chums, so that they should remain perfectly still and silent.

For some little time the three fags had been in danger of exposure, for they had been passing through the streets of Helmsford, and the road lamps had shone into the car. If either Bainbridge or Talbot had happened to glance round they could not have failed to see those crouching forms in the rear.

But neither of the men had the slightest reason to suspect that they were not entirely alone in the saloon car.

The rain was still pouring down in torrents, and the noise of it drumming on the roof was useful. It drowned any possible sounds that the fags might have made.

"This is the place," said Bainbridge, as he peered forward through the windscreen. "Here's the station, and there's the hotel right next to it."

"Better take the car into the hotel yard, I suppose," said the other.

The Morris-Oxford jerked forward, and presently it drove through a narrow opening into a dark yard. Willy breathed an inward sigh of relief. He had been fearing that this yard would be brilliantly illuminated, and that he and his companions would be discovered as the two men got out.

But fortune was on their side.

The lights were switched off, the two forward doors of the car were opened, and the two men got out. They slammed the doors, and Willy heard them walking away.

"My only sainted aunt!" he breathed. "We're more than lucky, my sons!"

He stood up, peered through the window, and just caught a glimpse of the two men turning into a lighted doorway. The next moment Willy wrenched open the door and slipped out.

"Come on!" he said quickly. "Make it lively!"

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon, agog with excitement, dived out. Then they all three hurried into the shadow of a wall and crouched there for a moment.

"What now!" whispered Chubby breathlessly.

"Follow me," replied Willy.

Within two minutes they were outside in the street and nobody had seen them leaving. Bainbridge and Talbot had gone into the hotel. And the yard men had been conspicuous by his absence.

Willy & Co. sought shelter in a doorway.

"Did you hear what those men were saying?" asked Willy tensely.

"They were those two Australians, weren't they?" asked Juicy Lemon excitedly.

"Australians my eye!" said Willy, with scorn. "They may have lived in Australia, but I'll bet a term's pocket-money that they're a couple of American confidence men."

"We didn't hear everything," said Chubby. "They're trying to swindle old Sunny, aren't they?"

"We'll talk about it on the way home," said Willy briskly. "Come on! We're just near the station, and if we're lucky we'll be able to catch a train."

"How about fare?" asked Juicy. "I'm broke!"

"That's all right—I've got enough money," replied Willy.

He led the way to the station, and the three fags were lucky again. A train was due to leave within seven minutes, and it would just enable them to catch the local connection at Bannington for Belton.

They secured a compartment to themselves, and on the short journey Willy told his chums exactly all that he had heard. They had gathered a few scraps on their own account, but Willy made everything quite clear.

"They're after old Sunny's five-thousand-pound legacy, then?" said Chubby, with a whistle. "Trying to sell him dud oil shares, eh?"

"Yes; it's the usual game those men play," replied Willy. "They got hold of a chap with some money, and then dish him out of it. First of all, though, they gain his confidence—and they've gained old Sunny's by pretending to be Australian cricketers, and by being very friendly with him. They're pretending to tour round England, and I suppose they made out that their visit to Bannington is quite a coincidence. Sunny's mug enough to believe anything!"

Cluddy and Jony were more excited than ever.

"I say, he'll be ever so pleased with us, won't he?" asked Cluddy, glowing.

"Sunny's a good sort," said Willy, "and I'd hate to see him swindled."

It was still raining when Willy & Co. eventually arrived at St. Frank's and hurried into the Triangle. It was late—for calling-over had finished nearly an hour ago. Not that Willy & Co. cared; they felt that they had a perfectly good excuse for being late. And Mr. Suncliffe, as their Form-master, would undoubtedly explain matters to their own House-master, and make things all right. He couldn't very well do less.

Willy was not thinking of warning Mr. Suncliffe so that he should obtain a reward. He would be quite satisfied if there was no reward forthcoming at all. At the same time, he really saw no reason why he should refuse to accept a little tip, if Mr. Suncliffe felt inclined to offer it.

They went straight into the East House, and they ran across Armstrong and Griffith of the Fourth Form, in the lobby.

"Hallo, you kids!" said Armstrong. "I hear that Fenton has been inquiring after you."

"Has he?" said Willy. "That was very kind and thoughtful of him."

"He had a case in his hand," said Griffith. "You kids were late for calling-over, weren't you? You're going to get into hot water, according to what I've heard."

"You mustn't believe all you hear," said Willy coolly. "Do you happen to know if old Sunny is in his room?"

"We're not interested in your silly Form-master," replied Armstrong. "Going to report yourselves to him, eh? Think he'll be softer than Fenton? Well, perhaps you're right. If Suncliffe wasn't soft, he wouldn't be the master of the Third."

Willy took no notice of this factious remark, but led the way towards Mr. Suncliffe's private apartments. Arrived there, he tapped on the sitting-room door and waited.

"Who is it?" came Mr. Suncliffe's voice. "Come in!"

Willy & Co. entered.

They found Mr. Suncliffe sitting at the table, and it was significant that he was engaged in the task of reading an imposing-looking prospectus, and near him, too, were

some bank books, and on a writing block there were a number of pencilled figures.

"What is it, Handforth minor?" asked Mr. Suncliffe impatiently. "I cannot be bothered now. I am very busy. You boys shouldn't come to me at this hour of the evening; you know perfectly well that I am now off duty."

"Yes, sir, but we've come to talk to you on a private matter," said Willy, shutting the door.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Suncliffe, adjusting his glasses, and regarding Willy in surprise. "If you think that you can excuse yourselves for being late, you are mistaken. I have been given to understand that you failed to answer your names at calling-over. It is for your House-master to deal with you—not me. You are Ancient House boys, and you really have no right in the East House—"

"We haven't come to you about our being late, sir," said Willy steadily. "We want to warn you that you're being victimised by a couple of crooks."

Mr. Suncliffe started so violently that his glasses nearly dropped off his nose. He sat back in his chair, and gazed at Willy in amazement.

"What is that you said, Handforth minor?" he asked. "I am being victimised—by crooks? What nonsense is this?"

Willy felt that this interview was going to be a difficult one. If Mr. Suncliffe had one fault, it could be described in one word—excitability. He was liable, at any moment, to "go off the deep end." He was quite a mild gentleman, good-tempered and good-natured. But it was an undeniable fact that the Third, as a rule, had to treat him very diplomatically in order to rub him the right way. Mr. Suncliffe also had a habit of resenting any criticism of any action of his. To put it with painful bluntiness, he was known in the Third as a "pig-headed old beast." In spite of these defects, however, the Third-Formers rather liked him.

"I am waiting, Handforth minor!" said Mr. Suncliffe sharply.

"Yes, sir," said Willy. "It's about Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot."

"Oh, indeed!" said the Form-master, raising his eyebrows. "I cannot remember having given you permission to come to me in order to discuss my friends. How dare you, Handforth minor! I regard this as a sheer liberty—"

"Just a minute, sir," interrupted Willy earnestly. "You're mistaken about those two men."

"Mistaken! What do you mean?"

"I don't think they're really Australians—"

"You don't think!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe angrily. "How dare you come to me with this expression of opinion? Handforth minor, you are impudent! What do I care what you think? These two famous Australian cricketers are friends of mine, and I positively will not allow you to discuss them."

"But they're crooks, sir!" put in Chelby Heath excitedly.

"They're out to swindle you, sir!" chimed in Jimmy.

Willy glared at them.

"Dry up!" he said fiercely. "What's the idea of blurring it out like that, you silly young asses? Just when I was trying to break it gently, too!"

Mr. Suncliffe heard nothing of these whispered words. He was standing at his table, looking at the flags with such concentrated anger that Willy felt, in that moment, that the worst had happened.

"Please listen to me, sir," he said, coming forward. "We've got something very important to tell you. This evening, quite by accident, we got into a car in Rannington High Street. We thought it was Brown's car, but it wasn't. These two men, Bainbridge and Talbot, were in it, and—"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Suncliffe.

"We heard them talking, sir," said Willy quickly. "They're planning to swindle you—"

"If you utter another word, Handforth minor, I will thrash you within an inch of your life!" broke in Mr. Suncliffe hotly. "How you dare to come to me and speak ill of my friends is beyond my comprehension! You, a mere Third Form boy, to have the unparalleled audacity and impudence—"

"If I couldn't give you any proof, sir, it would be impudence," said Willy. "But I've got the proof, and if you'll listen to me—"

"I refuse to listen!" stormed Mr. Suncliffe. "Do you think I want to hear every scrap of tittle-tattle that goes about among you mischievous boys?"

"But it's not tittle-tattle, sir!"

"Tittle-tattle!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe ex-

citantly. "I sincerely regret that the boys of this school spend half their time in making scandal and in setting rumours into circulation which have no foundation in fact. Not that this school is any different from any other. Boys, I suppose, will always be boys—and therefore they will always be mischievous."

"But, sir—"

"There is more gross slander circulated in a public school than in any other institution I know of!" declared Mr. Suncliffe furiously. "They talk of old fishwives, but schoolboys are a thousand times worse! Without the slightest justification, they will tear an innocent person's reputation to shreds—and take pleasure in doing it, too! By what right do you come to me, telling me that my Australian friends are attempting to swindle me? How do you know of my private business with them?"

Mr. Suncliffe was nearly breathless with indignation and anger. He had only heard a quarter of what Willy had said, but he gathered at once that some of the fellows had got to know that he was contemplating the purchase of some shares with his legacy money. And Mr. Suncliffe naturally assumed that there had been a lot of idle rumours floating about.

"If you'll only cool down, sir, and listen to me carefully, I can explain everything," said Willy steadily. "In the first place, I don't believe that Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot are real Australians."

"What you believe, Handforth minor, is of no interest to me!" snapped Mr. Suncliffe. "I am staggered to hear you giving me your opinions! My friends are most distinguished Australian cricketers, and therefore they must be honourable. Cricket is the cleanest game in the world—the game, indeed, which has given rise to the very saying that—"

"Yes, I know, sir," put in Willy. "And I'll use it now. Is it cricket of you, sir, to refuse to give me a hearing? I tell you honestly that Bainbridge and Talbot are wrong 'uns, and I'll prove to you—"

"I warned you once, Handforth minor, and I can see that any further warning will be wasted!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe ferociously. "Come here! Hold out your hand!"

"But listen, sir,"

"Hold out your hand!" thundered Mr. Suncliffe.
Swish!

"Now the other!"

Swish!

"Again!"

Swish!

Mr. Suncliffe fairly let himself go. He gave Willy a severe six-hander, and Willy, who knew that he did not deserve it, took it without a murmur. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon stood looking on, open-mouthed—thoroughly scared. Somehow, things didn't seem to be going very well!

CHAPTER 7.

Willy the Protector!

MR. SUNCLIFFE, breathing heavily, pointed his quivering cane at the door.

"Now go!" he said hoarsely. "Leave this study at once!"

"Yes, sir," said Willy quietly.

"It's not fair, sir!" burst out Chubby, nearly beside himself with excited indignation. "You-oughtn't to have caned Willy like that! He was only telling you the truth—"

"Heath!" stormed Mr. Suncliffe. "Unless you are very careful, I will cane you, too!"

Chubby Heath dodged out of the study, and Juicy Lemon was right on his heels. Willy paused for a moment in the doorway, and he looked at the Form-master more in sorrow than in anger.

"I didn't mean to be impertinent, sir," he said. "One day, perhaps, you'll understand that, sir."

He went out, and he was grabbed by Juicy and Chubby.

"What are you going to do, Willy?" demanded Chubby Heath. "You've had a swishing, and you didn't deserve it. You're not going to stand that sort of thing, are you?"

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Willy. "I can stand a swishing, I suppose! I'm not hurt."

"He laid it on like the very dickens!" said Juicy sympathetically.

"Who cares?" retorted Willy. "Blow the swishing! We've got to decide what we shall do to protect old Sunny from those crooks. He won't listen to us, and it's no good trying it on again. He's got so much faith in those swindlers that he won't believe a word against them."

"Haden't we better go to Mr. Goole, the East House-master?" asked Chubby. "Or what price seeing Mr. Nelson Lee, our own House-master?" he added eagerly. "He's the chap. He'll probably know those two crooks, and—"

"He haven't got any real proof," growled Willy, frowning. "That's the trouble. Besides, do you think that Sunny would listen to Mr. Lee even? He's so jolly obstinate that he would resent any interference from anybody. He's made up his mind that Bainbridge and Talbot are Australian cricketers, and nothing will make him alter his opinion. You know how pig-headed he is!"

"He jolly well deserves to lose that legacy of his!" growled Juicy.

"Yes, perhaps so, but we can't see him go like a lamb to the slaughter, can we?" argued Willy. "We've got to do something about this—and I think, as a first move, I'll call a meeting of the Third. No good keeping this to ourselves—we shall want lots of help."

"Help for what?" asked Chubby, staring.

"You'll hear later on at the Form-meeting," replied Willy. "Buzz round and tell everybody to be in the gym. within ten minutes. And if anybody else is in the gym, kick them out. We want the place to ourselves for this meeting."

Ten minutes later the gymnasium resembled a mob scene. Fags were shouting at the top of their voices, running about, pushing one another here and there, and generally behaving like so many monkeys. In the middle of it all, Willy came in, and shut the door.

"Everybody here?" he asked, looking round. "Dry up, you fairheads! Do you want half the prefects of the school to come down on you? Stop this silly din!"

The din ceased as though by magic. Willy's rule in the Third was of iron.

"I'm not going to say much to you, and this meeting won't last for more than five minutes," said Willy. "It's about old Sunny. He's going to London to-morrow—at least, he thinks he is—and we've got to do something to stop him."

"How can we do that?" asked Owen minor, staring. "Sunny won't take any notice of us, will he? Besides, what's the idea of keeping him from going to London? If he's away, we shall have an easy time!"

Willy had decided that he would not take the whole of the Third into his complete confidence. No need to have the fags running round, discussing Mr. Suncliffe's private affairs. Willy realised that something drastic was necessary—something of a bombshell, which would shake Mr. Suncliffe into a realisation of his danger.

This meeting of the Third, therefore, resolved itself into a discussion of ways and means. The fags were told nothing of Mr. Suncliffe's plans regarding his legacy, and nobody but Chubby Heath and Juicey Lemm knew that Messrs. Bainbridge and Talbot were crooked. In fact, the Third, as a whole, wondered what on earth Willy was up to; but as Willy wouldn't explain the Third remained in the dark.

One thing was certain, however. When action was needed, the Third would be ready!

Towards the end of lessons next morning, Mr. Suncliffe casually mentioned that he would be away during the afternoon, and that a prefect would take charge of the Third during his absence. The Form-master had been looking thoughtful that morning; he had been absent-minded, too, and he had made a point of ignoring Willy Headforth completely. Evidently, he was still very annoyed with Willy.

"This means that he's going to London by the midday train," said Willy, after the fags had been dismissed. "Couldn't be better. The train goes in about half-an-hour, and we'd better get a move on."

"What about dinner?" asked Dicky Jones. "Shall we be able to get back in time for dinner?"

"It all depends," replied Willy. "In any case, dinner doesn't matter."

"Oh, doesn't it?" said several of the fags.

But they knew better than to jibe. Jibbing, in the Third, usually meant a drastic and painful form of punishment.

Fifteen minutes later, Mr. Suncliffe emerged from the East House, wearing his overcoat and his best hat, and he was carrying an attache case.

"Going away, sir?" asked Simms, of the Third, who happened to be near by.

"Yes, Simms, I am making a trip to London," replied Mr. Suncliffe. "I shall probably not be back until to-morrow."

He nodded curtly, and walked towards the

gates. All went well until he was half-way down the lane towards the village. And then, unexpectedly, Owen minor came through a gap in the hedge, and respectfully lifted his cap.

"Hallo, sir!" he said, in a tone of surprise. "Going away?"

"Yes, I am going away, Owen minor," retorted Mr. Suncliffe impatiently. "I am going to London."

"Right-oh, you shape!" sang out Owen minor, with sudden excitement. "Come on!"

Mr. Suncliffe was amazed. In a second, the lane became alive with fags. Willy had made sure before he had acted. It was just possible that Mr. Suncliffe was only going to Bannington—that the big coup had been put off. But this was not so. Since Mr. Suncliffe was bent upon going to London, it proved conclusively that he was ready to walk into the trap. It was time for drastic action!

Drastic action took place.

A number of the fags whirled a huge laundry hamper into the road. Somebody swung open the lid, and about a dozen other fags grabbed Mr. Suncliffe, bundled him into the hamper, and the lid was slammed down!

It was all so quickly done that it was over within a comparatively few seconds.

"That's good!" said Willy briefly.

"Now, where's the truck? Buck up! We don't want anybody to spot us. Sharp's the word!"

"Help! Help!" came a gurgling, muffled shout from the interior of the hamper.

"Don't take any notice," said Willy. "Shove him on the truck!"

Most of the Third-Formers were Boy Scouts, and they now produced their scouting truck. The hamper was hoisted upon it, and, without any further delay, the party set off through the meadows, and did not stop until the old ruined mill was reached, on the edge of Bannington Moor. Here the hamper was removed from the truck, carried into the mill, and raised, with some difficulty, on to the first floor. It was a bit of a job getting it up the narrow, steep stairs, and Mr. Suncliffe was jelted about considerably in the process. However, he wasn't hurt—although, judging by his muffled shouts, he was somewhat enraged.

The majority of the fags were scared out of their wits; but Willy was quite calm.

"You chaps needn't worry," he said. "I'll take all the responsibility. I'm the ringleader, and I'll face the music."

The lid of the hamper was opened, and Mr. Suncliffe was allowed to climb out. He was nearly speechless with rage.

"You—you unmitigated young rascals!" he panted hoarsely. "What—what is the meaning of this outrage? How dare you? I've lost my train—"

"Yes, sir—we did it on purpose so that you should lose your train," said Willy. "I've made up my mind to keep you away from that appointment with Bainbridge and Talbot, in London."

Mr. Suncliffe nearly foamed at the mouth.

"You shall be expelled for this!" he panted. "Handforth minor, have you taken leave of your senses? Never in all my life have I been so grossly assaulted!"

The fags stood round, still scared. And Mr. Suncliffe, after straightening himself out a bit, tried to make a move towards the exit.

"Just a minute, sir," said Willy firmly. "Get out of my way, boy," shouted Mr. Suncliffe. "I must get to Bannington, where I can, perhaps, take another train—"

"You're not going to catch any train to London to-day, sir," said Willy steadily. "Either you'll give us your word of honour that you won't go to London, or we shall be reluctantly compelled to keep you here—a prisoner—until this evening."

Mr. Suncliffe's jaw dropped. His face became freshly suffused with colour, and his eyes positively blazed.

"You shall be expelled for this, Handforth minor!" he promised grimly. "And every other boy who took part in this outrage shall be flogged! Good heavens! Have you all gone mad?"

"I don't want you to think, sir, that we meant any disrespect," said Willy, speaking earnestly. "We knew that it would be useless to stop you in the ordinary way, and to plead with you, so we took these drastic measures. Those oil shares are dude, sir."

Mr. Suncliffe started as though he had been stung.

"What do you know of oil shares?" he demanded wrathfully.

"I know that Bainbridge and Talbot are a couple of confidence men, sir," replied Willy. "They've got you in their clutches, and they're trying to sell you some oil shares which aren't worth a penny each! They're trying to steal that five thousand pounds of yours—and if we had allowed you to go to London you would have fallen into the trap. We've only done this for your own good, sir."

"My own good!" stuttered Mr. Suncliffe, nearly stupefied. "You—you have allowed—Why, upon my soul, I've never heard of such outrageous insolence!"

"Later on, sir, you'll thank us for having saved you," said Willy. "If you'll only listen to me—"

"I will not listen!" thundered the Form-master. "Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot are my friends, and you are talking arrant nonsense when you say that they are attempting to trick me. How dare you? Release me at once! Do you hear me, Handforth minor!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but this thing is so important that I've got to be firm," replied Willy. "You may think that it's a piece of awful cheek on my part—and, on the face of it, I dare say I deserve to be sacked. But there's no impertinence intended, and I hope you'll believe that, sir. We're only doing this to protect you—"

"I need no protection!" fumed Mr. Suncliffe.

"I think you do, sir," insisted Willy. "I would never have dreamed of taking this action, only I know that the end will justify the means. And when you realise the full truth about those two men, you will have your eyes opened, and you will forgive me. It's the only thing you can do, sir."

"You—you young scamp—"

"Why, sir, you don't think that I would have dared to take this action unless I knew, do you?" went on Willy. "Nothing on earth could have saved me from the sack, then. But when you find that I've saved your legacy, you can't possibly be angry. You'll have to admit that I was right, sir. Last night I discovered that Bainbridge and Talbot are wrong 'uns."

"Stop!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe, in a shrill voice.

"But if you'll only listen, sir—"

"I will not listen!" shrieked the Form-

master. "I tell you, I will not listen! Release me at once, sir—"

"I can only release you, sir, if you will promise me—"

"I will promise nothing!" babbled Mr. Suncliffe, nearly mad with rage and indignation. "Good Heavens! There will be a reckoning for this, Handforth minor! A grim reckoning!"

Willy was beginning to feel uneasy. He had hoped that Mr. Suncliffe, under the influence of this shock, would listen. But Mr. Suncliffe was worse than ever. His faith in his new friends was absolute. It was a blind, complete faith. And he regarded Willy's interference as a piece of execrable hoodliganism. He was so furious, in fact, that he was beyond the point when he might have heeded the warning. Even when he had been told that those old shares were worthless, he still took no notice. He was so enraged that he even laid his hands on Willy, and attempted to force him out of the way.

"I'm sorry, sir, but this sort of thing won't do any good," said Willy quietly. "The Third has decided to protect you, and it's going to do its job! I'm afraid we shall have to keep you here until the evening."

And Mr. Austin Suncliffe, to his consternation and stupefaction, was hustled by the fags into an inner compartment. There was an window here, there was no outlet of any kind—except by the door. And this was closed on him, and he heard some bolts being shut. He shouted and raved, but nobody took any notice of him.

"There's going to be an unholy row over this, Willy," said Chubby Heath nervously. "It'll mean the sack for most of us!"

"Don't you believe it," said Willy. "Later on, old Sunny will come to his senses—and then he'll find that we've done him a good turn. We shall be all right, my lads. Leave it all to me."

But the other Third-Formers were uneasy and worried. Was it possible that Willy Handforth had made a ghastly mistake for once? Had his characteristic high-handedness landed them into a mess from which there was no escape?

As a general rule, Willy's cool cheek won the day for him; but in Mr. Suncliffe, it failed, he had met his "Waterloo."

CHAPTER 8.

The "Sucker."

THERE were several Third-Formers missing from the class-room that afternoon. The prefect in charge made a note of their names, and he indicated that there would be trouble for them later. The prefect also noticed that the rest of the Third were strangely excited and restless. But he could get nothing out of them.

Willy Handforth and Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were among the missing fags. They were still at the old mill—protecting Mr. Suncliffe!

Willy was now thoroughly worried. Never before had his plans gone so completely wrong. During the afternoon he had been certain that Mr. Suncliffe would capitulate. Or, at least, he would cool down and agree to a conference. Mr. Suncliffe had done nothing of the kind. More than once Willy had knocked on the door and had asked him if he would listen to what he—Willy—had to say. And on each occasion Mr. Suncliffe had burst out into a torrent of excited, furious condemnation. He positively refused to listen to one word that Willy might have to say.

"Well, it's beginning to look bad, my sons," admitted Willy to the other fags. "Still, you can rely on me. I won't let you down. I'll take full responsibility for everything."

"I'll bet you'll get bunked," said Chubby gloomily.

"Looks like it," agreed Juicy Lemon. "All the same, if you can prove to old Sunny that he's in the hands of crooks he's bound to simmer down. Why not go to the police?"

"Can't!" replied Willy gruffly. "No evidence."

"But we heard those men talking—"

"That's not sufficient," interrupted Willy. "If the police questioned those men, they would probably be able to give a full account of themselves. They would deny that they had attempted to sell Sunny some dud shares, and we should only make ourselves look silly. Those confidence men are old hands—they're up to all the dodges. Not our only hope is to convince Sunny himself that he's in the hands of twisters."

"And Sunny won't be convinced," said Chubby glumly.

At about tea-time, when it was nearly dark, Willy shoved back the bolts and entered that inner compartment. He found Mr. Sundcliffe pacing up and down, dishevelled, wild-eyed and desperate.

"Oh! So you have come, have you, young man!" he said thickly. "Do not imagine for one moment that you will escape the consequences of this—"

"You're all wrong, sir," interrupted Willy. "If we could have used gentle methods we would have done so. But you wouldn't listen. My idea was to prevent you going to London, so that you couldn't keep that appointment. I should hate to think of you deliberately throwing your money away, sir. These two men are criminals, and—"

"Enough!" said Mr. Sundcliffe harshly. "I will not lower my dignity by arguing with you, Handforth minor. I regret exceedingly that my high opinion of you was absolutely unjustified. You are a young scamp—a reckless, dangerous—"

"What I've done, sir, I've done because of my high regard for you," said Willy quietly.

"Upon my word! How you can stand there and speak in such a way amazes me!" fumed the Farm-master. "Am I to understand that I am now at liberty?" he added, indicating the door. "Have you, in the goodness of your heart, decided that I am to go free?"

"You can go as soon as you like, sir—but I wish you'd listen to me first," said Willy. "I knew that you were going to London to settle that oil-shere deal, and as you wouldn't take any notice of my warnings, I thought I'd better use force. Think, sir! How did I know about those oil-shares? The very fact that I knew about them proves that—"

"It merely proves that you have been interfering in the most unwarrantable fashion in my private affairs," said Mr. Sundcliffe ominously.

"Well, I want you to believe, sir, that I intended no disrespect," replied Willy. "And I take the full responsibility, sir. These other fellows didn't want to help me, but I made them. I'm the only one to blame, sir."

Mr. Sundcliffe didn't answer. He strode past, blundered down the rickety stairs and went off into the gloom of the November evening.

"Well, that's that!" said Willy gruffly,

when he and the others were walking back towards St. Frank's. They had been joined by a crowd of other lugs, who had come along to see how things were going. They were startled when they learned that no progress had been made. There was a feeling of uncertainty and menace in the air. It was generally believed that the chopper would soon fall—particularly upon Willy.

As it happened, there were two figures in the Triangle when the lugs arrived back at the old school. And Willy, with a sharp intake of breath, gathered his forces round him. He had recognised those two figures on the instant as those of Sievu Bainbridge and J. W. G. Talbot.

"They're come down from London!" he muttered. "Sunny didn't turn up, so they've come along to see what was wrong. Quick! We've got to hustle the rotters out!"

"But—but—"

"No time for arguments," said Willy. "We mustn't let those men get at old Sunny now! Come on!"

The lugs made a rush, and the next moment Bainbridge and Talbot were surrounded.

"All right, kids—all right!" said Bainbridge good-naturedly. "Sorry we can't give you our autographs just now—"

"We don't want your autographs!" interrupted Willy grimly. "We're going to give you one minute to get off these premises!"

The two men looked startled.

"Say, what's the big idea?" demanded Talbot curtly. "You kids had better not start any rough stuff—"

"If you're not out in the road, and on your way, within a minute, we'll throw you out!" said Willy. "We're on to your game, and we're not going to let you swindle Mr. Sundcliffe. If you don't want the police after you, you'd better hop it!"

This time Bainbridge and Talbot looked positively aghast.

"You don't know what you're talking about, kid," said Bainbridge, trying to speak calmly and easily. "What's all this nonsense? Who's been telling you—"

"Never mind that," interrupted Willy. "You may have fooled Mr. Sundcliffe, but you haven't fooled us. Your minute's up, and you're going out! Back up, the Third! Lend a hand here!"

The lugs crowded round closer, and the

two men found themselves being hustled towards the gates.

All would have been well, only Mr. Suncliffe himself appeared at that minute. He came running up, as excited and as angry as ever.

"Boys, boys!" he shouted. "Stand back! My dear fellows, I cannot say how pained I am that you should have been subjected to this—this gross outrage!"

Bainbridge gave his companion a quick nudge. He had realised, in that instant, that Mr. Suncliffe at least had not had his eyes opened.

"It's all right, Mr. Suncliffe," said Bainbridge coolly. "These boys are a bit excited—they don't seem to know what they're doing."

"They are mad—absolutely mad!" panted Mr. Suncliffe. "Handforth minor, if you dare to interfere any further—"

"Oh, all right, sir," said Willy, shrugging his shoulders. "We were going to throw these men off the premises, but as you've come along, we'll ease off."

Willy was feeling a bit fed-up. It wasn't usual for him to find out that he had made a blunder. He now realised that it would have been better from every point of view if he had gone straight to the headmaster. And the Head, no doubt, would have had a quiet talk with Mr. Suncliffe, and everything would have been all right. Perhaps it wasn't too late, even now.

Indoors, Mr. Suncliffe cooled down somewhat.

Bainbridge and Talbot were quite on their guard, and they were ready to make a hurried departure if necessary. They instinctively felt that their game was now a risky one. They were on the thin edge.

However, Mr. Suncliffe seemed as friendly as ever, and this was a good sign.

"I beg of you to forgive those unruly boys," said the Form-master with concern. "Really, they are quite uncontrollable."

"Just a bit high-spirited maybe," laughed Talbot.

"What I can't understand," said Bainbridge, "is why they should have turned against us. When we came last time they were full of enthusiasm. What's wrong, Mr. Suncliffe? I'm not feeling at all comfortable."

"I'm making my appointment to-day, but I owe you another apology for the behaviour of my boys," said Mr. Suncliffe. "The one is really wrapped up with the other. It was these boys who prevented my journeying to London in order to keep my appointment. An appalling business, gentlemen. I can only hope that you will absolve me from all blame."

"We thought maybe that you might have wired," suggested Bainbridge.

"I tell you it was impossible," replied Mr. Suncliffe. "These boys carried me off to an old ruined mill, and kept me a prisoner all the afternoon. They have conceived some preposterous idea that you two gentlemen are—ahem!—not on the—square."

"But what on earth gave them that extraordinary idea?" asked Talbot in wonder.

"I cannot say," said Mr. Suncliffe. "I only know that they spoke vaguely of a ride in a motor-car. They seem to have got hold of some rumour or other. One of the boys spoke of riding in a car with you to Helmsford."

"Riding with us to Helmsford!" ejaculated Bainbridge, with a quick glance at his companion.

"Last night, I think," said Mr. Suncliffe. "You were not aware of their presence. They concealed themselves, thinking that your car belonged to somebody else. Really, I don't know the full truth of it. Frankly, I refused to listen to their slanderous statements."

"That was very good of you, Mr. Suncliffe," said Bainbridge gently. "As for that ride in the car, I can easily understand now. Talbot here is a bit of a writer. When he isn't playing cricket, he's weaving sensational stories."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Suncliffe, with new interest.

"Oh, sure!" smiled Talbot, who had never written a word in his life.

"As it happens, Talbot and I were discussing a story plot during our ride to Helmsford last night," continued Bainbridge glibly. "All I can assume is that these boys must have mistaken fiction for fact."

"Gosh, you've hit it, Steve!" said Talbot with a whistle. "Anybody overhearing us talking of that plot would naturally assume that something was rather fishy. Well, I'm

"Not only do I owe you an apology for

hanged! And so these boys have been jostling you—"

"They prevented me making my journey to London," interrupted Mr. Suncliffe hotly. "And on the top of that they had the audacity to insult you two gentlemen!"

"Well, of course, that explains it," said Bainbridge calmly. "It's a pity you couldn't turn up to-day, Mr. Suncliffe. Morton tells us that these shares cannot be held secret for much longer. They're bound to be on the open market within a day or two; and then, of course, they'll be snipped up in no time. They say that the well is producing an amazing quantity of oil, and the shares have doubled their value within a week. The boom looks like continuing."

"Upon my soul!" said Mr. Suncliffe anxiously. "Am I—am I too late?"

"Well, it all depends," said Bainbridge, stroking his chin. "As it happens, Morton is coming to Bannington to-morrow on business, and I urged him to be down early. We'd very much like you to join in this escapade, and if you could manage to come over to Bannington in the morning, I dare say it might still be managed."

These two confidence men were postmasters in the art of trickery. It was part of their stock-in-trade to be plausible and smooth-tongued, and engagingly honest in their manner. They were so frank and so open that Mr. Suncliffe was soon completely in their toils. He deemed it impossible that they could be treacherous; they were so obviously straightforward. And their very appearance, too, was all in their favour.

If Mr. Suncliffe had had any suspicions, owing to Willy Handforth's activities, they were now completely wiped away. Bainbridge and Telbot had established themselves more firmly than ever.

Willy, having made up his mind to go to the Head, came out into the Triangle and started off towards Dig Arch. He had hardly gone half a dozen paces, however, before he saw three figures in the doorway of the East House.

Mr. Suncliffe was saying good-bye to his new friends.

"All right, then; ten-thirty to-morrow morning at the Grapes," Mr. Suncliffe was saying. "Splendid! I cannot tell you how glad I am that I am still in time."

"Well, it will all depend upon Morton,"

said Bainbridge. "He'll be there, of course, and if he can put it through, he will. He's one of the biggest lawyers in London, and a personal friend of ours. But he'll only do it as a special favour to us, Mr. Suncliffe."

"It is really very good of you," said Mr. Suncliffe gratefully.

Willy stood stock-still. Ten-thirty in the morning—at the Grapes Hotel, in Bannington! So the crooks were getting desperate—they were bringing their fake lawyer down to Bannington this time! They weren't taking any more chances!

Willy felt astoundingly helpless. Here was Mr. Suncliffe going bludily into this trap, and he would not listen to any words of warning. It was really too bad of him.

The two alleged Australian cricketers got into their car, which was waiting handy, and they drove away. And Willy moved across to Mr. Suncliffe.

"May I speak to you for a minute, sir?" he asked grimly.

"I want you, Handforth junior!" said Mr. Suncliffe. "You are coming with me to the headmaster—"

"That's all right, sir—I was just going to the Head myself," said Willy. "But please do listen to me, sir! If you're fixed up a fresh appointment with those fellows, please—"

"If you breathe another word against them, Handforth junior, I shall get very angry!" said Mr. Suncliffe, breathing hard.

"Come, not another syllable! Your conduct has been so outrageous that I am compelled to report you to the headmaster—and he, I have no doubt, will deal with you in the drastic manner that you deserve!"

"But I just want to say, sir—"

"You will say nothing!" thundered Mr. Suncliffe ominously. "Come! I have had as much of you as I can stand!"

CHAPTER 5.

Rough on Willy!

D R. MORRISON NICHOLLS, the Head, looked grave and troubled. "I am amazed, Mr. Suncliffe," he said slowly. "You tell me that this boy influenced his companions to seize you on your way to the station, and to—er—bundle you into a laundry hamper, and

to take you to an old ruined mill? Upon my soul, this is really a most extraordinary story!"

"They treated me with the grossest disrespect," said Mr. Suncliffe, with heat. "They kept me a prisoner—they prevented me from making a most important journey to London. As it happens, no serious harm has resulted, otherwise I would suggest that expulsion be the sentence of this wretched boy."

"I do not think that any other sentence will be adequate," said the Head grimly.

"Handforth minor is an excellent boy in many ways, and I therefore plead with you to be merciful," continued Mr. Suncliffe. "If I might suggest a flogging—"

"I am not sure, Mr. Suncliffe, that I can let him off with a flogging," interrupted Dr. Nicholls. "His offence is very, very grave. So grave, indeed, that I wonder at your forbearance. I am compelled to take a serious view of this matter."

"I would not suggest leniency, only I believe that Handforth minor had some absurd idea in his head that he was helping me," said Mr. Suncliffe hesitatingly. "And in these circumstances I think, perhaps, that his offence may be regarded in a less serious light."

The Head pursed his lips and turned to the culprit.

"What have you to say, Handforth minor?" he asked sternly.

"Only that we did our best to save Mr. Suncliffe from being swindled by a couple of confidence men, sir," replied Willy. "I knew that he was going to buy a lot of dud shares, and I tried to stop him. That's all, sir. If you can have a talk with Mr. Suncliffe, and make him see reason, I know he'll be grateful for it later. I did the best I could, but he wouldn't listen to me."

"What in the world are you talking about, Handforth minor?" asked the Head in astonishment.

"Mr. Suncliffe has got mixed up with two strangers, sir—two men he met in a London hotel," replied Willy. "He thinks they're Australian cricketers, but I know that they are crooks. They're trying to sell him some worthless oil-shares—"

"The boy is talking nonsense!" broke in Mr. Suncliffe, flushing deeply. "I am pained, indeed, that my private affairs should be so grossly bandied about and brought before your notice in this way! The whole thing has been misrepresented by

this boy. He does not know what he is talking about!"

"I am sure, Mr. Suncliffe, that I have no desire to probe into your private matters—"

"Thank you, sir," said the Form-master. "It seems that this boy took notice of an absurd rumour. Or he may have overheard something. It really does not matter which. One of my Australian friends is a novelist, and it seems that he was getting out a plot for one of his stories. This boy overheard some of this plot, and mistook it for—"

"So that's how they explained it, sir?" said Willy bitterly. "They're a cute pair, I must say."

"You see, sir?" said Mr. Suncliffe, appealing to the Head. "The boy still thinks that he was attempting to serve me by behaving in such an outrageous manner. I strongly resent his interference in my personal affairs!"

"Quite right, too, Mr. Suncliffe," nodded the headmaster. "You are surely old enough and sensible enough to conduct your own business. What does this boy know of such matters? Quite apart from that, nothing can alter the fact that he was the ringleader in a most outrageous assault. And for that he must be severely punished."

"Won't you ask Mr. Suncliffe about those two men, sir?" urged Willy earnestly.

"If he'll only consent to have some inquiries made, he'll find that they're wrong 'uns. And then he'll know that I acted for the best—that I saved his money for him."

The Head glanced at Mr. Suncliffe.

"I refuse to have any discussion whatever on this matter, sir!" said the Form-master stiffly. "As you so truthfully remarked, I am old enough to attend to my own private business. I would much prefer you to leave that aspect of the matter completely out, and to punish this boy as he deserves."

"Very well," said Dr. Nicholls quietly. "I do not think that an ordinary casing will meet the demands of the case. Handforth minor, you are guilty of a very serious offence, and but for the fact that Mr. Suncliffe has given it as his opinion that you believed yourself to be acting in his interests, I should expel you without compunction."

Willy was silent.

"As it is, I must flog you publicly," con-

joined Dr. Nicholls. "And I hope this will be a lesson to you—a lesson that you should not interest yourself in the private matters of your Form-master. If you thought you had any warning to give to Mr. Suncliffe, you should have spoken to him privately."

"I tried to, sir, but he wouldn't listen." "That is quite true," admitted Mr. Suncliffe. "Naturally, I refused to listen. Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot are my friends, and it was sheerly impossible for me to have this boy traducing them so abominably. In any case, I am satisfied that there was no justification whatsoever for his aspersion."

"If you are satisfied, Mr. Suncliffe, then the matter naturally ends," said the Head. "We have, therefore, merely to deal with this boy's offence. He handled you with the utmost disrespect this afternoon—and, I understand, he influenced a number of his companions to help him!"

"I am afraid so, sir," said Mr. Suncliffe. "It's not fair to punish them, sir," said Willy quickly. "It was all my idea—and all my doing. They only obeyed my orders!"

"Your orders?" repeated the Head sharply.

"In the Third, sir, I'm the skipper," replied Willy. "The chaps always do as I tell them. It wouldn't be fair to punish them over this affair, sir. I'm the only one."

"We will see about that," replied Dr. Nicholls sternly.

Everybody was surprised when the summons came that the whole school was to collect in Big Hall.

Rumours were floating about already, and it was known as a fact that Willy Handforth had mysteriously vanished. Enlightenment came when somebody said that he had seen Willy going off to the headmaster's house with Mr. Suncliffe.

"Looks as if your minor's in trouble, Handy," said Church, as he and a number of Removites made their way towards Big Hall.

"There's nothing fresh in that," granted Handforth. "I wonder what he's been up to now!"

"Something to do with old Suncliffe, I think," said McClure. "Anyhow, Suncliffe was away this afternoon, and your minor was missing, too. I've heard that

lots of those fags grabbed old Sunny, and kept him prisoner somewhere."

"What rot!" said Handforth. "Even my minor wouldn't do a dirty thing like that! It would have meant the sack!"

In Big Hall there was a stir when Willy Handforth was led on to the platform by Dr. Morrison Nicholls.

The Third stood apprehensive and uneasy.

Mr. Suncliffe was on the platform, too, and he was looking very troubled. He hated any scene of this kind—particularly when he was so closely mixed up in it. However, he felt that some sort of drastic punishment was necessary.

"I find myself under the painful obligation of giving this boy a flogging," said the headmaster, addressing the school. "He is guilty of a very serious offence. This afternoon he led a number of his companions to seize Mr. Suncliffe, and to imprison him for a number of hours. Mr. Suncliffe had intended going to London, but he was prevented from doing so by this outrage. But for the fact that there are certain mitigating circumstances, Handforth's minor would have been expelled."

And then and there, without any further delay, Dr. Nicholls proceeded to administer the flogging. It was a severe one. Willy suffered it without making a sound.

When it was all over he was allowed to go back to the ranks of the Third, and Dr. Nicholls came forward to the edge of the platform.

"There are certain other boys in the Third Form who were parties to this assault on Mr. Suncliffe," he said. "I call upon those boys to stand forward."

Only for a moment did the Third hesitate; then it stood forward as one man.

"We were all in it, sir," said Chubby Heath defiantly. "We back Willy up all along the line!"

"Yes, rather, sir!" chorused a number of other fags.

"If you punish one of us, sir, you'll have to punish the lot!"

It was a remarkable expression of loyalty, and Willy felt warmed towards his Form-fellows.

"I am glad, boys, that you have acted so sensibly," said the Head. "Handforth's minor has confessed to me that he was the ringleader, and he, therefore, is the only

boy who will be flogged. But every boy in the Third Form will be confined to gates for the period of two weeks. That is all. The school may now dismiss."

CHAPTER 15.

A Surprise for the School!

THERE was a startled look on Willy Handforth's face when he went out of Big Hall with Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon and a crowd of other lads swarming round him.

"Poor old Willy!" said Chubby sympathetically. "My hat! You must be smarting!"

"You won't be able to sit down for a week!" said Juicy, shaking his head.

Willy said not.

"Never mind about that," he said. "I'd forgotten about that smishing. I'm worrying about to-morrow. We're all gated!"

"We've got off jolly lucky, if you ask me," said Owen minor.

"We're gated!" repeated Willy grimly. "That means that we can't move outside the school premises."

"What about it?" asked Chubby. "We're not going to bother ourselves with old Sunny again, are we? I'm fed up with him! The rotter! We do all that for his own good, and all he can do in return is to get you a flogging—and all of us a gating! Blow him!"

"Hear, hear!" said one of the other lads.

"That is what we get for trying to do somebody a good turn!" said Dicky Jones bitterly.

"You mustn't blame Sunny," replied Willy, with rare forbearance. "By a piece of rotten ill-luck, he's seen those two crooks this evening—they've been with him for some time, and they succeeded in pulling the wool over his eyes."

"Oh, he's hopeless!" growled Chubby.

"He must have told them that we suspected them, and I'm jiggered if they didn't trot out some yarn that Talbot is a novelist, and that I must have heard some part of a giddy story plot," went on Willy. "Can you beat it? We knew that old Sunny was safe, but, by Jove, he's as innocent as a baby in arms! He ought to have a keeper!"

"I think we'd better drop the whole thing," said Dicky Jones.

"Not now!" declared Willy. "We've agreed to protect him—and we shall protect him. Besides, we're going to see that those crooks get their deserts, my sons! I've had a flogging through them, and I shan't forget it. I don't blame old Sunny—I blame those giddy twisters!"

"Why not go and tell Mr. Lee, or the Head?" suggested Juicy.

"No good," replied Willy, shaking his head. "Suncliffe told the Head that he wouldn't say anything about his private affairs, so if I started on the subject I should only be shut up. And Mr. Lee, I dare say, would be the same. Quite apart from that, I want to see this thing through myself. The Third's going to do it! Dash it, we're not going to admit defeat, are we?"

"Well, I suppose not," said Chubby, in a dubious voice.

Just then Handforth came along, with Nipper and Travers and several other Removites. They had all left Big Hall now, and were collected in the Triangle, in the chilly winter dusk.

"Now then, Willy, my son," said Edward Oswald sternly. "What's all this about? What do you mean by getting yourself a flogging?"

"It's nothing much," said Willy. "Old Suncliffe has got himself into the hands of a couple of confidence tricksters, and they're trying to rook him of his five thousand quid legacy. The Third has decided to save him. That's all."

"All!" echoed Handforth, aghast. "You young ass! Are you trying to pull my leg?"

"No—honour bright!" said Willy.

And he gave a few details, whilst Nipper and the others listened with keen interest.

"We'd better go straight to Mr. Lee," said Nipper, at length. "And you can rely upon the Remove to help—"

"Thanks all the same—but the Third doesn't need any help," said Willy coldly.

"What do you mean, you young chump?" said his major. "You're all gated! You can't do anything!"

"Can't we? Wait and see," said Willy. "And as for going to Mr. Lee, we've decided not to. Sunny is as obstinate as a mule, and he won't listen to anybody. If Mr. Lee talked to him, he'd only argue

him. We've had some! No; we're going to do this entirely on our own. We started the thing, and we're going to finish it."

Willy was very thoughtful for the remainder of the evening, and it was evident to the other Third-Formers that their young leader was thinking deeply on the subject of Mr. Austin Sundcliffe and his legacy.

When bed-time came, and the Third-Formers went to their dormitory, some of the other fags became curious.

"It's all very well to talk, Willy, but I don't see that we can do anything," remarked Chubby Heath. "We're gated, and that means we can't leave the school premises to-morrow—or at any time for the next fortnight. So how the dickens are we going to protect old Sunny from those crooks?"

"I'm going to suggest a pretty drastic thing," said Willy suddenly. "And you fellows are going to back me up. Understand? If there are any objections, I'll deal with them personally, and I shan't trouble to be gentle."

"What's the idea?" asked Juicy Lemon, staring. "Haven't you better tell us what it is before you start threatening?"

"I'm not threatening—I'm just giving a warning," replied Willy. "Every chap in the Third has got to be in this, and you'll soon understand why."

And the next morning, after the rising-bell had rung, there was a big surprise for St. Frank's.

A prefect, going into the Third-Form dormitory in the Ancient House to give the fags a dig, was astounded to find the room empty!

It was just the same in the Third-Form dormitories in the West House and the Modern House and the East House.

Not a Third-Former was to be found!

CHAPTER 11.

The Rebel Third!

"NOT a sign of them!" said Handforth, of the Remove Form, breathlessly.

The leader of Study D at St. Frank's had just joined Church and McClure, his chums, in the Triangle, and there were numbers of other Removeites congregating, too. They had come from all quarters of the famous old school. It

was a fine, crisp, early December morning, and as yet the breakfast-bell had not been sounded.

"Most mysterious thing I've ever known!" said Fullwood. "Where the dickens can the young fattedubs have got to?"

"They've bolted—the whole giddy Third!" said Harry Gresham. "The Head gated them all last night, too—gated them for a fortnight. That makes it worse."

"That's why they've bolted, I expect," said Nipper, the cheery skipper of the Remove. "It's Willy's doing, of course. He's at the bottom of it."

Edward Oswald Handforth frowned.

"My minor's going to answer to me for this!" he said darkly. "Of course, he's responsible. The Head gave him a flogging last night, and now he's asking for the sack! He'll get it too, as sure as the sun's shining!"

"He's a slippery young beggar," said Nipper thoughtfully. "Somehow or other, I've an idea that he won't be sacked, hands. Any other chap would—but not Willy."

"He's gone too far this time!" said Handforth, worried.

He was deeply concerned about his minor. And he felt helpless, too. Inquiries had been made in the village, and round about the neighbourhood; but nobody had seen any sign of the missing Third Form.

Even now prefects and masters were consulting, and were dashing about all over the school. The fags, to a man, had mysteriously disappeared. During the hours of the night they had stolen from the school, and had apparently vanished into thin air. It was rebellion!

And, without any question whatsoever, Willy Handforth was the ringleader of this daring enterprise.

But the Third wasn't so very far away.

The fags were gathered in a deep, obscure hollow at the rear of Bellton Wood. At the present moment they were considerably busy. Their task consisted of consuming biscuits and cheese, to say nothing of buns and doughnuts, and such-like delicacies.

This hollow in the wood was partially secluded. It was well away from any foot-path, and it was deep, and almost entirely surrounded by thick bushes. Scarcely any of the morning sunlight penetrated into this retreat.

Willy believed in doing things thoroughly. And he realized that there would be a lot of grumbling if the fags were required to spend the morning at work without having previously breakfasted.

So, before leaving St. Frank's, every available scrap of food had been bagged. Without conjunction, Willy had raided the household supplies of the Ancient House, and the fags had left the school laden with loaves and slabs of cheese and other eatables. As he truthfully remarked, it was up to the school to provide them with their breakfast, so there was nothing wrong in commandeering this foodstuff.

"Finished!" asked Willy briskly, as he looked round.

"Pretty well," replied Chubby Heath. "Young Jones is wolfing the last biscuit now."

"Well, the sponge we've finished with this eating, the better," said Willy. "There's a lot of work to be done this morning, my sons. I want you all to gather round me, and I'll give you your instructions."

The Third gathered round. Chubby Heath and Jucey Lemon were Willy's chief lieutenants, and they saw to it that the other fags collected. There were a few of the Third-Formers who were resentful—who had no desire to leave their beds and to participate in this minor rebellion. But Willy ruled the Third with an iron hand, and his word was law.

"There's going to be an unsholy row about this, you know," said Fullerton, of the East House. "I expect the masters and prefects are searching for us already, and they might drop on us at any minute. It'll mean a flogging all round, and the sack for Hardforth minor."

Willy looked at him coldly.

"By the time we've finished we shall have proved that we were justified," he replied. "There won't be any floggings for anybody—or the sack for me, either. Didn't I promise you, before we started out, that everything would be all right?"

"It's easy enough to say," retorted Fullerton.

"We're doing this for Sunny's sake," continued Willy. "We're going to save him from those rotten confidence tricksters—and this morning is our only chance. By midday we shall have gained success, and we can all return to St. Frank's, and old Sunny will give us his blessing."

"It sounds lovely," remarked Dicky Jones. "But I'm not so jolly sure that it will work out like that. And as for Sunny, he jolly well deserves to lose his beastly legacy!"

"Rats! Everything will be all right!" said Willy. "As I have told you, Mr. Susscliffe has arranged to meet Bainbridge and Talbot at the Grapes Hotel, in Bannington, at ten-thirty this morning. They're going to have another man there—a chap named Morton. He's supposed to be a lawyer, but I believe he's merely another confidence man. Anyhow, their wheeze is to grab Susscliffe's money while the grabbing is good. They're going to settle the deal straight away."

"It's rummy he didn't get suspicious when he heard they were bringing their lawyer down to Bannington," remarked Dicky Jones.

"Lots of men would have got suspicious, but not Sunny," said Willy. "He's too simple—too trusting. I expect they were plausible about it. Anyhow, what does it matter? We know that Sunny is going to meet those men at the Grapes at half-past ten. So it's up to us to put a kink in the whole game!"

"It's all very well to talk about putting kinks into it, but how are we going to do it?" asked Gates. "It seems to me that you've bitten off more than you can chew!"

"That's what I think, too," said Hubbs.

"Same here!" chorused a number of others.

"And we'll all get it in the neck!" said Fullerton, with a sniff. "We must have been mad to come out here like this! Goodness only knows what the end of it will be!"

Willy instinctively clenched his fists.

"Anything else?" he demanded, glaring round. "Are you kicking, my lad? If so, just tell me. I've got a little present for the first chap who jibs."

"Cheese it, Willy!" protested Chubby. "The chaps are naturally a bit nervous."

"Nervous!" said Willy scornfully. "What is there to be nervous about? Pull your socks up! We're not going to get into hot water over this!"

"You said that we shouldn't get into trouble for collaring Sunny yesterday," remarked Bobby Dexter. "And what happened? You were bagged, and we were gated for a fortnight! In my opinion, you've failed us!"



"Come on, the Third!" "Hurrah!" "Grab 'em!" With one accord the swarming Third-Formers flung themselves upon the three men.

The fags were becoming restive, and Willy could see that half of them would dodge back to St. Frank's unless he was careful. He regarded them with a cold, scornful eye.

"You're a fine bunch!" he said witheringly. "You've got just about as much backbone as a filleted haddock! Sunny is our Form-master, and we've got to save him from these crooks. He won't listen to reason—he won't take my advice. Therefore, we've got to use force."

"We used it once—and it was no good!" said Jimmy Hook, of the East House.

"We'll use a different kind of force this time," retorted Willy. "I only organised this rebellion because I knew that it would be short and sharp and because I knew, too, that we shouldn't get into any trouble when the whole truth came out. I tell you, you fatheads, we're on a safe thing."

"Well, I'm blowed if I can see it!" said Kerrigan, of the West House. "I'm game for anything, Willy—and you know it. But what's the good of collaring Sunny again?"

"Yes, that's what I'm thinking," said Dicky Jones. "Sunny will only go and report us to the Head, and then he'll meet those crooks again. If he's made up his mind to buy a lot of dud shares, he'll buy them."

Willy nodded.

"That's all right—we'll let him buy them," he replied coolly.

"Eh?"

"We'll do what?"

"We'll let him buy them," repeated Willy. "That's the whole idea."

"You're dotty," said Chubby, staring. "I thought you'd planned it so that we should diddle these crooks!"

"So I have," replied Willy. "But the first move will be to let Sunny go to Bannington, meet those rotters, and settle the deal."

"If he settles it, what can we do?" asked Jimmy.

"A lot—a whole lot," said Willy grimly. "But we've proved that it's no good arguing with him, or reasoning with him. So we'll let him buy those shares. He jolly well deserves a lesson—and this morning he'll get one. A lesson that he won't forget for years!"

Owen minor scratched his head.

"Well, I'm jiggered if I can understand what you're getting at," he said frankly. "In one breath you say that we're going to

diddle these crooks, and in another breath you say that we're going to let Sunny buy those spoof shares! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Don't I?" asked Willy sweetly. "Well, children, listen to this."

And while the "children" were listening, Mr. Austin Sundcliffe was having a very worrying time at St. Frank's.

The school was partaking of breakfast, but the master of the Third Form had no appetite. He did not go in to breakfast. None of his boys were there, and he could hardly sit at the Third Form table in the East House, and ignore the fact that his boys were missing.

He had been on the jump ever since he had got up. The news that the Third line vanished had struck him like a blow, and he had lost no time in sending prefects this way and that way, making inquiries. They had now returned, and the result of their search was disappointing. Not a soul in the district, apparently, had seen any Third-Formers that morning.

And now, at breakfast-time, Mr. Sundcliffe hurried over to the Head's house, in order to report.

"An amazing affair, sir!" he declared breathlessly, when he stood in Dr. Nicholls' study. "I must confess that I am completely at a loss. I really don't know what to do."

The Head frowned.

"It is a very grave situation, Mr. Sundcliffe," he said. "When these boys are found they will be very severely punished. I cannot doubt that Handforth minor is the ringleader in this rebellion."

"I fear you are right, sir," said Mr. Sundcliffe.

"He must be made to understand that this kind of thing is dangerous," said Dr. Nicholls grimly. "Indeed, there is only one possible punishment for Handforth minor. He will be expelled from this school. Mr. Sundcliffe, the very instant he is found. He has lost my authority, and he has influenced his Form-fellows to take part in this outrageous revolt. A boy of that type must be got rid of!"

Mr. Sundcliffe hesitated.

"I feel, sir, that Handforth minor has taken this action because he has some misguided notion in his mind that he is helping me," he said diffidently. "I fear, indeed, that Handforth minor is even planning another attack upon my—so—person."

"I think I don't quite understand, Mr. Suncilffe," said the Head curiously.

"I have an appointment this morning, sir, in Bannington," replied Mr. Suncilffe. "It is an important business appointment, and it was my original intention to place a prefect in charge of my Form during my absence. But, of course, there will be no lessons for the Third this morning, since the Third is not here."

"But what do you fear?"

"I feel that my journey to Bannington will be interfered with," replied Mr. Suncilffe. "I believe, in fact, that my boys are preparing an ambush for me. They will try to prevent my arrival in Bannington, to keep this most important appointment. You may remember that Handforth minor was flogged because of his activities in this same connection."

The Head nodded.

"Your boys believe that you are making a mistake, Mr. Suncilffe, in regard to some investments, eh?" said Dr. Nicholls. "I think you hinted at something of the sort yesterday."

"They are absolutely mistaken," said the Form-master hotly. "The whole thing is ridiculous. Quite apart from the fact that I dislike this interference in my private affairs, I resent—"

"Quite so—quite so," interrupted the Head. "And as for your present fears, Mr. Suncilffe, I really think there is nothing in them. The boys would not dare to ambush you, as you suggest. Indeed, I should be very pleased if they did."

"My dear sir!" protested Mr. Suncilffe.

"For in that case we should be able to round them up," said the Head dryly. "I understand that all the boys have completely vanished. No trace of them has been found?"

"No trace whatsoever," replied Mr. Suncilffe, with concern. "I have sent prefects into the village, and they have returned empty-handed. They have searched everywhere. They have made every possible inquiry. I can only think that the boys have concealed themselves in some distant retreat—perhaps near Bannington itself, so that they can entrap me—"

"Nonsense!" broke in Dr. Nicholls. "You really mustn't get such fantastic ideas into your head, Mr. Suncilffe. How did you intend travelling to Bannington this morning?"

"By train."

"You surely don't think that these Third Form boys would hold up your train?"

"Knowing the Third as I do, I should not be surprised at anything," replied Mr. Suncilffe feelingly. "Handforth minor, at all events, is capable of anything. Anything, sir! And yet, let me add, I like the boy. I like him immensely."

The Head rose to his feet.

"You need not feel worried regarding your little journey to Bannington, Mr. Suncilffe," he said. "As it happens, I am visiting the Bannington Grammar School myself this morning. If you would care to come with me, in my private car, I shall be most happy to accommodate you."

Mr. Suncilffe's worried expression vanished.

"That is really very good of you, Dr. Nicholls," he said eagerly. "I should feel very much safer in your company. But my appointment is for ten-thirty—"

"That is quite all right," said the Head. "I shall be leaving here at ten o'clock, so you will be in Bannington by twenty past, at the latest. And if those Third Form boys dare to ambush my car— But I will not think of such a possibility. It is quite out of the question."

Mr. Suncilffe hesitated before taking his departure.

"What steps are you taking, sir, with regard to these boys of mine?" he asked at length.

"I am not a man who believes in dramatic or spectacular moves, Mr. Suncilffe," said the Head evenly. "I am not excited, or even worried. These boys have rebelled, but they will very soon come to their senses. By midday, at the latest, they will return—and then they will receive their punishment. I should only make matters worse by organising a general hunt for the truants. Rest assured, Mr. Suncilffe, these boys will very quickly come to their senses."

CHAPTER 12

Into the Net!

MR. STEVE HAINBRIDGE looked anxiously at his watch.

"Only a quarter past yet," he said. "This is getting infernally hot."

"He'll come," said J. W. G. Talbot confidently.

"I'm not so sure," grunted Bainbridge. "Don't forget those confounded boys. They nearly messed everything up yesterday. There's no telling what they'll do to-day."

Talbot laughed.

"Those boys can do nothing," he said contemptuously. "Suncliffe is a born simpoton. We've got him where we want him. He'll be prompt on time."

"I hope you're right," said Bainbridge.

They were standing at the window in one of the first-floor rooms of the Grapes Hotel, which was, of course, Bannington's most exclusive hotel. Both men were looking smart and trim. Outwardly they had the appearance of well-to-do visitors from overseas. How could Mr. Suncliffe have guessed that these two men were a pair of the astute crooks engaged in this particular line of business? They were confidence men of world-wide experience. And Mr. Suncliffe's five thousand pounds had naturally tempted them.

There was a third man in the room—a lesser crook. He sat at the table, busy with some papers. He was a man of about middle age, precise in manner, with gold-rimmed pince-nez on his nose. At the present moment he was looking worried.

"I don't like it, boys—and that's the truth," he said, his words being uttered in short, sharp, incisive tones. "We've had many a deal together, but I'm uneasy about this job."

Bainbridge turned.

"Say it to yourself, Doc," he remarked.

"Hang it, you'll get five hundred out of this deal if it comes off. What are you grumbling about?"

"Doc" Morton sat back in his chair.

"I'm not grumbling," he replied. "But it seems to me, boys, that you're on a risky game this trip. It's not worth the candle. I've got a sort of hunch that there'll be trouble."

"I've had that hunch, too," said Talbot slowly.

Morton rose to his feet, and walked up and down once or twice.

"It was a big mistake for me to come here," he said. "You ought to have brought this bird up to London. We could have done the job easily there. But here, in this one-horse town, and so near to the school, it's taking a big chance."

Doc Morton was very well known to men of the Bainbridge and Talbot type. It

was his favourite dodge in pose as a lawyer. He looked like a lawyer, every inch of him. His precise manner was convincing. Furthermore, he was most remarkably eloquent, and his knowledge of the law was complete. It was because of this, perhaps, that he had nearly always succeeded in keeping out of the reach of the police.

"You're both yellow!" said Bainbridge contemptuously. "This Suncliffe bird has got nothing on us, has he? Even supposing he's suspicious, what can he do? We've sold him nothing yet. I tell you, he's easy. Once we get him into this room, the thing will be over in less than ten minutes. I know his sort."

"I'll grant you that he's probably as soft as they make 'em," said Morton. "But I still maintain that it was a mistake to bring me down here. You ought to have got Suncliffe up to London, as originally planned."

"Those boys prevented him from going to London yesterday," replied Bainbridge, with a frown. "It might have been a week before we could get him to go up again. We pitched him the tale last night, Doc, and it's logical enough that you should come here to-day. He doesn't suspect a thing. He thinks that Jim and I are just Australian cricketers, over in this country for a holiday. I tell you, we've never had a softer mug."

"It's those boys I'm thinking of," said Talbot. "The young hounds! There's never any telling with boys. You don't know what they're going to do next. It's quite on the cards that they've prevented Suncliffe from coming here this morning."

"Don't you believe it," said Bainbridge, who was at the window. "Suncliffe's out here now—just getting out of a big car. What did I tell you? He's easy game!"

"Anybody with him?" asked Morton sharply. "Whose car is it? We don't want him to bring anybody else into the game."

"Don't worry," said Bainbridge. "He's alone, and he's making for the hotel as though the sidewalk was red hot."

Mr. Suncliffe had been set down at the corner, just near the Grapes. The ride from Belton, in the Head's car, had been uneventful, as Dr. Nicholls had prophesied.

If the Third Form boys had been on the look-out for Mr. Suncliffe they had certainly missed him. And this was easy

enough, for they would hardly have expected their Form-master to be in the headmaster's car. And, in any case, they would never have dared to molest Dr. Nicholls' big limousine.

The Head himself was not in the least interested in Mr. Suncliffe's business. He had heard one or two hints, but he was by no means curious. Mr. Suncliffe himself had seemed reluctant to vouchsafe any information, and the Head was content to let it rest. Mr. Suncliffe was quite old enough to look after his own affairs.

The Form-master was agog with excitement when he entered the Grapes Hotel. It was ten-thirty exactly, and he was relieved to find that he was in good time for his appointment.

He had paid a visit to his bank on the way, the Head having obligingly waited outside that establishment while Mr. Suncliffe transacted a little business.

Now, with his pocket-book bulging, he inquired for his friends, Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot.

He was enormously relieved, because he still had an idea at the back of his head that Willy Handforth and the other Third-Formers had had designs upon him. Dr. Nicholls' move had frustrated those designs. It seemed perfectly ridiculous to even consider the saga at all in such a matter as this; but after his experience of yesterday Mr. Suncliffe had plenty of justification for his fears.

"Ah, my dear fellows!" he exclaimed gladly, as he was shown into a private suite on the first floor. "I have had a most worrying time this morning. Indeed, an exceedingly trying time. Those wretched boys of mine have completely vanished!"

"Vanished?" repeated Bainbridge, as he shook hands. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"They have had the unparalleled audacity to revolt," said Mr. Suncliffe. "I really believe that they had some idea of ambushing me, and preventing me from reaching you. However, I am here, and that is the main thing."

He noted, with some surprise, that a third man—a perfect stranger to him—was standing near by, hat in one hand, and bag in the other.

"Well, gentlemen, I must be going," said this individual. "I am delighted to have

been of service to you, and you can rely upon me to make sure of that block of Lone Hill shares——"

"One moment, my dear sir—one moment," interrupted Mr. Suncliffe, with concern. "You are not going, are you?"

"I am, sir," said the other, looking at Mr. Suncliffe over the tops of his glasses.

"This is Mr. Suncliffe, one of the St. Frank's masters," said Bainbridge. "Mr. Suncliffe, meet Mr. Morton."

"Delighted, I am sure," said Mr. Suncliffe. "But really, I thought——"

"Couldn't you manage to go by the next train, Mr. Morton?" asked Bainbridge. "Mr. Suncliffe is keenly interested in those Lone Hill shares, and Talbot and I, to tell you the truth, have let him in on the thing."

"Indeed!" said Doc. Morton, with asperity. "Wasn't that—er—rash of you?"

"Not with Mr. Suncliffe," replied Bainbridge easily. "We know that we can trust him. He hasn't let anything slip out."

Morton stroked his chin.

"You wish to invest in some of these oil shares, Mr. Suncliffe?" he asked dubiously.

"I have been told that they are exceptionally good," replied the Form-master. "Mr. Bainbridge, indeed, assures me that the Lone Hill oil shares are—er—gilt-edged, whatever that may mean. And there is some possibility, I understand, of their value increasing quite considerably."

Mr. Morton sat down at the table.

"Well, if it's all right with my friends, we'd better get down to business," he said briskly. "I suppose you know, Mr. Suncliffe, that this is very strictly private? There are only a few men who are in possession of the inside information just now. Once the news of this Lone Hill gusher gets out, there'll be a stampede for shares."

"Er—gusher?" repeated Mr. Suncliffe, bewildered.

"The Lone Hill oil well," replied Morton patiently. "It's a gusher, sir—producing oil at an incredible rate. The shares, just at present, are at their nominal value. When the boom gets fairly going they'll rocket up, and they'll be worth a fortune."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Suncliffe, his heart thumping against his ribs.

"It's a chance for you to get in on the

ground floor, Mr. Sunclice," said Bainbridge, nodding.

"Oh, yes!" said the Farm-master. "On the ground floor? You mean that I can obtain some of these shares? At the moment, I confess, I did not quite understand. Naturally, I am eager to—"

"One moment, Mr. Sunclice," interrupted Doc Morton. "With all due respect to my friends, Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot, I want you to go into this thing with your eyes open. I take it that you have not had much dealing in stocks and shares?"

"None at all," confessed Mr. Sunclice. "This money of mine is a legacy, and until now I have not been fortunate enough to possess any money which I could invest."

"Then you'd better be careful, sir," said the fake lawyer. "Frankly—and to be perfectly straightforward with you—I should strongly advise you not to buy any of these Lone Hill shares."

"You advise me—not to?" asked Mr. Sunclice, staring.

"I do," said Morton. "If you want something absolutely safe, you cannot do better than invest in Home Raile, or something of that nature. This Lone Hill stock is going in boom. Within a week from to-day the shares will be worth double—perhaps treble."

Mr. Sunclice gulped.

"You mean that if I purchase five thousand pounds' worth of these shares to-day, they will possibly be worth fifteen thousand pounds in a week's time?" he asked dazedly.

"Ten thousand pounds at the very least—fifteen thousand pounds probably enough—and there's a chance that they might go up to twenty thousand," replied Morton crisply. "That's the way with shares of this type when they rocket. I've every reason to believe that the Lone Hill gambler will turn out to be one of the most sensational oil discoveries in the whole of Australia."

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Sunclice breathlessly.

"And if these shares continue to boom, they'll be worth a fabulous amount by the end of two or three months," continued Morton glibly. "The one pound shares might rise in value to anything between twenty and twenty-five pounds."

Mr. Sunclice's brain reeled.

"Good heavens!" he panted. "But this is incredible—it is amazing! If I invest five

thousand now, I might be worth a hundred thousand within three months?"

"Tut-tut!" said Morton impatiently. "Really, my dear sir, you mustn't jump to such conclusions. I have said that the shares might jump to that value, and they probably will. But you mustn't, on any account, rely upon it."

"Don't take any notice of him, Mr. Sunclice," said Bainbridge, with a grin. "He's a lawyer—and he's cautious. He knows as well as I do that these Lone Hill shares are cast-iron. Any man with pluck—and money, of course—can make a fortune. I'm not saying that your five thousand will boost up to a hundred thousand—but you can be certain of a third of that amount, even if things go very badly."

Mr. Sunclice had some difficulty in speaking; his throat was dry.

"You must forgive me, gentlemen," he said huskily. "Really, I feel quite dizzy. I know, of course, that these shares were good, but the figures that you have mentioned have staggered me."

"The whole money market will be staggered when the boom starts," said Talbot.

"However, we must not lose sight of the fact that there might be a collapse," said Morton cunningly. "There's always the danger, gentlemen. Investments are all very well, but a man needs to be plucky. He cannot expect to gain a fortune unless he takes a certain amount of risk. Not, of course, that there is much risk in this present proposed investment. As far as I know, the Lone Hill shares are beyond all suspicion."

And so, with more of this plausible talk, they worked Mr. Sunclice into a state of excitement and agitation. The very fact that Morton advised him not to invest in any of the shares only made Mr. Sunclice all the more eager to obtain them. And this, of course, was the very aim of the crooks. Furthermore, they gave him to understand—by subtle hints and suggestions—that unless he invested now, he would never have another chance. For once the boom started the shares would rocket upwards in value, and then his opportunity would be gone.

In the end, of course, Mr. Sunclice was absolutely and wholeheartedly won. He was nearly falling over himself in his anxiety to buy.

"I have the money with me," he said breathlessly. "I celled at the bank on my way here, and I have the five thousand pounds in cash—in currency notes. If we can transact this—deal now, I shall be exceedingly grateful."

"Cash!" laughed Bainbridge. "Man alive, what was the idea? Your cheque would have done."

"Really?" asked Mr. Suncliffe. "But I understood you to say, Mr. Bainbridge, that cash was necessary?"

"Not at all," replied Bainbridge, who had, in fact, made that statement. "You must have misunderstood me. Not that it matters. Cash will do just as well."

"I am very glad about that," said Mr. Suncliffe, relieved.

He produced his pocket-book, and his hands were trembling as he withdrew the big bundle of notes.

There was much ado with the supposed lawyer—with legal documents, official stamps, and so forth. It was all very, very convincing.

Mr. Suncliffe sat near the table whilst Doc Morton juggled with imposing-looking share certificates. Huge, official-looking stamps were stuck here and there, and Mr. Suncliffe watched fascinatedly.

He was, as Bainbridge and Talbot had seen at first, an absolute novice in this sort of thing. He knew nothing. He was as putty in the fingers of these men. And everything was done so smoothly, so pleasantly, that never for one moment did a suspicion of the real truth enter his head. He paid over his five thousand pounds eagerly and willingly, fully satisfied that he was one of the luckiest men under the sun.

"I cannot express my gratitude, gentlemen," said Mr. Suncliffe, as he placed the share certificates in his pocket-book. "I owe this great stroke of good fortune to you, and if there is any way in which I can—"

"Forget it!" laughed Bainbridge. "It's not in anything, old friend. We should be poor specimens if we couldn't let you in on a good thing like this. We're in it ourselves, and we're glad that you're in, too."

"Well, I shall have to be going," said Morton, who was pleased and relieved to find that everything had gone so smoothly. "I hope there is an available train. I

have a most important appointment in London at midday, an appointment which I cannot afford to miss."

"You'll be all right, Mr. Morton," said Talbot. "There's a train almost at once." He turned to Mr. Suncliffe. "You'll stay to lunch with us?" he went on genially. "Don't say no, because Bainbridge and I won't take any refusal."

"Well, really, I wasn't thinking of staying—"

"You must," said Bainbridge boisterously. "And after that we'll come over to St. Frank's with you—and, if you don't mind, we'd like to have tea with you."

"I shall, of course, be most happy to entertain you," said Mr. Suncliffe. "But, really, I am not sure about staying to lunch. I am thinking of my boys. The headmaster, too—"

"Never mind your boys," said Bainbridge. "I should think you'll be glad to be free of them for once in a while. We'll all go over to St. Frank's together after lunch. Talbot and I are rather keen on meeting Mr. Nelson Lee, and we are hoping that you'll give us an introduction."

"Why, of course," said the Form-master.

"We've heard a great deal about Mr. Lee," said Talbot enthusiastically. "A rather wonderful man, isn't he? We missed him when we went to the school the last time, and we don't want to miss him again."

They were so eager to be introduced to Nelson Lee that if Mr. Suncliffe had had any doubts in his mind, they were now completely dispelled.

But the unfortunate Mr. Suncliffe was living in a fool's paradise!

CHAPTER 15.

The Seed of Doubt!

"DOC" MORTON held out his hand. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Suncliffe," he said, in his precise way. "I'm very pleased to have met you—and pleased, too, that I have been of some assistance to you. I must be going now—"

"We'll run you to the station, Morton," interrupted Bainbridge. "You won't mind, Mr. Suncliffe, will you? We shan't be gone long. You can make yourself at home until we get back."

"Yes, certainly," said Mr. Suncliffe willingly. "By all means."

"We shall have to hurry," put in Talbot, looking at his watch. "Jove! It'll be a rush, Morton!"

There was a good deal of bustle, and the three men hurried out, Bainbridge again promising Mr. Suncliffe that he and Talbot would soon be back. Mr. Suncliffe was left standing near the window, a dreamy, far-away expression in his eyes.

He went to one of the easy-chairs, sat down, and removed his glasses. He polished them idly as he gazed unceasingly before him. He was day-dreaming; he was visualising all the wonderful things that would happen when his modest five thousand pounds was turned into a fortune.

He was aroused to a realisation of the present by the chiming of a clock on the mantelpiece. He looked at it incredulously. The clock was chiming twelve. And he knew for a fact that the three men had left him at about eleven-fifteen.

"Impossible!" said Mr. Suncliffe, consulting his own watch.

But this timepiece told him that the hour was twelve, too. He must have been sitting in that chair, dreaming, for three-quarters of an hour!

"I wonder what can have happened to them!" murmured Mr. Suncliffe, as he rose to his feet, and went over to the window. "I sincerely trust that Mr. Morton did not lose his train, after all. But it looks like it. My friends have doubtless remained at the station in order to see him off."

Yet it was strange, all the same. Why had they been gone for nearly an hour? They had distinctly said that they would soon be back.

Somebody came into the room. Mr. Suncliffe turned as he heard an ejaculation. One of the hotel servants stood there, regarding him in astonishment.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir!" said the girl, in some confusion.

"Never mind," said Mr. Suncliffe. "It is quite all right. Have you a message for me?"

"No, sir," replied the maid. "I—I thought that this room was empty. I beg your pardon, sir."

She retired in some haste, closing the door behind her. Mr. Suncliffe frowned.

"Peculiar!" he murmured. "Why should that girl assume that this room is empty?

There must be something wrong with the administration of this hotel. The staff should surely know that Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot are the occupants of this suite."

He looked out of the window again, but he could see no sign of his friends. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed unobtrusively. A quarter past! The men had been gone an hour!

"I really think that something must have happened," Mr. Suncliffe told himself. "The station is only a few minutes' walk away, after all. If'm! Now I come to think of it, I cannot quite understand why Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot should have desired to see the lawyer off at the station. However, they cannot be long now, for it will soon be lunch-time."

And then, when the clock chimed the half-hour, he became restless. This was getting monotonous. There was really no reason why he should not take a stroll downstairs to the big lounge. If his friends came in, he could hardly fail to miss them.

So he went downstairs to the lounge, wandered about for a bit, and then sat down. He watched the people as they passed to and fro, coming in and out of the great entrance, with its swinging, circular door.

He noticed, with some uneasiness, that the clerk at the desk was eyeing him rather curiously. And presently an immaculate gentleman approached him.

"Are you waiting for somebody, sir?" asked this gentleman.

"Yes," replied Mr. Suncliffe. "Two of my friends are guests in your hotel—Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot. They have asked me to partake of luncheon with them, and I understand they went to the station to see somebody off. They should have been back before this. However, perhaps they were delayed."

The clerk leaned forward over his desk. "Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot, sir?" he said. "They've gone."

"Gone!" ejaculated Mr. Suncliffe, getting to his feet.

"Yes, sir," said the clerk. "Mr. Bainbridge mentioned to me that somebody might be inquiring for him, and he left a message."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Suncliffe. "Will you be good enough to give me his message?"

"Is your name Suncliffe, sir?"

"It is."

"Mr. Bainbridge asked me to tender his sincere apologies," said the clerk. "He and Mr. Talbot have been suddenly called to London by an urgent telegram. There was only a minute or two in which to catch the train, and they were compelled to hurry off."

"Oh!" said Mr. Suncliffe, startled.

"I am sorry if you have been kept waiting, sir," said the immaculate gentleman, who was evidently the under-manager. "How is it, Robins, that this gentleman was not informed earlier?"

"I expected Mr. Suncliffe to come to the desk and inquire, sir," replied the clerk. "I was not told that he was waiting in the hotel."

"It is really very strange," said Mr. Suncliffe slowly. "Mr. Bainbridge could, at least, have had the message sent up to me. Well, never mind—never mind. I dare say there was a rush. One cannot think of everything."

He wandered out of the hotel, considerably disturbed. Yet, even now, he had no inkling of the real truth. Certainly, the seed of doubt was being sown in his mind; but that was not sufficiently strong yet to give rise to any alarm.

The master of the Third Form was a very trusting man—a very simple, unsuspecting man. And Bainbridge and Talbot had so completely convinced him of their genuineness that never for a second did he doubt their integrity.

It was unfortunate that they should have been called away so suddenly. Yet, on the other hand, perhaps it was all to the good. He had not really wanted to stay to luncheon at the Grapes. He would much prefer to go back to St. Frank's, so that he could learn the latest regarding his missing boys.

But somehow he was reluctant to leave Bannington. He did not know why. He wandered about aimlessly. It was really that seed of uncertainty which was causing him such inward uneasiness.

No definite suspicions had taken shape in his mind, but he could not avoid turning over the various events of the morning in his thoughts. It was strange, in the first place, that Talbot and Bainbridge should have gone to the station to see the lawyer off. It was strange, in the second place, that they should have departed so hurriedly

without sending up a message to him. They had left him flat. He excused them because, apparently, they had been called away on an urgent summons. But, however urgent this summons, they might, at least, have informed the clerk that he, Mr. Suncliffe, was upstairs, so that the message could be sent to him immediately.

It was all very disturbing.

In fact, Mr. Suncliffe came to the conclusion that there must have been some blundering at the hotel. He began to feel increased. That smooth-tongued clerk must have got hold of the message wrong. Of course! Mr. Suncliffe even began to doubt that Bainbridge and Talbot had really gone to London. It might be a good idea to go back to the hotel, and to make more searching inquiries. By this time, possibly, Bainbridge and Talbot had turned up, and were wondering why their proposed guest had gone.

Mr. Suncliffe would have been exceedingly astonished—in fact, staggered—if he could have known what had actually been happening to Messrs. Bainbridge and Talbot.

Those rascals, together with "Doc" Morton, had not gone to the station at all. Immediately upon leaving the hotel they hurried to the Grapes garage, climbed into their Morris-Oxford car, and drove off.

The three men were jumpy and inwardly excited as they drove away. None of them spoke until Bannington had been left behind—until they were on the open road towards Helmford and London.

"Well, boys, that's that!" said Bainbridge, at length.

"Worked like a dream, eh?" said Talbot, who was driving.

"I hope it's all right, that's all," said Morton.

"Confound you, Doc, you're always grouching!" said Bainbridge impatiently. "What's biting you now? We've got the money, haven't we? Cash, man! And you might as well have your share—"

"I'm not saying that the thing wasn't a success," interrupted Morton. "That fellow, Suncliffe, is a sucker of the easiest sort. By golly! Never saw anything like it! We could have sold him the earth if he had had enough money to lay it! He ought to go around with a couple of missmaids to look after him!"

Bainbridge chuckled.

"I'll lay even odds that he's sitting in that room now, as unsuspicious as a baby in arms," he said. "We'll be in London before he even starts making any inquiries!"

"That's the only point I'm uneasy about," admitted Morton. "What's going to happen when he starts making inquiries? It was a good stunt to leave a message for him—to say that you had been called suddenly to London. But how long will it last? Once a bird like that gets suspicious, he goes into a panic."

"I tell you we're O.K.," said Bainbridge easily. "We'll drop you in London, Morton, and you're safe, anyway. Talbot and I are going straight on to Harwich. We've got our passports ready and our passages booked. We'll be in Rotterdam by this evening. We're old hands at this game, and we know the ropes. That Sandliffe guy is the sort we dream about. But seldom meet. What do you say, Jim?"

"You bet!" agreed Talbot. "The chances are that he'll keep the thing to himself—even after he's had the shock. He'll be too ashamed to talk about it. I know 'em!"

"We might hear no more about it," said Bainbridge. "All the same, it's just as well to be on the safe side. We'd better quit England while the quitting's good."

"Hallo! What's that?" said Talbot suddenly. "Well, of all the blamed—"

He broke off, applying his brakes.

They had turned a bend in the road, and some little distance ahead there was an obstruction. A telegraph pole, apparently, had fallen right across the road, blocking it completely. And as the car was doing nearly fifty miles an hour, Talbot found it necessary to brake sharply. There was no arguing with a fallen telegraph pole. It was such an unusual discovery that the three men stared ahead with a quick sense of uneasiness. Their guilty consciences, perhaps, affected them.

"Nobody about, by the look of it," said Talbot. "I thought the post office men were at work, perhaps. But there's not a soul here. What the devil can have happened?"

The car came to a standstill within ten or twelve feet of the obstruction. It wasn't a telegraph pole, after all—but a big scaffold pole. There were others of a

similar nature lying in the grass, beside the road. It was a lonely spot, just on a bend, and down in a bit of a hollow. There were high trees, gaunt and leafless, on both sides of the road, and also thick hedges.

"Darned queer!" said Bainbridge, frowning.

"You don't think—it's a trap?" asked Morton nervously.

"A trap nothing!" snapped Talbot. "Use your brains! How could anybody have known of our plans? Besides, if they wanted to stop us, they'd use a different method from this."

"This pole must have blown across the road, somehow," said Bainbridge, opening his door. "Either that, or some mischievous kids put it here. Kids, most likely. Come on! We'll shift it. Won't take us more than a couple of minutes."

All three men got out of the car, Talbot leaving the engine ticking over. They advanced towards the pole, and seized hold of it.

"Better swing it round," said Bainbridge, as he tugged. "Come a bit farther this way, Doc. That's better. Now then, all together!"

They heaved, and the pole swung round. The men found it a comparatively easy task to lift the obstruction out of the way.

But just at this moment, when they were at a disadvantage, a remarkable thing happened.

There came a great yell, as though from nowhere. It was positively ear-splitting in its suddenness and high-pitched intensity.

And then, in a second, the road was alive with humanity.

Small humanity.

In fact, Third-Formers of St. Frank's.

They appeared from both hedges, swarming down into the road like a flood of ants. They wormed through little gaps in the hedge, they leapt over the top of the hedge. They appeared from the very ditches. And, with one accord, they flung themselves upon the three men.

"Come on, the Third!"

"Hurrah!"

"Grab 'em!"

Bainbridge and Talbot and Morton, taken completely by surprise, really had no chance. They dropped the scaffold pole as though it had become red-hot: but

before they could assume fighting attitudes, they were seized and flung over ruthlessly. The fags knew the type of men they had to deal with, and they made no mistake about this attack!

There were about ten fags to each man, so it will be seen that Messrs. Bainbridge and Co. stood utterly no chance.

Bainbridge, shouting something about these "internal kids," went down first. Fags swarmed over him and smothered him. He found himself flat on his back on the grass border of the road. Two fags were sitting on his legs, other fags were sprawling across his chest, and one fag was actually sitting on his head.

It was just the same with Talbot and Morton.

They went down, and were smothered, in the first ten seconds.

If these men had had a chance of fighting they might possibly have done a great deal of damage before going down. They might, indeed, have escaped. But as it was, the ambush had been planned so cunningly and so cleverly that the trio were captured almost before they could realise it.

"Good!" sang out Willy Handforth cheerily. "Couldn't have been better, my sons. You've done well!"

"We've got 'em, anyhow!" panted Chubby Heath.

"Now, then—the ropes!" went on Willy. "Don't forget my instructions. Legs first—and then their arms. And if anything happens to come along, keep them hidden. We don't want any interruptions."

But, as it happened, there was no other traffic of any kind on the road. The fags had the spot completely to themselves.

And, in a remarkably short space of time, Talbot and Bainbridge and Morton were roped up and gagged. Their ankles were tied, their wrists were secured behind their backs, and muffers were tied round their mouths. Not until then were they relieved of the crushing weight of the fags.

Unquestionably, the ambush had been a complete success!

CHAPTER 14.

Willy's Way!

"CONGRATULATIONS, brother! A singularly smart piece of work, for which I have nothing but the warmest praise."

William Napoleon Browne, the lanky skip-

per of the Fifth Form at St. Frank's, now appeared from behind one of the neighbouring hedges. He regarded the scene with an approving eye.

"Pretty quick work, eh?" grinned Willy coolly.

"Quick, Brother Willy, is hardly the word," replied Browne in his queer way of speaking. "Seldom have I seen anything quite so swift. I am thankful to see that our three friends have been effectually secured."

Willy grinned again.

"Well, we took a chance—and it's come off," he said comfortably. "I was fairly certain that these beastly crooks would make for London in their car. We knew they had a car, and that they'd try to make a get-away as soon as they had sold those dud shares to old Sunny. Didn't I tell you, my son, that this ambush would be successful?"

"You did," said Chubby breathlessly. "My only sainted aunt! You're a wonder, Willy!"

"Yes, rather!" sang out the other fags.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Willy!"

"Bravo!"

"Cheese it, fatheads!" said Willy, frowning. "No need to cheer me like that—I've done nothing yet. Wait until the whole affair is over. We've hardly started!"

As he had said, there had not been much doubt that this ambush of his would be successful. According to Willy's plan, he had allowed the share transaction to go through; for it was generally agreed that Mr. Sundcliffe deserved a lesson. The crooks, however, were not to get away, as they had so fondly imagined. Already, they were securely in the hands of the Third—and once in the hands of the Third, there was really no telling what would happen to them.

William Napoleon Browne had come into the affair more by chance than anything else. He was a very useful man. While in Basington, Willy & Co. had happened to see the lanky Fifth Form skipper, and Willy had promptly collared him, giving him a few of the details.

Browne was the very man for the job. For the fags needed a driver for the car, and who better than Browne? In the first place, Browne was familiar with a Morris-Oxford, and in the second place this car looked almost identical to his own. There-

fore, if he was seen in it, it would be assumed, at once, that he was merely driving his own car.

"Now, you know what to do, you chaps," said Willy, addressing the rank and file of the Third. "Get your bikes from behind the hedges, and buzz off home. We shall get there before you, of course, but if you ride hard you won't be much behind us."

"Home!" repeated Parry minor. "You mean the island?"

"Of course," said Willy. "Haven't I given you your instructions? Make straight for the island—and don't forget the grub. And be careful, too, as you're approaching. If any of you get yourselves collared, you'll only have yourselves to blame. Stick to me, and I'll promise that you won't get any punishment."

"Good old Willy!" sang out the fags enthusiastically.

"I like to see this brotherly expression of affection," said Browne kindly. "It warms my heart considerably to know that there is such harmony in the ranks of the Third. Well, Brother William, what about it? I take it that we leave without any delay?"

"The sooner we're gone, the better," replied Willy.

The three men were lifted, and bundled unceremoniously on to the floor in the rear of the Morris-Oxford. Then Willy and Chubby and Juicy and two or three others piled into the car, taking possession of the rear seat, and the near-side seat in front.

Browne, in the meanwhile, climbed elegantly into the driver's place.

"Tell me when you're ready," he said complacently.

The doors slammed.

"Go ahead," said Willy. "All serene now."

Two minutes later the car was gliding back on the road towards Barmington.

"Well, we might as well be doing something while we're riding along," said Willy, after a while. "Lend a hand with Bainbridge, Chubby. You, too, Juicy. He's the chief man, I believe—and he'll probably have old Sunny's money on him. We'll soon see."

Steve Bainbridge was lugged up into a sitting position, and Willy deftly dived into his inside coat pocket and produced a well-filled pocket-book.

"Here you are—bulging with notes," said Willy.

"The rotters," said Chubby wrathfully. "My only hat! Fancy robbing poor old Sunny like this!"

"I say, I suppose it's really true?" asked Juicy Lemon, with a tinge of uneasiness in his voice. "I mean, I suppose those shares really are duds?"

"Of course they're duds," said Willy.

"We shall be in a fine mess if those shares turn out to be genuine," went on Juicy. "I mean, there'd be no excuse—"

"Chuck it, you ass!" interrupted Willy coldly. "Do you think I'd make a blunder like that? You overheard those men planning, too, didn't you? We know that those shares are duds. Those fellows are confidence men—tricksters of the worst type. They'll get about five years for this!"

Bainbridge wriggled, and his eyes burned with hatred and fury. He was roughly pushed back into a horizontal position again, and the fags rested their feet on him.

By now the car had reached Barmington, and as it was gliding through the High Street, Juicy Lemon suddenly gave a little gasp.

"Look! There's old Sunny!" he whispered. "See him? He's standing at one of the windows of the Grapes Hotel!"

"By jingo! So he is!" ejaculated Chubby Heath.

"Do you think we'd better stop and tell him what's happened?" asked Juicy.

"No fear!" replied Willy promptly.

"I'm inclined to agree with you, brother," said Browne, over his shoulder. "I may be wrong, but it seems to me that this is hardly the right moment for the enlightening of Brother Sundcliffe."

Mr. Sundcliffe had not yet left the Grapes Hotel, of course—for the fags had been working rapidly. Willy, glancing searchingly at the Form-master as he stood at the window, could see that Mr. Sundcliffe was a trifle uneasy. But there was no sign of consternation on his face. Apparently, he had not yet discovered the truth.

"No," said Willy, "we've got to let old Sunny have his shock. He must get the idea that he has been robbed of his five thousand quid. It'll be a lesson to him."

"Oh, rather!" said Chubby.

"He scoffed at us—he said that we were a lot of young idiots," continued Willy grimly. "He went to the Head and complained, and got me a flogging. The more we told him about Bainbridge and Telbot, the less he would heed us. Well, a man

like that needs to be taught—and, by Jingo, old Sunny's going to learn something this morning!"

"I trust, Brother William, that he survives," remarked Browne.

"He'll survive all right," remarked Willy. "It'll probably turn his hair a bit grey, but doesn't he deserve it? And we're not going to move until old Sunny comes back to St. Frank's, and until he acknowledges his mistake. Unless we can make a stand like that the part we have played will lose half of its effect."

The car continued on its way, but before it had gone far along the road towards Bellton, Browne turned off, and went down a narrow, rutty side lane. He skirted the River Stowe for some little distance, and then brought the car to a standstill at a point in the lane where the banks were high, and where there was a gateway close at hand, leading into a meadow.

It was a lonely, isolated spot.

"Good man, said Willy. "This is exactly the place I mentioned, Browne. I don't think there's much chance of our being seen by anybody—and, even if we are, it won't matter. Nobody takes any notice of fags."

"Being a fag," said Browne, "undoubtedly has its advantages."

Browne was left in charge of the car, and Willy and his companions yanked Bainbridge out, and in a very short time they were carrying him across the neighbouring meadow. The River Stowe was near by, and there, in full sight, was Willard's Island.

There were some unusual features about Willard's Island.

It was a comparatively small islet in the middle of the river, just where it broadened out. There were a good many trees on the island, and in the centre of it there was a curious, castle-like building. Indeed, it had all the appearance of a medieval fortress in miniature. There were the turrets and the towers and the battlements.

The place had been built, many years earlier, by a crank; but it had never been completely finished. Locally it was known as "Willard's Folly." The St. Frank's fellows had more than once made use of that quaint, old-style building.

Willy, apparently, had decided that the Folly would serve the Third as an excel-

lent retreat. It was an easy place to hold, for not only were there the battlements of the "castle" itself, but there was the surrounding river. Any attempt to rush the place would be impossible. The defenders would always have plenty of time to prepare themselves for such an attack.

Not that Willy really expected any attack. His main idea in coming to Willard's Island was because there were some old dungeons beneath this quaint building; and these dungeons would serve as excellent cells for the three prisoners. It did not suit Willy's plan to hand the rascals over to the police just yet.

Arrived at the river, Bainbridge was transferred to a punt, which was moored handy. The fags dumped him in, got in themselves, and then the punt was poled across to the island.

The distance was short, and in a very few moments the island was reached. Bainbridge was hauled out, carried into the old building, and safely deposited in one of the dungeons.

"That's number one," said Willy, with satisfaction.

They went back, and soon Talbot joined his companions. Then "Doo" Merion was fetched, too. All three of them were placed in the same dungeon, and left bound and helpless. There was no possibility of escape for them.

The snuffers were removed, but their hands and ankles were still bound. And there was a heavily-bolied door between them and freedom. Even if they could conquer this door—which was most unlikely—they were still bottled up on the island, where there were plenty of fags.

"What did I tell you?" snarled Merion hoarsely. "Didn't I have a hunch all along that this job was going to fail?"

"Cut it out!" said Bainbridge, breathing hard. "We haven't failed because of Suncliffe. It's these infernal boys!"

"Hang them!" snapped Talbot. "What are we going to do, Steve? I believe they're going to tell the police!"

"What's the good of asking me?" said Bainbridge. "Just when everything was going right, these school kids step in and ruin the whole business!"

"Can't we get out of here?" asked Merion hoarsely.

"Aw! Be yourself!" growled Bainbridge. "Get out, eh? I'd rather be up

against the police than these darned school-boys!"

"I knew it was a mistake to come down into the country," Morton muttered, his voice shaking with fear. "Didn't I tell you? You're fools, both of you! You ought to have fetched Suncliffe to London! We're done now—absolutely done! They'll have the police here within the hour!"

"What I can't understand is why they didn't drive to the police station while they had us in the car," said Bainbridge, when he became calmer again. "What was the idea of bringing us here?"

"How in the heck should we know?" snarled Talbot savagely. "There's no telling with these kids. Gosh! If I could only get just one sock at them—particularly that young rat who seems to lead them!"

Meanwhile all the other members of the Third arrived in a flood, on their bicycles. They had avoided the main roads, for the lads had had the constant fear that they would be seen by somebody at St. Frank's.

But much to their relief there seemed to be no hue and cry after them. They had met nobody of importance, and now they crossed over to Willard's Island with relief, and brought with them various parcels of food.

Before long the rebel Third were indulging in a rough-and-ready meal. A big camp fire was lit on the island, and there was no pretence of secrecy now. Willy didn't care who knew that the Third had chosen the island as an encampment.

"Blessed if I can see what your game is, Willy," said Chubby Heath, scratching his head. "We've collared the crooks, and there's no reason why we shouldn't hand them over to the police straightaway. What's the idea of staying here, on the island?"

"If you had a brain, instead of a sponge, you'd understand!" retorted Willy.

"Rats!" said Chubby. "It seems dotty to me."

"It would—to you!"

"But why?" insisted Chubby, glaring. "Those men might give us some trouble—they might escape, and then all our work would have been for nothing. Why not hand them over to the police immediately?"

"Yes, why not?" asked Dicky Jones.

"We're all a bit puzzled, Willy!" said Freddy Mason.

Willy sighed.

"I suppose I'd better explain," he said in a withering voice. "You chaps are as dense as the dickens! It's obvious why we're marking time here, and yet you can't see it. What about Suncliffe?"

"Suncliffe?" repeated Juicy Lemon.

"Our soft, good-natured, simple, but hopeless Form-master, with a head of solid ivory," said Willy, nodding. "How do we know that he won't go and fall into the hands of other confidence men? We've got to teach him a lesson to-day that he won't forget for years. And if we expose our hand now we shall rob the lesson of half its value."

"I'm blessed if I can see it," said Chubby.

"We've got to wait until old Sunny comes back to St. Frank's," replied Willy grimly. "Don't you understand? When he does come, it's ten to one that he'll have jumped to the truth, and he'll think that he's lost his five thousand quid, and that he's in the soup. Nobody except Browne knows that we've got those three crooks here, and Browne won't say anything."

"Did you warn him before he went off?" asked Dicky Jones.

"Of course I did," replied Willy scornfully. "Browne's gone back to St. Frank's, and he's a good sort. He won't say a word. The only way is to let the matter take its own course."

"Perhaps you're right," said Chubby.

"I jolly well know I'm right!" retorted Willy. "We want old Sunny to get into a proper panic, to dash to the police with his story."

"Isn't that a bit thick?" asked Juicy. "I mean, is it necessary to be so rough on him?"

"It is!" replied Willy, with conviction. "Anything less rough would leave him cold. He's got to find out for himself that he's been swindled. He'll have the shock of his lifetime, and he'll realise then that our warnings were worth something."

"Supposing some of the masters come along and order us off the island?" asked Fullerton.

"We shan't go," replied Willy promptly. "We're staying here until Suncliffe shows up. Don't forget that, my sons! And I'll do all the talking, too. No matter how long old Sunny stays away, we've got to hold out here, on this island. We shan't be safe until he returns—and then,

you can take it from me, we'll be on velvet."

"We're on velvet, anyhow," argued Owen minor. "If you went to the Head straightaway, Willy, and told him everything, he'd understand that we'd done the right thing, wouldn't he?"

"What about it?" asked Willy coldly.

"Well, the Head would come along, see the prisoners, hand them over to the police, and then we could all go back to St. Frank's and there'd be no punishment," said Owen minor. "I'm dashed if I can see the object of sticking here, on the island, like this!"

There was a murmur of approval from all the other lads who were gathered round.

"A minute or two ago," said Willy deliberately, "I mentioned that old Sunny's head was made of solid ivory. Your heads are made of cast-iron! And most of them are cracked, too!"

"Look here!" began Chubby Heath indignantly.

"Supposing we did as you said?" asked Willy. "What would happen? The Head would come, the prisoners would be handed to the police, and somebody would go to Bannington and tell Sundcliffe. Sundcliffe would hear that the crooks were collared, that his money was safe, and that everything was all serene. What about the shock? What about the lesson for him? He wouldn't feel anything—except a bit of surprise."

"That's true," admitted Chubby. "My only hat! I hadn't looked at it that way!"

"He wouldn't feel the thing at all," went on Willy. "He wouldn't even realize that his five thousand quid had been in danger. But as it is, if we lie low, old Sunny will have about four fits. He deserves to have four fits, too, after the way he treated us—and after the way he got me that flogging. I'm still sore, don't forget."

"Yes, the Head did lay it on thick," said Juicy sympathetically.

"I'm not a vindictive chap, but we've got to prove to Sunny that we know what we were talking about," insisted Willy. "He'll find out that those shares of his are duds, and then he'll realize that he's been duped. We needn't have any compunction about it, because we shall soon put him out of his misery—and we shall

make him joyous again by returning his money. He'll be as pleased as a cat with two tails, and he'll give us an easy time for the rest of the term."

Chubby Heath took a deep breath, and he looked at Willy with open admiration.

"Willy," he said, "you've got it all put!"

CHAPTER 15.

Marking Time!

WHEN morning lessons were over at St. Frank's, the Removites and the Fourth-Formers swarmed out into the Triangle, eager and inquisitive. Even the seniors were mildly interested. What news of the Third?

Apparently, none.

The Third Form-room had been empty all the morning, and there were no lads to be seen in the Triangle, or in any other parts of the school. And when inquiries were made of prefects, it was found that the Third Form was still missing.

"It's no good asking me questions," said Biggleswade, of the Sixth, when a number of Removites surrounded him. "I haven't seen the beastly Third! I'm not in the least interested in the Third, anyhow. The longer those lads stay away, the better."

"Don't you want anybody to run your errands for you?" asked Fullwood.

"If I hadn't thought of that," admitted Biggleswade. "Still, if the Third doesn't show up, we shall have to get some of you Remove kids on the job."

"Some hopes!" said Handforth, with a sniff. "Our fagging days are over, Biggy—and don't you forget it!"

"It's very queer," said Nipper, with a frown. "I wonder what on earth can have happened to the kids!"

"When I see my minor again, I'm going to give him a covers talking to," said Handforth grimly. "The nerve of it! Taking the Third off like this, flouting the Head's authority, risking the sack, and everything else! He ought to be tanned!"

"I'm afraid he's in for something worse than a tanning, Handy," said Nipper. "Unless he can satisfy the Head that he was justified in taking the Third off, he'll be sacked."

Handforth snorted.

"Let 'em try to sack my minor!" he said

defiantly, "By George! If Willy's bunked from the school, I'll go, too! Anyhow, we know jolly well that Willy is after those crooks. Didn't he tell us all about 'em? They've been trying to swindle old Sunny, and Willy warned Sunny, but he wouldn't listen. I'd give quids to know what those fags have been doing this morning."

"You'll probably know soon, without risking any of your quids, dear old fellow," said Travers. "I might as well tell you that I've heard a rumour."

Travers had just come up, and he was looking amused.

"What's the rumour?" asked a dozen voices.

"Well, well! What a lot of excitement over the Third!" chuckled Vivian Travers. "As a matter of fact, I've just been talking to Rodgers, the West House page boy. It seems that Rodgers has got some news of the Third, and he has heard on the soundest authority that the Third is quite near by. Rodgers got it from Perkins, the groundsman, and Perkins heard it from one of the labourers on a ploughed field, beyond Big Side. Remarkable how these things get about, you know."

"But what did Rodgers hear?" demanded Handforth impatiently.

"Nothing much—only that the Third Form is safely entrenched on Willard's Island," replied Travers, grinning. "Apparently they're turning the old 'Folly' into a kind of fortress, and they mean to hold it against all comers."

"I don't believe it!" said Edward Oswald gruffly. "What rot! Why, before lessons, prefects went down by the river and everywhere else. They didn't see any sign of the fags."

"They must have taken possession of the island since, then."

"By George! I wonder if it's true?" asked Handforth, with sudden excitement. "What price going along to see, you chaps?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie Glenethorne, jamming his monocle firmly into his eye. "I mean to say, these dashed fags ought to be severely ticked off. A poisonous sort of game, if you know what I mean—rebeling and grabbing islands, what? Distinctly on the raw edge!"

Not many of the fellows believed that the Third had really seized Willard's

Island; but, all the same, a big crowd of Remmivates, led by Handforth, made tracks for the river. It would be easy enough to find out the truth, for Willard's Island was not very far away, and it could easily be reached by crossing the playing fields and one or two meadows.

The river soon came in sight, and, in the distance, Willard's Island was visible. Handforth let out a yell as soon as he caught sight of it. No telescope was needed to see the warning figures on the little mid-river island.

"They're there!" yelled Handforth. "By George! That rumour was right, then!"

"They must be dotty!" said Nipper. "As soon as the Head gets to hear of this, he'll come along, and he'll make short work of the rebellion."

"They'll defy him, I expect," said Tommy Watson.

"I'm not so frightfully sure of that," put in Sir Montis Tregellis-West. "They might have defied dear old Dr. Stafford, but he's gone now. Dr. Nicholls is a different proposition, begad! It takes a rash fellow to defy him."

The juniors hurried along the river bank and came to a halt opposite the island.

The fags gave them a cheery hail.

"Good egg!" sang out Willy Handforth, from the other side of the narrow channel. "Just the man I wanted to see! Good old Ted!"

"Never mind your 'good old Ted,' my son!" said Edward Oswald sternly.

"What's the idea of that? You'd better surrender at once, before things get any worse. Even as it is, you'll probably be sacked."

"Never mind that, Ted," said Willy. "I want to know if old Sunny has come back?"

"Not that I know of," said Handforth.

"What have you been up to? You'd better explain everything to me at once!"

"Too fagging," replied Willy. "It's an awful strain, shouting across the river like this—"

"I'll come over there, then," interrupted Handforth.

"Better not, old man," warned Willy. "We might have an 'accident,' and tip you into the river."

"I'm sure we should have an accident," said Chubby Heath, grinning.

"You young fathheads!" roared Handforth. "I'm coming over there, and you're going to tell me what you've been doing all this morning!"

"You'll hear soon enough, Tad, if you have patience," said Willy. "I'll take it as a favour, you Remove chaps, if you'll tell us when Sunny shows up. It's rather important."

"It's a lot more important that you kids chuck this silly game!" roared Handforth. "Do you realise that it's rebellion? Do you realise that—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" interrupted Willy. "We're going to stick here, and hold the fort until Suncliffe comes back. We're on safe ground, and we're not going to budge. And we don't care who comes along!"

"Don't you?" sang out Gresham. "Well, here's Fenton—and I dare say he'll have something to say to you!"

Willy sighed. "I shall hate being rude to Fenton, because he's a good chap," he said. "But it can't be helped, I suppose."

Edgar Fenton, of the Sixth, was the captain of the school, and he was deservedly popular. He was a great sportsman, a genial, good-tempered fellow, and one of the best in every way. He now came striding up, accompanied by Morrow, the head prefect of the West House, and one or two other Sixth-Formers.

"So you're here, are you?" said Fenton grimly, as he stopped opposite the island.

"Yes, please, Fenton, thank you," said Willy in a meek voice.

"What on earth are you kids doing over there?" demanded the school captain.

"We're waiting, Fenton."

"Waiting? Waiting for what?"

"Waiting for Mr. Suncliffe to come back from Bannington."

"Well, you'd better not wait any longer," said Fenton grimly. "Come along, all of you! Get off that island as quickly as you can, and form up into a double column here, on the bank. I'm going to march you back to St. Frank's."

"If it's all the same to you, Fenton, we'd rather not," said Willy calmly. "No offence, of course. We like you, and we hate to disobey. But we're not leaving this island until old Sunny shows up!"

Edgar Fenton looked dangerous.

"You cheeky young scound!" he said angrily. "You're only making things

worse for yourself by this defiance. There's going to be an unholy row over this rebellion, I can tell you, and things might be a bit better for you if you surrender at once, and—"

"By George!" came an interruption from Handforth. "Here comes the Head now!"

Fenton turned, and there, sure enough, was Dr. Morrison Nicholls.

Fenton hesitated for a moment, and then he muttered to Morrow and the other prefects, and waited. It was distinctly up to the Head now.

Dr. Nicholls was looking calm and composed as he came along the towing-path, to stop opposite the island, where the fags were crowding, silent and somewhat apprehensive.

"Well, young men, what's all this about?" asked the Head evenly, as he looked across the narrow strip of water. "What are you doing on that island?"

"We're waiting for Mr. Suncliffe to come back, sir," replied Willy.

"Is it necessary for you to wait there, instead of on the school premises?"

"Yes, sir," said Willy. "If we come back to the school we might get flogged, or something. We're safe here. We hope you won't think that we mean any disrespect to you, sir, but we've made up our minds to stay on this island—"

"One moment," interrupted Dr. Nicholls grimly. "So you've made up your minds, have you? That is very interesting! Curiously enough, I have made up my mind, too. You will leave that island at once, and you will return to the school."

Dr. Nicholls was in no way angry. He was as calm and as cool as ever, and there was something about his personality which made the fags somewhat uneasy. Indeed, without Willy to lead them, they would have meekly surrendered on the spot.

But Willy Handforth was made of sterner stuff.

"We're staying here, sir," he said, without the slightest sign of defiance in his tone. "Mr. Suncliffe reported me yesterday, and you gave me a public flogging. Mr. Suncliffe was wrong, and that flogging wasn't deserved. When Mr. Suncliffe comes back, sir, he'll be the first to admit to you that he blundered."

"I do not intend to stand here, Handforth minor, and to argue with you," said the Headmaster. "I have given you my orders, and I expect you to obey them."

"You're making it very difficult, sir——"

"There is no difficulty whatsoever," said the Head. "You are the ring-leader in this affair, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you accept full responsibility for leading these Form-fellows of yours into this revolt?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I order you to come back to the school without further delay," said the Head. "You can explain why you took this step to me there. I will give you half an hour to report yourselves to your various Housemasters. If you have not obeyed my orders by then, I shall take other steps."

The Head turned to Fenton, chatted with him for a few moments, and then he departed, taking the prefects with him.

"Now, that's what I call masterly," said Nipper. "No fuss, no excitement, no harsh threats. Dr. Nicholls is brainy. Those quiet words of his were ten times more effective than a lot of shouted orders."

"He's the best Head we've ever had," declared Travers. "Another man might have got excited, and then the fags would have defied him, and made things ten times worse. But Dr. Nicholls is a sportsman."

On the other side of the river—on the island—Willy was looking uncomfortable, and the rest of the fags were feeling nervous.

"What's going to be done now?" asked Chubby uneasily.

"We can only hope that old Sunny will turn up during the next half-hour," replied Willy. "I simply hate defying the Head. He's such a brick, you know. But perhaps we shan't have to defy him. Suncliffe is bound to show up before long."

And in this, as in most other things, the astute Willy was right.

CHAPTER 14

The Truth!

MR. SUNCLIFFE, at that very moment, in fact, was wandering up and down the High Street in Banington. It was at this period that he had made up his mind to return to the Grapes Hotel in order to make more pressing inquiries concerning his new friends, the supposed Australian cricketers.

And, although he was slightly uneasy, he was certainly not suspicious. He hadn't the faintest notion that those share certificates in his pocket were worthless. He was only puzzled because of the strange behaviour of Messrs. Bainbridge and Talbot.

"I really cannot understand why they should have left me without any definite message," he muttered, frowning. "I can only assume that there was some misunderstanding. No doubt the hotel people blundered. I feel that I should make some—or—investigation."

And back he went to the Grapes, relieved that the uncertainty was over. He would, at least, find out something definite now.

When he got into the hotel lounge he found the same clerk on duty at the desk. The time was just about one o'clock, and Bainbridge and his companions had been gone for well over an hour and a half.

"I am sorry to trouble you again," said Mr. Suncliffe diffidently. "But I am convinced, young man, that there has been some mistake."

"Aren't you the gentleman who was waiting for Mr. Talbot and Mr. Bainbridge, sir?" asked the clerk.

"I am," said Mr. Suncliffe. "It is with reference to that matter that I am now here. I might as well inform you that I was invited by Mr. Bainbridge and his friend to stay to luncheon, and——"

"Are you sure of that, sir?" asked the clerk, in a surprised tone.

"Sure of it? Of course I'm sure of it."

"Well, it's very strange to me, sir," said the clerk. "As far as I know, Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot had no intention of remaining here to lunch. They settled their hotel bill at nine-thirty this morning, directly after breakfast."

Mr. Suncliffe started.

"At nine-thirty!" he ejaculated. "But——but——"

He paused, feeling rather dim.

"Yes, sir," said the clerk. "Directly after breakfast Mr. Bainbridge told me that he and his friend would be leaving the hotel during the forenoon, and, as he was expecting a very urgent telegram, he preferred to settle up then, so that there could be no possible delay——"

"One moment!" interrupted Mr. Suncliffe. "You said my friends were expecting an urgent telegram."

"So Mr. Bainbridge informed me, sir."

"It's very puzzling," said the Foreman, in some agitation. "I was given to understand that Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Talbot merely left the hotel in order to see a friend of theirs off at the station."

"Something wrong there, too, sir," remarked the clerk, eyeing Mr. Suncliffe with interest. "They didn't go to the station at all, and never intended to go to the station."

"Do not be absurd, young man," said Mr. Suncliffe impatiently. "Mr. Morton had to get back to London—"

"I don't know anything about that, sir," broke in the clerk, nettled. "But I do know that Mr. Bainbridge gave instructions that his car should be filled up with petrol and got all ready for immediate departure. He told Wright, our garage manager, that he might want the car at a moment's notice. Those three gentlemen left by car, and they didn't go near the station at all."

Mr. Suncliffe was now breathing hard.

"Then when they left this hotel they travelled by car?" he muttered. "They left hurriedly—having paid their bill immediately after breakfast. They had no intention of returning, and I was left upstairs, thinking that—Where did they go to?" he demanded, looking at the clerk with a growing anxiety in his eyes. "Did they leave you no address?"

"None, sir. They said that there was no likelihood of any letters coming for them, and—"

"Very well—very well," said Mr. Suncliffe dazedly. "Thank you, young man!"

He went out of the hotel like a man in a dream. Or, to be more exact, he was like a man waking up from a dream. All these circumstances were suspicious—exceedingly suspicious. He had discovered that Messrs. Bainbridge and Talbot and Morton had deliberately fooled him. When they had left that apartment, apparently to go to the station, they had really jumped into their car and driven straight off. And he had been left upstairs, waiting, like a fool, and—

Mr. Suncliffe remembered, with a sensation that was like an acute stab, Willy Handforth's warnings. Willy had told him that those men were rogues—that they were confidence tricksters. Willy had urged him to be careful. And he, in his folly, had ignored Willy's well-meant tip!

Mr. Austin Sandcliffe suffered a complete reaction.

Ten minutes earlier he had been sublime in his supreme confidence. He had believed in Bainbridge and Talbot up to the hilt.

Now his mind was seething with suspicion—with fear.

He began to realize that he had been caught like a rat in a trap. He saw something suspicious in everything that had happened that morning. Now that his eyes were opened, he wondered that this eminent London lawyer should have come to Bennington. Was there something in Willy's warning? Was it true that those shares—

In a panic, Mr. Sandcliffe rushed to his bank. He had forgotten everything else now. There was one thing that he must know. His bank manager would tell him about those share certificates: the bank manager would know. Mr. Sandcliffe was doubtful about them now; he had a horrible feeling that those Lens Hill shares were questionable. At any rate, no harm would be done if he showed them to his bank manager.

He fairly ran into the bank, and clutched at the massive mahogany counter. One of the clerks came forward and looked at him in astonishment.

"Hallo, Mr. Sandcliffe!" he said. "Is something the matter, sir? You're out looking well—"

"Where's Mr. Forbes?" demanded the Foreman. "Is Mr. Forbes in? I want to see him! It is most important."

"Mr. Forbes is in his office, sir, and—"

"Let me see him at once!" panted Mr. Sandcliffe.

He was directed into the manager's private office, where he found Mr. Forbes sitting at his desk.

"Back again, Mr. Sandcliffe?" asked the manager, smiling. "I hope there's nothing wrong?" he added keenly. "You're looking quite pale. You haven't lost that money you drew this morning—"

"I want you to examine these documents, Mr. Forbes," broke in Mr. Sandcliffe hoarsely. "Tell me if they are sound, and for Heaven's sake be quick!"

Mr. Forbes took the share certificates and looked at them very closely. Mr. Sandcliffe sat watching, nervous and pale. The bank manager already had some jiggling of what had happened.

After thoroughly going over the share

certificates, he consulted one or two reference books, and then he sat back in his chair and looked at Mr. Suncliffe with a grim, hard look in his eyes.

"Well?" asked the Form-master hoarsely.

"I am very sorry to tell you, Mr. Suncliffe, that these share certificates are forgeries," said Mr. Forbes.

"Forgeries!" shrieked Mr. Suncliffe, leaping to his feet.

"Steady, sir—steady!" urged the manager. "No good can come of getting excited. I should like you to tell me how you obtained these certificates, and—"

"I bought them!" panted Mr. Suncliffe, "I thought they were genuine! I was told they would be worth thirty or forty thousand pounds within a week or two."

"Thirty or forty thousand pounds!" echoed Mr. Forbes, aghast. "Tell me, how much did you pay for these certificates?"

"How much?" repeated Mr. Suncliffe dazedly. "I paid five thousand pounds for them. I withdrew the money from—"

"Five thousand pounds!" breathed the manager. "That means to say, Mr. Suncliffe, that you sunk your entire legacy in this worthless proposition! I am really grieved to learn of this, for it is perfectly obvious that you have been grossly swindled. These shares aren't worth a penny!"

Mr. Suncliffe sat down again. He fell limply into his chair and sat there like a man who had been drugged.

"There is no such oil-well as the Lone Hill," said Mr. Forbes gently. "These shares are utter forgeries. They are worth nothing—absolutely nothing. I think, Mr. Suncliffe, that you had better go straight to the police. You have evidently been victimised."

Mr. Suncliffe took his head in his hands and now looked utterly dejected.

"And I was warned, too!" he groaned.

"Young Handforth told me—he told me! I thought he was a young fool, and that he didn't know what he was talking about. Good heavens! This is appalling, Mr. Forbes—absolutely appalling!"

"It is certainly very serious," agreed the manager. "Is there no way in which you can get in touch with the man who sold you these shares?"

"The man has gone—he and his companions," replied Mr. Suncliffe brokenly. "It was I who was the fool—not Hand-

forth minor! And I was doubly a fool, because I went into this thing with my eyes open, and yet I did not choose to see!"

Mr. Forbes drummed his fingers on his desk.

"You may remember, Mr. Suncliffe, that I discreetly questioned you regarding the withdrawal of so large a sum," he said gently. "Unfortunately, you refused to take me into your confidence—"

"And that boy did everything in his power to stop me," continued Mr. Suncliffe, having heard none of his companion's words. "He even seized me by force and kept me a prisoner, so that I should not keep my appointment in London. He knew what he was doing, for he saved me then. And in spite of that I fell into those scoundrels' hands this morning! I deserve everything, Mr. Forbes—everything! There never was a greater fool than I!"

Mr. Forbes felt uncomfortable.

"You are not the first man, Mr. Suncliffe, who has been swindled in this way," he said slowly. "And you will serve no good purpose by uttering these recriminations. You had far better go to the police at once and tell them everything you know. There is still a chance that they might get on the track of the criminals and have them stopped."

"By heavens, yes!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe, leaping up. "I know that they went to London by car—or, at least, they left Bannington by car. Perhaps that car could be traced! I can give descriptions of the men, and—"

"I will come with you to the police-station myself," said Mr. Forbes briskly.

CHAPTER 17.

A Lesson for Mr. Suncliffe.

INSPECTOR JAMESON, of the Bannington police, looked dubious when he had heard the whole sorry story.

"I wish you had come to us two hours ago, Mr. Suncliffe," he said. "We might have had the car stopped then. But by now it has doubtless reached London. Those men have obtained such a good start that there is little or no hope of getting on their track. You can be quite certain that they made their plans very carefully in advance. However, we'll do the best we can."

"You think they have already reached London?" asked Mr. Suncliffe dully.

"They were in London long ago, I should say," replied the inspector. "And you will realize that it's going to be a difficult task to locate them. They might be anywhere. The whole position is made worse by the fact that you paid for these shares in cash. There's not even any hope of the money being traced."

The more Mr. Suncliffe thought of the transaction, the more he realized his incredible folly. He had been so confident and so certain an hour or two ago. Those men had completely hoodwinked him. The shock of the discovery had left him very upset and nervous. Willy Handforth's scheme to give Mr. Suncliffe a lesson was a good one. For this was a lesson that he would never forget.

"You'll do all you can, won't you, inspector?" he asked in a shaky voice.

"You can rely upon us," said Inspector Jameson. "However, I shouldn't advise you to be too sanguine, Mr. Suncliffe. Frankly, there's very little hope of your ever seeing that money again. We might possibly catch the criminals, but their arrest will not mean that you'll get your money."

Mr. Suncliffe was not a vindictive man. It would give him no satisfaction to see those confidence tricksters in the dock, and to know that they were to be sent to prison.

His legacy was gone—for ever. He would never see a farthing of that money again. In his eagerness to get rich quickly he had thrown everything away. Like many another, he awakened to the reality of things when it was too late.

Mr. Forbes, the bank-manager, was very concerned about his client. He could see that Mr. Suncliffe was still dazed by the blow, and he doubted if the Form-master would be able to get back to St. Frank's without an escort. He was in such a state of mind that he was quite capable of wandering away and rambling aimlessly about.

So Mr. Forbes chartered a taxi-cab, and placed Mr. Suncliffe in it, with one of the bank's clerks.

"Now, Mr. Suncliffe, you had better go straight home," he said gently. "We have done everything possible, and now you must let the matter rest with the police. I strongly advise you to see the head-

master of your school, and to request him to grant you a few days' holiday. You have had a nasty experience, and—"

"I require no holiday," said Mr. Suncliffe huskily. "Work will be better for me—it will help me to forget. I am grateful to you, Mr. Forbes, for all that you have done. I cannot blame myself enough for this dreadful thing. I should have sought your advice. I deserve no sympathy. The fault is entirely my own."

During the ride back to St. Frank's Mr. Suncliffe sat silent.

The clerk was relieved when the great school was reached, and when he safely deposited Mr. Suncliffe on the steps of the East House.

The master of the Third stood there for some little time after the taxi had gone and when he finally moved he went off towards the Head's house, instead of going off to his own quarters.

Nobody saw him, as it happened, for the school was indoors, feeding. It was the hour of the midday meal.

Mr. Suncliffe was shown into the Head's study by Phipps, and he found Dr. Nicholls sitting at his desk. This was somewhat unusual, for, normally, the Head would have been partaking of his luncheon.

"There is really no need for you to look so upset, Mr. Suncliffe," said the Head, as he eyed the haggard Form-master. "Perhaps you do not know that your boys are on the little island in the river? I am now making plans to reduce them to subjection. This rebellion is ridiculous, and I quite refuse to take it seriously. However, the ringleaders must be very severely punished."

Mr. Suncliffe started.

"I was not thinking of my boys, sir," he replied. "I have come to you because I think it is only right that you should know of my recent activities."

"I hope nothing is seriously wrong?" asked the Head, eyeing his visitor with concern.

"I have been a fool, Dr. Nicholls—an arrant fool!" said Mr. Suncliffe bitterly.

"My dear sir!"

"It is the truth!" insisted Mr. Suncliffe. "If you will permit me, I will give you a few of the details. I want you to release me from duty for the remainder of to-day. I really feel that I cannot carry on my normal work. To-morrow, however, I shall resume."

"If you will give me just five minutes, Mr. Suncliffe, I will be at your service," said the Head. "I have certain instructions to give regarding those rebellious Third-Form boys, and—"

"Ah, my boys!" said Mr. Suncliffe, with a start. "Of course—of course! You mentioned, I think, that they have rebelled?"

"They are encamped on Willard's Island," said the Head grimly. "I have already ordered them to return to the school, but I am not sure that they will obey. I believe they are waiting for you to return, Mr. Suncliffe—although I cannot quite understand their reason for that."

The Form-master looked excited.

"You say that you are preparing to take action?" he asked quickly. "Does that mean that you will punish them?"

"All those boys shall be dealt with as they deserve," said Dr. Nicholls. "Handforth minor, who is the ringleader, shall be expelled."

"No, no!" panted Mr. Suncliffe. "That would be grossly unfair!"

"Really, Mr. Suncliffe—"

"You must not expel him!" urged the Form-master. "It is no ordinary rebellion. Handforth minor was flogged yesterday, and the rest of my Form was confined to gates. That punishment was thoroughly undeserved. The boys tried to help me, and I was so blind that I refused to see it. Those punishments yesterday should never have been inflicted, sir."

"But you must remember, Mr. Suncliffe, that I acted upon your own complaint—"

"I know—I know!" broke in Mr. Suncliffe. "And this morning the boys were missing because they had some idea, I have no doubt, of helping me again. Indeed, I feel sure that they would have helped me if I had not gone to Bannington in your own car. They would have seized me for a second time, and they would have prevented me from making an object-lesson of myself!"

"You really must calm yourself, Mr. Suncliffe!"

"I cannot be calm!" shouted the Form-master excitedly. "These boys of mine are staunch—they are true to me. They tried to help, and I wouldn't let them. It will be an appalling miscarriage of justice if you punish them for what they have done. I urge you, Dr. Nicholls, to reconsider your decision. Handforth minor, in

particular, must not be punished! He is the one boy who has done everything in his power to help me. And for him to be expelled would be unfair and unjust. In fact, all these boys deserve praise, rather than punishment."

"I am afraid you do not quite appreciate the position," said the Head quietly. "The Third has rebelled, and—"

"They rebelled because it was the only possible way in which they could help me," said Mr. Suncliffe tensely. "Don't you understand, sir? They were gated, and therefore they could not ordinarily move outside the school premises. So they took French leave—hoping that they would be able to render me some assistance. But I, like a simpleton, refused to believe in their warnings. I insist, sir—absolutely insist—that my boys shall not be punished for this breach of the school rules."

"I would remind you, Mr. Suncliffe, that I am the headmaster," said Dr. Nicholls grimly.

CHAPTER 16.

ALL'S WELL!

THERE was something so determined in the headmaster's voice that Mr. Suncliffe rose to his feet in agitation.

"I am not presuming to dictate to you, sir," he said hoarsely. "But, really, you must allow me to know best in this matter. These boys are the boys of my own Form. I know them—I know them far better than you do, sir! And I am convinced that although they may have broken the letter of the school rules, they have done so purely in my interests. If I had had an ounce of common-sense, I should have listened to them. What they have done, they have done for me. And if they are to be punished for this, then I shall never forgive myself."

"If only you would keep cool, Mr. Suncliffe—"

"I cannot keep cool, sir!" shouted Mr. Suncliffe. "Perhaps you know that I recently inherited a legacy of five thousand pounds!"

"Yes; you told me so yourself."

"This morning I have been robbed of that money—every farthing of it!"

"Good gracious! I am sorry to hear this—"

"And it was entirely my own fault," continued Mr. Suncliffe, reluctant in his condemnation of himself. "Handforth never attempted to warn me, and all I could do was to scorn him—to have him flogged. He and his Form-fellows knew the truth all the time, and I would not listen. If I had heeded them, my money would have been intact now. I tell you, Dr. Nicholls, I am nearly at my wit's end!"

And, sitting down again, he gave a full and complete account of all that had happened. It did him good, for it restored him to a condition of calmness. And Dr. Morrison Nicholls gained a much clearer insight into the general situation.

"Of course, Mr. Suncliffe, this makes a great difference," he said, at length. "As you say, these boys have been trying to help you. Indeed, their loyalty to you—their concern for your welfare—is quite touching. It is a certain indication that your boys of the Third Form hold you in high regard."

Mr. Suncliffe bowed his head.

"And I—I, like the blockhead that I am, turned a deaf ear to their warnings," he said bitterly. "Don't you see, Dr. Nicholls, that it would be unfair to punish them? I well know that they have broken the rules, but surely that aspect of the matter can be overlooked?"

"I think, perhaps, it can," agreed the Head dryly.

"Then let me go to these boys, sir," said Mr. Suncliffe. "Let me go at once, so that I can acknowledge my mistake. At a word from me, they will quietly come back to the school, and resume their duties this afternoon. I beg of you, sir, to grant me this—"

"It is not necessary for you to beg of me, Mr. Suncliffe," interrupted the Head. "You are perfectly at liberty to go. Only I should like you to remember your dignity."

"My dignity is nothing," said Mr. Suncliffe, with a sigh. "It is for me to express my regret to these boys—and they will understand. I shall lose no dignity by acknowledging my folly to them. Indeed, I must do so, or I shall never be able to teach them again. As for my money, that is gone—and I deserve to lose it."

"You mustn't be so pessimistic," said

the Head. "Perhaps the police will recover your lost money."

"I have no hope of that," said Mr. Suncliffe, shaking his head. "I paid the money in cash, and even if the rascals are captured there is very little chance that the money will still be on them."

The Head could appreciate now that Willy & Co. had made all their efforts in Mr. Suncliffe's interests. Dr. Nicholls was not a man who believed in strictly conventional methods; and he realised that here, at all events, there was a case which demanded unusual treatment.

"Go to this island, Mr. Suncliffe, and have a talk with the boys," he said kindly. "Tell them that if they return in an orderly fashion, they will hear no more of this affair. Your story has placed an entirely different light on the rebellion, and I am, I hope, possessed of a sense of justice."

"Thank you, sir—you are indeed good," said Mr. Suncliffe gratefully.

Willy Handforth sighed.

"Well, I suppose we shall have to be going," he said reluctantly. "I hate doing it, but the Head is such a good old sport that we can't defy him."

"This means that the whole giddy thing has collapsed!" asked Clueby Heath nervously. "It means that we're going to get it in the neck, eh?"

"You won't get it in the neck," growled Willy. "It might mean a flogging for me, but I don't care. Anyhow, when the Head hears what we've done, I dare say he'll think twice about punishing me. It's a pity old Sunny hasn't turned up. I was expecting him before this."

All the Third-Formers were out in the open—looking anxiously across the meadows towards St. Frank's. Never for a moment did Willy Handforth consider the possibility of defying Dr. Morrison Nicholls. If he did so, he would place himself entirely in the wrong—and he knew it.

"What about the prisoners?" asked Juley Lenson.

"They're all right for the time being," said Willy. "They can't get out of that dungeon, and I shall leave two or three chaps on guard, anyhow. In fact, it

might be a good idea for me to go to the Head alone—so that I can explain everything."

"I say!" sang out Parry minor, of the East House. "Here's old Sunny—at last!"

"What!" yelled Willy.

"Look! He's coming across the mudflats!" shouted Parry minor. "He's alone, too!"

Willy's face cleared.

"My sons, everything's all right," he said solemnly. "Good old Sunny! He's turned up in time, after all! No need for us to surrender now."

They all waited eagerly and anxiously as Mr. Sundcliffe approached. And when he came nearer they could see that he was not the Mr. Sundcliffe of old. The change in him, indeed, was startling.

"My only sainted aunt!" murmured Chubby. "Look at him! He seems six inches shorter, and he's dragging his feet over the ground as though they were made of lead. Look at his face, too—all lined and haggard!"

"Poor old Sunny!" murmured Willy. "It's rather rough on him—but it's only right that he should have had his lesson. But he'll soon buck up when we tell him the truth."

He turned, and gave some instructions to Owen minor and Dicky Jones and Tommy Hobbs and some of the others. They didn't quite like it at first, but there was a grim glint in Willy's eyes which warned them that they had better obey.

They vanished into the quaint old building in the centre of the island.

In the meantime, Mr. Sundcliffe had reached the river bank, and he stood there, regarding the rebellious fags across the little strip of water.

"Boys, I have a message for you—from the headmaster," he said, trying to speak in a normal tone.

"Will you come across, sir?" asked Willy. "If you step into that boat, and give it a push, you'll drift over, and you'll be here in two ticks."

"Perhaps I had better," said Mr. Sundcliffe doubtfully.

He got into the boat, pushed off, and, sure enough, he came right across to the island without finding it necessary to use this device.

"Hallo, sir," said Willy cheerfully. "Sorry if we've caused you any worry this morning, but—"

"Handforth minor, I have something to say to you," interrupted Mr. Sundcliffe quickly. "I have something to say, in fact, to all the boys of my Form. If I had listened to you, instead of scolding you, I should have been a wiser man. As it is, I want you all to forgive me for my harshness and my incredible stupidity."

"Oh, I say, sir!" said Willy uncomfortably.

"You know the truth about those two men, and you told me the truth," continued Mr. Sundcliffe. "If I had not been blinded by my own self-sufficiency, I should have heeded your words. As it was, I ignored you, and I caused you to be punished. That punishment, I may tell you, is now rescinded."

"Hurrah!" yelled the excited Third.

"Unhappily, it is impossible to rescind the flogging that you received yesterday, Handforth minor," continued Mr. Sundcliffe. "The Headmaster has instructed me to say that if you all return to the school forthwith, you will be allowed to resume your normal status without the infliction of any punishment."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Head!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Sundcliffe!"

"Hurrah!"

"Willy was right!" yelled Chubby. "He told us that everything would work out all right, didn't he?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Good old Willy!"

"Dry up, fathead!" said Willy, frowning. "Do you mind telling us, sir, what happened this morning?" he went on, turning to Mr. Sundcliffe. "Did you meet those two men at the Grapes?"

Mr. Sundcliffe sighed.

"I did," he said wearily. "I met them, and I fell into their trap. I bought those oil-shares, Handforth minor—which you had previously told me were worthless. I paid five thousand pounds to those infernal rascals! Heavens! I cannot imagine how I was duped! I was a blind fool!"

Mr. Sundcliffe was so handsome in his acknowledgment of his folly that Willy

hadn't the heart to keep up this farce any longer. He had originally intended to keep "old Sunny" on the rack for some little time. But now he suddenly made up his mind.

"Well, as long as you know the truth now, sir, everything's all right," he said cheerfully. "We haven't been idle this morning, sir. I'm glad that the Head has decided to let us off—because we've been doing some good work."

"I don't understand you, my boy," said Mr. Suncliffe. "It is too late now. The damage has been done. My money has gone—"

"But that doesn't mean to say that you won't get it back, sir," put in Willy.

"It is beyond recovery, Handforth minor."

"Don't you believe it, sir," grinned Willy. "What about this?"

With the air of a conjurer, he produced Mr. Suncliffe's bundle of banknotes. The rest of the Third gathered round, eager and excited. They were all grinning with sheer delight. This was the moment they had been longing for.

"What—what is this?" asked Mr. Suncliffe, staring.

"Your money, sir."

"My—money!" gasped the Form-master hoarsely.

"Yes, sir."

"But—but—Is this a jest?"

"Of course it isn't, sir," grinned Willy. "Didn't I tell you that we'd been busy this morning? We knew that you'd buy those shares, and we didn't want to see you diddled. So we got your money back for you. Here it is, sir—just as you drew it from the bank. Five thousand quid, I think."

Mr. Suncliffe was flabbergasted. He took the money in a feeble, nervous hand. The colour had gone from his cheeks, but now it flooded back again. His grip became convulsive; his hand shook.

"This money?" he panted. "Do you tell me, Handforth minor, that this is my money?"

"Your five thousand quid, sir," nodded Willy. "Honour bright, sir—the very notes you handed over to those crooks."

Mr. Suncliffe fought for his breath.

"If—if you are telling me the truth Handforth minor—" he began.

"I said 'honour bright,' sir," remarked Willy reproachfully.

"My boy—my boy!" panted the amazed Form-master. "I am bewildered! I cannot understand this! What has happened! How did you obtain this money? I have never been so amazed in all my life!"

"It was Willy's doing, sir," sang out Chubby Heath. "He arranged everything—and he told us that we shouldn't be punished. He was right, too! Good old Willy!"

"You'll get a black eye in a minute!" warned Willy ominously.

"Rats!" said Chubby. "We other chaps aren't taking any credit. It was you who fished us out in the middle of the night and planned to collar those crooks."

"You planned to—to collar the crooks?" ejaculated Mr. Suncliffe dazedly. "But—but this is astounding! This is certainly my money—and yet I am more bewildered than ever. Is it possible that I have not been robbed, after all? Have you boys saved me from my insane folly?"

Willy gave a sudden whistle, and it was obviously a signal. For there was a movement near the old building, and now a number of fags appeared, pushing Messrs. Bainbridge, Talbot and Morton in front of them. The three men had had their ankle ropes cut, and they were pushed forward roughly.

"Bainbridge and Talbot!" ejaculated Mr. Suncliffe aghast! "Here! And—and I thought that they had escaped to London!"

"We collared them, sir!" explained Willy. "They didn't get far on the road to London in their car. We stopped it, you know, grabbed them, took your money, and then we shoved them down into one of the dungeons of this old building. We wanted to keep them until you came along, sir."

Mr. Suncliffe was a changed man already. The haggard look had gone from his face, and his eyes were glittering with excitement and joy.

"You have saved me, my boys—you have saved me!" he said breathlessly. "I was grateful to you before—but now you have placed me so deeply in your debt that I shall never be able to repay you."

"That's all right, sir," said Willy. "It's good enough for us to know that everything's all serene, and that we're not going to get any punishment."

Bainbridge and his companions were pushed forward, and Mr. Sundcliffe regarded them with scornful eyes.

"You unmitigated rogues!" he said fiercely. "These boys were right. You gained my confidence and you tricked me. You shall go to prison for this!"

"You're mad!" said Bainbridge thickly. "The kids are all wrong! Those shares are worth every penny you paid for them—and within a fortnight they'll be worth treble! Why take any notice of these young fools?"

"When we get free, we intend to prosecute them for assault!" said "Doc" Morton desperately.

Mr. Sundcliffe laughed.

"Oh, no!" he said contemptuously. "You cannot fool me again. I have been informed, on the highest possible authority, that those shares are forgeries. The boys knew it all along—but now my bank manager has verified—"

"He knows no more than the boys!" snarled Bainbridge.

"Have you got those share certificates on you, sir?" asked Willy.

"Yes, I think so."

Mr. Sundcliffe handed them over, and Willy tucked them into Bainbridge's inside jacket-pocket.

"There you are, Mr. Bainbridge," he said coolly. "We've taken Mr. Sundcliffe's money, but we've given you back your shares. Exchange is no robbery, eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Third.

"And now," continued Willy, "as everything is all settled, we'll take you down to the police station. At a rough guess, I should imagine that you'll get about three years' penal servitude for this job."

Steve Bainbridge flew into such a rage that he burst the cords that tied his wrists. The next second, with a shout of triumph, he knocked several of the fags down and made a leap for the boat. At the same second, Talbot and Morton wratched themselves away, although their arms were still bound. They, too, ran for the river.

But it was a hopeless move from the outset.

In his haste, Bainbridge upset the boat; and his companions, chased by the fags,

were pushed headlong into the river. All three of them were dragged out—cold, shivering and thoroughly subdued. Every ounce of fight had been knocked out of the three rogues.

The Third, in great triumph, escorted the prisoners to the police station in Reilton. In fact, Bainbridge & Co. were frog-marched all the way. The fags felt that it was safer to escort them in this fashion, since there was no chance of their making a break for freedom.

P.C. Sparrow, the local constable, was considerably startled when the prisoners were handed into his care. They arrived exhausted and dishevelled and bruised—for they had received more than one bump on the way down. The fags felt that they deserved this punishment for their insult to Australia.

Inspector Jameson was rung up, and he promised to be over within fifteen minutes. The crooks had met their match in the unorthodox Third-Formers, and it was certain that they would receive severe terms of imprisonment.

The Third enjoyed a victorious return to St. Frank's. They marched to the old school in an orderly fashion, and they entered the Triangle just as the bell was ringing for afternoon lessons. The Removites and the Fourth-Formers crowded round, amazed and starled. And they were astonished when they heard that the Third had escaped scot-free, and that Willy was the hero of the hour.

"Aren't you going to get sacked?" asked Edward Oswald, as he looked at his minor.

"Sorry, Ted, but the Head's decided to let me off," replied Willy, grinning. "I'm not even going to get flogged."

"Willy's all right!" said Chubby Heath. "He promised us that everything would turn out all serene, and, as usual, he knew what he was talking about! He's a giddy marvel!"

"Well I'm jigged!" said Handforth, scratching his head.

Mr. Austin Sundcliffe considered that Willy was a hero. His money was intact, and the situation had been saved. Mr. Sundcliffe had always had a warm spot in his heart for Willy—and that spot was now warmer than ever.

FOES of the JUNGLE!

A Thrilling Complete Story of Daring Adventure

CHAPTER I.

Red Revolution!

"WELL, good-night, uncle!" said Clive Hart, squeezing the hand of the tall, thin-faced, anxious-eyed gentleman. "I'm awfully sorry about this. But perhaps it's not so bad as you fear. Probably we'll hear better news in the morning."

"We may," faltered Mr. Asprey in tones which implied the precise opposite to the words used. "But out here, you know, one must be prepared for anything. And this looks decidedly ugly. Still, of course, reports may have been exaggerated."

"No doubt, no doubt!" promptly voiced his stalwart nephew, fastening instantly on this remote possibility. "It's very often so at such times. Anyhow, don't you worry; we'll be all right."

But, once outside, all that cheery optimism vanished.

For, though this was his first visit to Haiti—he had called on his way home from Panama, where he had been working on the great canal—Clive Hart already knew sufficient of that hotbed of strife to be quite sure that this new revolution which had so suddenly broken out must mean serious trouble.

Mr. Asprey, a coffee-planter, had settled near the coast in Hayti with his sixteen-year-old son Raymond and his daughter Grace.

But, if business had proved largely successful, the locality was anything but a desirable place to live in, and, though a comfortable home was now theirs, the hard-working trio could never really feel secure, surrounded as they were by hostile niggers—blacks so innately savage and bloodthirsty that all the boasted civilization of our day has only been able to put the thinnest of veneers upon them!

"I do wish dad would chuck it and cleat off back to the Old Country," remarked Raymond to his newly-arrived cousin. "The wretched hole has never suited him, but he will stick on. This yellow fever's pulled him down frightfully, and I'm positive the vile atmosphere's killing him. Then there's sis. She's a fair brick; don't know what we should have done without her! But, frankly, this is no place for her!"

"Quite so!" nodded Clive. "But uncle knows that, too."

"Oh, yes! Only—well," smiled Raymond, "you know how it is with some people. The more you hammer away, the less they think of budging. Dad sees the point, but he won't be forced."

"Strikes me he will, old man!" grinned the other. "If this row goes on, I reckon he'll jolly well have to make tracks. Heard any more?"

"No. Matabi"—Mr. Asprey's faithful negro overseer—"is away now, trying to get news. We've had a tidy few dust-ups here; but my private feeling is that this'll be the worst. However, nothing can happen to-night. The boundaries are too far off to strike our trail 'fore daylight, even if they steer in this direction. So I'll say night, old chap!"

Clive turned in, but not to sleep. For himself he feared nothing. Despite his youth—he was twenty, but looked older—he had faced death more than once. It was of his uncle he thought as he tossed restlessly upon his bed—his uncle, Raymond, and Grace—the sweet, gentle-eyed girl he had so often romped with in the old days in England. Why, they had grown up together as children. And here they were all united again after the lapse of years in a strange, wild land, with terrible peril closing in upon them.

Early astir, he learned that Matabi had

and returned. But on coming in from a stroll about midday, Clive found the coffee-planter and his son conversing gravely in low tones.

"Bad news!" spoke the former. "A large band of insurgents, marching hither, are plundering and burning places wholesale; so we'll shortly be up against it!"

"No good fighting," Raymond promptly declared, discerning his father's mind. "It'd be sheer madness to tackle single-handed"—the servants had fled—"all these cut-throat beggars. Once let 'em besiege us, and we're done!"

"But we may be able to obtain help—a cruiser, or perhaps—"

"Too late, dad!" broke in Raymond. "Had we known earlier, when the rumors was booming, we might have got assistance, but there's no time now. Besides, think of Grace."

"Yes, yes, I know." Mr. Asprey sighed wearily. "I suppose— What say you, Clive?"

Like his uncle, Clive was a fighter. He had the same bulldog spirit, his square-set jaw told you that, but he also possessed discretion, and knew when to use it.

"I hate knuckling under to a pack of howling blacks," replied he; "and I guess them's your sentiments, too! But this seems a case of up sticks and run, no matter how much it goes against the grain. Otherwise"—with a grim smile—"we risk a complete wipe-out!"

The planter's hands clenched. To leave all at a moment's notice, to abandon that which the labour of years had wrought for others to ruthlessly pillage, was hard indeed. Yet it must be.

"You're right," he owned, after a moment's pause. "We'll have to decamp. Have the launch got ready."

To which Raymond, who had been thoughtfully preparing for the inevitable crisis, made answer that steam was up.

"Then run and tell Grace, and we'll be off at once," cried the planter, slipping some papers into his pocket.

Hardly had this decision been arrived at when a terrific yell burst out from the heights behind the plantation—a fearful, terror-striking roar that could only bear one interpretation.

The revolted blacks were close at hand!

CHAPTER 2.

Trouth and Gai!

THINGS then began to spin!

Clive, springing to find Grace, hurried her down the path that led to the quay, while Raymond remained for a moment to help his father gather a few articles he particularly wished to take.

"It's all right!" soothed Clive, in answer to Grace's imploring cries to them to be quick. "They'll catch us up."

On they sped, the tumult increasing every minute. Louder and louder grew the rebels' shouts. They must be at the house now, thought Clive. He threw back a quick glance. No sign of Mr. Asprey or Raymond!

A moment more brought them to the creek, the launch, and friend Matalu.

Rushing up, the last-named gabbled out anxious inquiries in his curious, debased sort of French; then, scarcely waiting for a reply, the brave fellow, knowing only too well what tremendous danger the absentees were in, tore off to the house with all speed.

One thought leapt to the minds of the runners—Matalu had gone to his death! And, if so, did not that of itself imply the heartrending fact that it was now too late to—

Potting Grace aboard, Clive stood ready to cast-off, well-nigh bursting in his longing to bound after Matalu, yet restrained by his duty to Grace.

The nerve-torturing moments ticked by. With eyes and ears strained to their utmost they waited in agonised suspense.

But no one came!

"Oh, Clive," wailed a choking voice, "why don't they come? What can—"

"Wait a minute." Clive's tone was wonderfully composed, but intense suffering was depicted on his face. "Fancy I heard—Hark!"

Yes, the yelling was rapidly coming their way. A sudden crashing made itself heard. More shouts and trampling feet.

Plainly someone was being hoily pursued.

Nearer came the hunt; and then, all in an instant, out shot the lanky figure of Mr. Asprey, and panted unsteadily for the launch.

Helping him in, Clive flung himself on

the throttle, and got the screw churning just as the pursuers raced madly down to the quay, firing a running fusillade of gunshots, which rattled on the smokestack and chipped the boat's paint.

Summoning his fast-ebbing strength, the breathless planter desperately seized the tiller, while Clive stopped further shooting by levelling his Browning as they glided out into the creek.

Overawed by the vicious lead pumpkin, the baffled pursuers speedily retreated, and soon returned to their looting.

"Look! They've fired the place already!" cried Grace presently, pointing to a rising column of smoke and a lurid glow. But where was Raymond? And Matsuo?

Questioned the moment they were at a safe distance, Mr. Asprey, bewildered and utterly exhausted, could at first give no coherent reply. But as they raced on, not knowing whether the feet-footed savages would try and head them off, he recalled that he and Raymond had finally left the house by different doors—Raymond's object really being to check the enemy's advance, and so increase his father's chance of escape.

Believing his son would quickly converge on the path, Mr. Asprey hastened not, to be almost immediately pursued by the flanking-party into whose clutches he had so nearly fallen. Of Matsuo he had seen nothing.

What was to be done? Clearly they must return—or one must—while the others went for help.

The distracted father immediately announced his intention of going back, but Clive would not hear of it.

"No, you won't!" he snapped firmly. "I'm going myself! So if you'll put me across, I'll be off, uncle."

"But, Clive," began the latter, while Grace looked her admiration for her old chum, "you must not—er—"

"Look here!" cut in Clive. "We can't be far from the sea, and Port au Prince. No, I thought so. Well, you rip on to the port, and see if you can obtain some reinforcements. Meanwhile, I'll make back-tracks for the old place. Somehow, I believe Ray'll outwit those brutes yet. Anyhow, I'm going to find him."

After a few further remarks, the launch was put about, Clive being landed at a

point where there was a trail leading to the plantation.

Two hands were gripped in turn, and then, with one last look, Clive Hart disappeared through the gap in the vegetation that crowded to the water's edge.

CHAPTER 2.

A MOONLIGHT FIGHT.

CLIVE harboured no delusions regarding his perilous undertaking. That it was fraught with danger he was fully aware. Equally certain was it that he stood little chance of saving his cousin, who, in all probability, was now beyond all human aid, or, for that matter, of preserving his own skin. Most likely he would never return—never see again those he had just left. Perfectly conscious of this, he did not flinch or repent his decision.

So, while two aching, prayerful hearts throbbed on their painful way to the sea, Clive swung resolutely inland, grimly determined to rescue Raymond or die in the attempt.

TWO MORE, CHUMS! —AND TWO OF THE BEST!

THE SCHOOLBOYS' OWN LIBRARY

Nos. 121 and 122.

"THE GREYFRIARS HYPNOTIST!"

By FRANK RICHARDS.

"ST. JIM'S AT SEA!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

**THEY'LL BE OUT ON
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The course, he quickly discovered, was one seldom used—a mere track, cutting up through the forest; and he had to force through thick, trailing undergrowth that seemed to confront him at every twist and turn of the winding, primeval jungle path.

The day was sweltering, the heat terrific, there being no air to breathe, only a hot, stifling, dank haze that hung over everything, and made the odorous tropical plants drip moisture.

Holding doggedly to it, the perspiring Clive came at last to a clearing. Before crossing this he paused, but there was no one about. Several times he stopped to listen, without hearing anything. But now, on picking up the path afresh, he soon caught sounds from a distance—sounds that proclaimed he was fast nearing the danger zone.

Presently, as he sped on warily, a bend in the path—which was here much better—brought him to an opening, where familiar ground burst into view.

He was now on the edge of the plantation, but little or nothing was visible, for the coffee-bushes cut off all else. Skirting these, still dimly hearing shouts afar off, he shortly emerged close to the ruined hamstead.

What he there beheld seemed incredible, like some horribly bad nightmare. Only yesterday all was fair to look upon, and now—

The house had gone! Built mostly of wood, it had blazed as tinder, and only a charred heap marked the spot. The whole place was deserted, but the wreckers were not far away. For as Clive went first to the one solitary outbuilding, a little removed from its ill-fated neighbours, that still remained, he saw in the distance a number of men climbing the mountain-side.

Clearly they had all departed. But where was Raymond? Had he been carried off? Or had the fiends—

Clive strode over to the smouldering debris, where, almost at once, he dropped on his knees with a sharp cry, his gaze falling suddenly on an object partly covered by ashes—a dead body.

Matai! The face was little disfigured, while the clothes, though scorched, were recognizable. Yes, Matai; and the loyal old servant and scout had fallen riddled with bullets.

But what of Raymond?

Clive was rising, when his sorrow-and-rage-filled eyes glimpsed something wedged under the poor dead's body. A quick pull, and it was in his hand—a scribbler—Raymond's!

Yes, there could be no doubt—the colour was unmistakable. Protected by the body, it had been little hurt.

Then, did this mean Raymond had also fallen? Clive did not believe so, though he thought well to make sure by further searching.

No; Raymond had been captured—that was the seeker's fixed conclusion, and speedily he set himself to follow the insurgents' trail, which he soon saw was leading onward.

All was now silent, and nothing of the enemy could be observed; but Clive had a keen sense of direction, and confidently breasted the slope.

That he would track the Haytiens he had little doubt; but would he be in time?

It was this that sent him climbing with such haste, soon to enter the dense woods that ran right down to the shore.

Of a sudden a new sound reached his ears, a weird noise that quickened his steps, and caused his heart to thump madly.

For that, surely, was the tom-tomming of the Voodoo drums—a signal that the witch-priests were already astir. The or had commenced!

Louder grew the beating drums, pushed on, torn with maddening thought of Raymond. Was he there? Was he— All in an instant the red gleam of a fire shone through the trees. A ruddy light increased, and now, not more than a dozen yards ahead, the forest end abruptly. Beyond was a broad, open cove, with the sea showing on the left side, and—

Creeping forward, he beheld a horribly revolting sight.

Around a great camp-fire several eerie, shadowy forms were dancing to a vampire jig, leaping and yelling with the ferocity of demons.

For a moment the watcher's horrified gaze rested on the debasing scene, then stealthily he stole towards another part, where something had already caught his keen eye—a dimly seen bundle, lying on the ground behind the inhuman throng, apparently quite alone.

Working round cautiously, Clive managed to wriggle up near to the dark shape.

"Yes! it was Raymond!"

Bound hand and foot, he lay with closed eyes, and a face like death.

Worming through the grass to Raymond's ear, he gently spoke his name. Slowly the eyes opened.

"It's me—Clive!" whispered he, sloshing at the thought. "There!" as the last was uttered. "Up you get!" He helped him to his feet. "Now, come on!"

But the boy was dazed and cramped, and at first scarcely knew how to stand.

Instantly Clive's strong arms lifted him up and bore him towards cover.

But hardly was this gained when a loud shout, quite near, interrupted a mumbling statement of Raymond's, and Clive, peering forth, saw to his horror three forms advancing. The guards had discovered that the human sacrifice was missing.

"Come on!" cried Clive.

Down the moonlit path they ran, expecting every instant to have a yelling, blood-thirsty mob at their heels; but the pursuit did not immediately begin.

"We mustn't stop!" gasped Raymond.

"Those brutes will spread out in no time. This track leads to the creek, and if we can only reach it, there's a boat near by, and—"

"Yes, but don't talk," ordered Clive.

"How far is the water?"

"Oh, barely another mile, I should say!"

"Then we ought to do it."

"Unless they're playing to cut us off or move in. Instead of our having the lead, we imagine they may be ahead now—waiting to pounce on us!"

"I see." Clive slipped a spare pistol into his chum's hand. "Well, we'll be ready. Keep your eyes skinned!"

In silence they plunged on. All seemed quiet, and they were rapidly nearing the creek, when a series of yells burst out, and almost immediately several shadowy forms were seen racing up, while here and there others could be discerned sitting between the trees.

Suddenly it flashed on the hunted pair that the wily savages had drawn a cordon around them.

With the road blocked ahead it was useless going on, and Clive, knowing they

would have to fight, spurred for the one deserted spot that remained—a big tree.

As they gained this—they were in a glade with little or no bush cover—a score of negroes sprang from the surrounding timber, brandishing all sorts of weapons.

Even in that moment Clive, who rarely missed a point, espied another detachment working round to the rear.

Shouting to Raymond to attend to those from his side, he took the main body.

Crack, crack, crack!

Checked by the rapid fire, the savages returned to the trees.

Ammunition was now getting low, and Clive was wondering whether they should make a dash for the creek, when a bullet sang past his head, followed by others.

The hidden blacks were sniping, and only by dropping flat on the instant was the ensuing volley avoided.

"Lucky they're such rotten shots, or we'd have been plugged fore now!" muttered Raymond. "Wonder what—"

A queer click told Raymond that his magazine was empty. He had used his last cartridge!

Clive had scarcely half a dozen left. Another minute would see those gone, then it would be fists and—the end!

Suddenly in the very midst of that despairing crisis a ringing cheer and the quick barking of rifles was heard, and next instant the desperate defenders saw a squad of bluejackets hurl out on the surprised savages, who gave back and fled right and left.

"A rescue! Huzzah!" boomed Clive. "We're saved, Ray!"

But Raymond, overcome by the strain, had slid to the ground in a swoon.

At Port au Prince, Mr. Asprey, finding H.M.S. Speedy just arrived to inquire about the reported revolution, at once interviewed her commander, who forthwith despatched the steam pinnace up the creek, retaining Grace and her father on board the cruiser.

Thus directed and urged on by the sounds, the rescue was accomplished in the nick of time. Indeed, though Clive Hart and Raymond Asprey have since tumbled into other hot corners, they readily agree this one in wild Hayti was easily the tightest of all.

THE END.

FLIERS OF THE PAST.

One hundred and five years ago, England saw its first locomotives, and, reading of the startling sensation they caused, most of us are inclined to smile.

They may have seemed clanking, snorting, fire-eating monsters to their first gaping spectators way back in the early eighteenth century, who were scared almost out of their wits at the mere sight of them; but compared with our modern giants of the iron road the Rockets and Puffing Bilities strike us as funny little boxes of tricks.

The 1930 Model.

Watch one of the latest-type expresses as it steams majestically out of its terminus, making light of its huge load, or hurtles with breath-taking speed through a station on its journey of hundreds of miles, and it'll be hard to convince yourself that it's only a 1930 model of those ancient museum exhibits.

At first sight there may seem to be no real comparison between the locomotives of this century and the last, but—just a moment!

Of course, the old crocks, even if they were "still going strong" to-day, could not hope to compete with their modern rivals so far as size and power are concerned. But when it comes to speed we find that the old 'uns had a record or two to their credit which would not disgrace even a Flying Scotsman or a Lord Nelson.

Amazing Speeds!

Let us go back eighty years. Between 1840 and 1850 the old broad-gauge "fliers" made some amazing runs. Rumour had it at one time that they reached speeds of a hundred miles an hour and over. They didn't do that, of course; but coming to hard facts we learn that in tests in 1848 the Great Britain and Iron Duke, the champions of their day, covered 75 miles an hour.

The Great Britain, with a load of four carriages and a van, ran from Paddington to

Didcot, a distance of 33 miles, in 47 minutes, which gives a result of only just under 70 miles an hour. Some going!

One of the greatest achievements ever recorded in railway history also took place in the last century. This belongs to the Midland Railway's "single-driver" which, in 1897, attained a speed of 90 miles an hour, and afterwards covered 13 more miles at the rate of one-and-a-third miles to the minute.

A Famous Flier.

Until fairly recently the 239-mile run of the Cornish Riviera Express from London to Plymouth was the longest in the kingdom, and once, years ago, when it was carrying royalty, this famous train fairly surpassed itself. The down line to Plymouth had been specially cleared, and the non-stop journey was made in three hours fifty-four minutes—an average speed of over a mile a minute.

So far all these accounts have been of locomotives of the past that were real fliers, but here's a story of one which was more of a crawler. It happened in America, and the engine was Tom Thumb, the first to be built on the other side of the Herring Pond. Its first trial run had been completed, and on the return journey the owners of a stage coach decided to show what their horse could do against this new-fangled invention.

Horse v. Iron Horse!

Coach and train started together, and soon the latter, belching steam from almost every joint, drew ahead. The coach driver whipped, the horse strained every nerve, but still Tom Thumb gained. Not for long, though. Without warning the train suddenly began to lose speed—a blower on the engine had gone out of action.

It was the horse's chance. With the coach careering wildly behind, it caught up its rival, passed it, and romped home an easy winner.

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