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## **BOWLED OUT!**

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Expelled from St. Frank's," "Under False Colours," "Faked Evidence," etc., etc.

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**(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)**

## CHAPTER I.

### FULLWOOD ASKS FOR IT!

"**H**OW much longer, I wonder?" said Tommy Watson thoughtfully.  
"Eh?"  
"When will things be as usual again?"

Watson looked at me across the table of Study C, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. We were partaking of tea. Sir Montie Tregellis-West set his cup down and gave a little sigh.

"Yes, it will be frightfully rippin' when everythin' is as usual again," he agreed. "But I must admit that you're gettin' on famously, Nip—er—D'Albert, I mean. You made a toppin' show at the cricket, begad!"

"The fellows are beginning to respect you more, too," said Watson.

"That's what I intended," I said. "I came back to St. Frank's as a duffer—acting the part and looking the part—but it was a bit too slow. Everybody accepts me as a new fellow, and there's no danger of recognition now. So there's no reason why I shouldn't make things hum a bit."

"But we want to have you back again—you, yourself, Nipper," said Watson. "We don't want any more of this giddy pretence and acting."

"Why can't you keep the thing up," I interrupted in a low voice. "Don't call me Nipper, you ass! These studies are almost public—with the window wide open. One little hint to the other fellows, and the fat will be in the fire."

"I'll remember," said Watson.

"You ought to," I retorted. "Only the other day you nearly gave Starke the tip by being incautious—and I believe he's been thinking. I shall be bowled out unless we're all very careful."

"All right, don't chew the rag!" said Tommy. "I'll be cautious, D'Albert."

It certainly sounded curious to hear my chums referring to me by that name. But it was right that they should do so.

For the time being I, Nipper, had vanished from St. Frank's. And Algernon Clarence D'Albert had returned in my place.

My disguise was complete; I looked something of a freak, and the Remove had regarded me as several kinds of a simpleton.

But I had made my mark already. After a terrific struggle to get a chance at the cricket I had failed, and had only shown the St. Frank's juniors what I could do by playing for an opposing team.

As a consequence, St. Frank's had lost the match, and the Remove had awakened to the fact that Algernon Clarence D'Albert was hot stuff on the cricket field. De Valerie, who had been appointed junior captain after my "departure," had been only too ready to offer me a place in the Junior Eleven.

But why was I masquerading at St. Frank's in another identity? I was not impersonating a living individual; there was no such boy as Algernon Clarence D'Albert; it was a fictitious name and a fictitious character.

My only aim had been to get back in the Remove, in order to be on the spot so that I could work easily. For I had been expelled from St. Frank's in disgrace and dishonour.

My task was to prove my own innocence; to establish the fact that I had been sacked unjustly—although, strictly speaking, I did not blame the Headmaster for believing the worst of me. The evidence had been overwhelmingly black.

"We'll just discuss the situation, my sons," I said quietly. "You might close that window, Tommy. It's warm this afternoon, but we'd better be stuffed up for ten minutes than risk being overheard."

The window was closed, and I thoughtfully scratched my head.

"I was sacked for assaulting Starke of the Sixth," I said slowly. "He's as well as ever now, but when he was picked up in the lane on that night his head was bleeding, and he was unconscious. Because I happened to be on the spot I was accused of the crime."

"And when Starke recovered his beasty wits he swore that you'd knocked him down," said Tommy Watson. "The cad! The liar! The rotten criminal!"

"You needn't get excited!" I chuckled. "We know all this, Tommy. Starke is certainly a cad, we know that he's a liar, and he has the makings of a pretty complete criminal in him. His statement settled the matter, I had no loophole. So I was sacked in disgrace."

Sir Montie smiled.

"An' then you came back, dear fellow," he observed. "You hoodwinked all of us, begad! Even Tommy an' I suspected nothin' until you revealed yourself. An' we're the only chaps in the school who know the truth. It's frightfully rich, it is, really!"

"If I'm not suspected, I shall be able to complete my investigations successfully," I went on. "It's a thousand pities that the gov'nor's away. I don't know what's become of him—"

"Mr. Lee's in Italy, isn't he?" asked Tommy.

"That's what I thought," I replied. "But I haven't heard a word for weeks, and, if you want to know the truth, I'm getting a bit anxious. Still, the gov'nor can be trusted to look after himself all right. I'm in a rotten hole here, and it's up to me to get out of it."

"Dear old boy, you've got one foot out already," smiled Tregellis-West.

"Have I?" I said. "I wish I could believe you, old son. What have I done? What have I discovered up till now? Simply that Starke was really knocked over by a motor-car belonging to a man named Millford, of Midshott, five miles beyond Bannington. But it was driven at the time by Mr. Millford's chauffeur, a rotter named Beckett. Beckett said nothing, and that's why I was confused. It seems that Starke knows the man, for they've already met at a little country inn. As for proving anything, I'm as far away as ever."

"Then there's that other chap," remarked Watson.

"Yes, that mysterious stranger who's been hanging about," I said thoughtfully. "I can't quite place him, you know. But still, we needn't bring him into it now. The fact remains that my only chance of getting at the truth is to keep a strict watch on Starke, and to bluff him into revealing the truth when the first opportunity comes. I know exactly what happened on that night, but I can't prove a thing."

"Supposing you told the Head all about it?"

"He wouldn't believe me," I replied. "But I think he'd investigate. I think he'd question Starke and send for Beckett. The result would be nix. Starke would stick to his original accusation — because he daren't do anything else—and Beckett would deny that he was out with the car on that night. So where should I be?"

"Still in the cart, begad!" observed Sir Montie.

"Exactly!" I agreed. "Therefore, as I said before, Starke and Beckett have got to be trapped, and I can only hope for that by keeping Starke under strict observation."

The whole case is as clear as daylight now—there's practically no mystery left. It amounts to this—proof is needed. When that proof is obtained I can expose Starke as a liar, and return to St. Frank's with my name unblemished. But proofs must be obtained."

"An' that's where you're goin' to find the trouble," said Tregellis-West slowly. "An' if you ain't careful, old boy, you'll strike a snag somewhere. Patience is a great virtue—an' we must all be patient."

"Quite so," I agreed; "but I think we'd better switch off the subject. The fellows are getting about the passages again. Really, my dear chums, we must display great caution henceforth."

Sir Montie and Tommy chuckled. I had changed my tone abruptly, and became D'Albert again. Watson opened the window, and we talked on ordinary, safe subjects. And when tea was over we sailed out into the sunny Triangle.

"Going to surprise us with something else before long, D'Albert?" asked De Valerie cheerfully, as we paused at the bottom of the Ancient House steps. "You're hot stuff on cricket."

"It is possible that I may surprise you in some other manner, my dear De Valerie," I replied mildly. "This is a world of uncertainties, you must remember, and many things might happen."

Ralph Leslie Fullwood was just passing, accompanied by Gulliver and Bell. The precious trio of Study A were all attired in smart grey flannels, gorgeous ties, and straw hats.

"That fellow's got too much bally cheek for a new kid," remarked Gulliver, with a sneer. "He's always pushin' his way forward where he ain't wanted. He'll come a cropper before long."

"Oh, rather!" agreed Fullwood. "Don't take any notice of the cad. That's my plan. Simply ignore him."

"I always do," remarked Bell.

"Really, nothing could possibly suit me better," I said, turning. "To be ignored by such cads as yourselves is quite a high honour. I am sure I am most grateful to you for your consideration."

Fullwood and Co. scowled.

"We don't want any cheek," said Fullwood sourly. "One word from you, an' I'll soon put you in your place."

"Go on, do it!" grinned Handforth.

"This chap comes here—a rank idiot and a fool—an' he throws his weight about!" went on Fullwood sneeringly. "For two pins I'd knock him flat! He's a new kid, an' he ought to be squashed. He makes me sick to look at him, by gad! Let's get cut of this atmosphere!"

I still smiled, but I was grim inwardly. Fullwood spoke contemptuously because he thought it was safe to do so. He could fight quite decently, in spite of his "dog-gish" ways, and he thought himself immune from punishment.

"Wait a moment, Fullwood," I said mildly.



"You have said some very rude things about me—"

"Have I?" sneered Fullwood.

"Yes, indeed you have," I said. "And I must really request you to apologise."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Fullwood and Co.

"Dot them in the eye, D'Albert!" advised Handforth, grinning.

"I have no wish to resort to violence," I said quietly. "I only use my fists when force is really necessary. Fullwood has elected to be insulting, and I do not allow that!"

"Oh, you don't allow it?" gasped Fullwood.

"No. I do not!"

"You don't allow me to call you a squirming cad, an' a rank idiot, an' a burbling fool?" grinned Fullwood. "You don't allow me to call you a pushin' outsider? In that case I'll call you a few more things—"

"Really, you had better be careful," I said smoothly.

"What?" shouted Fullwood.

"You had better be careful," I repeated speaking distinctly. "It may as well be mentioned by me that a further insult, Fullwood, will be punished by violence. In brief, I will knock you down!"

"Oh, good!" roared Handforth. "Go it, old son!"

"Better be careful, Fully!" grinned De Valerie. "You don't want to be knocked down in front of this crowd, do you? Besides, it might spoil that nice new suit of yours!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood scowled; that laugh was against him, and he didn't quite like it. He had intended taking me down a peg or two. Instead of that he was finding himself the butt of the crowd's cackles.

"You silly little worm!" he snapped. "If you put one of your filthy hands on me I'll make you sore for a week. Knock me down—eh? Try it on—just try—"

"Better not have a scene!" interrupted De Valerie.

"Why not make a fight of it?" suggested Reginald Pitt. "There's plenty of space behind the gym, and we haven't had a fight with seconds for weeks. A fight! That's the idea!"

"Hear, hear!"

"A fight—a fight!"

Fullwood scowled as he looked round him.

"Rot!" he exclaimed. "I'm not going to fight this infernal freak! Hang him! I wouldn't demean myself by touchin' the cad!"

"Quite right!" said Gulliver. "Let's go away, Fully!"

"That's the idea," agreed Bell.

"Really, you mustn't go yet," I put in. "I have already mentioned, Fullwood, that I required an apology from you. You will please state in clear words that you are sorry for having insulted me."

The crowd grinned, but Fullwood couldn't see anything funny in the situation.

"Go to the deuce!" he snapped.

He was about to turn away, when Handforth seized him and whirled him round.

"Not yet, my son!" he said, grinning.

"Apologise, or be knocked down! Choose! Buck up about it, too!"

Fullwood muttered something under his breath.

"Go it, Fully!" grinned the crowd.

"Confound you!" snarled Fullwood. "I'm not going to waste my strength by hittin' this fool—"

Crash!

"Yaroooooh!" howled Fullwood violently.

My fist, coming out with lightning-like rapidity, caught the cad on the point of the chin. I had warned him, so it was his own fault for not being prepared. He went clean over on his back and lay gasping.

"Knocked flat, by thunder!" roared Handforth. "Oh, first class! Good for you, D'Albert! Get up, Fully, and let him do it again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood scrambled to his feet, looking rather rocky.

"I'll—I'll—I'll—!" He paused and gulped.

"You'll do nothing here," put in De Valerie quickly. "I'm Remore skipper, and I won't allow it. A scrap here would mean detention for the lot of us, and the fight wouldn't be half done before a master interrupted us. You can't get out of it now, Fullwood. You'll have to fight."

"By gad!" said Fullwood thickly. "I will fight, too. I'll give this rat a lesson he'll never forget! Gulliver and Bell will be my seconds!"

I beamed.

"Nothing could be better," I said. "It will give me much pleasure to thrash you, Fullwood. Shall we say this evening, or to-morrow evening, or shall we say now, at once? I am not particular."

"The sooner the better," said Handforth promptly.

"To-morrow evenin'!" snapped Fullwood.

"We shall need to-night for a bit of trainin'. I'll meet D'Albert with the gloves on at eight o'clock to-morrow evenin', behind the gym. Things will be quiet then, an' we shall have plenty of light—the fight will be over in two rounds!"

"That is quite possible," I said smoothly.

Fullwood scowled and strode away with his chums. The crowd melted and broke into groups. A fight was an event particularly a fight with an untried new fellow. The juniors would have been far more interested if they had known the actual truth! And Fullwood would have been in a blue funk, for I had licked him with ease on more than one occasion. It was my intention to lick him again.

"He asked for it, and he's going to get it," I said, as I strolled on to Little Side with my chums. "In a way, I'm glad, because this'll give me an opportunity of gainin' further laurels."

Watson grinned.



"Oh, if they only knew!" he chuckled.

"Shush!" I breathed. "They'll know too soon if you don't be careful!"

And we settled down to cricket practice. The fight arranged for eight o'clock on the following evening was the general topic of conversation that night, and quite a number of fellows believed that I should receive the thrashing of my life.

It was my job to correct this totally wrong impression. And I should do it by battering Ralph Leslie Fullwood until he was counted out.

But I had no idea, at that time, of the startling events which were destined to occur in the meantime.

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## CHAPTER II.

### STARKE'S TRIUMPH!

**W**ALTER STARKE lit a cigarette. "It's queer," he declared slowly—"confoundedly queer. There's no getting away from it, Kenny. You can say what you like, but it's queer!" "I'm hanged if I know what you're talking about," said Kenmore.

The two prefects were sitting in their study in the Sixth-Form passage. It was another tea-time—the following evening, to be exact. Starke had been thoughtful all the time, ever since the commencement of the meal. Not that Kenmore minded, for he had been immersed in a novel.

"It's queer," declared Starke absently.

"That's the fourth time you've said it!" snapped Kenmore. "Can't you think of some other word? And what's queer, anyway?"

"I've been thinking," said the other prefect—"I've been thinking about that new kid in the Remove—D'Albert."

"He's a bit of a freak, perhaps, but there's nothing much the matter with him," said Kenmore. "If you've been thinking about D'Albert all the time, I should advise you to change the subject. Dry up—I want to finish this chapter!"

"Never mind that chapter," said Starke. "When you come to consider all the points, there's something fishy about that new kid."

"Fishy?"

"Exactly," said Starke. "Why is he so tremendously friendly with Watson and Tregellis-West; or, to put it better, why are they so tremendously friendly with him?"

"I expect they like him," said Kenmore.

"That's not it," went on Starke. "There's something deeper about the matter, Kenny. And it's my idea that the new kid is somehow connected with Nipper."

"Nipper?" said Kenmore, staring. "Rot!"

"Well, I'm willing to back my opinion," declared Starke. "Isn't it rather strange that Nipper's never shown a sign since he left? I haven't even heard of him writing a letter. He's vanished—gone completely. And he wasn't the sort of kid to take a squashing without making a fuss."

Starke was also aware that his victim had been innocent, and that was why he was so suspicious at the present time.

"How do you mean—connected with Nipper?" asked Kenmore.

"Well, it's my opinion that D'Albert has been watching me, and it's quite possible that Nipper is hanging about the district somewhere," said Starke. "This new kid may be in communication with him—although I've seen no sign of it. I've watched D'Albert two or three times, but I've never discovered anything."

"Oh, forget all about it!" said Kenmore. "Nipper's gone, so what's the good of talking about the little rotter? I want to go on with this book, so please stop jawing!"

"But if you consider—"

Kenmore growled, got up from the table, and marched out of the study with the novel under his arm; he was not feeling in the mood for a discussion. And Starke was left alone.

He certainly did not guess the actual truth—although he was dangerously near it. And after a while an idea came into his head. He got up, paced the study for a few minutes, and then sat down at the table.

He wrote—or rather scrawled—a few unintelligible words upon a plain sheet of paper. He folded it up, slipped it into an envelope, and then addressed the latter, in a disguised handwriting, to himself.

"That ought to do," he murmured, smiling grimly.

A few minutes later Starke strolled across the Triangle, passed out of the gateway, and made his way down the lane towards the village. Before he actually reached Bellton he saw what he was looking for—a village youngster of about twelve. Any village boy would have done, but this particular young gentleman was the very pick; for he had run many an errand for Starke on previous occasions. He was working in a meadow, just off the road.

"Come here, Newson," called Starke. "I want you for a minute."

The village boy looked up, and hurried towards the gap in the hedge where Starke was standing.

"Evenin', Mr. Starke," said the boy, touching his cap.

"Would you like to earn a shilling?" asked the prefect abruptly. "You can do it in half an hour if you want to."

Newson grinned.

"I wouldn't mind, Mr. Starke," he said. "Do you want me to go somewhere?"

"You see this letter?" said Starke, pulling the envelope from his pocket. "Well, I want you to play a little joke on somebody—I needn't explain it to you. But I want you to take this letter, and to go up to the school with it. Wait behind the wall until you see me make a sign—I shall be on the Ancient House steps. As soon as I raise my hand in the air, bring this letter in to me. Then you can go."

"It seems a queer game, Mr. Starke, but it's



none o' my business," said the village boy. "I don't mind a-doin' of it a bit."

"Come into the Triangle in a hurry," went on Starke. "Pretend that you're breathless, and all that sort of thing. Now, do you know exactly what to do?"

Newson nodded.

"I've got to go to the school an' wait behind the wall, an' watch for you on the steps of the Ancient Ouse," he said. "When you raise your 'and, I've got to rush up to you with this letter."

"That's right," said Starke. "Simple as A B C. You can't make a mistake, young 'un. I'll give you the shilling when you bring the letter. Give me five minutes' start, and then you can come."

And Starke went off with a peculiar smile on his face. He hurried towards the school, and when he entered the Triangle he looked round somewhat anxiously. As it happened, I was standing in the shade of the old elm trees, chatting with Tregellis-West and Jack Grey.

I saw Starke come in, and I saw him glance in my direction; but I took no further notice at the moment. Certainly I did not suspect any trickery; there was no reason why I should.

Starke leaned against the stonework near the Ancient House steps, and appeared to be very interested in a copy of the local paper. He was really keeping his eye on the school wall—and he was abusing himself for not telling Newson to appear sooner.

"I shall lose my chance if he's not quick," muttered Starke.

He feared, of course, that I should move out of the Triangle. But I did not do so, and a minute or two later Starke distinctly saw Newson's head appear above the wall for a moment.

"Good!" muttered the prefect.

He raised his hand as though to ease the sleeve of his coat, and went on reading. Immediately afterwards a breathless figure came running into the Triangle from the roadway.

Jack Grey had just gone off to join Pitt, and Sir Montie and I were alone. We looked at the village-boy with interest.

"He seems to have been in a frightful hurry, dear fellow," murmured Tregellis-West.

Handforth came charging across the Triangle.

"Hi!" he roared. "What the dickens do you think you're doing here, kid?"

Newson paused.

"I want Mr. Starke," he panted. "I've got a note for Mr. Starke—an' it's important."

"What's that?" exclaimed Starke, striding forward. "You've got a note for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Starke."

Newson handed it over, and took his promised shilling.

"You can cut off," said Starke curtly.

The village boy lost no time, and Starke tore the envelope open, removed a sheet of paper, and regarded it closely for some

moments. He gave a distinct start, and looked almost scared.

Then, jamming the note into his pocket, he hurried off.

"That's queer," I exclaimed sharply. "I wouldn't mind betting a dollar that note was from Beckett! He's going to meet Starke in a hurry. Look here, Montie, I'm going to follow——"

"But, dear fellow, pray pause——"

"No time!" I interrupted. "It may be nothing, or it may be something important. My game is to keep my eye on Starke, and I mustn't lose a single opportunity. I don't suppose I shall be long."

And without another word, I made my way to the gates and glanced up and down the road. Walter Starke was just vanishing through a gap in the hedge, and his obvious intention was to penetrate Belton Wood.

"Yes, it looks a bit fishy," I told myself. "And nothing could be better than this; I can follow him with ease through the wood."

I was in a sad state of ignorance at the time; but it is an undoubted fact that I was completely deceived by Starke's little trap. I fell into it with both feet, so to speak.

Not that I blamed myself. There was no cause for suspicion on my part, and I could not possibly guess that Starke's movements were all part of a prearranged plan. I should soon learn the truth, however!

Starke made no attempt to conceal his movements as he walked through the wood—which wasn't very surprising, considering his object. He never once looked back, and I was quite sure that my own activities were unknown to him.

We went through the wood until, at last, I stood upon the edge and watched Starke making across the moor towards another clump of trees. He plunged into them, and I at once raced across the open space.

I reached the cover of the trees, and then paused to listen. And, quite distinctly, I heard somebody talking in a low voice. It was Starke, and I edged my way forward cautiously and carefully.

The voice had ceased, and I fancied I heard a slight movement towards my left. But I could see nothing when I turned.

Then I moved forward again. And at that moment something happened which startled me very considerably. For, without any warning whatever, a crash in the bushes came from behind me, and before I could turn something heavy landed on my back and I was flung to the ground.

"Got you!" exclaimed a triumphant voice.

I was somewhat dazed and bewildered, for my forehead had struck against a root, and my brains were reeling. And before I could twist round my hands were secured behind me. And I saw Starke's flushed face close against my own.

"Didn't think it was a trick, did you?" he exclaimed harshly.



"What—what do you mean?" I panted. "Let me go, Starke——"

"You were following me," interrupted the prefect. "I worked the trick just to see if you would take the bait. Now, you little worm, you've got to tell me why you were shadowing——"

"Really, Starke, you must be dreaming," I managed to say, while I attempted to conceal my dismay and fury. "I was walking through the wood——"

"You were following me," interrupted Starke. "I want to know the truth, D'Albert. Why are you so confoundedly interested in my movements? Out with it! I give you one minute to speak up!"

I hardly knew what to say. I was under a delusion no longer. Starke had trapped me—and by an absurdly simple device, too; it was its very simplicity which had disarmed me. And now I was helpless, for my hands were secured behind my back. Resistance was impossible.

"I can tell you nothing, even if you give me a whole day, Starke," I said, with mild bewilderment. "Why have you done this? Surely, it is an outrageous proceeding on your part?"

Starke laughed fiercely.

"That stuff won't do!" he exclaimed. "You're not so simple as you look—or as you pretend to be. What's your game, D'Albert? And what do you know about Nipper? Speak up, confound you!"

I could tell that Starke was dangerously near to the truth.

"About Nipper?" I repeated blankly. "Really, Starke——"

I paused, for Starke, bending over me, was staring fixedly at my hair. Then, abruptly, he parted the locks and examined my scalp. I did my utmost to prevent him, but was unsuccessful.

"Great Scott!" shouted Starke. "What's the meaning of this? You've got red hair, and yet it's dark chestnut near the roots! Why, you young hound, your hair is dyed!"

I was really alarmed now. My hair, of course, was dyed; for in my new character I had altered my appearance as much as possible. A wig was too risky, and so I had resorted to a wonderful dye of Nelson Lee's own manufacture.

But dyes of any kind only cover the actual hair; when the hair grows it does so with its natural colour; and I had not applied any dye for close on a week. I had not thought it necessary. But I attempted to bluff.

"Really, Starke, you are most absurd," I panted. "My hair is dyed? How truly ridiculous! If you do not release me——"

"And these spectacles!" rapped out Starke tensely. "You don't need them—they're a fake. When you were playing cricket the other day you left your specs in the pavilion!"

Starke placed his face quite close to mine, and examined me with staring, eager eyes. Then the very worst happened. His suspicions had been enormously increased by the

discovery that my hair was not naturally auburn.

"Good heavens!" shouted Starke blankly.

"I must really request you——"

"You're Nipper!" roared Starke. "I can see it as clearly as daylight now—you're Nipper! I can understand why you follow me—I can understand why you got into Study C——"

"Please do not be so insane!" I exclaimed. "You must be mad, Starke. What wildness causes you to assume that I am Nipper?"

Starke laughed with triumph and excitement.

"Bluffing won't serve you!" he exclaimed, calming down a lot. "You're Nipper—so don't attempt to deny it. I ought to have guessed it before. Being associated with Lee, you naturally know all about disguises, and I must say that you've done well this time. But I've bowled you out!"

I knew that further bluster was useless.

"Well, let me get up," I said calmly. "You've spotted me, Starke, so we may as well have a little chat. I'm bowled out—not that it matters much. You can't do me any harm."

Starke made no attempt to release me. He seemed rather dazed, and was far more bewildered than I was. The sudden revelation that I was Nipper came to him as a tremendous shock.

And this was not surprising, for Starke had been congratulating himself that I was safely out of the way, that I had been kicked out of St. Frank's for good. And now he had made the discovery that I was still at the school. It was only natural that he should be bowled over.

But, quite suddenly, he recovered himself, and when he looked down at me his eyes were glittering with evil triumph.

"I can't do you any harm, eh?" he exclaimed harshly. "We'll see about that, you infernal young swindler! There'll be a terrific row about this, and you'll be kicked out again—neck and crop!"

"Then we shall both go together," I said calmly—"as far as the station, at all events. That will be splendid, Starke!"

"Do you think I'm afraid of you?" exclaimed Starke, with a laugh. "You can't hurt me, you young fool! I'm absolutely safe—and I mean to expose you to the Head and everybody else as soon as I get back to St. Frank's!"

"What's the good of doing that?" I asked. "I'm not Nipper now. I'm a new boy, and the Head won't believe you——"

"Oh, yes, he will!" interjected Starke. "You won't have a leg to stand on. For the second time you'll be hounded out of the school. The cheek of the thing is staggering. You were expelled for brutally assaulting me, and now you'll be booted out again!"

I smiled.

"You overlook one point, Starke," I said. "When I was expelled I wasn't in a position to prove that you were a foul liar—but I can



prove it now. I was sacked for assaulting you, but I know more now."

"What do you mean?" asked Starke, startled.

"I haven't been idle since my return," I replied. "And if you say a word to the Head, I'll explain that there was no assault, but that you were knocked down by a motor-car!"

Starke stared at me with glaring eyes.

"When I've proved that," I went on, "the Head will want to know why you laid the blame on to me. You'll be in a corner, Starke, but you won't be there for long. It'll mean the push for you!"

Starke gave a gulp, and then laughed harshly.

"I'll admit that you scared me for a minute," he said. "But your word, unsupported, is of no value at all. You've got no proof—no evidence. You can't harm me in the least. Everything you say will be denied, and I absolutely defy you to produce a shred of evidence. You're helpless, but you might not be helpless in a week or two's time. So I'm going to get rid of you at once!"

"Just as you like," I said carelessly. "Tell the Head as soon as you choose, Starke. I'm prepared for it!"

But, although I spoke confidently, I felt utter dismay within me. For I knew that Starke was right—I knew that I was absolutely helpless. My exposure had come too early; I was not prepared to state my case yet.

The Head, of course, would give me a hearing; but I could do no more than I had done before. I could bring accusations against Starke; I could compel Beckett to give his evidence.

But what would be the use? Starke would maintain his original story, and Beckett would naturally deny having driven the motor-car—for his own sake. I could not produce a mite of positive proof, and Starke would be as secure as ever. Exposure at this juncture would be disastrous—for me.

And Starke knew it as well as I did. He knew that I could do nothing. He knew that he held me in the hollow of his hand. In short, the game was up, and I knew well enough that Starke would give the game away. Being confident of his own safety, he would take an evil delight in seeing me exposed and kicked out.

"You'd better make the most of your time," exclaimed the prefect harshly. "You've only got an hour or two longer, and then you'll take your departure—for good. Understand?"

"Perfectly," I said quietly. "But, even if you succeed this time, Starke, your success won't be permanent. I'm not beaten by any means."

But I felt in my heart that I was. Cast out again, I could return to the neighbourhood, of course, but Starke would be expecting that, and he would take care to safe-

guard himself. Exposure now would mean failure—utter and complete.

My career as Algernon Clarence D'Albert was at an end!

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE ONLY WAY OUT.

**T**HE blow had fallen!

I was bowled out; within an hour I should be exposed as an impostor to Dr. Stafford—to the whole school.

And, instead of being respected and liked, I should be hissed and booed and hounded from the school. The whole miserable performance would be gone through again. I felt that I could not stand a second ordeal of that nature.

I had looked forward to the joyful prospect of clearing my name; of surprising the fellows by revealing myself in my true character. Now that exposure would come without any word from me.

And it would find me unprepared!

Instead of establishing my innocence, I should be in a worse plight than before. As I made my way back towards St. Frank's I scarcely knew what to think or what to do. A wild idea entered my head, and for a moment I almost entertained it.

I would flee!

I would clear off without even returning to the school. But this idea only remained for a few seconds. I wanted to see Watson and Tregellis-West before I went; I wanted to fight for my good name; and, more than anything else, I wanted to tell the Head that Lord Dorrimore was not fully responsible for my presence at St. Frank's, although Dorrie had introduced me.

I had managed to get away from Starke easily. It was his intention, I believe, to lead me back to St. Frank's like a prisoner. But I had dodged away as soon as I gained my feet, and Starke had not thought it worth while to run in chase. He only laughed as I went off—wrenching my wrists free of the binding handkerchief.

Starke knew that I was done. Even if I ran away his object would be achieved. He knew very well that I should be gone from St. Frank's before the morning—whatever happened.

The fact that Starke had discovered my secret was appalling in its consequences. The cheerful prospect which had stretched before me had changed its aspect. All was dark and gloomy.

And when I emerged from the wood, almost opposite the school gates, the evening sunlight was shining down more gloriously than ever. The sky was deep blue, and everything was looking perfect.

I could hardly realise that I should be packed off once more. Starke had not reached the school yet, of course; he was a considerable distance behind, for I had hurried through the wood.

In the Triangle I met Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West.



"Oh, so there you are!" said Watson. "Montie's been telling me that you followed Starke—"

"Pray be careful, old boy," murmured Sir Montie.

"It doesn't matter—he can shout my name from the house-tops if he wants to," I interrupted grimly. "But come along to Study C. I've got something to tell you fellows."

"What's the matter with you?" asked Watson curiously.

"Come indoors!"

I marched into the Ancient House, and we all entered Study C together. Then I closed the door securely and locked it.

"It's all up," I said shortly.

"Eh?"

"Starke planned a little trap for me—and I fell into it," I went on. "I've only got myself to blame, naturally, but it's rotten—"

"What's the ass talking about?" demanded Watson.

"Begad! Don't ask me, dear fellow," said Sir Montie. "I don't quite understand what has happened—"

"I've been trapped, I tell you," I interrupted. "Starke pounced upon me after I had followed him to the edge of the moor—and he discovered the secret!"

Tommy and Sir Montie stared at me with horror.

"Starke—knows?" gasped Watson.

"Yes."

"That you're Nipper?"

"He knows everything," I replied quietly.

"Begad! This is frightful!" exclaimed Sir Montie, in great distress. "It is not only frightful, but simply appalling. I really think that you must be attemptin' to pull our legs."

"I'm not," I said. "Listen for a minute."

And, without wasting words, I told them exactly what had occurred. They listened in a dazed condition—thunderstruck.

"It's awful—terrible!" said Watson, with a gulp. "Starke will tell the Head as soon as he comes in!"

"And the Head will call the school together, and I shall be publicly exposed and sacked," I said calmly. "Quite a pleasant prospect, isn't it? I suppose it serves me right—for being over-confident."

Tregellis-West was greatly agitated.

"But, dear old boy, I can't believe it—I can't, really!" he declared. "You are so calm about it—"

"What's the good of getting into a panic?" I asked. "The damage is done, and all I can do now is to wait for the blow to fall. I'm not going to sit down and wail, anyhow."

"But Starke won't dare to say anything," exclaimed Watson. "You know too much about him, Nipper. He won't breathe a word, for his own sake. If he does you'll be able to prove your innocence."

"Begad! There's somethin' in that," said Sir Montie. "This exposure may be a blessing in disguise, you know. It will bring matters

to a head quickly, an' you'll be able to re-assume your own identity."

I shook my head.

"Don't get those ideas into your heads," I said. "Starke has nothing to fear. We can't prove a thing. The position, to all intents and purposes, is exactly the same as it was the day after I was sacked."

"But you know heaps!" said Watson quickly.

"Very likely; but it's not what a fellow knows that counts, it's what he can prove," I replied. "In just the same way, the police often know positively that a man is a criminal; but they can't touch him until they've got proof. Whatever I say will be scoffed at. I shall simply be regarded as a liar; I can't expect the Head to take my bare word."

My chums were fairly dancing with anxiety.

"You'll be flogged and sacked!" said Watson huskily. "It'll be just the same as it was—all over again—only worse!"

"That's my opinion," I agreed.

"You'll be ragged by the fellows," went on Watson.

"Yes, I expect to be!"

"You'll be half-slaughtered——"

"Probably!"

"And you stand there as cool as ice!" roared Watson. "Don't you realise, you ailly ass, that it's not worth while? You mustn't stop here; you'll have to clear out at once!"

"Tommy's quite right, Nipper old boy," said Sir Montie. "I don't like the idea of scootin'—but there's nothin' to be gained by waitin' for the blow to fall. You must flee!"

I sat down in the armchair.

"Certainly," I replied—"like this!"

Watson and Tregellis-West stood over me anxiously.

"Don't act the fool, Nipper!" panted Tommy. "It's all rot to take up that attitude. You don't want a flogging, I suppose?"

"I'm not longing for one," I replied.

"You don't want to be sacked?"

"Well, no!"

"Then what's the idea of sticking here?" demanded Tommy hotly. "You will be sacked—and you will be flogged—and ragged into the bargain. Clear, you ass—clear while you've got the chance!"

"Dear fellow, please take our advice," urged Sir Montie.

"It's no good," I said firmly. "I'm not going!"

"But look here——"

"Begad! Pray listen——"

"I'm not going!" I repeated. "I'll stay here and face it out. I'm not going to have all the chaps saying that I'm a funk. My dear asses, don't look so frightened—this disaster hasn't killed me. I shall survive—and I shall win in the end, too. Set-backs only tend to make a fellow more determined."

Tregellis-West eyed me admiringly.

"You're amazin', old boy—you are, really!"



he declared. "You sit there an' you talk about this frightful affair as though it were just nothin'. How do you manage it?"

"I expect I'm feeling pretty bad," I said grimly. "I don't show it—that's all. Now, be good chaps and keep a look-out for Starke. It'll be rather interesting to see what he does when he comes in."

"Interesting?" gasped Watson. "You—you ass!"

"Thanks!"

"You fatheaded duffer!" roared Watson. "You'll make me wild in a minute!"

"How do you look when you're wild?" I asked politely. "I suppose you're quite calm now?"

Watson nearly choked.

"You—you fathead!" he stuttered. "If you don't agree to bunk at once, Montie and I will chuck you out on your neck!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "Shall we?"

"Yes!" shouted Watson.

"That would be a fine way of making the thing public, wouldn't it?" I asked. "No, old sons, I'm firm. Starke has found out the truth, and that's all there is about it. It's rotten, of course, and I'm jolly wild with myself. But grumbling won't make any difference, and all I can do is to sit tight and wait for the chopper to come down. I don't suppose I shall have to wait long."

"But—but if you go you won't be able to get back again!" exclaimed Tommy Watson miserably. "After you're sacked for the second time you can't work this wheeze again."

"No," I replied. "The Head will be on the alert in future. It'll be the finish, my sons—so far as St. Frank's is concerned. Just when I was getting on so well, too. It's a hard life!"

"Nipper old boy, you're simply a wonder," said Sir Montie. "You're feelin' like blubbin', begad! I know you are, an' you can't deny it. Yet you sit here as calm as anythin', waitin' for the crash."

"It's all I can do," I replied quietly.

Watson walked to the window, glanced outside, paced up and down several times, and then came to a halt in front of the mantelpiece. He looked at the clock, compared it with his watch, and then turned to me with sparkling eyes.

"There's a train from Bellton in twenty minutes!" he exclaimed eagerly. "We can just catch it if we buck up. We can all ride down on bikes, and Montie and I will see you off. We'll bring your jigger back——"

"My dear Tommy, it's no good!" I interrupted. "I'm not going to run away. I'm determined on that point."

"Dear fellow, I wish you would reconsider your decision—I do, really," said Sir Montie earnestly. "Won't you go just to please Tommy and me? We're your chums, an' we don't want to see you bein' ragged like you were before."

"Be a sport, Nipper," said Watson quickly. "Don't keep up this attitude of bravado—

that's all it is. Clear out before the storm breaks, and Montie and I will be almost happy."

"But look here," I began. "All the fellows will say——"

"What the dickens does it matter what all the fellows say?" interrupted Watson. "A lot of 'em have said rotten things already, and words don't hurt a chap. I'm thinking of what'll happen when the truth gets out. They'll be after you like a lot of wild beasts—you know how excited they get!"

"So we're urgin' you to go," said Sir Montie.

"Just to please us—your old pals," put in Watson.

"Begad! You won't refuse, old boy?"

"You can't!" said Tommy.

I looked at them squarely. My determination was already weakening. They were imploring me almost on their knees—and they were my own chums. If they wanted me to go, perhaps it was my duty to respect their wishes.

"I'd rather face it out," I said quietly.

"Of course you would—we both know that," said Watson. "But that's not the point. You've got to do the wisest thing under the circumstances. And the only way is for you to bolt—scoot at once!"

"Clear right away, begad!"

"You can write to us to-morrow," went on Watson. "I'll tell you what," he added eagerly. "Why not go just to Helmford, and put up there—in an hotel? You'll be comparatively near then——"

"I was thinking of staying in Bannington," I put in—"but not until after the blow had fallen. I don't want to crawl away like a sneak!"

"But you've got to—you've got to!" exclaimed Tommy shrilly. "If only to please us, Nipper. We're begging of you to go at once, so as to avoid the terrible fuss. We're begging of you!"

"On our knees, begad!" said Sir Montie, dropping down.

I jumped up.

"Oh, don't rot!" I said gruffly. "I don't want you to beg of me, you asses! But if you particularly want me to go——"

"We do!"

"Then I'll take that train," I said, coming to a decision, and speaking briskly. "We've just got time to get down. Perhaps it's best, after all—and we may be too late. Starke's had plenty of time to get back——"

"My hat!" gasped Watson. "Let's buzz!"

We all hurried out, and my feelings are hard to describe. Only a few weeks earlier I had been compelled to leave the old school in disgrace. And now the whole miserable business had cropped up again.

It seemed that my troubles were never-ending.

But I kept a bold front, and when I passed Handforth and some other juniors in the lobby they had no suspicion of my state of



mand. Indeed, my chums looked far more agitated than I did.

We managed to get our bicycles out, and then we started off for the village.

"I thought about going on the jigger," I said. "But perhaps I'd better not. I shouldn't know what to do with it in Barnington, or Helmsford—and I should be noticed. I'd better go by train."

"Yes, rather," agreed Watson.

We shot through the village, and as we approached the station we noticed that the signal was already down. The train, in fact, was in sight. I rushed into the booking-office and obtained my ticket.

By that time Montie and Tommy had come in, and we all passed on to the platform together. The train was just drawing to a standstill. I opened the door of an empty compartment and jumped in.

"Good-bye, my sons!" I said, trying to speak cheerfully. "I didn't want this to happen; but we can't control these things. It's just a piece of rotten luck."

Watson took my hand, and pressed it hard.

"It's a shame—a beastly, crying shame!" he declared passionately. "Oh, it's not fair, Nipper! You've done absolutely nothing, and you've got to go through all this! It's a rotten shame!"

"Well, never mind," I said softly. "It won't last long."

"That's what you said before, dear old boy!" exclaimed Sir Montie sadly, shaking his head. "I'm afraid things are simply frightful this time. But you're an amazing optimist, and I won't say a word to discourage you."

"That's the way!" I said. "And we'll meet on Saturday afternoon."

"Can we manage it?" asked Tommy eagerly.

"Easily," I replied. "I'll drop you a line and arrange a meeting-place. I'm not going back to London this time—Hullo! She's starting. Well, so long, my sons!"

They muttered their good byes, and I don't think I have ever seen a more miserable-looking pair than Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West as they stood on the platform watching the train go out.

Well, the die was cast, and I had fled before Walter Starke exposed me in my true colours. But had I acted wisely?

## CHAPTER IV.

### RATHER UNEXPECTED!

**B**Y thunder! I've got the little brat properly pickled this time!"

Starke murmured those words to himself with much exultation as he made his way through Beilton Wood. He had been in no hurry, for he knew well enough that my fate was sealed.

He had walked slowly, in fact, in order to think out the thing in all its details. And he had come to a satisfactory decision.

"Nipper will tell his yarn, of course," Starke murmured. "But he won't be able to support it. Beckett will deny everything—I've arranged all that long ago. Beckett won't say a word. And I shall have the pleasure of getting Nipper kicked out for the second time."

Starke gloated over his triumph.

He was very fond of the limelight, and he pictured the sensation which would be caused when he revealed the startling truth to the whole school. He promised himself an exceedingly enjoyable evening.

His triumph would be complete and absolute.

There was no danger for himself. Starke was quite certain that I was the only person who knew the actual truth—and my word was nothing. I had no outside witnesses; Tregellis-West and Watson would not be accepted at all. In any case, they knew nothing.

"Yes, I've got him on toast," Starke told himself. "I'm as safe as houses, and this time we'll really be rid of the young dog! Even if he hangs about the district, he'll be as helpless as a gatepost."

For Starke was determined to have no more meetings with Beckett. He was quite safe as matters now stood, and the whole affair could die. All prospects of the actual truth coming out were extremely slim.

Starke's face was flushed with malicious joy and satisfaction as he strode through the wood. He took no notice of the beauties around him; his thoughts were too busy.

The sunlight streamed through the trees, and small clearings here and there were dazzling in their brilliance. The green verdure, the gay colours of the numerous wild flowers—all were lost upon Starke.

As he walked through the shady undergrowth he knew that he was going nearer and nearer to his biggest triumph. The first affair had been splendid, but this totally eclipsed it.

For not only should I be sent away in disgrace, but the school would be provided with a huge sensation beforehand, and Starke would get the honour of having been the first to expose the fraud.

So engrossed was Starke that he did not even notice the approach of a stranger. The Sixth-Former knew nothing whatever of the man's presence until he saw a black shadow moving close beside him as he crossed a sunlit patch. It wasn't his own shadow, and Starke looked round sharply.

A man was keeping pace with him.

Starke gave a start. The stranger's movements had been so noiseless that it was almost uncanny. The man was curious in appearance, too. A tall, slim individual in a black mackintosh which reached almost to his ankles. A wide-brimmed hat was set upon his head, and his face was like a mask.

There was no expression upon it. A neatly trimmed beard, dark in colour, adorned his chin, and a waxed moustache gave him a



decidedly foreign appearance. His black eyebrows were bushy.

"A—a nice evening," said Starke. "I—I didn't know you were here——"

"But I am here," said the stranger, in a deep, unemotional voice. "Your name is Starke, and you are a member of the Sixth Form at St. Frank's College. I wish to speak to you, Walter Starke!"

The prefect stared at the man. His voice was almost a drone, but, somehow, there was a grim note in it which Starke did not miss. And the man's face remained almost immobile.

His keen eyes were fixed upon Starke so intently and so steadily, that the prefect was unable to maintain his gaze. He dropped his eyes quickly.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," he growled. "I don't think I know your name, do I?"

"My name is of no concern," said the man. "You may call me Jones, if you wish. Not so very long ago you employed a somewhat crude device in order to entrap a boy named Nipper. You did your work rather smartly, and Nipper was deceived, which, in itself, is remarkable."

"I don't know what you mean," said Starke nervously.

In some vague way, Jones—as he preferred to call himself—instilled into Starke a feeling which almost amounted to fear. Starke couldn't understand why, and he tried in vain to shake the feeling off.

"Nipper is at present masquerading in the name of Algernon Clarence D'Albert," went on the stranger evenly. "Very good. Nipper must remain secure. His real identity must not be revealed."

Starke laughed harshly.

"Is that so?" he sneered. "It may interest you to know, Mr. Jones, that I intend to expose the young scoundrel within an hour."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said the stranger grimly.

"Oh!" shouted Starke. "And who'll stop me?"

"I will!"

Starke laughed again.

"Perhaps you'll tell me how?" he sneered.

"I forbid you to speak—simply that!" exclaimed the stranger. "When you leave me you will keep your tongue still."

"You can give your orders to somebody else," snarled Starke, feeling unaccountably nervous. "Mind your own confounded business—hang you! This affair is none of your concern."

And Starke strode on, but only for a couple of paces.

For a hand was placed upon his shoulder, and the fingers which pressed into his flesh were as hard as steel. Starke winced and uttered a gasp as he was brought to a halt.

"Let me go, confound you!" he shouted hoarsely.

"Our conversation is only just commenced," said Mr. Jones. "There is really no hurry, Starke. You must listen to me

carefully, and you must pay heed to my words. Do you understand?"

"I understand that you're an interfering busybody!" shouted Starke.

"It is my business to interfere—sometimes," said the stranger smoothly. "In this instance I shall interfere to advantage. You are proposing to undertake a very dangerous step——"

"Dangerous!" interrupted Starke.

"Precisely!"

"Who'll be in danger?"

"You will!"

Starke stared angrily at the immobile Mr. Jones.

"I shall be in danger!" he ejaculated.

"You don't know what you're talking about, and you had better go away before I—I——"

Starke's voice trailed away. The man was looking at him intently, and all the prefect's bluster died away. He felt as he imagined a Second-Form lad must feel when in the grip of a senior bully.

"It will be a dangerous step—for you," continued Mr. Jones. "I intend to give you orders——"

"Orders?" gasped Starke.

"Exactly!" said the stranger. "You are to go to the school, and you are to say nothing of what has taken place this evening. When you meet Nipper—every time you meet Nipper—you are to recognise him as D'Albert. You are to forget that he is anybody else. And not a single word must pass your lips regarding this secret. These, I repeat, are my orders."

Starke shook himself.

"You can go to the deuce!" he shouted violently. "I don't take orders from anybody!"

"That is rather interesting," said the stranger, maintaining his absolute calm. "I will now explain to you why it is necessary that you should obey me. I happen to be in possession of the knowledge that you caused Nipper's expulsion in the first instance by a cowardly, dastardly lie. You informed your Headmaster that Nipper struck you down——"

"And so he did!" panted Starke.

"You were struck down by a motor-car," continued Mr. Jones relentlessly. "You were struck down by a car driven by a fellow named Joseph Beckett. You have arranged with that man to keep the thing quiet, and it may interest you to know that Beckett has said nothing. He has kept his compact. I obtain my knowledge by other methods."

"Beckett has been talking!" snarled Starke savagely.

"You make the mistake of placing Beckett in the same category as yourself," said Mr. Jones smoothly. "You are an unprincipled young scoundrel, but Beckett is an honest, hard-working man. He was compelled to agree to your arrangement, because he fears that he may lose his situation. But this is all by the way, Starke. I merely wish to tell you that I am aware of the whole truth.



Not only that, but I am in a position to expose you in your true colours."

"You can't!" gasped Starke. "You can't do anything! The Head wouldn't believe you, anyway!"

"That is beside the point," said the stranger grimly. "If I so decree, you will not only be expelled from the school, but you will probably find yourself in danger of arrest!"

"A-a-a-arrest!" stuttered Starke faintly.

"Precisely," said Mr. Jones. "That is all I need say to you. I do not guarantee that you will be safe for one day, but you will not be safe for one hour if you breathe a single word regarding the boy D'Albert. Take heed of my words, and let them sink deeply into your mind!"

The stranger stepped aside and vanished amidst the trees, leaving Starke badly shaken and nervous. He was, in fact, half scared out of his wits. He had been brought up with a nasty jar.

In a dazed kind of way he looked round. The stranger had gone. There was no sign of him, no sound of his footfalls. He had vanished into the wood as mysteriously as he had appeared.

The whole affair was somewhat uncanny, and Starke shivered.

He wondered if the meeting had really taken place. It seemed wildly fantastic; almost like a nightmare.

And fear suddenly took possession of Starke. He ran forward and increased his speed as his fear grew. Through the gloomy portions of the wood he was in a state bordering upon panic.

And he did not pause until he reached the lane near the school. The sight of some juniors near the gates brought him to himself, and he came to a halt, panting heavily.

But Starke knew, even at that moment, that he was beaten. He dare not say a word. The fear of the mysterious stranger was upon him. If he told of the secret which was in his possession he would expose himself. So, in fear of his own safety, Starke was unable to lift a finger.

He told himself again and again that the stranger had bluffed. But this had no effect. The man's appalling grimness had taken right hold of Starke, and he would not even share his secret with Kenmore, his study-mate.

He had managed to pull himself together when he entered the Triangle, and he whistled in a careless way as he walked across to the Ancient House.

Tregellis-West and Watson were waiting there, watching for Starke's arrival. They had wondered why he had been so long in coming. And now they were rather surprised by Starke's expression. It was not one of gloating triumph, as they had imagined it would be.

"Now for the bust-up!" murmured Watson. "The cad will go straight to the Head's study—you see!"

"We'd better watch, dear fellow," said Tregellis-West.

The pair were in a state of utter misery, but they had something to do at last. They went along the Sixth-Form passage boldly, and were just passing Starke's study, when the door opened and Starke himself appeared.

"Well?" he snapped. "What do you kids want here?"

"Oh, nothing!" gasped Watson.

"Then I can soon satisfy you!" growled Starke. "Clear off!"

Montie and Tommy went down the passage, and Starke, to their surprise, followed them. To their further surprise, he passed out into the Triangle and made his way on to the playing fields.

And there, on Big Side, he stood watching the First Eleven at cricket practice. It was really extraordinary, for Starke usually took no interest in cricket.

"It's amazin', dear boy," said Tregellis-West, sorely troubled. "Why hasn't Starke gone to the Head? Why isn't he revealin' the truth?"

"Don't ask me!" said Watson.

"Perhaps the Head isn't in."

"He was looking out of his window five minutes ago."

"Begad! Is that so?" said Tregellis-West. "I can't think of any reason why Starke should delay. An' did you notice his expression, Tommy?"

"Of course I did! He looked as though he'd had a row with somebody, and got the worst of it," said Watson. "I thought he'd be grinning all over his beastly face. It's a mystery."

It was, and the pair did not know what to make of it.

Starke remained on Big Side until half-past seven. Then he strolled away and sauntered in the Triangle for some little time. Watson could not contain his patience any longer, he wanted the suspense to end.

"Look here, Montie," he said, "I'm going to ask Starke if he knows where D'Albert is."

"What's the good of that, dear fellow?"

"Why, if he means to blurt out the truth, he'll say something to me," said Watson shrewdly. "He couldn't resist it, I know Starke. Anyhow, I'm going to try it on. You wait here."

Watson marched across and came to a halt in front of the prefect.

"I say, Starke," he said boldly.

"Well? What is it?"

"Do you know where D'Albert is?" asked Watson.

Starke seemed to swallow hard, and he shook his head.

"No, I don't know where D'Albert is!" he snapped. "What's more, I don't care where D'Albert is, and D'Albert can drown himself if he likes! Don't come to me with your silly questions."

And Starke strode away, leaving Watson almost speechless.

He rushed back to Sir Montie after a moment or two, and his face was flushed and he was greatly excited.





1. "Good Heavens! You're Nipper!" roared Starke.

2. "I forbid you to reveal the identity of Nipper," said the stranger.



"Did—did you hear?" he panted.

"Dear old boy, I did hear," said Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "It was amazin'—it was, really!"

"He said that he didn't care where D'Albert was!"

"An' that D'Albert could drown himself if he wanted to, begad!" exclaimed Montie, in a mild voice.

"It's staggering!"

"In fact, old boy, Starke doesn't mean to say anythin'!"

"Perhaps he doesn't know anything—he didn't seem like it!" panted Watson. "I'm blessed if I know what to think, Montie. Nipper wouldn't pull our legs on a subject of this kind."

"Hardly," agreed Tregellis-West. "But we were right, after all."

"What do you mean—right?"

"We suggested that Starke wouldn't dare to say anythin', but Nipper scoffed at the idea," said Montie. "Starke must have thought better of it, begad! An' now the fat's in the fire!"

"I should think it is!" groaned Watson miserably. "There's no danger at all, and Nipper's bunked! He's not going to be exposed, and yet he's bolted away from St. Frank's!"

"Owin' to our urgin'!" said Tregellis-West, shaking his head. "This is what comes of our buttin'in, dear boy. We ought to have left it to the better judgment of Nipper, you know. We've made a shockin' mess of the affair, we have, really. I'm feelin' frightfully small!"

Handforth and Co. came bustling along.

"Hi, you chaps!" called out Handforth briskly.

"Oh, don't worry now, Handy——"

"You ass!" shouted Handforth. "I want to know where the giddy champion is."

Tommy Watson started.

"The—the champion!" he gasped.

"The mighty D'Albert," grinned Handforth. "He's going to smash Fullwood into the middle of next week, or July, or August, isn't he? The fight promises to be the best show of the term!"

"Oh, begad!" said Sir Montie blankly.

"What's the matter, you dummy?" demanded Handforth. "D'Albert hasn't funk'd it, has he? Fullwood's a regular outsider, but he can use his fists. It's as much as I can do to whack him in a proper fight, so D'Albert won't stand a dog's chance. I'll be rather interesting to see him whacked."

"Or to see him whack Fullwood," put in McClure. "If I was a betting chap, I'd lay my money on D'Albert."

Handforth snorted, and he and his chums walked off, leaving Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West staring at one another with expressions of dismay and concern. Watson glanced at the clock.

"Ten to eight!" he exclaimed huskily.

"Ten to eight, and the fight's due to come on at eight o'clock! Oh, my only hat! I'd forgotten all about it!"

"So had I, dear old fellow," said Sir

Montie. "An' Nipper overlooked the fight, I'm sure. This other business put it out of our minds. An' now Fullwood will wait in vain!"

"The chaps will think that D'Albert funk'd it!" exclaimed Watson. "Things are getting worse and worse! We can't explain anything, we can't say a word! If we do we shall give the game away!"

"It's a frightfully awkward position," said Montie, shaking his noble head. "If we're questioned we can't tell whoppers, an' we shall have to give evasive answers. Begad! I can see a terrible amount of trouble ahead!"

And the anxious pair gazed at one another blankly.

## CHAPTER V.

### SECOND THOUGHTS.

**T**HE train rattled along towards Bannington noisily.

It was only an old "local," and it was nearly empty. I sat in my empty compartment, gazing unseeingly out of the window. Barely five minutes had elapsed since I had parted from my chums.

And for the first time I was thinking clearly.

I had an opportunity of regarding my position in its true perspective. And my thoughts and feelings were by no means comfortable.

I had bolted!

Not of my own free will, but in order to please my chums. This didn't make any difference, however; the solid fact remained that I had cleared out of St. Frank's before the blow fell.

And it came to me, with stunning force, that I had blundered. I ought to have remained firm; I ought to have disregarded the entreaties of Tommy and Montie. For I knew that the other fellows would regard my action as the very essence of cowardice.

What a humiliating exit!

My previous departure had been bad enough. I had been hustled down to the station by a crowd of hostile juniors. But this was even worse, for I had not waited, I had bolted.

I didn't care what the cads and rotters thought. But what of fellows like De Valerie and Burton and Somerton and Pitt? What would they think? How would they look upon my action?

The question needed no thought.

The decent fellows would condemn me—they would set me down as a funk and a coward. They had expressed their belief in my innocence often enough; they had declared themselves to be my supporters.

And yet when this exposure came I had not dared to face it.

What would it look like? Pitt and the rest would naturally assume that I was guilty, after all. In the hurry and excitement—and in the presence of my chums—I had not thought of these points.



But now they all came to me, and I knew full well that I had blundered. What should I do? Stick to my decision and go on to Helmford, or turn back? I hardly knew which way to decide.

It was the good opinion of the decent chaps that I wanted to keep. Such fellows as Gulliver and Fullwood didn't matter—

Fullwood!

I gave a jump in my seat, and stared blankly at my reflection in the mirror which adorned the opposite side of the compartment. Another thought had struck me—a thought which gave me a real start.

I had arranged to fight Fullwood at eight o'clock!

I grabbed my watch and consulted it. The time was only just half-past seven. But I couldn't get back to St. Frank's before eight—at least, not without severe efforts. And if I exhausted myself by tearing back by road, I shouldn't be much use in a scrap.

For, with that thought about Fullwood, I decided to return to St. Frank's—no matter what came of it. If I was collared and taken to the Head as soon as I arrived—well, that wouldn't be my fault. Fullwood would never be able to say that I had funked the fight.

And nobody would know that I had started off with the intention of making a bolt for it. Even if some of the fellows began to suspect it, my reappearance would put an end to all such suspicions.

Although I was sure that terrible trouble was waiting for me at St. Frank's, I felt almost contented after I had come to that decision. To run away was awful; to face a thing boldly was the right thing to do.

The train seemed to crawl after that, and I said a few very uncomplimentary things about it—not that this made it go any faster! However, it rattled into Bannington Station at last. I jumped out long before it had stopped, and raced like mad for the exit.

There was no cycle shop near the station, but there was one in the town—several, in fact. My only fear was that they would be closed. The first shop was closed—naturally! Shops always are closed when you particularly want them to be open!

I mentally resolved that I would never spend another farthing in that particular shop. And I came to the same conclusion with regard to the second establishment; for this, too, had closed its doors.

"They're mad!" I muttered fiercely. "Only a quarter to eight, and they close up! They don't deserve to do any business!"

I hastened along to the next cycle-shop—the only remaining one where it was possible to take out a machine on hire. And it was a considerable distance down the High Street.

I ran along, hot and breathless, in the dusty road. But I gave a little gasp of relief when I saw that the place was open. I charged in, and quickly asked if I could hire a bicycle until the morrow.

"I dare say I've got one out in the yard, sir," said the owner leisurely. "If you'll just wait while I finish this repair—"

"But I'm in a hurry!" I broke in quickly. "You look it, too," said the man. "All right—I'll find one for you."

He left me waiting in the shop, and I began to think that he was engaged in the task of manufacturing a machine. But after five full minutes he appeared at the back of the shop, wheeling an ancient mount.

"There you are, sir!" he said. "I had to lower the saddle and adjust the back brake—but she's all right now. You're from St. Frank's, ain't you? I shall require a small deposit—"

"Here's a quid!" I said promptly. "Thanks!"

And I jumped on to the machine almost before I was out of the shop. The time was now just upon eight, and I knew that I should be late for the fight. But that would be better than missing it altogether.

I rode hard, for I was in splendid condition, and knew that I could beat Fullwood with ease. But I was not destined to make the run to St. Frank's without an interruption.

For I was just entering upon the last lap, as it were, when I caught sight of a figure crossing a meadow from the direction of Bell-ton Wood. The road was quiet, and nobody was within sight except this one man, who was a curious-looking individual in a long black mackintosh and a wide hat. He saw me at about the same time as I spotted him.

And I should have taken no further notice, had he not acted in a curious way.

For he at once commenced to wave his arms wildly.

"Stop!" he shouted. "I want to speak to you, boy!"

"Sorry!" I yelled. "I'm in a hurry!"

He waved his arms more than ever.

"D'Albert! You must stop!" he shouted. "I have something of the utmost importance to say to you—something which affects you critically!"

I was astonished at his words. He knew my name, and he spoke in such an urgent tone that I instinctively ceased pedalling. A minute or two would make no difference now, anyhow.

And I was curious. I came to a halt, and propped my bicycle against the bank. The stranger came up, passed through a gap, and halted before me. He was the same man, of course, who had accosted Starke.

He must have seen me by chance, and had seized the opportunity to have a word with me. His appearance at close quarters was even more unusual than I had thought. But there was something about his eyes which caught my attention, and held it. They did not exactly twinkle, but it was very near to it.

And, although the man was an absolute stranger to me, those eyes reminded me vaguely of somebody else. Suddenly I remembered. They reminded me of the man who had driven Mr. Millford's car on one occasion—the man I had erroneously supposed to be Beckett, the chauffeur. And even then I was not satisfied, for those eyes reminded me



of somebody else, too. But I couldn't place them.

"I perceive that you are in a hurry, D'Albert," said the man. "In that case I will not keep you longer than is necessary."

"But who are you, sir?" I asked. "You know my name, but I don't think I have the pleasure of knowing yours——"

"Any name will suffice; you may call me Mr. Jones," said the stranger. "I stopped you because I thought you would care to know something. You are quite safe, Nipper—you have nothing to fear!"

"Nipper!" I gasped. "How—how——"

"Never mind how!" interrupted the mysterious Mr. Jones, his eyes twinkling in real earnest now. "Your little disguise is most excellent, and you must allow me to congratulate you upon your somewhat remarkable subterfuge. And there is no danger of it being exposed."

"But Starke——"

"Starke will be silent," said Mr. Jones calmly. "I have already had a most interesting chat with the young gentleman—or, I should say, the young blackguard. And Starke will keep his mouth closed. You may return to St. Frank's with perfect confidence. You will not be given away. I have settled that for you."

I looked at the man in amazement.

"But—but how could you?" I asked. "And how did you know about Starke?"

"I am afraid that I am not in a position to answer questions," said Mr. Jones. "You must be satisfied with what I have told you——"

"If I really am safe, I want to thank you with all my heart," I said gratefully. "Everything depends upon it. You know that I'm Nipper, so you obviously must know that I'm trying to establish my innocence."

"Precisely!" said the stranger. "I am well aware of all the facts, my dear Nipper. And it may cause you some satisfaction to know that within a week from to-day you will be back at St. Frank's in your own identity!"

"Back back at St. Frank's?"

"Yea."

"As myself?" I gasped.

"As Nipper," said Mr. Jones, nodding. "The truth will be out by that time, and you have nothing to fear meanwhile. Your troubles, my dear lad, are nearly at an end—so be of good cheer."

And the stranger smiled upon me, and pushed his way through the hedge again. I was left standing in the road, excited, bewildered, and strangely elated. I believed that Mr. Jones had told me the truth.

But who was he? And why had he taken the trouble——

But there was no time for me to think closely on the subject. I had to get to St. Frank's—to fight Fullwood! But now I pedalled on lightheartedly and gaily. I had not felt so cheerful for weeks.

I was not returning to be exposed, but to keep my appointment behind the gym. Afterwards I should be able to discuss the

astonishing affair with my chums. But at the present all my thoughts and energies were concerned with showing Ralph Leslie Fullwood that insults didn't pay.

And, meanwhile, a rare hullabaloo was taking place behind the gymnasium!

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE ABSENTEE!

EIGHT!

The last stroke of the hour sounded musically from the old clock-tower in the Ancient House. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were in Study A; and Bell nudged his chief as the sound died away.

"Better not keep the cad waitin'," he said. "It's eight o'clock, Fully."

"I've got ears, haven't I?" snarled Fullwood.

"There's no need to bark at me!" said Bell gruffly.

"He's a bit touchy, old man," grinned Gulliver. "Fightin's a bore—ain't it Fully?"

"It's an infernal nuisance!" snapped Fullwood.

"An' you ain't sure of winnin'—what?" asked Gulliver pleasantly.

Ralph Leslie jumped to his feet.

"You silly fool!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I can't whack that beastly freak? I could wipe him up with one hand!"

"Better use two!" advised Gulliver—"it'll be safer, Fully, an' you can polish him off in the first round!"

"Oh, shut up!"

Fullwood spoke savagely. He knew well enough that Gulliver was chipping him—and Fullwood's dignity was such that he had strong objections to being chipped, even by his own chums.

"I suppose we'd better get along now," he said. "I meant to be late, anyhow—the cad can be kept waitin' for me. That's only as it should be, anyhow. I shall stroll up with perfect ease."

Gulliver and Bell grinned to themselves. Fullwood was by no means easy. In fact, he was beginning to be a trifle doubtful as to whether he would win. But he would never dream of expressing one of those doubts.

And while he was leisurely strolling out of the Ancient House, a large crowd was waiting impatiently on the battleground. This was situated in a convenient hollow immediately behind the gym.

It was a sort of natural arena, with a ring in the centre. The grassy slopes were capable of accommodating two or three hundred fellows, if necessary. And at present the slopes were thickly covered.

The Remove had turned up to a man, and a considerable number of Third-Formers had come to see the "mill." Even a sprinkling of Fifth-Formers had condescended to grace the scene with their presence.

Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were already on the spot—with towels and



sponges and everything else—for they were, of course, my seconds. There was no sign whatever of the other party—and, naturally, no sign of me.

"Eight o'clock, and nobody here!" exclaimed Handforth grimly. "If Fullwood doesn't turn up within five minutes, I'll take a crowd of chaps, and we'll fetch him. The cad ain't going to get out of it!"

"Rather not!"

"And where's D'Albert?" asked Hubbard. "He hasn't turned up, either."

Pitt strolled across to Sir Montie and Tommy.

"Where's your champion?" he asked.

Watson turned rather red.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I don't quite know," he said. "I—I expect he'll turn up—"

"We haven't seen him for some little time, old boy," said Sir Montie.

"Well, it's rummy!" said Pitt. "A fight's arranged for eight o'clock, and only the seconds of one chap turn up!"

Watson looked at Tregellis-West miserably.

"What can we do?" he muttered.

"Nothin', dear boy."

"But can't we tell 'em—"

"It wouldn't be wise," murmured Sir Montie. "Better wait until Fullwood turns up, anyway. An' we can't explain anythin', in any case. It's simply a frightful position—it is, really!"

"Oh, here they are!" said Handforth suddenly.

All eyes were turned upon the grassy slope near the corner of the gym. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell had just appeared, and they came along briskly. Fullwood was looking supremely confident and perfectly at his ease. He put it on rather too thickly, in fact, and most of the juniors saw that it was an obvious affectation. A good many grins went round.

"Here comes the marvellous bantam-weight!" chuckled Jack Grey.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bet you're not so comfortable as you look, Fully!" yelled Owen major.

Fullwood looked round him loftily.

"I'm ready to smash that red-haired freak to a pulp!" he said. "I'm only too anxious to have a chance of puttin' him in his place!"

"You'll have to find him first!" shouted Merrell. "The freak hasn't turned up! Perhaps he's as nervous as Fullwood!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood looked round him sharply.

"Hasn't D'Albert turned up?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Well, I'm not going to wait long for him—I can tell you that!" he exclaimed, hoping that he might get out of the fight, after all. "If the cad doesn't choose to turn up, I'm not going to wait—"

"You'll wait until nine o'clock, if necessary!" said Handforth. "We'll keep you here by force, you rotter! Or, if D'Albert doesn't turn up by half-past eight, I'll jolly well fight you myself!"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Fullwood. "For two pins I'd fight you now!" exclaimed Edward Oswald, pushing up his cuff. "I've been waiting since last night to see this giddy mill—and I'm not going to be swindled out of it!"

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Pitt.

Fullwood and Co. stood aloof, and the rest of the crowd became uneasy and fidgety. Christine, of the College House, strolled over to Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West.

They dreaded being questioned, but there was no getting out of it.

"Don't you know where your man is?" asked Christine.

"No, I couldn't say," replied Watson uncomfortably. "He knew the time for the fight, too. The silly ass must have forgotten all about it."

"Very convenient," remarked Christine. "Chaps don't usually forget a fight unless they're afraid of the scrap. And I thought D'Albert was a decent sort. He provoked the fight, don't forget."

"No, he didn't," said Watson warmly. "Fullwood insulted him—"

"And D'Albert knocked Fullwood down," said Christine. "If that wasn't provoking the fight, what was it?"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Watson. "I'm getting fed-up with this waiting. I wish the silly ass would turn up!" he added fervently.

"Begad! Perhaps he will," said Sir Montie, without hope.

The crowd began to get more impatient than ever.

"Hi, Watson!" yelled Hubbard. "Where's D'Albert?"

"Where's the funk?"

"Yah! It's a fraud!"

"D'Albert doesn't mean to turn up!"

Fullwood looked round with a sneer.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said. "I meant to smash the cad to bits; but I can't if he's not here. We'd better be going along, you chaps. I don't feel like waitin' all the bally evenin'!"

Fullwood was immensely relieved. For even if he won the scrap, he didn't particularly want to engage in it. He couldn't hope to win without receiving some disfigurement—and Fullwood hated having his manly beauty marred.

"Not so fast!" said Handforth grimly.

"You mind your own business—"

"It is my business," said Handforth.

"You'll wait here until half-past eight. It's always usual to give a chap half an hour," he added, on the spur of the moment. "He might have had a puncture or something."

"I didn't know he'd gone out," said McClure.

"Rats!" said Hubbard. "The chap's funking it!"

"Of course he is!"

"There won't be any fight!"

The uproar increased.

"We'll scalp the chap when he turns up," said Owen major warmly. "We'll frog-march him round the Triangle!"

"Rather!"



"And make him run the gauntlet, too!"

Watson grinned weakly at Tregellis-West.

"Well, he'll miss that, anyway!" he murmured. "I'm blessed if I know what—Hi! What's the matter, you ass?"

He turned as he felt somebody tugging at his sleeve. It was De Valerie, and Somerton was near by.

"Look here, Watson," said De Valerie grimly. "I'm timekeeper in this fight, and I'm getting a bit fed-up. Where's your man?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you ought to know!" said De Valerie. "You and Tregellis-West are his seconds, and yet you don't know where your principal is. You've been looking a bit queer ever since you came into the ring, and I believe you know more than you'll admit."

"Oh, rot!" said Watson uneasily.

"It's not playing the game," went on De Valerie. "There's a whole crowd of fellows here waiting, and even Fullwood's turned up—and we all know what a cad Fullwood is. If you know anything about D'Albert, you ought to speak up."

Watson was silent.

"You see, dear old boy, the position is rather difficult," said Tregellis-West, coming to the rescue. "D'Albert went out, an' we—we— That is to say, he was goin' to Bannington, or— Begad! It's rather awkward, you know! There's no tellin' whether D'Albert will come or not."

De Valerie and Somerton looked at one another.

"You mean he went away deliberately—so that he would miss the fight?" asked De Valerie curtly. "In short, he funk'd it?"

"No!" shouted Watson.

"Begad! Not at all!"

"Then why has he gone?" asked Somerton.

"Well the fact is, something important cropped up," said Watson. "That's the absolute truth. I—I can't tell you exactly what it was, because it's private. But D'Albert didn't go away because he funk'd this fight. I can give you my word of honour on that."

"That's good enough," said De Valerie promptly. "And I'm glad—jolly glad. But I hope the boulder will turn up before long. Do you think this important business will keep him away long?"

"He must have forgotten the fight," said Watson evasively.

Handforth, who was listening, snorted.

"He forgot it!" he roared. "Forgot a fight! Gammon! Rot! Absolute piffle!"

"The rotter was afraid!" shouted Owen major.

"Of course he was!"

"The whole thing's a swindle!"

"Look here," said Watson desperately. "Montie and I will run along to the gates to see if we can find any sign of the chap. You fellows wait here until we come back. Give him another ten minutes, anyhow."

"No more!" said De Valerie grimly.

And he attempted to subdue the crowd while Tommy Watson and Sir Montie made their escape. The questions were getting too

warm for them, and they were enormously relieved to get away—alone.

"My hat!" panted Watson, as they emerged into the almost-deserted Triangle. "What a ghastly state of affairs!"

"It's truly shockin'," agreed Tregellis-West. "I don't know what we're goin' to do, dear fellow. We can't explain, an' there's no prospect of Nipper turnin' up. We're simply helpless. It's frightfully awkward."

They strolled to the gates miserably.

"What asses we were to urge him to go," said Watson. "Starke doesn't mean to do anything, and he'd be as safe as houses! We forgot all about this giddy fight beforehand!"

"Well, we can't remember everythin', an' we were so worried that we hardly knew what to do," said Montie. "Perhaps we'd better go back an' tell the chaps that Nipper went to Bannington, or Helmford, an' that he won't be back—"

"There'd be a riot!" said Watson. "We can't do that, you ass! We shall have to pretend that we're expecting our man every minute. The crowd will soon melt away after another quarter of an hour. And the fight can take place to-morrow, instead. Anything to get out of it now."

They gazed down the lane without hope. The summer evening was still brilliantly light, and everything was looking still and peaceful. The juniors could see down the lane as far as the bend. But there was not a soul in sight, and they were about to turn back into the Triangle, when Watson stopped.

"There's somebody coming!" he exclaimed. "On a bike, too!"

"Dear fellow, it can't be Nipper," said Montie. "He went by train, an' we brought his jigger back—"

"By George!" shouted Watson. "I—I believe it is him, though!"

"Pray control yourself—"

"I tell you it is!" yelled Tommy. "Look! I can see his giddy red hair! It's him—it's D'Albert!"

"I'm glad you shouted out the right name," murmured Sir Montie. "But you must be wrong, old boy— Begad! But I believe you're right!" he added, gazing through his pince-nez. "It certainly looks like the dear boy!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Watson. "It's him, as sure as a gun!"

A few seconds later the cyclist rode up. It was he, of course, and I dismounted breathlessly.

"What about the fight?" I demanded.

"They're waiting for you!" said Watson huskily.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I thought they'd give me up—"

"They're nearly on the point of it," interrupted Watson. "But what the dickens have you come back for? How did you know—"

"Has Starke said anything?" I interrupted.

"No, not a word!"

"Then that chap was right," I said. "My hat! It's a bit of a mystery, my sons! I can't quite understand the thing."

"Did somebody tell you it was safe to come back, then?"

"I decided to come back five minutes after the train had started from Bellton," I said grimly. "It was a mad thing to bunk, and I expect you realise that as well as me. And when I remembered about that fight, I nearly had a fit. I came back expecting to be exposed."

"But you're safe, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie. "Starke hasn't said a word—an' I don't think he intends to."

"I'm sure he doesn't," I exclaimed. "I'm feeling as fit as a fiddle and as happy as a sandboy. Where's Fullwood? I want to smash him! I feel like it!"

My chums stared at me in wonder.

"I'll tell you all about it afterwards," I said briskly. "We can't keep the crowd waiting any longer. But everything's O. K., my sons. We needn't worry about Starke, or anybody else. So let's get busy with the slaughter!"

And I marched across the Triangle towards the gym. Tommy and Montie came with me, and their worried looks had gone. After being certain that I should not turn up, they were overjoyed to find me on the spot—cheerful, and anxious to get to business.

Fullwood was not to be let off, after all.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE FIGHT!

"HERE he is!"

"About time, too!"

There were a number of shouts as we appeared behind the gym. And the tone of those shouts was quite satisfactory. The fellows had been angry and impatient a moment or two before, but my appearance made them forget the wait. The fight was to take place—and that was all that really mattered.

"Why didn't you turn up before, you bounder?"

"Where the dickens have you been to?"

"You're over twenty minutes late!"

I looked round mildly as I removed my spectacles.

"Really, I am truly sorry," I said. "But surely it is to Fullwood that I should apologise? I regret, Fullwood, that I have kept you waiting. But there is no necessity for any further delay."

Fullwood scowled.

"I've a dashed good mind not to fight you," he said sourly. "If you think I'm prepared to hang about in order to thrash you, you're mistaken!"

"In order to be thrashed, you mean," grinned Handforth.

I was much relieved to find that the juniors did not press their questions. I had arrived, and that was good enough. The main thing was to get on with the fight; it didn't much matter why I was late.

"We'd better buck up," said De Valerie, glancing at his watch. "Plenty of daylight yet, but the mill might be a long one."

You're pretty warm, D'Albert, and breathless, too. You've been riding hard."

"Fairly," I admitted.

"Well, it's your look-out, of course," went on De Valerie. "But you stand more chance if you're fresh. It strikes me that you'll be considerably puffed before the first round's over. Perhaps you'd better wait ten minutes."

"No, thanks," I said promptly. "I'm ready now."

"I wouldn't consent to wait ten minutes, anyhow!" put in Fullwood. "The fight'll be over by that time. It's goin' to be short an' sharp. I don't believe in playin' with a fellow; I give the knock-out at once!"

There were a great many grins.

"Such modesty!" said Handforth admiringly.

Fullwood scowled again, and leisurely proceeded to peel off his coat. He was quite pleased to find that I had been riding hard, and that I was hot and dusty. He considered that his chances of success were far greater.

The majority of the audience was on my side—although the fellows feared that I should receive a thrashing. I was untried—so they thought—for I had not engaged in a proper fight since my arrival at St. Frank's—as D'Albert.

And Fullwood, in spite of his caddish ways, was no coward. And he knew how to use his fists. When he really made up his mind to it, he could fight well. But he was frequently brought up for fouling.

"Buck up, you bounders!"

"Haven't we been waiting long enough?"

I was all ready, and Watson was hovering about with a happy smile on his face.

"Feeling all right?" he asked softly.

"Really, I am quite well, thank you," I replied.

"You won't have that face for long, of course," said Handforth comfortingly. "I expect you'll find it hard to wear your specs. to-morrow—not that they'll be much use, with both your eyes bunged up!"

"Clear out of the ring, Handy," said De Valerie. "Now then, are you chaps ready? You can start as soon as ever you like. Get prepared!"

"I'm waitin'," said Fullwood languidly.

He looked at me viciously, and I was quite sure that it was his intention to attack with all his might. Well, I should adopt my own tactics. I was still a bit puffed from the cycling, and I knew that it would be my best plan to hold myself in for a while.

If Fullwood liked to exhaust himself—that was his look-out. It was not playing to the gallery, and I didn't care what the fellows thought at the outset. My plan was to give Fullwood a thrashing—not to provide an entertainment.

"Time!" said De Valerie sharply.

Fullwood rushed at me like a tiger. He hadn't wasted a second, and he came on with tremendous force.

"He means to finish it in the first minute," murmured Handforth disgustedly. "What's the good of this? D'Albert will be knocked flat—By George! That wasn't bad! Did you see the way the chap dodged?"



Fullwood's rush bore no fruit. He was quite surprised at his non-success, for he had meant to flatten me out. A tremendous drive at my chin missed badly, and Fullwood's face came in contact with my gloved fist.

He staggered back somewhat dazedly.

"That wasn't a bad fluke!" said Owen major. "It was Fully's own fault—he shouldn't rush so hard!"

Fullwood came on again, with his head down. He punched out right and left, and there was no doubt that his attack was formidable. I was obliged to give ground, for it was my game to reserve my own strength.

"Fullwood's got his man set!" yelled Gulliver.

"He'll walk right over the ass in a minute!"

"Go it, Fully!"

"Kata!" roared Handforth. "Stand up to him, you ass! Hit back, and smash him in the eye! Why don't you—"

Handforth gave a bellow.

"That's no good!" he went on. "You ain't using your fists at all!"

"Time!" rapped out De Valerie.

We went into our respective "corners," and De Valerie turned to Handforth.

"They can get on quite decently without your advice," he said. "You'll oblige me by keeping quiet, Handy. D'Albert knows what he's doing, and you'll only confuse him by yelling like that."

"The chap's too blessed weak!" growled Handforth. "He was letting that cad walk all round him!"

Reginald Pitt grinned.

"But D'Albert doesn't seem to be marked much, does he?" he asked. "And Fullwood gave some hefty punches, too."

The first round was discussed animatedly by the crowd, and it was generally decided that I wouldn't last beyond the fourth. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie were somewhat anxious as they sponged me down.

"You didn't make much of a show, old son," said Watson softly.

"I didn't mean to," I said. "This isn't a show—although I shall give the chaps something to shout over before long, perhaps. They think I can't fight, and Fullwood's beginning to think so, too. Well, I'll let them think it until it suits me to do otherwise!"

Sir Montie beamed.

"Watson, old boy, this is going to be good," he declared gently. "I am positively sure of it, I am, really!"

"Time!"

Fullwood again came to the attack with energy. The second round was even more vigorous than the first, and most of the work was done by Fullwood. I made scarcely any attempt to hit back, but confined myself to parrying Fullwood's heavy thrusts. And I had plenty to do.

But that kind of work did not call for much effort on my part. More than once I was forced almost completely round the ring. But I managed to avoid the face blows, although Fullwood got in a good few on my chest.

Thump! Thump!

Right and left thudded upon my ribs, and I staggered. Fullwood pressed his advantage, amidst a roar.

"Fullwood wins!"

"Go it, Fully!" roared Gulliver. "Oh, good man!"

"Wake up, D'Albert!"

"Oh, my hat! That's done him!"

Crash!

Fullwood's fist had landed between my eyes, and I went over like a ninepin. It had been a miscalculation on my part, and I paid for it. But I was up again in a second, and before Fullwood knew where he was, my right swung up and landed squarely upon his jaw.

Thud!

Fullwood went over full-length on the grass, as much surprised as anybody. And a yell of delight went up from the crowd.

"By George! That was neat!" yelled Handforth.

"Give him some more, Dally!"

"Go it, Ginger!"

Fullwood didn't like that punch, but he was not on the ground for more than a second. He charged forward with a look of absolute hatred in his eyes, and as he came at me he punched right and left.

Crash!

Something struck me forcibly on the shin, and I crumpled up with a yell of pain. The cad of the Remove had deliberately kicked me, but he had hoped to hide this brutal trick by his fist attack.

"Foul!" roared Handforth angrily. "Foul, you cad!"

De Valerie grabbed hold of Fullwood's shoulder.

"You confounded blackguard!" he shouted hotly. "Do you call that fair fighting? If anything like that occurs again I'll stop the fight and declare D'Albert the winner!"

"My foot slipped!" growled Fullwood.

"Yah! Liar!"

"Boxoon!"

There was a storm of booing and hissing, and Fullwood scowled heavily. Time had been called, and Watson pulled down my sock and revealed an ugly graze on my left shin.

"The cowardly beggar!" said Watson hotly. "Does it hurt much, old man?"

"Not much now," I replied. "But it bowled me over for a moment; I wasn't looking for it. I'll make the brute pay for it next round—and I think I'll show the fellows what boxing is!"

That kick had settled me. Fullwood should receive all the punishment that I could administer. He had attempted to crook me with a foul blow, and he had failed. I would do my best to settle his hash by straight fighting.

"Time!"

Fullwood was not looking so fresh as before. He was in a nasty temper, and was quite capable of fouling again if he saw half a chance. But I did not give him much of an opportunity to think of anything.

I attacked with all my strength.



My right came up, drove through Fullwood's guard, and landed squarely on his right eye. While he was still staggering from the blow, I followed it with a left upper-cut. Fullwood went over with a jar which shook every bone in his body.

"Whacked, by thunder!" shouted Handforth.

"By D'Albert, you mean!" grinned Pitt.

"One—two—three——" counted De Valerie.

"Get up, Fuly, you fool!" shouted Gulliver anxiously. "You're not going to be beaten by this freak, are you?"

"Four—five——"

Fullwood raised himself on his elbow, and then sprang to his feet. There was a light in his eyes which looked positively dangerous. And he hurled himself at me with all his strength.

He made no attempt to fight fairly, and before I could divine his intention he struck out forcibly with his left and hit me below the belt. Fortunately the blow did not go home with full force, but I was doubled up, nevertheless.

And Fullwood was just about to punch at my head while I stood helpless, when De Valerie charged him and sent him flying.

"Stop that, you hooligan!" he shouted.

"Foul!"

"Scalp the cad!"

"Let's frog-march him!" roared the crowd.

I turned quickly.

"Really, you must allow me to punish Fullwood for what he has done," I shouted. "I can assure you that I am anxious to do so."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old D'Albert!"

"Go it, duffer!"

I did not object to being called by that term. Even the few supporters that Fullwood had had at the commencement of the fight were now anxious to see me win. Fullwood had played dirty, and his own chums considered that he deserved a thrashing.

The next round was destined to be the last.

It commenced with a rush from Fullwood which was intended to be overpowering. But he had shot his bolt long since, and the attack had no life in it. His nose was bleeding, one eye was rapidly closing, and he was beginning to look a general wreck.

I dealt with his charge easily, and then attacked.

And this time I meant to finish the fight. Fullwood's guard was nowhere, and I got in three body blows which sent him staggering. I was quite sure that he wanted to fall down and he counted out; but I managed to deliver a left drive which struck him over the sound eye, and he collapsed in a heap, gasping.

"One—two——"

The counting went on, but Fullwood did not move.

"Ten!" said De Valerie, at last.

"Hurrah!"

"D'Albert wins!"

"And Fullwood's got two black eyes!" said Handforth, with great satisfaction. "I'm

glad you gave him that last one, D'Albert; one black eye looks odd!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I was surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd. The fellows were delighted with me—just as they had been delighted with my performance at cricket. I was certainly making my mark in the Remove!

"You're a bit of a fraud, you know," observed De Valerie. "You made us all think that you were a first-class duffer, and you're as keen as mustard on every giddy thing you touch!"

"He's hot stuff!" said Grey.

"And look at his face!" chuckled Handforth.

"Why, is it marked very severely?" I asked.

"You silly ass, it ain't marked at all!" said Handforth. "I don't believe you've got a scratch on you. That guard of yours is like a blessed brick wall. Why, I don't think I could whack you!"

This, from such a tremendous fighter as Handforth, was a wonderful tribute, and everybody grinned.

"I am glad that I have given Fullwood the lesson he deserved," I said quietly. "Perhaps he will not be so insulting in future."

I went over to Fullwood, who was struggling with his waistcoat and jacket, and held out my hand.

"You didn't fight fairly, Fullwood, but it is over now," I said quietly. "We will shake hands and——"

Fullwood deliberately turned his back.

"You can take your filthy paw somewhere else!" he said savagely.

I flushed, and turned away.

"Cad!"

"Oh, you rotten bounder!"

"That's done it!" roared Handforth. "I'm not going to stand here and see this beastly cad—this—this Bolshevik—insult D'Albert any more. Who'll help me to frog-march him?"

"I will!" shouted a dozen juniors.

Fullwood regretted his contemptible action a moment later, for he was swept off his feet by Handforth and Co.—a greatly enlarged "Co." for this occasion—and whirled away, yelling and shouting.

And another section of juniors swung me up on their shoulders and marched me in triumph across the triangle. Just as it happened, as we were about to enter the Ancient House, Starke, of the Sixth, appeared.

"What's all this?" he demanded angrily.

"Only a little celebration, Starke," said Pitt genially. "D'Albert just knocked the stuffing out of Fullwood, and we've chaired him."

Starke looked at me squarely.

"Oh, D'Albert's been fighting Fullwood—eh?" he said. "D'Albert doesn't seem to be such an ass as everybody thought."

"He's a regular terror!" said De Valerie.

"Well, he'll take five hundred lines for fighting," said Starke sourly. "Do you hear that, D'Albert—five hundred lines!"



And Starke pushed past amidst a cold silence, which soon changed to an outburst of hissing.

"The cad!" gazed Pitt. "I never dreamed he'd take it like that, or I wouldn't have breathed a word. Prefects never give lines when the chaps indulge in a proper contest. Don't you do 'em, D'Albert!"

"Really, I have no such intention," I said, from my lofty perch. "You will greatly oblige me, my dear fellows, by letting me down."

I was released at last, and a few minutes later I found myself alone in Study C with Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West. As soon as the door was closed they grabbed hold of me and clasped me to their bosoms.

"It seems like a giddy dream!" said Watson breathlessly.

I grinned.

"Well, we've had some changes this evening," I said, with a chuckle. "Instead of being hooted out of the school, I'm brought into the Ancient House on the chaps' shoulders!"

"Things are not so bad as we feared, Nipper, old boy," said Tregellis-West. "Starke is helpless; he has plainly shown that he means to say nothing. But can you explain why?"

I became serious.

"There's something queer about it, my sons," I declared. "You remember I told you that I decided to come back—even at the risk of exposure? Well, on the Bannington Road I met a rummy-looking man in a black mackintosh. And he told me that Starke couldn't harm me—that Starke was

helpless. It strikes me that the stranger had already interviewed Starke."

And I told my wondering chums all about that astonishing meeting with the mysterious Mr. Jones.

"And that chap told you that you'd be back here in your own character within a week?" asked Watson incredulously.

"That's what he said."

"Begad! I only hope it's true, dear fellow," said Sir Montie fervently. "But who is this man?"

"He is the same man that's been hanging about the district for some time," I replied.

"He's in disguise, too, and I've got a vague suspicion that the guv'no—— Oh, but that must be wrong!"

"What do you mean, you ass?"

"It's rummy—that's all," I said. "This suspicion of mine is just beginning to take definite shape, but I daren't encourage it. Perhaps it's all wrong, and I should look an ass——"

"Do you really mean to suggest, Nipper boy, that that mysterious stranger might be your——might be Mr.——" began Sir Montie.

"Don't say any more!" I broke in. "Theories are all very well, but they're a bit dangerous; they make a fellow get on the wrong track. We'll leave this affair as it stands for the present. But I'll bet my bottle of patent hair-dye that we shall have some adventure and excitement within the next day or two!"

"Dear fellow, I can quite believe you," declared Tregellis-West firmly.

And, as events turned out, we were both right!

THE END.

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## GRIPPING NEW SERIAL.

# THE HOUSE IN THE JUNGLE; OR, JOHN HAMMOND'S DELUSION.

A Tale of the Adventures of an English Lad and a Young American in the Wild Heart of Africa in Quest of a Mysterious Valley.

By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

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

## THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

**ALAN CARNE**, a young Britisher captured by the Germans in East Africa, is cast out at the end of the War, to wander in the jungle. He is joined by a Hottentot servant named **JAN SWART**. After a few days of hardship they fall in with

**DICK SELBY** and his native servants. Alan and Dick become great pals. They witness the death of an old man named John Hammond, who tells them a wonderful story of a house in the jungle, where an English girl is kept captive. The chums determine to find this mysterious house. On the way Dick slips and falls into a river. He floats down stream and manages to make a landing. After walking for some hours he hears voices. He has unwittingly walked into an Arab camp, and the Arab leader is Tib Mohammed, the noted slave dealer. A girl called Lorna has also been captured, and in view of the sentry the two have a talk together. She tells him of a man named Tarverner, whom her father wished her to marry, against her wish. Later on she is rescued, but Dick is recaptured. Dick saves Tib Mohammed's life, and thus his own is spared. He makes a daring escape and rejoins Alan Carne and his party. Eventually they decide to trek north in search of the hidden valley. After several weeks of hardship in lion infested country, they saw rising majestically in the grey distance beyond the jungle precipitous mountains stretching from east to west.

(Now read on.)

## TIB MOHAMMED AGAIN.

**W**ITH dauntless courage, bravely enduring hardships, Dick and Alan had pressed in a north-westerly direction. They had often been in peril from wild beasts, and sometimes, when they could find no game to shoot, they had been without food for many hours.

Their resolve had not faltered. The lure of the hidden valley, the impelling wish to save Lorna Ferguson from the designs of a ruthless villain who had deceived her and her father, had drawn them on and on.

A month ago Alan had fallen ill of a fever, and for a fortnight he had been down with it, unable to travel, while Dick dosed him with quinine and other drugs; and the Hottentot, who claimed to have knowledge of native remedies, forced him to take bitter draughts brewed from roots and herbs.

Between the two he had recovered, and he had now regained his full strength. The colour had returned to his wasted cheeks, and the brightness to his dull eyes.

He was as keen as ever on the quest, and he believed, as did the young American, that they had at last got to within an easy journey of the Bana River. The valley of mystery could not be far behind the granite range that thrust its peaks into the blue sky.

"Come along," bade Dick, as he rose to his feet and slipped the binoculars into their case. "I want to cross those mountains by the end of the day. If we can't do it we must reach the base of them and camp there. I say, Carne, I wish I knew what Tib Mohammed and his band of ruffians have been doing."

"So do I," Alan replied. "It has been always on my mind. But we can hope for the best. The Arabs were as far from the valley as we were when your porters deserted us, and they couldn't have raided it as yet."

"They might have, Carne. We lost a fortnight while you were ill."

"Ah, so we did! I had forgotten that."

The rifles were shouldered, Jan strapped the medicine-case to his back, and the three descended the grassy slope and entered the jungle.

It was fairly open at first, but the nature of it changed as they advanced, and they were in difficulties, when they fortunately stumbled on an old trail, presumably made by slavers, which led them roughly northward.

For hour after hour they followed this, judging that it would bring them to some pass through the mountain range. They had to stick to it, at all events. It would have been impossible for them to diverge from it, for to right and left of them were



walls of prickly-thorn so densely woven that a cat could not have squeezed into them.

They halted once to eat a simple meal of dried antelope-flesh, and resumed their march; and in the course of the afternoon they observed here and there to one side of them the mouths of narrow paths that cleft the jungle, and appeared to have been recently trodden.

They judged that these might lead to Bajanga villages, and they were sure of it when they picked up a broken spear with a double blade.

"It is a Bajanga weapon, I'll bet!" Dick declared.

"No doubt it is," Alan gravely assented. "Those ferocious savages live in this neighbourhood, and not far off."

"We've got to push on, anyway."

"Yes, risk or no risk, Selby. We can't turn back."

The broken spear was an ominous discovery. A sense of peril, a foreboding of disaster, weighed heavy on the lads and the Hottentot. They travelled warily and in silence, as fast as they could, still shut in by the impenetrable walls of thorn-scrub.

The dusk of evening shrouded them, but they were afraid to stop. They hurried on, fighting against fatigue, bent on reaching the mountains; and a couple of hours after night had fallen, as they were groping in darkness, they heard beyond them a confused, muffled noise.

"It is a Bajanga village," said Dick, "and the blacks are holding a festival of some kind."

"Well, we'll have to slip by them," Alan replied. "There is nothing else for it."

They had no alternative but to face the danger. On both sides of them was still the dense, scented jungle, bristling with sharp thorns. As they went alertly on the noise swelled louder and louder, hollow, booming notes blending with raucous voices; and at length, when they had gone for a quarter of a mile, they paused in deep shadow and stood gazing at a thrilling and fearsome spectacle.

"Look at them!" whispered Alan. "An ugly lot, aren't they?"

"More like gorillas, or big apes, than human beings," said Dick. "But, by all that's marvellous, who is that?" He broke off in amazement. "By George, Carne, it's Tib Mohammed!"

"Is that who it is, Selby?"

"Yes, there he is! The wicked old devil!"

They had a good view. To their left ran a path that was only three or four yards in length, and widened at the farther end, beyond which was a village that some of the Bajangas had carved out of the jungle.

Ranged about it were a number of hive-shaped huts of clay and wattle, and in the middle of the open space was a great fire, blazing high, around which at least two score of the big, frizzy-haired warriors were performing a dance, to the accompaniment of the most fiendish whooping and yelling that

can be imagined, and the beating of native drums, made of crocodile skin.

A few women and children hovered in the rear, and on a log that was close to the fire squatted Tib Mohammed. He was not alone. To one side of him sat three of his Arabs, and on the other side was a huge, fat-paunched savage, who looked to be the headman of the village, for he wore a karsak of lion's-skin, and a brass ring dangled from his nose.

It was evidently a war-dance that was in progress, from the fierce, menacing way in which the Bajangas brandished their spears and shields; and the weird, barbaric sight held Jan and the lads spellbound, gripped by a blood-curdling fascination.

The excitement increased. Louder sounded the drums, louder the frenzied clamour. With the firelight playing on their bronze and black figures, their frizzed hair waving, and their pointed teeth flashing, the warriors screeched and bellowed, and swayed to and fro, and swirled in and out amongst one another, leapt and capered, lunged their weapons at imaginary foes, and stamped in unison on the ground.

Now and again one would dash from the circle, snatch from a flat stone a large gourd that probably held palm-beer, and drink deeply from it. Still they kept at it, with wild contortions; and finally, with one accord, all raised their spears and shields aloft, and a deafening shout burst from their lips:

"Zug boom! Zug boom!"

The dance was over. They threw themselves on the grass, panting and exhausted. The headman clapped his hands, and said something to Tib Mohammed, who nodded in approval. He took a silver-mounted pistol from his belt and gave it to the headman, clearly as a gift. And then, reaching into a bag that was by his side, he flung string after string of beads to the savages, who scrambled madly for them.

"Selby, I've been wondering what Tib Mohammed is doing here," Alan murmured, "and now I know."

"You'll have to put me wise, I guess," Dick replied. "What is the explanation?"

"Tib Mohammed concluded that he and his band weren't strong enough to force their way into the hidden valley, so he has come here to get the Bajangas to join him in a raid. And they have agreed to it, and have performed their war-dance."

"You're right, Carne! By Jupiter, you are! That's the meaning of it all! That's why the old devil has given them presents! It's a bit queer, though, considering that the tribe are on friendly terms with that skunk Taverner, who lives with the girl and her father."

"Their friendship with Ralph Taverner hasn't held the Bajangas back," said Alan. "Tib Mohammed has won them over."

"There isn't any doubt of it, after what we've just seen," Dick agreed. "I say,

*(Continued on p. 111 of cover.)*



Carne, it's fortunate that we have discovered this.

"Yes, very fortunate. We're not in any danger. The blacks won't know that we have gone by, and there will be nothing to prevent us from reaching the valley and warning Robert Ferguson."

"And the valley isn't far behind the mountains, I'm dead certain. We must get across them to-night, Carne, if it takes all the strength out of us."

"Yes, we had better. Come along, Selby, while we have the chance."

The red glow of the flames did not penetrate beyond the village enclosure. The way to the north was clear.

Leaving the Bajangas quarrelling over the heads, and Tib Mohammed and his Arabs in conversation with the headman, the lads went quietly forward, with the Hottentot following at their heels, and quickly passed the village. They were in cheerful spirits again, no longer afraid of what they had been in dread of all day.

But an unforeseen emergency was to shortly arise and bring deadly peril upon them. They had gone less than half a mile, when they heard a low, rumbling growl and had a glimpse of a dusky form crouching in the trail close in front of them, and of two gleaming eyes. It was a lion or a leopard, and it was about to spring.

Dick at once threw his rifle to his shoulder, and, though he realised what the consequences would be, he aimed and fired.

"That's done it!" Alan said ruefully.

The beast had been wounded, not killed. With a rasping squall it bounded into the thorny jungle, floundering and threshing through it; and as the noise grew fainter there floated from the rear a shrill clamour of alarm.

The report of the gun had been heard in the village, and there could be no doubt that the Bajangas and the Arabs would suspect that the survivors of the safari had passed by them, and that they would promptly give chase.

Jan and the lads looked at one another in dismay by the dim glow of a crescent moon that was swimming overhead.

"That's done it!" Alan repeated.

"It was a leopard, and I had to shoot, else it would have been at us the next instant," declared Dick.

"Oh, yes, I know that. There was no help for it. But the blacks will be after us now like a pack of hounds."

"Let the beggars come! We have a good start, Carne, and I believe we can keep ahead of them until we have a chance to hide."

"We'll do our best, old chap. If we should be caught—well, we'll never see the hidden valley."

"We'll live to see it, Carne. I'll bet you'll put those mountains between us and the Bajangas and find the river on the other side of it. And once there we'll find shelter."

The mountainous range towered darkly beyond them. How near they were to it they did not know, but they felt that they might

be able to cross to the further side if they could be overtaken.

All was quiet behind them now, but they were not deluded into a false sense of security. Not doubting that their enemies were in noiseless, stealthy pursuit of them, they travelled rapidly, at desperate speed, weary though they were.

They had to hold to the path, for still they were shut in by the thorny, impenetrable walls of the jungle. The lithe and wiry Hottentot kept in the lead, pausing at intervals to let his companions catch up with him.

They dared not stop to rest, fear of death spurring them on, driving them to frenzied efforts. Presently they had over their heads a screen of matted foliage, which obstructed their view to the north.

For more than an hour they pressed on as fast as they could, and they were ready to drop from fatigue, when, to their relief, they emerged from the dark cover. In front of them was a stretch of open sward, rising gently; and beyond it, within a hundred yards of them, the great range of mountains thrust their peaks to the moonlit sky.

By strenuous exertions the fugitives struggled on, hoping to find a means of ascent. They reached the base of the granite rampart, and as they paused here a chorus of blood-curdling yells rang in their ears, and they looked back, to see the Arabs and Bajangas swarming out of the mouth of the jungle trail.

### THE ASCENT OF THE MOUNTAINS— SAFETY WON—THE BANA RIVER— THE FIGURE ON THE CLIFF—THE MEETING WITH LORNA.

"BY George, there they are!" exclaimed Dick Selby. "The whole yelping pack of them, Carne! They've been stalking us in silence! What are we to do?"

"What can we do?" Alan Carne asked bitterly, as he gazed at the wall of stone that slanted upward in front of him. "We're trapped!"

"No, no, baas!" said the Hottentot, raising his arm as he spoke. "We can go farther, I think! Look! What is that above us? Do you see?"

At a height of twenty feet, running along the face of the cliff, was a line that showed dark in the moonlight, and ascended at an angle towards the lofty crest of the range.

"It is a path of some kind," declared Alan. "We must get to it!"

The Arabs and the savages had all emerged from the jungle, and were dashing across the open sward to capture the fugitives. Delay would be fatal. Jan, going first, climbed rapidly up the wall, finding here and there crevices for his toes and purchase for his fingers. His companions mounted as nimbly, and when they reached him he was standing on a narrow shelf of rock that was barely a

(Continued overleaf.)



yard in width. Dick pointed to another shadowy line higher up, and to another that was above it.

"It is a zigzag path," he said. "I believe it will take us over the mountains."

"It appears to lead to the top," Alan replied. "We've precious little chance of keeping ahead of those black rascals, though."

There was at least some hope for them now. They were sorely fatigued, exhausted by the strain of the flight from the village; but the prospect of escape gave them fresh strength, urged them to strenuous efforts. In single file, as fast as they could, they held to the narrow ledge. They were ascending gradually by it. Behind them the Bajangas and Tib Mohammed and his men were scaling the sloping rampart with the agility of goats. They were scrambling on to the path, a dozen of them at a time, leaping to their feet and coming in chase, with shrill whooping and screeching. Meanwhile, however, the fugitives had got a good start, and by desperate exertions they gained a little. Higher and higher they went, farther and farther along the precarious shelf. They turned at a sharp angle of it, bearing from east to west, in the direction from which they had come. And when they had gone for a short distance on the backward and loftier stretch, still ascending, strength was failing them again. Their way was now blocked by a great, round stone, of the size of a large cask, that had fallen from above and lodged on the trail. Dick stumbled against it, panting for breath.

"I can't climb over this!" he gasped. "I'm done for, Carne! You'll have to leave me, and—"

"Pull yourself together!" Alan broke in. "An idea has just occurred to me! I think we'll be all right! If we can cut those black fiends off from the path they won't be able to scale the cliff! Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes, by George, I see! If we only have time enough to—"

"Lend a hand, Selby, you and Jan! Be quick!"

With that Alan grasped the round stone, which was loosely balanced; and, his companions assisting him, the three bore their weight on the heavy mass of granite. It was obvious to all that they had an opportunity of checking the pursuit. The upper ledge on which they had stopped was a shallow platform that projected from the precipice. The lower one, which was the same, jutted farther out because of the slope of the mountain. And the slanting wall of rock that separated the two ledges, dipping downward for thirty feet, was so steep and smooth that not even a cat could have obtained a footing on it. The Arabs and Bajangas had not passed below. They were a number of yards from the spot that was directly beneath the fugitives. But they were rapidly approaching it. The critical moment was near, and the stone had not yet been shifted from its position. It had merely swayed, rocked to and fro.

(To be continued.)

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