No. 278.—A Magnificent Story of Detective Adventure at St. Frank's!

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THE NEXT MOMENT GOODWIN WAS THROWN CLEAN OVER THE HANDLEBARS.

MISSING FROM SCHOOL.

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 "The Study of Mystery," "The Lancashire Lad," "The Secret of the North Tower," etc.

October 2, 1920.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

HANDFORTH ON THE JOB.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH grunted.

"Two hundred lines each—that's what this'll mean!" he exclaimed grumpily. "In fact, it might mean five hundred lines each!"

"Well, it's all your own silly fault!" said Church.

"Of course it is," agreed McClure promptly.

Handforth came to a halt.

"My fault!" he roared. "You silly idiots! If we weren't in a hurry I'd stop and punch both your noses! My fault, indeed! It was you chaps who did all the arguing in Bannington."

"Well, my only hat!" said Church. "How the dickens you can stand there and say that, Handy, is beyond me! You know as well as anybody your watch was slow. You wouldn't take any notice of us when we told you about it—and just because we missed the train, you blame us!"

"And now we shall be late for calling over!" said McClure. "It wouldn't matter about the gates being locked—we could easily slip over the wall. But it means lines for missing call over."

Handforth didn't reply. He trudged on, and his chums walked by his side. It was pitch dark, and the famous trio of Study D, in the Ancient House of St. Frank's, had just left Bellton behind them. They were on the outskirts of the village, and were hurrying along the little lane which led up to St. Frank's.

It was not very late in the evening, but quite late enough to make the three juniors miss calling over, and that would certainly mean being hauled over the coals by their Form master, or by one of the prefects.

It was really Handforth's fault.

He and his chums had been to Bannington, the local town, and they had intended catching the early evening train back to Bellton. But, owing to Handforth's obstinacy regarding his watch, the train had left Bannington without them. They had been compelled to wait until the next one—and this had landed them in the village too late to reach the school in time for calling over.

It was now about five minutes past seven, so the three juniors would be six or seven minutes late.

"There's just a chance that we might be able to wangle things," remarked Church thoughtfully, as he walked along with his chums. "I think Morrow is on duty to-day, and he's a jolly decent sort. If we get on the right side of him he won't report us to old Crowell, or to Mr. Lee. When we explain how we lost the train, he might let us off!"

"Rather!" said McClure. "That's quite likely, you know. Morrow knows

what an obstinate rotter Handforth is——"

"Eh?" said Handforth.

"Well, so you are obstinate!" said McClure. "You know that as well as we do, Handy. You can't get away from the simple truth. If you hadn't stopped arguing about that watch in Bannington, we should have caught the train, with several minutes to spare. But you would have your own giddy way—and so we are late."

"Oh, dry up!" said Handforth. "Can't you chaps give it a rest?"

He walked on, in rather an irritable mood. As a matter of fact, Handforth knew well enough that he was to blame, and he did not like admitting it—in fact, he wouldn't admit it openly.

The evening was exceedingly dark, for the sky was overcast with great masses of black clouds, and a fairly high wind was blowing. It was chilly, too. But there did not seem much prospect of rain.

"As long as we don't allow ourselves to be seen, we might be all right," remarked Church. "As soon as we get in we'll find Morrow, and work the trick all right. But we mustn't be seen by anybody else——"

"Shush!" muttered McClure suddenly. "There's somebody coming!"

It was within the bounds of possibility that the "somebody" was a master. And Handforth and Co. were not particularly anxious to meet a master at that moment. So they crouched near a hedge, with the intention of waiting there until the other pedestrians had passed by. They were just against the garden of the White Harp Inn—which was situated on the very outskirts of Bellton.

The White Harp was rather a disreputable establishment. The landlord, Mr. Jonas Porlock, was not very particular concerning the people he entertained. And it was a well-known fact that gambling went on fairly frequently in the back parlour of the White Harp.

Handforth and Co. waited in the hedge somewhat anxiously. And the dim figure of the man who was coming down the lane, came into view. McClure was the first to notice that the newcomer's legs were far from straight. They were, in point of fact, decidedly bandy. And McClure recognised the owner of those legs at once.

"It—it's old Cuttle!" murmured McClure.

"By George!" whispered Handforth. "So it is! We'd better sit tight, my sons. Cuttle is a decent old chap, I believe, but he might report us if he sees us here. Let him go by, and don't breathe a word."

Mr. Josh Cuttle came on. He was a newcomer at St. Frank's, at least, he had only been at the old school since the commencement of the term. Mr. Cuttle occupied a position in the domestic quarters of the Ancient House. None of the juniors knew exactly what his duties were, and it did not concern them in the least.

Cuttle was quite a character, and the majority of the boys were interested in hearing him talk, for everything, in Mr. Cuttle's eyes, was gloomy. He had never been known to smile, and whenever he spoke on any ordinary, everyday subject, he always did so in the most melancholy tones.

Handforth and Co. expected that Mr. Cuttle would walk straight by towards the village. But Mr. Cuttle did nothing of the sort. Instead, when he arrived opposite the garden of the White Harp, he came to a halt. He did not actually go up to the garden gate, but crouched there, near the hedge, quite still. And he remained there for some moments, practically opposite the spot where Handforth and Co. were concealing themselves.

At last, after a couple of minutes had elapsed, Mr. Cuttle acted in rather a mysterious way. He bent down, and wormed his way through a gap in the hedge, until, at length, he disappeared into the inn garden. The juniors saw him walking stealthily through the bushes for a moment or two, and then came complete silence—except for the rustling of the leaves in the wind.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth "What do you think of that, my sons?"

"Seems a bit queer," remarked Church. "But there's no need to make a mystery of it, Handy. I expect the genial Mr. Cuttle wants a little whisky, or rum—or something of that kind. He probably gets it on the quiet."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Why should he sneak into the garden like this? The pub is open, and he can get any amount of rum or whisky in the

bar. No, my sons, there is something fishy about this."

"Well, it's none of our business," said McClure. "We'd better slip away now, while we've got the chance."

"That's the idea," whispered Church.

But Handforth, as usual, failed to agree with his chums.

"Not likely!" he declared. "We're going to stop here!"

"What?"

"We're going to stop here!"

"What the dickens for?" asked Church. "What's the good of remaining here, Handy? Don't be an ass, you know! If we're only a few minutes late for calling over, Morrow won't give us any lines—but if we turn up half-an-hour late——"

"We might as well be hung for sheep as lambs!" interrupted Handforth. "We're late for calling over, and it doesn't make much difference how late we are. I'm going to stop here, and I'm going to investigate this mystery."

Church and McClure sighed.

"A bit of detective work, I suppose?" asked Church sarcastically.

"Yes, that's it!" replied Handforth.

His chums almost groaned. Handforth as a detective was decidedly not a success. He had tried his hand at the game many a time, and he had only succeeded in bringing ridicule upon his head. But experience never taught Handforth anything. He was a decent fellow, but he was obstinate and pig-headed. Once he set his mind on a thing that thing was going to be done. And it was quite evident that he had set his mind on watching for Mr. Cuttle. Both Church and McClure knew by Handforth's very tone that argument would be useless.

"Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't stop, if you want to," remarked Church carelessly. "We'd better be going McClure."

"Rather!" said McClure. "Well, so long, Handy!"

Two hands reached out, and grasped the shoulders of Church and McClure.

"No you don't, you rotters!" hissed Handforth. "Going to leave me in the lurch, eh? Not likely! We're all in this together, and we'll get to the bottom of the mystery!"

"But there isn't any mystery, you duffer," snapped Church. "There's no mystery in Mr. Cuttle going in the garden of the White Harp! He might have gone there to meet somebody——"

"Exactly!" said Handforth darkly. "That's just it!"

"Eh?"

"I've had my suspicions about Mr. Cuttle for some little time," went on Handforth. "You chaps go about with your eyes closed—but I don't. And I'm pretty keen, don't forget. Who is Cuttle? Why is he at St. Frank's? What does he do? Why does he prowl about at night very often?"

"Goodness knows!" said Church. "That's his business—not ours!"

"We're going to make it ours," said Handforth grimly. "If you want to know the truth, my sons, I believe that Cuttle is a spy!"

"A which?"

"A what?"

"A spy!" repeated Handforth. "That's what he is. He's up to no good, you mark my words! I wouldn't mind betting all I've got that Mr. Cuttle is an enemy of Goodwin's!"

"Goodwin's!" repeated Church, in astonishment. "What on earth makes you think that? Dick Goodwin is a new boy, and he came to St. Frank's about the same time as Mr. Cuttle; but there's nothing to connect the two. That Lancashire kid is quiet, and——"

"It's no good arguing," interrupted Handforth. "I know what I'm talking about, and there's an end of it. And I believe that Cuttle is spying on Goodwin; he means some harm to the chap. What about those chaps who broke into the school the other night? Two of them, and one was collared by Mr. Lee. What were their names?"

"How the dickens should we know?" snapped McClure. "And, as for breaking into the school, I suppose they got in like any other burglar would. You're not suggesting that Cuttle let them in, I suppose?"

"There's no telling," said Handforth, vaguely. "It's quite possible that Cuttle let them in; in fact, I think it's almost certain. And perhaps he has now come down here to meet the chap who escaped, to arrange another affair. Anyhow, I'm going to keep my eyes open. And, if I'm lucky, I shall be able to expose Cuttle in his true colours!"

Church and McClure thought it would be quite useless to say anything further.

Personally, they rather liked Mr. Cuttle, and they did not suspect anything shady about him.

Possibly, Handforth, in his own heart, was of very much the same opinion. But Handy loved to make a mystery, and he would get all sorts of wild ideas into his head, at a moment's notice. It was quite a habit of his to make mysteries, so that he could investigate them. It seemed as though he were doing something of the sort in this case.

As a matter of fact, it had been Fullwood who had let the two men into the school a night or so earlier. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell had made the acquaintance of the two plausible rascals. They had called themselves Mr. Naggs and Mr. Colmore, and they had managed to win Fullwood and Co. over to their scheme—by telling a great number of lies. And, in the end, Fullwood had left open a cellar grating, so that the two men could get into the school, their object being to search Dick Goodwin's study in the Remove passage. But, fortunately, Nelson Lee had been on the alert, and he had frustrated the scheme.

Handforth, having got it into his head that Mr. Cuttle was mixed up in that business, was determined to look into this present affair. And he found himself coming to all sorts of wild conclusions concerning Mr. Josh Cuttle.

And just as the wait was becoming rather tiresome, somebody came out of the little gateway, not very far from the gap in the hedge. It was a man, but not Mr. Cuttle. He came out quietly, looked up and down the road, and then walked along in the direction of the village.

To tell the exact truth, this man was Mr. Naggs himself. He was staying at the White Harp,and he continued to stay there. For he knew well enough that he had not been recognised on that eventful night. He had been wearing a heavy mask, and, although his companion, Colmore, had been captured, Naggs felt quite secure. He kenw that he would not be given away. Therefore it was safe for him to remain in the village.

"There you are!" whispered Handforth. "That's the chap Cuttle has been jawing with. They've been plottin' somethin'!"

"Rats!" muttered Church. "What's the good of inventing all these fairy tales, Handy?"

"You'll soon see whether they're fairy tales or not!" said Handforth grimly. "It won't be very long before I make some big discoveries. Just you wait a bit, and you'll see——"

"Yes, but what on earth is there to make a fuss about?" asked Church. "Just analyse what we have seen, Handy, and you'll soon find that you're on a fool's errand."

"Are you calling me a fool?" demanded Handforth darkly.

"Nunno!" said Church, with haste. "Of course I'm not, Handy! But think of the position! We see Mr. Cuttle come down here, and he goes into the garden of the White Harp——"

"In a very mysterious manner!" interrupted Handforth.

"Well, perhaps it was a bit mysterious," admitted Church.

"Sinister, in fact—that's the word, sinister!" said Handforth, with relish.

"Well, we won't argue about that," went on Church. "It was a bit mysterious, I'll admit. But, even supposing it was, there might be quite an easy explanation. Mr. Cuttle goes into the back garden of the White Harp Inn; about five minutes later a man comes out through the gateway. Is that any reason to assume that the pair have been talking together——"

"Plotting, you mean!" said Handforth. "They've been plotting!"

"Oh, rats! How do we know they've been plotting?" demanded Church. "It's simply nothing but your imagination, Handforth—that's all it is. I don't suppose for a minute that Cuttle ever met this man, and it's positively ridiculous to assume——"

"I don't want any more of this jaw," interrupted Handforth impatiently. "I'm just about fed up with it. If you don't shut up, Church, I'll punch your fatheaded nose!"

"But look here——"

"I don't want to hear another word!"

"Simply because you know I'm talking sense!" snapped Church. "That's about the size of it, you pigheaded bounder!"

Handforth rolled up his sleeves.

"By George!" he breathed. "I'll soon make you——"

"Hist!" whispered McClure. "Here comes old Cuttle again!"

The interruption was rather fortunate for the exasperated Church, for Handforth was not able to deliver the punch he was getting ready to supply. He suddenly became quite still, and watched the hedge. Yes, sure enough, Mr. Cuttle was reappearing through the gap.

"There you are!" whispered Handforth. "What did I tell you?"

His chums did not exactly remember what he had told them—and, in any case, they didn't care. All they wanted to do was to get back to St. Frank's as quickly as possible. But Handforth did not seem at all anxious to fall in with their desires. He wanted to remain here, investigating. It almost made Church and McClure weep when they thought about it.

Of course, it would have been possible for them to slip away, and disregard Handforth altogether; but they had two reasons for not leaving their leader.

One reason was that they thought he required somebody to look after him. It was necessary for them to remain, so that he should not get into any mischief. And, undoubtedly, Church and McClure were quite right in this aspect of the matter.

The other reason was that they would certainly have to pay dearly for their desertion later on. As soon as Handforth reached the school, after his investigations, he would seek out Church and McClure, and if they avoided him, and if they attempted to keep out of his way, it would make no difference—they would each receive punches sooner or later. Not only this, but Handforth would make their lives miserable for the next day. So they considered, on the whole, that it was better to remain with him.

"There you are!" repeated Handforth triumphantly. "Cuttle's going down the road, towards the village. It's as clear as daylight that he's arranged with that other chap to meet somewhere further down, where they'll be more private. We're going to follow him!"

"Follow Mr. Cuttle?" asked McClure.

"Exactly!"

"But he may be going right through the village—he may be even going to Bannington!" protested Church. "You're not suggesting that we should follow him all the way?"

"We're going to follow Mr. Cuttle to his destination!" said Handforth grimly. "We're on the track, and we're going to remain on the track. Come on!"

"Oh, my only hat!" breathed Church. "Why this chap isn't murdered outright is beyond me! He ought to be smothered—he ought to be boiled in oil!"

"What's that?" asked Handforth.

"Nun-nothing!" said Church hastily. "Nothing at all, Handy!"

"Well, don't mutter to yourself!" said Handforth. "We've got to follow Cuttle, and it's just about time for us to make a move. If we stay here much longer, we shall miss him!"

Church and McClure fervently hoped that Mr. Cuttle had already disappeared. But this did not prove to be the case. As soon as the juniors got out into the road, they could easily discern the bow-legged figure of Mr. Cuttle some little way ahead. He was walking slowly, and he was in the act of lighting his pipe.

"There you are!" whispered Church. "That doesn't look very suspicious, does it? Can't you be reasonable, Handy? Can't you think properly? It's absolutely obvious that Cuttle is simply taking a stroll to the village, and that he hasn't got any sinister intentions at all, as you call them. There's nothing suspicious about this matter at all."

"You'll see!" said Handforth firmly. "Just wait, my son—that's all. Just wait!"

"Yes, we shall wait until we're grey before we find any mystery here!" said Church tartly.

The juniors walked on in a very cautious way—Handforth with exaggerated caution, in fact. At any other time Church and McClure would have been quite amused, for it was certainly rather humorous to see the serious way in which Handforth took himself. There was no doubt about his sincerity. He fully believed that Mr. Cuttle was on a sinister mission, and Handforth also considered that it was his duty to investigate the matter.

Mr. Cuttle did not seem in any hurry to enter the village.

On the contrary, when he arrived at the old bridge which crossed the River Stowe, Mr. Cuttle came to a halt. He stood there, lounging against the brick parapet, and he did not seem at all anxious to depart. Once he glanced at his watch, and then he took a long look

down the road. But he was quite alone —except for Handforth and Co., who kept well in the shadow of the hedge.

"He's waiting for somebody!" whispered Handforth.

"Go hon!"

"What a marvellous deduction!"

Church and McClure were both sarcastic—and they were both fed up.

"Yes, he's waiting for somebody!" went on Handforth. "That's obvious—to my mind, at all events. I don't suppose you fellows notice these things. You don't take the trouble to reason matters out the same as I do. For example, Cuttle has come to the bridge, and he is waiting there. What for? Not because he feels warm and wants to take a breath. It's cold to-night, and the wind is chilly. Cuttle wouldn't stop there unless he'd made an appointment —that shows that he is expecting somebody to come."

"Marvellous!" said Church. "I'm blessed if I can understand how you do it, Handy!"

"It must be his brains!" said McClure. "I expect he's got a special quality brain, you know!"

Handforth was quite unaware of the fact that his leg was being pulled.

"Well, as a matter of fact, my brain is a bit different to other people's," he admitted. "All great detectives have peculiar brains, you know—— What the thunder are you giggling at, Church?"

"I—I—— Was I giggling, Handy?" gasped Church.

"Well, it sounded like it, anyhow," whispered Handforth. "As I was saying, all great detectives have special brains. My brains are special, I suppose. Anyhow, I can deduce these sort of things quite easily, whereas you fellows couldn't do it to save your lives. That's just where the difference comes in. You'd be all right as an assistant—my assistant. When it comes to rough work, you're just the chaps I need. But if we jaw so much, Cuttle will hear us!"

"He can't," said McClure. "The wind isn't blowing in his direction, and, in addition, he is standing just against a tree which is making a lot of noise in the wind. It's absolutely impossible for him to hear us at this distance. Where is your brain, Handy? What about your deductions?"

"If the wind happens to die down a bit, we shall be heard—that's all I say!" said Handforth. "We simply must be careful. As soon as the other man comes up——"

"What other man?"

"Why, the man that Cuttle is waiting for, of course!"

"But we don't know that anybody will come," said Church.

"My dear chap, it it absolutely obvious!" said Handforth pityingly. "Of course another man will come. He must come. I have deduced that—— There you are! What did I say?"

Handforth broke off, and there was a note of victory in his voice, for at that very moment a form had appeared on the other side of the bridge. He came over fairly briskly, and he did not seem to take any notice of Mr. Cuttle at first. But then, just when he was about to go past, Mr. Cuttle moved out, and spoke to him.

A moment later the pair were in deep conversation together.

"I knew it!" whispered Handforth. "What did I say all along? Cuttle came here especially to meet this other man! And the other chap is carrying something—do you see?"

"I'm not a cat—I can't see in the dark!" snapped McClure.

"Well, the other man is carrying a bag—I can see it, even if you can't!" whispered Handforth. "What does that bag contain?"

"Cabbages, probably!" said McClure.

Handforth snorted.

"Cabbages!" he repeated witheringly. "You—you brainless ass! Burglars' tools, I expect—jemmies, and things to smash cupboards with, you know! I'll bet a quid that some awful villainy is being concocted, and it's up to us to put a stopper on it!"

"Oh, I suppose so!" said Church wearily.

And he and McClure resigned themselves to their fate.

CHAPTER II.

THE VILLAINY OF MR. CUTTLE.

MR. CUTTLE stood talking to the stranger in low tones. The pair were lounging against the brickwork of the old bridge, and, at the feet of the stranger, lay the bag which he had brought with him. It was

really a small canvas sack, and the top was tied securely with string. What it contained was, of course, a matter for conjecture only, since it was quite impossible to see through the canvas.

Handforth and Co. might have been a dozen miles away, for all they could hear. They could only dimly see the two men as they stood against the bridge. To hear what they were talking about was quite out of the question.

"I say, this is rotten!" muttered Handforth. "We can't hear anything, you know!"

"Well, we don't want to be eavesdroppers!" muttered Church.

"Eavesdroppers—rot!" said Handforth. "Detectives ain't eavesdroppers, you ass! When a detective creeps near and overhears a conversation, he's simply getting evidence! It's always considered right for a detective to overhear things."

"When a detective is dealing with a couple of criminals, it's a different matter," said McClure. "But I call it rather off-side when a chap goes and listens to two innocent people——"

"Innocent people be blowed!" said Handforth. "Cuttle is a rotter, I tell you, and he's in the school in order to spy, and to let burglars in! I know what I'm talking about, my sons!"

"Well, there's no sense in us stopping here," said Church. "The best thing we can do is to get back to the school—it'll be late enough as it is, goodness knows!"

"You chaps have got to stop here!" said Handforth firmly. "I'm going to creep forward, behind the hedge, and I'm going to listen to what Cuttle and this other chap are saying. I might be able to catch a few words—and even a few words is very important. You chaps stick here!"

Handforth did not wait for any more. He slipped away, under cover of the hedge, and crept nearer and nearer to the spot where Mr. Cuttle and his companion were standing. They were not talking in particularly low tones, and when Handforth was fairly close, he was able to detect one word here and there, although the wind made it impossible for him to hear everything that was being said.

"Very careful with that bag, Cuttle!" the stranger was saying. "If you drop it, it'll be serious—there'll be a lot of damage done!"

Mr. Cuttle nodded.

"There was clumsy people, and there was other kinds of people!" he remarked. "I was one of them, Mr. Frost. My hands was strong, and my fingers was nimble. There was no fear of this bag being dropped. And why was there no fear? Ask me! Because my grip was firm, and my fingers was strong!"

"That's all right, then, Mr. Cuttle!" said the other man. "But you can't be too careful——"

Handforth was unable to hear any more, for a big gust of wind came along at that moment and it drowned all other sound.

Handforth was rather annoyed, but there was no hope for it. It was quite impossible for him to approach any nearer. Even as it was, there was some slight possibility of him being seen.

He was compelled to wait until the wind died down somewhat, and then his patience was rewarded in a somewhat startling manner. True, he only heard a few words here and there, most of them disconnected and disjointed; but what he did hear was of such significance that Handforth fairly shook with excitement as he crouched there, near the hedge.

"Bombs!" exclaimed Mr. Frost, in a sinister voice.

Of course, he said more than that, but "bombs" was the only words which Handforth caught, and it fairly made the leader of Study D jump. His mind was full of suspicions, and to hear this word uttered by Mr. Cuttle's companion was indeed staggering. Handforth felt quite sure at that moment that he had not made a mistake.

"What terrible goings on!" said Mr. Cuttle. "We will—no mistake—bomb all to atoms—can't go wrong!"

Those were the words that Handforth heard—just a few words out of many. And then Mr. Frost went on with the conversation.

"Wrecked—smashed to smithereens—the whole school—must be going!"

Handforth could hardly contain himself.

"Great heavens!" he muttered. "They're—they're going to blow up St. Frank's! They've got bombs in that bag, and they're going to blow the school to atoms! I knew I was on the track of something big—I felt it in my bones! And it's left to me—it's left to

me to save the school from destruction!"

He listened again, stretching his ears to catch every word.

"Be very careful with the bag!" Mr. Frost was saying. "For the love of Mike don't drop it!"

"There was times when a man was always careful!" said Mr. Cuttle heavily. "There was times when a man was compelled to be careful. And when was those times? Ask me! When a man was carrying something which wasn't to be dropped!"

A moment later, one of the men lit a match, in order to light his pipe, and, in the momentary glow, Handforth caught sight of the bag. There was no mistaking the shape of the objects which were contained in it. They were round—about as big as cocoanuts. And Handforth saw that Mr. Cuttle was handling the bag in a very gingerly fashion. And then the men parted, Mr. Cuttle lumbering his way up to the school, carrying the bag well away from him.

The other man vanished in the direction of the village, and Handforth crouched in the hedge until he thought it was safe to move, and then he went back and rejoined his chums, who had not shifted from their position. They were, as a matter of fact, cold and miserable, and decidedly fed up. They were hoping that Handforth had had enough of his task by now.

"Well, are you satisfied?" asked Church, as Handforth joined him and McClure.

"Satisfied!" echoed Handforth. "Good Heavens!"

"What's the matter, you ass?"

"What's the matter!" repeated Handforth. "You—you don't know! I've made a terrific discovery!"

"Mr. Cuttle is wearing a pair of boots, I suppose?" asked McClure sarcastically.

"You—you silly ass!" hissed Handforth. "Listen! I'll tell you! Cuttle has got a bag in his hand, and that bag is full of bombs!"

Church and McClure stared.

"Full of—which?" asked Church blankly.

"Bombs!"

"What rot!" said McClure.

"We shall soon see whether it's rot!" said Handforth. "I know you chaps won't believe it—I didn't expect you would, so I sha'n't punch your noses. But it's an absolute fact that that bag contains bombs, and Cuttle has been plotting with that other rotter to blow up the school! They're going to blow St. Frank's to smithereens!"

Somehow or other, the effect of this news was not exactly what Handforth had anticipated. He was quite sure in his own mind that Church and McClure would be utterly staggered and flabbergasted. As a matter of fact, Church and McClure eyed their leader somewhat pityingly. They certainly did not believe a word of his story.

"My dear old chap, what you need is a rest!" said Church. "Perhaps it would be just as well if we ran through the village and called on Dr. Brett——"

"You—you burbling lunatic!" roared Handforth. "Don't you think I know what I'm talking about? I've overheard everything. I heard those two rotters telling the whole business! Cuttle has got a bag full of bombs, and he's going to blow up the school. I knew he was a villain of some kind, but I didn't think he was as bad as this."

"And what are you going to do about it?" asked McClure, with a yawn.

"Why, I'm going to expose him, of course!" declared Handforth grimly. "We're going to follow Cuttle into the Triangle, and, before he can get into the school I'm going to give the alarm, and the scoundrel will be unmasked. It will be left to me—alone—to save St. Frank's from destruction."

Church and McClure sighed.

"Poor old Handy!" murmured Church. "I didn't think you were so bad as this, you know!"

Handforth shook both his fists in the air.

"You—you miserable idiot!" he shouted, fairly choking with excitement. "Why won't you believe me? Why won't you understand the truth? I tell you that Cuttle intends to blow up the school!"

"You said that before!" remarked Church. "It's no good shoving the same old record on, time after time, my son."

"Well, we can't waste any more time here," said Handforth. "I'll deal with you chaps later—after I've saved St. Frank's! Come on—we've got to get a move on; we've got to follow Cuttle!"

Church and McClure were only too glad to get a move on; they were quite anxious to get up to the school. And,

within a minute or two, they were walking quickly along the lane, in the direction of Mr. Josh Cuttle, who was some way ahead. And, at length, the gates of St. Frank's were reached.

Mr. Cuttle had already passed through, and he was half-way across the Triangle by this time. Handforth had refused to say anything to his chums on the way up the lane—he told himself that he would make them pay for their doubtful attitude later on. He would show them whether he had made a bloomer or not!

And, just as Mr. Cuttle was about to enter the Ancient House, Nelson Lee appeared. The famous housemaster-detective came out of the lobby, and he paused for a moment on the steps, looking out into the gloom. He saw Mr. Cuttle approaching.

"Ah, Cuttle, how are you getting on?" asked Nelson Lee genially. "Just come back from the village?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mr. Cuttle gloomily. "There was wind, and there was a feeling of cold in the air. It was going to rain, sir!"

"That is quite possible, Cuttle," said Nelson Lee. "I think that——"

At that moment Edward Oswald Handforth came rushing up. He had chosen his moment dramatically, and he confronted Mr. Cuttle, and pointing an accusing finger into that gentleman's face—he pointed so closely, in fact, that his finger nearly went into Mr. Cuttle's mouth.

"You villain!" shouted Handforth excitedly.

"By hokey!" said Mr. Cuttle.

"Handforth! What are you doing?" demanded Nelson Lee sharply. "How dare you address Cuttle in that manner!"

"He's a scoundrel, sir—a murderer!" roared Handforth, fairly bursting with his news. "He means to blow St. Frank's to bits!"

"By hokey!" said Mr. Cuttle again. "There was lunatics at large!"

"Handforth is certainly speaking as though he had taken leave of his senses," remarked Nelson Lee. "What is the meaning of it, Handforth? How dare you utter those ridiculous statements? Have you gone out of your mind, my boy?"

Handforth laughed triumphantly.

"No, sir; I am as sane as anybody!" he shouted. "But I've suspected Cuttle for a long time, and now I'm able to show him up in his true colours—he'll be caught red handed. He's been plotting with another villain in the village, and between them they mean to blow St. Frank's to bits!"

By this time quite a crowd of fellows had collected—juniors and seniors. And they were standing round, vastly interested, curious, and somewhat excited.

Mr. Cuttle appeared to be quite calm. He stood there, in the very centre of the crowd, next to Nelson Lee, with Handforth confronting him, calmly drawing at his pipe.

"I can only conclude, Handforth, that you are indulging in something that you consider to be a joke!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "You will allow me to tell you that I do not believe in these kind of jokes—and, further, I shall punish you severely——"

"But—but you don't understand, sir!" gasped Handforth. "Cuttle is a scoundrel—a murderer, and I can prove it!"

Mr. Cuttle sighed.

"There was times when a man was beaten!" he remarked. "I was beat now. And why was I beat? Ask me! Because I was exposed in my true colours! I was a scoundrel—I was a murderer—I was a willain! It was a gloomy night, and gloomy things was happening!"

"Do you know what Handforth is talking about, Cuttle?" said Nelson Lee quickly.

"I was puzzled, sir," said Mr. Cuttle. "Boys was queer critters, and boys wasn't in their right sense, sometimes. Master Handforth was a boy, and there was times when he was queer in the head. How do I know? Ask me! Because I was observant, and Handforth was a boy with a big voice. I have heard things—I have seen things, and I know that Master Handforth was a rum young gent!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Somebody knows you, Handy!" grinned Reginald Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence, boys, please," said Nelson Lee. "Handforth has made a very serious accusation against Mr. Cuttle, and the matter must be thrashed out at once. Now, Handforth, please explain yourself. It is a well-known fact that you are a very foolish boy, but I think

you have stepped beyond the limits of foolishness on this occasion."

"Foo-foolish, sir?" gasped Handforth. "But—but I've got proof of this! I heard Cuttle talking to another man on the bridge, near the village. And I'm not asking you to take my word, I can prove at once, here, that Cuttle means to blow up the school. He's got a canvas bag in his hand, and that bag is full of bombs!"

"By hokey!" said Mr. Cuttle, looking at the bag intently.

"Mind he doesn't throw it down, sir!" shouted Handforth quickly. "It's quite likely that he'll try to blow up the school now—these desperate characters don't care a jot about being killed themselves. They're mad, you know!"

"And so, Handforth, you imagine the bag which Mr. Cuttle is holding, contains bombs?" asked Nelson Lee, with a trace of amusement in his voice.

"Yes, sir; it does contain bombs, sir!" replied Handforth. "I should seize it at once, if I was you, sir. He is—he's dangerous!"

"Not so dangerous as you are, my son!" chuckled De Valerie. "We all knew you were dotty, but we thought you were harmless. It's a bit thick for you to go about accusing people of trying to blow up the school!"

"Bombs!" said Mr. Cuttle. "There was all kinds of bombs, there was bombs which was dropped from aeroplanes, and there was bombs which was thrown by the hand. But it's the fust time that I ever saw bombs which was full of juice!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Juice!" echoed Nelson Lee. "What do you mean, Cuttle?"

"Examine these bombs, sir," said Mr. Cuttle gloomily. "They was specially ordered for the Headmaster's table, and they was to be handled very carefully. If they was bombs, it must be pleasant to be blown hup!"

Nelson Lee took the bag from Mr. Cuttle, and Handforth came nearer. The string was removed, and Nelson Lee inserted his hand.

"Be careful, sir!" said Handforth breathlessly. "They may go off, you know; you may touch something that may cause them to explode!"

"You need not be afraid, Handforth, I shall be most careful!" said Nelson Lee smoothly.

Everybody craned their necks. Nelson Lee produced something from the bag which was smooth and round. At first sight it certainly did appear to be a kind of bomb. But then a yell of laughter went up as the object was recognised. Handforth stared at it with goggling eyes.

"Dear me!" said Nelson Lee. "A hothouse melon!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There was melons," said Mr. Cuttle. "There was cheap melons, and there was dear melons. Them melons come from the hothouse. They was expensive, and they was juicy, and they was not to be bumped on the ground!"

"So these are your bombs, Handforth?" said Nelson Lee. "Don't you think it is necessary for you to explain, and for you to apologise to Cuttle for having made such a monstrous accusation?"

But Handforth was not done.

"I—I expect it's a ruse, sir!" he gasped. "They must be bombs—I know they are, in fact! But they are made to look like melons. It's just a trick, sir."

Nelson Lee's smile vanished.

"I think we have had enough of this nonsense, Handforth," he said sternly. "This bag contains melons, and nothing else but melons. I want no more of your ridiculous statements."

"But—but I overheard——"

"It does not matter what you overheard, Handforth; the fact remains that you have made yourself look extremely ridiculous and foolish!" said Nelson Lee. "And, what is more, I must demand that you make an explanation at once—without any delay whatever. How did you get such a preposterous idea into your head? What made you believe that these melons—procured especially for Dr. Stafford's table—were explosive bombs?"

"There's only one explanation, sir," put in Church. "Handforth is dotty! We told him so long ago, but he wouldn't believe it!"

"I aways knew I was unlucky!" remarked Mr. Cuttle, in a melancholy voice. "I was not so fortunate as to be mixed up with bombs and blowing hup. Bomb outrages was good—they was something to make a man think. And why? Ask me! Because bomb outrages was good for the noospapers. They was good for the detectives; they was good

for the public to read. And they gave work to the horspitals, too!"

"Handforth, I am waiting," said Nelson Lee grimly.

Handforth looked round, his face very red, and his eyes staring. He could not understand it; he was almost dazed, he was in a kind of maze. What could it mean? He had been so certain—he had been absolutely positive. And now it turned out that the bombs were nothing more harmful than melons!

Handforth thought he was dreaming.

"You--you see, sir, I saw Cuttle talking to another man, and I thought they were up to some mischief," began Handforth weakly. "And I saw that bag handed over to Cuttle, and there was some talk about bombs, blowing up the school, and the place being smashed to atoms. The other man told Cuttle to be very careful with the bag, too, so I naturally assumed that there were bombs in the bag. I deduced that fact, sir!"

Nelson Lee restrained a smile.

"I'm afraid that your deductions were rather wide of the mark, my lad," he said. "However, perhaps Mr. Cuttle will be able to throw some light on the matter. I shall be pleased, Cuttle, if you can clear up this little mystery."

Mr. Cuttle nodded.

"It was the head gardener, sir," he exclaimed. "I was going to the village, and the head gardener wasn't. So he asked me to meet Mr. Frost, who was coming with the melons for the Headmaster. That was all, sir!"

"What about your conversation with that other man?" demanded Handforth. "You know jolly well that you were talking about bombs, and blowing up the school! You can't deny it."

"There was nothing to deny," said Mr. Cuttle. "We was talking about bombs, and we was talking about things being blowed up. And why was we talking like that? Because Mr. Frost was chatty, and I was in no hurry."

"You say that your companion was chatty," said Nelson Lee. "Can you tell me what you were talking about, Cuttle?"

"There was noos in the paper this morning, which made a man cheerful to read it!" said Mr. Cuttle. "There was noos about bombs being thrown in America. There was people killed, and there was buildings blown to hatoms. Among them buildings there was a school, and that was why Mr. Frost brought up the subject. We was talking, but we was unaware of the fact that Master Handforth was listening. And why was we unaware of that? Ask me! Because it was dark, and it wasn't easy for a man to see in the dark, like he was a cat. Master Handforth was mistook—which wasn't surprising."

Handforth staggered.

"Great pip!" he gasped. "I—I thought——"

"It is quite obvious, Handforth, that you have made an idiot of yourself," said Nelson Lee severely. "In your endeavours to act the part of an amateur detective you have blundered with your usual success. From what I hear, I understand that you attempted to listen to the conversation between Cuttle and his companion, and you only understood a few of the words. Catching these words here and there, you misconstrued the whole trend of the conversation—and assumed that an attempt was being made to blow up this school. It only indicates, Handforth, how foolish it is to concern yourself in affairs which are not your business. You owe Cuttle a full and complete apology, and you will please supply that apology at once, in my hearing."

"Ye-es, sir," said Handforth huskily.

He mumbled out an apology, and Mr. Cuttle nodded.

"That was good enough, Master Handforth," he said. "I was sorry that I could not oblige you. Nature was unkind to me—Nature didn't make me a willain. And I was born to be a willain, really. Crime! When I read of crime I feel happy. But there was no crime worth reading of nowadays, things was quiet!"

And Mr. Cuttle, seizing his precious bag of melons, made his way into the Ancient House. Handforth stood there, very red in the face, and very flabbergasted. The juniors yelled with amusement, and Church and McClure felt they were rewarded for all the inconveniences they had been put to.

"Well, Handforth, I trust that you are satisfied?" said Nelson Lee grimly. "You are a very foolish boy, and I can, therefore, make excuses for you. In order to impress you with the fact that it is always better to mind your own business, I must request you to write me five hundred lines. You may go!"

"Thank—thank you, sir!" said Handforth faintly.

He fairly staggered into the Ancient House, and did not feel happier as he heard the juniors yelling with laughter. Handforth had expected to cover himself with glory—and he had only succeeded in covering himself with ridicule.

CHAPTER III.

INSPECTOR JAMESON MAKES A CALL.

TUBBS, the Ancient House page-boy, tapped Nelson Lee lightly on the arm.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said apologetically.

The schoolmaster detective had been about to walk down the Ancient House steps. Handforth having gone indoors, and the other juniors were now dispersing.

"Well Tubbs, what is it?" asked Nelson Lee.

"There's a gent to see you, sir," said Tubbs. "He came in the other way, and I took him to your study. He says it's most important that he shall see you."

"Did he give you his name, Tubbs?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes sir," replied the page-boy. "The gent is a police officer, sir—Inspector Jameson of Bannington."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Thanks you, Tubbs—I will go to my study at once," he said. "Inspector Jameson, eh?" he mused, as he went along the passage. "I wonder what has brought the worthy inspector over from Bannington? It is hardly likely that he has come to appeal to me—Jameson is a most self-opinionated individual, and not at all the type of man to appeal to anybody for advice."

A minute or two later Nelson Lee entered his study. As he did so a burly, stolid individual, in the attire of a police-inspector, rose to his feet. He nodded to Nelson Lee in a somewhat pompous manner, and he extended his hand.

"'Evening, Mr. Lee," he said. "Hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"Not at all, Jameson," said Lee. "Make yourself comfortable. This is a most unexpected pleasure. I hardly thought that I should find you here this evening."

The inspector nodded again. He was a stolid man and Nature had not blessed him with a very large amount of brain power. Nevertheless, Jameson considered that he was quite an able orator; in fact, his pet grievance was that he had not been transferred to the special branch of Scotland Yard long ago.

"I dare say you are aware of the fact, Mr. Lee, that we have had a great many burglaries in this district of late," said the inspector. "Not only in this district, but in many parts of England. It is fairly obvious, in fact, that a big organisation is at work—a criminal gang which has parties in many counties, and they are all working simultaneously."

"Yes, I am quite aware of that fact, Jameson," said Nelson Lee. "I have known for a week or two past, that a crime wave has been passing over England. The police, it seems, are quite unable to cope with the deluge of robberies and other crimes which have been occurring. And so things are rather bad in this district, too?"

"They are, sir," said Jameson, nodding. "At the same time I must say that we have matters well in hand—so far as Bannington is concerned, at all events. While I'm in charge, there won't be many crimes undiscovered."

"Of course not," said Nelson Lee gravely. "With such a man at the helm as yourself inspector, it is difficult to understand how any criminals can exist in this neighbourhood?"

Jameson looked at Nelson Lee sharply.

"They are a daring lot, Mr. Lee," he said. "And they even possess the audacity to burgle houses in the Bannington district. However, there is not much chance of their being successful in the long run. Please do not imagine that I have come to you now appealing for assistance. Nothing of the kind. I am acting under instructions from my superior."

"Ah, yes, of course," murmured Nelson Lee. "And may I ask what you require of me?"

Inspector Jameson coughed.

"Well the fact is, Mr. Lee, the Chief Constable requested me to call upon you at the first opportunity. The Chief Constable would like you to investigate matters in this district, if you thought it possible to spare the time. Of course, he doesn't expect you to interfere with the

police, in any way, but just to have a general look round on the off chance that you might be able to help us."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I quite understand," he said smoothly.

And he did understand. Jameson, as a matter of fact, had been making an unholy mess of his investigations of late. Burglaries had been taking place in and around Bannington, and the culprits had got off scot-free in every instance. The police had been absolutely helpless. Jameson, in particular, had acted with extreme wooden-headedness. But he would never admit this fact to a soul.

To tell the truth, he did not know that he had acted in this way, he fondly imagined that he had been conducting his cases with the utmost sagacity and cleverness.

The Chief Constable, however, knew better. And there was something just a little quaintly humorous in the fact that Jameson had been sent to Nelson Lee on this mission.

"I have certainly no objection to investigating any little matter which you may wish me to deal with, Jameson," said Nelson Lee. "I will run over to Bannington to-morrow, perhaps, and then you can give me more details—on the spot. If there is any way in which I can help, I shall be quite glad to do so. And you need not be afraid that I shall interfere with you in any way whatever."

Inspector Jameson rose to his feet.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee," he said gruffly. "You realise, of course, that I have only come because the Chief Constable instructed me in that way. Personally, I think the whole thing is unnecessary—and I consider any action on your part is quite needless. However, it will do no harm, I daresay, if you look into one or two matters."

Very shortly afterwards Jameson took his departure leaving Nelson Lee vastly amused. It was fairly clear that Jameson considered himself far cleverer than Nelson Lee, and he did not welcome the great detective's proposed investigations at all.

Lee decided that he would run over to Bannington as soon as possible, on the morrow probably—and then he would personally look into one or two of the mysteries which were puzzling the Bannington police. Lee was quite confident that he would be able to achieve some concrete results.

Very shortly after Jameson had taken his departure—at about a quarter past eight to be exact—Nelson Lee happened to come across me in the lobby. I was just coming along from Study C with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. We had finished our prep., and we were on our way to the common-room.

"Just one moment, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee.

"Right you are, sir," I replied. "Anything important?"

"Well not exactly important," said the guv'nor. "It is just possible that I may be away for a day or two."

"Why, where are you going to, sir?" I asked curiously.

"I have not said that I am going anywhere, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "It is impossible—that is all."

"But what's the game, sir?" I inquired. "Can't you be a bit more definite?"

"I am afraid, I cannot, my lad" replied the guv'nor. "You see, I may find it necessary to investigate certain matters in the district, and it will be essential for me to go at a moment's notice. It is even possible that I shall leave late at night—after you have retired to rest. Therefore, if I am not to be found the next morning, you must not worry—just wait for me to come back, and all will be well."

"Right you are sir," I said. "But I think you might let me into the secret."

"My dear Nipper, there is no secret to let you into," smiled Nelson Lee. "Well, I won't delay you any longer."

A moment or two later I was back with my chums, and I told them what Nelson Lee had said.

"Jolly queer, I call it," I finished up. "The guv'nor has something in mind, evidently—but he doesn't want to tell me."

"Dear old boy there is no need for you to worry yourself," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Mr. Lee is quite capable of lookin' after himself, and if he goes off on an investigation, it is quite certain that he will be successful."

"Oh, rather!" I agreed. "But at the same time if there's any excitement going, I'd like to be in it."

I didn't think much more of the matter that evening. In the common-room there was a great deal of fun over

Handforth's latest exploit. Edward Oswald himself appeared, and he attmepted to brazen the whole thing out—and failed. He was the laughing stock of the Remove, and he was chipped unmercifully.

In the end he only obtained a little peace by punching about a dozen noses in quick succession. A good many of the fellows who laughed at Handforth's expense wished that they had not done so very shortly afterwards. For Handforth had a terrific punch, and he was not particular where he landed with his fists.

In the morning I was very forcibly reminded of what Nelson Lee had said to me the evening before. For it soon became known that the guv'nor was not in the school. He had slipped away during the night.

"Oh, it's quite evident that Mr. Lee meant to go all along," said Tommy Watson. "He just told you that last night, Nipper, to make you feel comfortable. He knew jolly well he was going—and I don't suppose we shall see him again until the end of the week."

"Well, I don't quite like it," I said shortly. "It's rather queer of the guv'nor to act this way. Where could he have got to?"

"It's no good askin' us that, dear old fellow," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "There are hundreds of places where Mr. Lee might have gone to—London, for example. It is quite possible that he is on the track of some frightful criminal, I suppose. He may be engaged on somethin' tremendously important, begad!"

A moment or two later Mr. Crowell, the master of the Remove, came into sight along the passage. I went up to him at once.

"Do you know where Mr. Lee has gone to, sir?" I asked.

The Remove master shook his head.

"I am sorry, Nipper, but I cannot tell you," he replied. "It is rather mysterious, as a matter of fact. Mr. Lee went out for a walk last night between eleven and twelve—I know that for a fact, since I saw him in the Triangle. But after that nobody seems to know what became of him. He did not return to the school, and he is still absent."

"What does the Head say about it sir?" I asked.

"Oh, Dr. Stafford is quite at ease," said Mr. Crowell. "You see, Mr. Lee had already mentioned that he would probably be away for a day or two—and Mr. Lee also indicated that he might go off at a moment's notice even in the middle of the night, so there is no reason why we should worry ourselves. We can be quite satisfied that Mr. Lee had an excellent reason for acting in this way."

"Yes, sir, I suppose so," I said slowly. "But somehow I don't feel quite satisfied, you know. Somebody told me that the electric light in his study was still on this morning."

"Yes, that is quite correct Nipper," said Mr. Crowell. "The light in Mr. Lee's study was certainly on this morning—the housemaids found the light burning when they came down."

"Well, it's not like the guv'nor to go off in that way, sir," I said. "If he decided to leave St. Frank's on an investigation, he would surely put his light out before he went."

"He may have forgotten it, Nipper," said Mr. Crowell.

"Yes that's possible—but Mr. Lee isn't the kind of man to forget things, sir," I said. "I'm rather worried."

The Form-master smiled.

"My dear lad, there is no earthly reason why you should worry," he said smoothly. "Mr. Lee is surely able to take care of himself—and there is no fear whatever of his getting into any trouble. We shall probably hear from him during the morning."

I frowned as Mr. Crowell went down the passage.

"I don't like it!" I said firmly.

"Oh, rats!" said Watson. "There's no need to get into a stew, you ass! Keep your hair on. Mr. Lee doesn't want somebody to look after him. He knew what he was doing, you can bet your boots on that."

"Yes rather, begad!" said Sir Montie. "Dear old boy, why are you so concerned?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I hardly know," I confessed. "But, somehow or other, I've got an uneasy feeling right down in my heart. I can't quite believe that everything is all right. Even though the guv'nor spoke to me like that last night I'm still anxious. And I mean to go along to his study now, and have a look round."

"Right you are," said Watson. "We'll come with you."

There was no reason why I should object, and so we went along the passages until we reached Nelson Lee's study. It was, of course, strictly prohibited for any juniors to enter a Housemaster's study without permission, and during the mae-

ter's absence. But in Nelson Lee's case it was different. My relations with the guv'nor were not those of an ordinary schoolboy with an ordinary Housemaster.

"I suppose it'll be all right for you chaps to come in," I said rather doubtfully. "Anyhow I'll take the blame if we're surprised. But I want to have a look round—I want to satisfy myself that everything is all serene."

Tregellis-West smiled.

"I am quite sure, dear old fellow, that you are concernin' yourself for nothin'," he said. "The fact that Mr. Lee went out without puttin' his light off is simply nothin'—nothin' at all. He may have had a special reason for doin' it, in fact. Still, a look round the study won't do any harm."

By this time I was standing right in the centre of Nelson Lee's apartment, and I was looking round with a keen, searching gaze. I noted all sorts of things during the first minute—and they were things which did not tend to make me feel more comfortable.

"Well?" said Tommy Watson, after a moment or two.

"I'm worried," I said keenly. "Just look! What do you see?"

"Nothing particularly startling," said Watson. "Anyhow, there's nothing here to make you feel worried!"

"Isn't there?" I said. "What about that ash-tray on the table?"

"The ash-tray?"

"Yes."

"Well, what about it?"

"Use your eyes, my son," I said. "Don't you see that half-smoked cigar there? It was evidently laid down fully alight, and it continued burning for some time afterwards. That seems to indicate that the guv'nor went out of this study in a hurry, and he intended to come back almost at once. You see, he left his cigar in the ash-tray just for a moment. But he didn't come back—he remained away. And he left the light burning, and that cigar burning, too."

"Nipper, dear old boy, it certainly seems a bit strange," admitted Sir Montie.

I nodded.

"Strange!" I echoed. "Significant—that's what I call it. And then, look at the writing-pad. There's a letter there—a letter to a business firm in London, about some electrical supplies for the school. That letter's only half-written, and the guv'nor's fountain-pen is lying beside it. He broke off actually in the middle of a word," I went on, examining the letter closely. "That looks strange, doesn't it? And it substantiates all I have said—Mr. Lee went out of his study in a hurry, and he expected to come back almost at once."

"It certainly looks a bit that way, I must admit," said Tommy Watson. "Well, even supposing it is so—what does it matter?"

"It matters just this much," I said. "The guv'nor didn't go off on an investigation, as we imagined. He wouldn't leave the school at such short notice, and he wouldn't leave his study in this condition. Everything may be all right—I suppose it is all right—but, at the same time, I don't feel positively certain. And anything of an uncertain nature always makes me uncomfortable. It's a rotten feeling."

"I quite agree with you, dear old boy," said Sir Montie, nodding. "There is nothin' quite so disconcertin' as uncertainty. Suspense is frightful, begad! An' I say—look at these!"

Sir Montie was pointing to the floor, and I followed the direction. I saw Nelson Lee's boots there, and I looked up at my two chums with fresh worry in my eyes.

"The guv'nor's boots!" I exclaimed. "My only hat! He surely didn't go out without his boots?"

"Oh, rats!" said Watson. "Mr. Lee has got more than one pair, you ass!"

"Perhaps so—but he doesn't keep them all in use," I said. "All his other boots are in the store cupboard. These other ones he has been wearing lately. And where are his slippers? It seems to me that he was sitting in his study, wearing his slippers, and he went out for something on the spur of the moment. Anyhow, we'll have a look round. If his slippers aren't here, it'll be absolutely certain that he's wearing them at the present moment!"

We searched the study all over, but we could find no sign whatever of the guv'nor's slippers. I knew what kind they were—strong ones—but the soles, after all, were only thin. What did it mean?

Would Nelson Lee leave St. Frank's in order to go upon a long trip, wearing only a pair of thin slippers?

I was very anxious, and I could not help worrying.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CODE TELEGRAM.

DICK GOODWIN, the new fellow in the Remove, stood on the steps of the Ancient House, looking thoughtfully across the Triangle. The lad from Lancashire was a very studious junior, and it was very seldom that he was seen out in the open.

He spent nearly all his time in the privacy of his own study, and it was, indeed, an exceedingly secluded spot.

For the end study in the Remove passage—which was occupied by Dick Goodwin—was really a place of mystery. The door was fitted with a patent lock, the window was barred, and its spaces were filled with frosted glass. It was impossible for anybody to see what lay within Dick Goodwin's study!

And he spent nearly all his time there—presumably in studying. But many of the juniors could hardly believe that this was the case. The view which was held throughout the Remove was that Dick Goodwin had some other occupation—something which he desired to keep absolutely to himself. And, since he would say nothing in explanation of his somewhat strange conduct, it was largely a matter of conjecture.

Goodwin now stood on the Ancient House steps, and it was apparent that he was thinking deeply. It was nearly tea-time, and the Triangle contained quite a number of fellows. It was already quite dusky, and before long night would fall—dark and still. Even now there was a cold snap in the air which felt quite wintry, and the wind was rather high, too.

I was out in the Triangle, and I was feeling decidedly moody. I had been worrying about the guv'nor all day, and my fears were by no means at rest.

I could not satisfy myself that Nelson Lee had gone off willingly, attired in only a pair of slippers, and apparently without a hat. Where had he gone to so abruptly? What had called him away at a second's notice? And where was he now?

These were questions which were puzzling me, and I did not know what to think.

But it was quite pointless for me to worry and for me to get into a stew. All I could do was to wait—to wait until Nelson Lee returned. Of course, I had no real fears—I was quite certain in my own mind that the guv'nor was safe and sound; but, at the same time, why should he have gone off in that way? I felt, inwardly, that there was some exceptionally urgent reason for his action.

"Well, Nipper, it's nearly tea-time," said Tommy Watson, coming up to me. "Hallo! You're still looking absent-minded and broody. What's the matter? Worrying about Mr. Lee?"

I nodded.

"Yes, a bit," I admitted. "The fact is, Tommy, I can't quite get the hang of things—that's all. Where's Montie?"

"Indoors, I believe," said Watson. "Probably indulging in a nap before the fire. It's a good thing we did light a fire to-day—we need it!"

Just at that moment a figure on a bicycle entered the Triangle, and we recognised him at once as a telegraph-messenger. The boy dismounted from his red machine, and then came walking across towards the Ancient House steps, where a good many juniors were collected.

"Hallo! Who's the telegram for?" said Reginald Pitt. "Not for me, I suppose?"

The messenger shook his head.

"It's for Master Goodwin, sir," he said. "Master Goodwin, of the Remove. I suppose I'd better take it in and give it to——"

"It's all right—Goodwin is here himself," interrupted Pitt. "I say, Goodwin!"

"Ay, I can see," said Goodwin, coming down the steps. "A telegram for me? Are you sure?"

"Master Richard Goodwin, Remove Form, St. Frank's—that's what it says," declared the telegraph-boy.

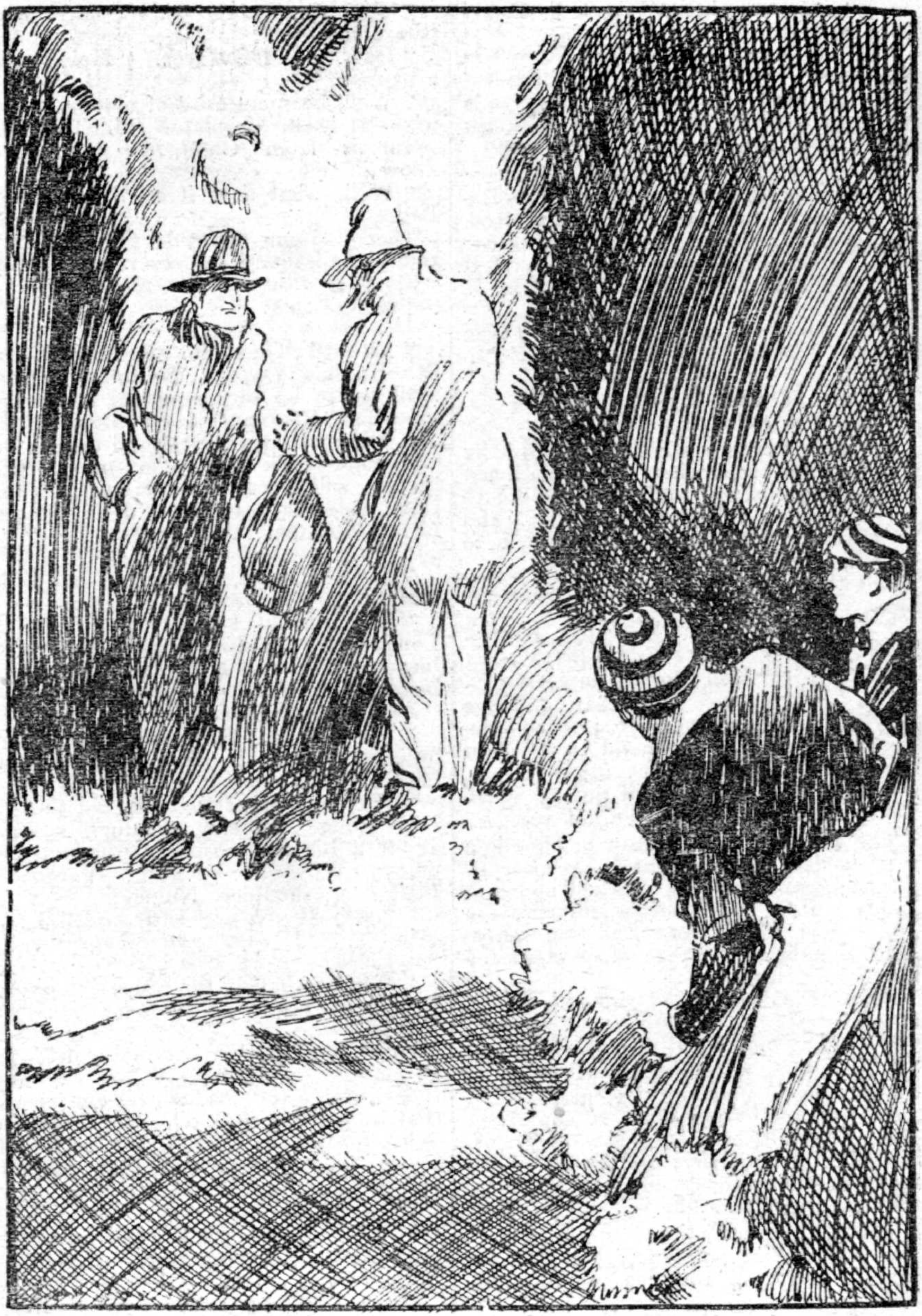
"Then it is for me," said Dick Goodwin. "Ay, but this is a surprise! I wasn't expecting a telegram from anybody. I wonder what it can be?"

He took the buff-coloured envelope, and quickly tore it open; then he folded out the flimsy sheet, and glanced at the words with rather a puzzled frown upon his clear, honest face.

"Bad news?" asked Hubbard curiously.

Goodwin shook his head.

"Nay, not bad," he said. "But I can't quite understand—— Ay, but I'm a champion noodle—I am that! Of course, I can understand it now!"



"What terrible goings on!" said Mr. Cuttle. "Wrecked—smashed to smithereens—bombed—the whole school——" were a few chance words Handforth caught.

"What's it about?" asked Teddy Long eagerly.

"Mind your own business!" put in Handforth. "You're too jolly inquisitive, my son! Goodwin can receive a telegram without you wanting to know what's in it, I suppose?"

Teddy Long looked injured.

"It ain't often that chaps in the Remove have telegrams," he protested. "If ever one does come, a chap always lets the other fellows have a look. It ain't right to have private matters in the Remove!"

"Of course it's not!" said Owen major. "Let's have a squint, Goodwin?"

"Show us what the wire says?"

"Hand it round, my son!"

Several juniors were not troubled by any scruples regarding good manners. They were curious, and they wanted to see what this telegram contained, and they did not hesitate to ask Goodwin to pass it round.

But the lad from Lancashire shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I can't show you this telegram—it's private!"

"Oh, is it?" said Merrell unpleasantly. "Well, let me tell you that Remove kids ain't allowed to have private telegrams! You'd better hand over that wire before we take it by force!"

"We'll jolly well take it now!" yelled Teddy Long. "Yah! I've got it!"

The sneak of the Remove had made a sudden dash forward, and he snatched the telegram out of Dick Goodwin's hands before the latter could prevent him. And Long went scuttling across the Triangle, with a crowd of other fellows round him.

"Let's have a look?" shouted several voices.

"Read it out, Teddy!"

The juniors swarmed round, eager to catch sight of Goodwin's telegram. They were curious to see what it contained. But nearly all these fellows were juniors like Merrell and Noys and Gulliver; not many of the really decent Remove chaps took part in this scene.

Teddy Long read the telegram, and he was rather disappointed, for it did not contain anything startling or interesting.

"Why, it's only about a beastly bicycle!" said Long, in disgust.

"A telegram—about a bicycle?"

"Yes. Goodwin's pater must have pots of money!"

"Rats!" said Gulliver. "He's nearly a pauper!"

"Well, he spent a lot of money on this wire—at least, his mater did. This telegram is from Goodwin's mater, you know!"

"Well, what does it say?" demanded Bell.

Teddy Long passed the telegram round, and many juniors read it. And what they saw on that flimsy sheet of paper was this:

"Richard Goodwin, Remove Form, St. Frank's College, Bellton, Sussex.—Will try to be very punctual in sending machine Bannington on October 27. Am taking train for Scotland to-day, but will come back soon. On my return, bicycle will receive very special attention. Important matters detain father now.—MOTHER."

"Well, it's only about a bally bicycle!" said Gulliver.

"That's what I said!" put in Teddy Long. "So Goodwin is going to have a bicycle at the end of the month! Lucky beast! I wish I'd got one!"

Dick Goodwin went into the crowd.

"Have you finished?" he asked quietly. "Can I have my telegram back?"

"We don't want the silly old thing!" said Long. "Fancy sending a wire about a bicycle! Your mater must be dotty! Why, I—— Yow! Yarooooh! Leggo my shoulder, Nipper!"

"Not just yet, you little cad!" I said grimly. "I say, you chaps—lend a hand!"

"What—what's the idea?" gasped Long, in alarm. "Lemme go, you beast!"

"Not until we've bumped you!" put in Handforth warmly. "You contemptible little rotter! What was the idea of snatching Goodwin's telegram like that? What business is it of yours? You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself, you inquisitive little wretch!"

"Ow!" howled Teddy Long. "If you don't lemme go, I'll—I'll——"

"Now then—all together!" said Handforth.

Long had been seized by Handforth, myself and two or three others, and he was brought to the ground with considerable force.

Bump!

"That's for being inquisitive!" said Handforth. "Now again! Bump! That's for being a cad!" said Handforth. "Once more! Bump! And that's for getting your nose into affairs which don't concern you!" concluded Handforth. "You deserve three or four more bumps, but we'll let you off—too much giddy trouble."

Long picked himself up, howling, and he fled across the Triangle. By this time Dick Goodwin had recovered his telegram, and walked into the Ancient House, and made his way straight to the Remove passage. The fellows out in the Triangle did not think anything more of the matter. The telegram was of no importance, since it only referred to a bicycle which Goodwin was to have, presumably, on the twenty-seventh of the month.

But as Goodwin went into his own study, his eyes were gleaming—and it really seemed that the telegram had another significance in his eyes.

"By gum!" he muttered, as he closed the door of his study. "This looks important! I wonder what it can mean?"

He went straight over to his desk, and sat down at the writing-pad. Then he drew the telegraph-form towards him, and produced a pencil.

"Now, let me see," he murmured. "The first word is all right, but I've got to cross out the next two—leave the fourth word, cross out the next two, leave the next word, and so on. Yes, that's right—that's the code!"

Goodwin had the telegram in front of him, and he placed a pencil line through the words "try to," then he crossed out "very punctual," then "sending machine," then "on October," and so on throughout the wording of the wire. He cut two words out, and left one in. And when he had finished there was, indeed, a very different message to read. It was one which caused Dick Goodwin to open his eyes in some surprise, for this is how the telegram now read:

"Will be in Bannington 27 train today. Come on bicycle. Very important. —FATHER."

In its original form, the telegram had seemed of no importance whatever; but now it was very different. Having been decoded, the result was rather startling. The telegram was not from Goodwin's mother, but from his father, and Goodwin senior was evidently coming down to Bannington during the evening.

"Now I wonder what it can mean?" muttered Goodwin, to himself. "Why is dad coming down? And why did he take the trouble to wire me in this way? It must be something very important. Ay, but it's champion—I didn't expect to see dad for weeks and weeks!"

His eyes gleamed with pleasure for a moment; then he looked rather troubled again, and very thoughtful. He could not help coming to the conclusion that there was a very serious reason for his father's sudden visit to St. Frank's.

The code which Goodwin senior had used was quite a simple one, but it was known only to himself, his son, and one or two of his most trusted employees. There was not the slightest doubt that Mr. Goodwin had a very particular reason in wishing his visit to the school to be kept a secret, for obviously he did not want anybody at St. Frank's to know that he would be arriving during the evening.

Dick had another look at the telegram. It was clear to him that the "27 train" meant the seven-twenty at Bannington. There was an express in from London at that time, as Goodwin very soon found out by consulting a local time-table.

Tea was over in Study C when there came a tap at the door, and Dick Goodwin presented himself. He stood there, hesitating in the doorway.

"Come in, my son," I said cheerfully. "What's the trouble?"

"I—I was going to ask a favour," said Goodwin, hesitatingly.

"Ask away!"

"We are frightfully obligin' chaps in this study," remarked Sir Montie. "Anythin' that you want doin' Goodwin, will be done. Pray allow us to hear your requirements."

Dick Goodwin entered the study.

"Well, you see, I wanted to run over to—to the village," he said slowly. "Could you lend me a bicycle, please? It will be champion of you if you can."

"Well, my back tyre's punctured," I put in. "I'm afraid my machine isn't much use."

"That's all right," said Tommy Watson. "You can have mine, Goodwin. I sha'n't be using it to-day, and you're welcome to it if you bring it back whole."

The visitor nodded.

"Oh, I shall keep it quite safe!" he said. "Thank you, Watson! It is very good of you. I may take the machine from the bicycle-shed, I suppose?"

"That's it," said Watson. "You can't mistake my jigger. It's enamelled dark green, you know, and both the tyres are new. Everything is in perfect order—lamps trimmed, too. You won't have any trouble at all."

"Ay, it's good of you. It is that," said Goodwin. "Thank you, Watson."

"Don't mention it!" said Watson lightly.

The Lancashire boy passed out of the study, and there was a silence for a moment or two.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Watson.

"I think that we ought to get up a search for him," I said absently.

"Eh?"

"A search for whom, dear old boy?"

"Why, the guv'nor, of course!" I replied. "It's jolly mysterious!"

"I was talking about Goodwin, you ass!" said Watson. "There's no need to worry about Mr. Lee: he can look after himself all right. I wonder why Goodwin wants to borrow my jigger? Why can't he walk down to the village?"

"My dear chap, it's no good asking me," I replied. "You've lent him your bike, and there's an end of it. I'm not worrying myself about Goodwin."

And, as a matter of fact, I hardly gave the Lancashire boy a thought. I was deeply concerned regarding Nelson Lee. He had not communicated with the school during the whole day. Nelson Lee had disappeared during the previous night, and nothing had been seen or heard of him since.

And I could not help worrying. I could not help thinking of the curious circumstances in which the guv'nor had left the study. Attired only in slippers and a light brown suit, it seemed incredible that Nelson Lee had gone right away from the district. There was every indication, in fact, that the guv'nor had been surprised, and that he had just left his study for a few minutes only. Then why had he not returned?

But, after all, I took Watson's advice. I realised that Nelson Lee was easily capable of looking after himself, and so I ceased to worry.

Meanwhile, Dick Goodwin was getting ready for his journey to Bannington. There was still plenty of time. It was, in fact, only just after six.

But Goodwin thought it would be just as well to get off at once. He could wait at Bannington. Moreover, he was a very careful junior, and he thought it would be just as well to be prepared with plenty of time, in case of a puncture.

And so, at about half-past six, Dick Goodwin started out on his journey. He would take it easily, and would arrive at Bannington at about seven o'clock. That left him barely half an hour to wait at the station.

Goodwin went to the bicycle-shed, took Tommy Watson's machine from its place, and lit the lamp, for it was quite dark already. Dark, dull masses of clouds filled the sky, and there was a considerable wind. It seemed, in fact, that the night was likely to be a rather stormy one.

However, there was no rain, and the roads were comparatively dry; but in places where the trees overhung the road there were patches of mud—thick, sticky mud.

Goodwin took it easily, and he rode in a leisurely fashion down the lane into the village, and then took the main road to Bannington. There was practically no traffic about, and the solitary cyclist had the road to himself. As he pedalled along, he was wondering why his father had taken this sudden trip down to Bannington. What could it mean? Why was Mr. Goodwin coming to the school, or nearly to the school? And why, above all, had he wired to his son in code?

It was rather a puzzle, and the Lancashire boy decided that it would be quite useless for him to conjecture. It would be far better to wait until he saw his father, and then he would understand everything.

Watson's bicycle went beautifully. It was really a splendid jigger, and it was in perfect order. Tommy Watson was a careful youth, and anything that he possessed he kept scrupulously clean, well oiled, and well cared for.

Dick Goodwin was just passing through a very quiet stretch of road. It was about half-way between Bellton and Bannington. The trees grew thickly on either side of the road, and the branches almost met overhead, in a kind of natural arbour. Within this stretch the darkness was absolutely intense.

The oil-lamps which were fitted to the bicycle only served to intensify the gloom.

But Goodwin was not a nervous lad; he did not care a jot about the darkness. He rode on easily, thinking only of the coming visit of his father.

And then, with startling abruptness, a strange thing took place.

Right in front of the bicycle, and stretched from side to side of the road, he saw a rope—a thin rope, which was drawn tight, its position being about three feet from the surface of the road.

"By gum!" muttered Goodwin, in alarm.

He applied his brakes, but there was no time to pull up. He had only seen the rope when he was almost upon it. The next moment he went straight into it, and he shot completely over the handle-bars and lay in a heap on the road, his bicycle crashing over, and both the lamps being extinguished on the instant.

Goodwin was dazed by the shock of it, and he hardly knew where he was, or what had happened. He attempted to pick himself up; but, even as he was doing so, two dark forms came towards him, one from either hedge. The next moment Goodwin was seized and held securely.

"Eh, what—what does this mean?" said the lad. "By gum, if you touch me——"

"Take my advice, young man, and don't struggle," exclaimed a rough voice. "You can't possibly get away, so you'd better take the thing calmly. It'll only be the worse for you if you make a fuss."

Dick Goodwin was startled, but he was not scared, and the next moment he landed out with all his strength, for he was desperate. But it was quite hopeless from the start. Before Goodwin had struggled for long he was thrown to the ground, and a heavy knee was placed in the small of his back. Then his arms were wrenched round, and his wrists were secured with thick ropes. Two minutes later his ankles were in a similar plight. The junior was absolutely helpless.

And then, before he could speak, a thick muffler was forced round his mouth and drawn tight. Meanwhile, Goodwin himself was absolutely confounded; he was flabbergasted. He could not understand what this meant. It was so startling that he found his mind in a whirl.

His captors did not speak any more. They carried Dick Goodwin through a gap in the hedge and deposited him on the grass beyond; then the bicycle was fetched, and the road was left, dark and deserted.

What did it mean?

Who were these men who had seized the Lancashire boy in such dramatic circumstances?

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CHAPTER V.

REGINALD PITT'S DISCOVERY.

REGINALD PITT, of the Remove, gave a grunt.

"Buck up, Jack, my son!" he said. "We shall have to hurry, you know, or we shall be late for calling over. We must buzz like the very dickens!"

"Rather!" said Jack Grey. "Still, I think we shall just manage to do it all right."

The two juniors were on their way home from Bannington. They had been doing a little shopping, and now they were compelled to hurry in order to be at St. Frank's in time for calling over. It was very dark, and it seemed that rain was in the air, although no rain was actually falling.

The chums of Study E pedalled hard, and they had the road to themselves. They were already nearly half-way, and the brilliant acetylene lamp on Pitt's bicycle illuminated the road clearly for a good distance ahead.

They entered upon a dark stretch of road, where the trees met together overhead. It was the same stretch of roadway which had witnessed the startling adventure to Dick Goodwin. There was nothing very curious in the fact that Pitt and Grey were using the same road very shortly afterwards. They were returning from Bannington, and Dick Goodwin had been on his way to the town.

The mud was rather thick beneath the trees, and the two juniors could not proceed so quickly, and quite suddenly Reginald Pitt uttered an exclamation.

"Hallo!" he said. "What was that?"

"What was what?" asked Grey.

"I thought I saw something glittering in the mud," said Pitt, applying his brakes. "In fact, I'm sure I did—something that looked like silver."

He dismounted, and Grey slowed up, too.

"Oh, it's nothing!" said Jack Grey. "This is only wasting time, Pitt. We mustn't be late for calling over."

"It can't be helped," said Pit. "I'm pretty sure I saw something, and I want to investigate. It will only take two seconds."

He wheeled his bicycle back along the road, and almost at once he caught a glitter of something lying in the mud. He bent down and picked the object up, and wiped some of the mud from it.

"A giddy pocket-knife," said Pitt—"a beauty, too!. Look at it, Jack!"

Grey looked, and he suddenly opened his eyes wider.

"Why, that belongs to Goodwin!" he said. "I saw him use it only yesterday. He was sharpening a pencil on the Ancient House steps."

"I expect he dropped it as he was coming along this way," said Pitt. "It's a good thing we found it, my son. It's a fine knife—must have cost twenty-five bob at least. Goodwin will be jolly grateful to us when we hand this to him. By jingo, you're right! There are his initials engraved here! Look!"

Jack Grey looked, and the initials "R. G" were quite distinct upon the surface of the pocket-knife.

Pitt slipped it into his pocket, and was about to continue his ride, when he looked upon the ground, and then his attention became fixed. Reginald Pitt was a very keen junior, and there was not much that could miss his gaze when he was on the alert, and he was suddenly on the alert now.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "It seems there has been an accident."

"An accident?" repeated Grey, rather startled.

"Well, look for yourself," said Pitt. "Just see how the mud is disturbed here. These marks are as clear as anything, and I'm pretty sure——"

"Hallo! What's this?" said Grey abruptly.

He bent down and picked up a small object from the road, and the two juniors had no difficulty in recognising it as a broken lamp-bracket. It was twisted and bent and smashed. It's presence there was rather significant, for it clearly indicated that a smash had recently occurred on the spot.

"It seems to me that Goodwin came a cropper," remarked Pitt grimly. "He must have been riding along this way, and possibly he side-slipped in the mud. Anyway, he came over with a terrific crash—that's obvious."

"Well, where is he now?" asked Grey.

"It seems to me that the accident happened some little time ago," replied Pitt. "Perhaps Goodwin went on, walking. Anyhow, it seems that his bicycle was a bit bashed up. I think we'd better investigate this."

"Investigate it?" repeated Grey.

"Exactly!" said Pitt briskly. "We'll just put our bicycles against the hedge and take the lamps off. We shall have more freedom of movement then."

It was not long before the two juniors were back in the centre of the road, their bicycles reposing against the hedge. Both Pitt and Grey held their lamps in their hands, and they flashed these brilliant lights upon the surface of the roadway. It was now possible to see everything with much greater distinctness.

"Here we are—another clue!" said Pitt suddenly.

He bent down and cast the rays of his light fully upon some pieces of broken glass which were mixed up with the mud. The pieces of glass were red, proving that they had orginally belonged to the rear lamp of a bicycle.

"It looks pretty serious," remarked Grey.

"Well, we don't know yet," replied Pitt. "But this mud is tremendously disturbed. There's no doubt about that. Fortunately, it is thick and sticky, but not wet. It has left the tracks clearly."

Staring keenly at the road, both the juniors could see the marks where Dick Goodwin had fallen. There were many tracks on the road—the marks of motor-car tyres, cycle tyres and cart wheels. And they were all very clearly indicated. Walking along some little distance the two juniors examined the road with even greater care than before.

And Pitt came to a halt again, and stared eagerly down.

"Do you see these tracks?" he asked. "They were made by Watson's bicycle."

Gray looked rather surprised.

"How do you know that, Mr. Sexton Blake?" he inquired.

"Nothing easier," replied Pitt. "These tyres are special ones, they have a peculiarly studded tread. Don't you remember Watson fitting them to his machine last week? They're new tyres, and there aren't any others in the school like them. Watson was rather proud of that tread, I remember."

"Yes I do remember something about it," said Grey. "Then Watson must have come along this way, too?"

"Obviously."

Pitt retraced his steps, Grey accompanying him. And they once more got to the place where the accident had occurred. Passing along, Pitt continued to examine the surface of the road. And once more he came to a halt, and this time there was rather a startled expression in his eyes.

"Look down there!" he exclaimed. "What do you think of it, Jack?"

Jack Grey stared at the ground.

"Well, either I'm very dull or there's something wrong with my eyesight," he said. "I can't see anything startling."

"It's not what you can see—it's what you can't see?' said Pitt lucidly.

Grey stared.

"What I can't see?" he repeated.

"Where are the tracks of Watson's bicycle?" asked Reginald Pitt keenly.

Grey understood then, and he stared down quickly. No, there were certainly no tracks now. Watson's bicycle had come to this spot, but had not continued past it. The mud could not be lying.

"Well, what about it?" said Grey, at last.

"There is only one thing to think," said Pitt. "Goodwin was using Watson's bicycle. He hasn't got a jigger of his own—we know that—so it is pretty clear that he borrowed Watson's. That's what I make of it, anyhow. We'll reason it out. We'll try to reconstruct what happened."

"My hat! You're quite a giddy detective!" exclaimed Jack Grey, smiling.

Pitt grinned.

"Not yet," he said. "I've often thought that I'd like to be a detective later on. But there's no telling what a chap will be when he grows up. Fellows make all sorts of plans, and spend heaps of money on a certain career, and when they're about twenty-five or thirty they branch off in a totally different direction. That's generally the way of things, you know."

"Well what about these tracks?" said Grey practically.

They went back along the road, past the spot where the accident had occurred, and then they made another discovery. The tracks of Watson's bicycle were single—that is, there were no returning tracks. This positively indicated that the bicycle had come to this spot, had not proceeded beyond—and had not turned back. Then what had become of it?

"Great Scott!" muttered Pitt, with a frown. "This looks queer, you know. These tracks tell a complete story, if you only look at them in the right way. Don't you see Jack? Here are the tracks of Watson's bicycle—clear and distinct. The machine came along in this direction, and then Goodwin—who was riding the bike—came a cropper. He didn't continue his journey to Bannington, because there are no traces in the mud. We know that for certain. He didn't ride back to Bellton, because there are no returning tracks in that direction, either."

"He might have carried the bike," suggested Grey shrewdly.

Pitt nodded.

"Yes, that's quite right," he said. "In fact it is probably the only explanation. One of the wheels was buckled, no doubt, and Goodwin was forced to carry the machine. That's about the size of it, I figure. At the present time I'm not satisfied."

"Why aren't you satisfied?"

"Well, it looks—it looks queer," said Pitt, scratching his head. "How did Dick Goodwin have a spill at this spot? Now I come to look at the mud, it is too thick for anybody to side-slip in. There was no other traffic and I can't see why Goodwin should come a cropper here. There might have been foul play!"

"Foul play!" repeated Grey, startled.

"Very likely," said Pitt. "Don't you remember the hints that have been going about lately? Goodwin has been a bit of a mystery ever since he came to St. Frank's—and on one occasion somebody tried to kidnap him. Don't you think it possible that he was stopped on the road—pulled from his machine, or something? If that happened, it would account for the missing bicycle, and all the rest of it."

"But how can we be certain?" asked Grey, who was now becoming very serious.

"Well we can have another look

round and see if there are any more clues," said Pitt. "If Goodwin was pulled from his machine and made a prisoner, it's fairly obvious that he was taken through the hedge somewhere—and, probably, his bicycle was taken through after him. So what we must do now is to have a look at the hedges."

The two juniors passed along on the grass, near the ditch, and their lights illuminated the ground clearly. Jack Grey was rather sceptical; he did not exactly believe that Pitt's theory was correct. It was altogether too startling and extraordinary. But before long Grey changed his opinion.

For at a certain spot in the hedge Reginald Pitt came to a halt. He directed the rays of his lamp down upon the soft path. There, clear and distinct was a mark—a mark caused by a bicycle tyre!

"What do you think of it?" said Pitt steadily.

It was the same peculiar tread—a distinctive pattern. The bicycle wheel had touched on that spot just for a moment, as it was being carried through the hedge. There were other marks, too—footprints. There was absolutely no doubt that Goodwin's bicycle had been taken through the hedge, and the junior had been taken through, too. There had certainly been foul play!

"Good heavens!" muttered Jack Grey. "This—this is terrible, you know! What shall we do, Pitt?"

"Get back to the school as quickly as we can!" said Pitt briskly. "It's the only thing to be done my son. We must give the alarm, and then search parties will be sent out. The police will be informed, and all sorts of things. It seems to me that Goodwin has been kidnapped!"

"Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed Grey. "And—and we have discovered all this because you're so jolly keen Reggie. I must say that you're a bit of a wonder!"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "All I did was to use my eyes. We happened to come along here, and we found Goodwin's pocket-knife. Then we had a look round, and all this has resulted. The mud of the road has told us the whole story. And now we've got to buzz ahead and give the alarm."

"Perhaps we'd better go to Watson, to begin with" suggested Grey, as they prepared to remount their bicycles. "He might be able to tell us something. In any case, he'll know if he lent his jigger to Goodwin."

"Yes," said Pitt. "That's rather a good idea. Well, come on, we've got to buzz like the very deuce!"

A moment later the two juniors were on their bicycles, and they were pedalling towards St. Frank's at top speed.

They arrived in record time, and, having placed their bicycles against the stone-work of the Ancient House steps, they dashed indoors, hot and breathless, and rushed straight down the Remove passage to Study C. Then they burst in and found Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and myself busy at our prep.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie, laying down his pen. "It's an invasion, dear old boys! Pray tell us what is the matter, Pitt!"

"I want to speak to Watson," said Pitt. "Did you lend your bicycle to Goodwin?"

Tommy Watson nodded.

"Yes," he replied. "What about it?"

"Well, I'm right in that respect, anyhow," said Pitt. "Close the door, Jack."

Grey quietly closed the door.

"What's the mystery?" I inquired, laying back in my chair. "Why the need for privacy?"

"Something has happened," said Reginald Pitt. "Something rather bad, I believe."

"To my jigger?" asked Watson, jumping up. "If that ass has had an accident with my bike I'll half slaughter him! It's a new one, and——"

"There's no need for you to be wild," interrupted Pitt. "I don't suppose for a moment that Goodwin has had an accident in the ordinary way. But it is fairly certain that he has met with foul play!"

I jumped up!

"What do you mean, Pitt?" I demanded sharply. "What reason have you got for saying that?"

Pitt looked at me straight.

"Every reason!" he replied. "Goodwin has met with foul play, and I believe that he has been kidnapped!"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie mildly.

"I'll tell you exactly what we have discovered," went on Pitt. "You're a keen fellow, Nipper, and you'll be able to appreciate the facts. Now, listen."

And Pitt, without any further delay, proceeded to explain exactly what he and Jack Grey had discovered. They told us how they had found the pocket-

knife in the mud. How they had detected the tracks of Watson's bicycle. How they had read the story of the mud, and all the rest of it. We listened intently, and with growing alarm. And when Pitt had finished there was only one possible conclusion to come to. Dick Goodwin had met with disaster on the Bannington Road!

"This is jolly serious, Pitt!" I said. "As you say, there is no doubt that Goodwin was stopped, pulled off his bicycle, and made a prisoner. In short, he has been kidnapped."

Tommy Watson grunted.

"I was going to make a fuss about my bicycle," he said. "But if Goodwin has had trouble of that kind, there's no need for me to make it worse. It wasn't his fault, anyhow. It's a lucky thing I had new tyres on my jigger, because you were able to examine the tracks. Well, what's going to be done?"

It only took me a few seconds to decide.

"The guv'nor isn't here," I said. "Goodness knows where he is. The best thing we can do is to go straight to the Head, Pitt—you and I. You can tell Dr. Stafford exactly what you have discovered, and then the Head will be able to give his orders. I expect a party will be sent out at once in search. Come along!"

Pitt nodded.

"Yes, that's about the best thing to do," he said briskly.

We went out of Study C, and before long we were tapping on the door of the Headmaster's own private sanctum. We were invited to enter, and we walked in and found the Head chatting with Mr. Crowell.

"Well, boys, what is it?" asked the Head rather sharply. "You should not disturb me now——"

"I am sorry, sir, but this matter is of the utmost importance," I interrupted. "Goodwin, of the Remove, has disappeared! He is missing!"

"Disappeared?" repeated the Head. "Missing? What do you mean, Nipper?"

Pitt proceeded to explain, and he did so as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, the Head and Mr. Crowell listened with growing interest and alarm. By the time Pitt had finished, the Head was on his feet, and he was pacing up and down his study with agitated strides.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "This is most disconcerting—it is, indeed, startling! Judging from your story, Pitt, it seems only too certain that Goodwin has met with some disaster! Are you absolutely certain? Do you not think it possible that you have made a mistake, and that Goodwin met with just an ordinary mishap?"

"No, sir, Pitt is quite right," I put in. "There's no doubt that Goodwin met with foul play—he has been kidnapped—and I think the police ought to be informed!"

"Good gracious!" said the Head.

He paced up and down for a few moments.

"What a pity it is that Mr. Lee is not here," he went on, at length. "He is just the man we need in such a crisis as this."

"Haven't you heard anything about the guv'nor, sir?" I asked anxiously.

"Not a word, Nipper, not a single word!" replied the Head. "To tell the truth, I am becoming somewhat uneasy about Mr. Lee. However, we must not discuss that question now. You may go, boys—I will deal with the affair at once."

We took our departure from the Head's study, and very shortly afterwards we became aware that sudden activities were afoot. Morrow and Fenton of the Sixth appeared accompanied by the Head and Mr. Crowell. There were two or three other prefects, and they came out into the Triangle, and were about to go to the gates when the Headmaster beckoned to me.

I went over at once, and the Head was frowning with worry.

"Where is Pitt?" he inquired. "I want Pitt to come with us so that he can point out the exact spot."

"Here I am, sir," said Reginald Pitt, coming up. "I'll come with you, with pleasure, sir. Perhaps Nipper had better come, too—he is rather a keen chap——"

"I don't think so, Pitt," I said. "I couldn't do anything, anyhow."

Pitt stared.

"You don't want to come?" he said. "That's rather unusual—for you!"

"Well, I suppose it is," I said. "But I have something else to do, old man. You will understand, perhaps."

Pitt was rather puzzled, but he went off at once with the Head and the prefects. And they disappeared out of the gateway and went down the lane at a sharp walk.

The spot where Pitt had found the marks in the road was about a mile and a half distant, and almost half an

hour had elapsed before the place was reached. It was dark and dismal, and the wind was howling through the trees. Many electric torches had been brought, and Pitt lost no time in pointing out the many indications in the mud, and in the hedges.

And Dr. Stafford came to the only possible conclusion.

Dick Goodwin had been kidnapped—he had been made a prisoner by some unknown assailant, and he had been taken away. His bicycle had been removed with him, and it was clear that the men who had it attempted to destroy all traces. But they had been in a hurry, and they had failed, although it was fairly certain that Goodwin had been made a prisoner, there was really no method of getting on the track of his captors. The meadows on both sides of the road were searched, but they were fruitless of result. It was impossible to tell which direction Goodwin's assailants had taken, and where they had gone to. It was also a mystery who they were.

One thing, however, was obvious—the telegram which Dick Goodwin had received was a fake. It had been sent for the deliberate purpose of making the boy ride to Bannington on a bicycle. And then the trap had been set, and Dick Goodwin had been ambushed. The whole affair, in fact, had been carefully and cleverly engineered from the very start.

What was the explanation?

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING SURPRISE.

TOMMY WATSON grabbed my arm firmly.

"Now, you ass, you've got to explain yourself!" he said grimly. "What's the meaning of it?"

"Eh?" I said. "What's the meaning of what?"

We were in the Triangle, and the search-party had already vanished down the road. A good many other fellows were in the Triangle, for the news of the disaster to Dick Goodwin had leaked out, and the juniors, in particular, were agog with excitement and interest. But I was very thoughtful, and I had been silent for some little time.

"Out with it!" said Watson. "Why didn't you go with the search-party, Nipper? Why didn't you take advantage of what Pitt said?"

"Yes, dear old boy, you really must explain," said Sir Montie. "I'm quite certain that you have somethin' in your mind. I was sure that you would go with the search-party, because I know that you are interested in detective work. But, instead of doing that, you remain here and look as though all the cares of the world had fallen on your shoulders."

I smiled.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've another idea in my mind," I said. "Look here, you chaps. Come over by the gymnasium wall—where we can talk quietly. I want to have a chat with you. I've got something in my mind, and I want to ask you what you think of it."

"I knew there was something stirrin' in your brain, dear old fellow," said Sir Montie. "You've got some startlin' idea—you have really! I know it, begad!"

We went over to the wall of the gymnasium, and we were then quite private. I looked at my chums thoughtfully, and there was rather a grim light in my eyes, too.

"Look here," I said, at last, "do you remember that old mill on the edge of Bannington Moor?"

"Remember it!" said Watson. "Of course we remember it, you ass!"

"I mean, do you remember that little adventure we had about a week ago?" I said.

"When we found those two men there, and you climbed the mill sail?" asked Watson. "Yes, we remember that, Nipper. How could we forget it? You nearly came a cropper, too."

I nodded.

"That's right," I said. "I climbed up that mill sail, and was able to look in at the window right at the top of the mill where a light was shining. I saw two men there, and the room had been especially prepared."

"A new door, and barred windows, and all the rest of it," said Watson, nodding.

"Exactly," I went on. "In fact, it was clear that the place had been prepared as a prison. There was a great open door, fitted with locks and bolts. And the window was barred, and on a

special shelf there were dozens of tins of food—meat, fish, fruit, and all the rest of it. And there were lots of biscuits and cakes. We came to the conclusion that the room at the top of the mill had been specially prepared as a prison for somebody who had not yet been captured."

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "You—you mean Goodwin?"

"My dear chap, isn't it obvious?" I asked quietly. "Even at the time we reckoned that the place had been prepared for Goodwin's benefit. And we made up our minds that if ever Goodwin vanished, we would look in that mill first off. Well, he has vanished. Perhaps you now understand why I didn't want to go with the search-party."

"By jingo!" said Tommy Watson. "So that's the wheeze—eh? I believe you're right, Nipper. I believe that Goodwin has been taken to that old mill. It's the only explanation, in fact. He must have been taken there, and he is being kept a prisoner. He was captured by these two mysterious men we followed to the mill last week!"

I nodded.

"You've hit it on the nail," I said. "It's a dead certainty that Goodwin is there, and we are going off now—at once—to have a look."

"But those two rotters may have changed their plans by this time," said Watson doubtfully.

"Why should they?" I asked. "What reason have they for changing their plans? They don't know anything about our visit—they don't know that we went there that night, and they think that everything is secret. They simply prepared the place in advance, and they kidnapped Goodwin to-night. It will be rather good if we rescue him at once!"

"Rather, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie. "Well, I suggest that we get off now. There is no sense in wastin' time."

Sir Montie was right, and almost at once we started off. But I took a little electric torch with me, and an empty revolver of the guv'nor's. I did not suppose for a moment that I should have to use it. But even an empty revolver is sometimes very handy. It is quite sufficient to scare a man who doesn't know that it isn't loaded.

We took the route through Bellton Wood. And, after following the narrow footpath right through the wood, we at last came out upon the edge of the Bannington Moor. It loomed before us, dark and dismal, with the wind roaring across its undulated surface, in great, powerful gusts.

It was still comparatively early in the evening, but the whole scene was deserted. Not a light showed in any direction. One might have supposed that we were standing upon the edge of a wilderness. The sky was gloomy and overcast. But, outlined against the clouds, we could distinctly see the old mill.

It was dark; no light showed from any window, but we were not surprised at this. If Goodwin was a prisoner there, the fact would not be advertised.

It was really a splendid evening for our purpose. The wind howling round the mill made it a simple matter for us to approach quite close without being heard; any sound that we happened to make would be drowned by the wind, and so we crept closer and closer until at length we were within a few yards of the broken down doorway.

"I don't see the reason for this," whispered Watson. "Why can't we go up boldly, instead of creeping along——"

"My dear chap, if Goodwin is here, it's pretty certain that somebody is on guard," I said. "One man probably. And he won't be upstairs. He'll be down here, prowling about, or just inside the doorway. We've got to be jolly careful, or we may spoil everything!"

"Begad!" whispered Sir Montie suddenly. "I—I saw——"

"What did you see?" asked Watson.

"The glow of a pipe, or a cigarette," replied Tregellis-West. "I am quite certain. There you are, dear boys! Look!"

I was already looking. And there, in the blackness of the doorway, I saw a red glow for a second. It was the glow of a cigarette, and this proved that I had been right in my deductions. Somebody was there—a man was on guard. This very fact caused me to thrill with excitement.

For it was now almost certain that Dick Goodwin was indeed a prisoner in the mill.

"There's only one thing to do!" I murmured. "We shall have to rush him!"

"Begad!"

"We'll make a dash at the doorway,

and we'll overpower this chap before he can make a fuss," I went on. "We ought to be able to do it easily between the three of us. Then we'll bind him up, gag him, and leave him on the floor while we rush upstairs."

"But how can we bind him?" said Watson. "We haven't got any string, or rope——"

"Yes, we have," I interrupted. "I brought a length of rope; it's always just as well to be prepared."

I took a long coil of thin, strong rope out of my pocket, and held it in my hand ready. Then, with the electric torch in my other fist, I gave the word.

"Now!" I breathed. "Creep up to the door, and then rush in!"

We left the bush under which we had been sheltering, and we crept quietly and cautiously towards the broken doorway of the old mill. And then, when we arrived, we dashed forward with tremendous force.

Crash!

Tommy Watson and I bumped forcibly into somebody who appeared to be sitting on an upturned box. Anyhow, he was sent flying, and he landed upon his back with a thud.

"By thunder! What—what the——"

"The light!" gasped Sir Montie.

Even as he spoke I switched on the electric torch, and the beam of light revealed the fact that a man was lying on his back beneath us. He was trying to struggle to his feet, but he found it impossible. The next moment I had got busy with the rope. And before our prisoner could move, his wrists were securely bound, and then the rope was twisted tightly round his ankles. He struggled and kicked and used all his strength in order to defeat our purpose. But it was useless; we soon had him trussed.

Meanwhile, he was swearing fiercely, and in a most disgusting manner. But we soon put a stop to this—by tearing the muffler from about his neck and binding it round his mouth. By the time we had finished we were breathless and hot. And we stood over our captive, triumphant, and glowing with success.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "We've settled his hash, anyhow. And now to get upstairs!"

We left the man where he was, and I led the way up the wooden steps towards the trapdoor in the ceiling, which admitted into the next floor of the mill. This trapdoor was bolted, but we soon slipped back the bolt, and climbed through.

A glance showed that this apartment was empty, and another ladder let up to the next floor. And so we progressed, until, at length, we were right at the top of the mill. We now found ourselves upon a little landing, only about a yard wide, and there, right in front of us, stood a heavy oaken door—quite bare and unfinished. It was a rough door, but it was tremendously strong. And, fitted to it, there were two enormously thick iron bolts. There was also a lock, and the key projected from it.

"Here we are!" I muttered. "Just as I thought! Goodwin is inside, and he is bolted and locked in. We will have him free in about two minutes!"

"There's a light in there, too!" whispered Watson. "I wonder why we didn't see it from outside?"

"There's obviously a shutter fitted to the window," I replied. "I expect it is on the outside—beyond the reach of the prisoner. Come on; there's no time to waste!"

I seized the top bolt of the door, and shot it back. Then I turned the key in the lock, and followed this up by pushing back the other bolt. But before entering I turned to my chums again.

"Be ready for another scrap!" I whispered. "There might be another man in here—with Goodwin. We shall probably have another scrap, but we're going to win!"

"Yes, rather!" said Watson excitedly.

I pulled open the door, and a flood of light came out upon us. Although I was momentarily doubtful, I dashed in, holding my empty revolver ready. And then I gave a great shout—a shout of absolute amazement.

For there, standing in the centre of the little room, was—Nelson Lee!

"Guv'nor!" I roared.

"Well, I'm dashed!" gasped Watson. "We—we thought——"

"Dear me! This is decidedly interesting. Nipper!" said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I did not expect to have a visit from you this evening, my lad. Splendid—splendid!"

I simply stood there, staring at Nelson Lee in a stupefied kind of way.

"But—but we thought we should find Goodwin!" I panted. "We had no idea that you were here, sir——"

"We were looking for Goodwin, sir," said Watson.

"I am exceedingly pleased that you were looking for Goodwin," said Nelson Lee. "For, by so doing, you have released me from a very unfortunate perdicament. To tell you the truth, my boys, I have been kept a prisoner in this apartment, and your arrival is more welcome than I can possibly say."

"It's absolutely astounding, sir!" I exclaimed. "What does it mean? How were you brought here? How did you get into this fix?"

Nelson Lee was quite cool.

"I regret to say, Nipper, that I acted with extreme foolishness," he said candidly. "I was caught in a very simple trap, and I really do not deserve to be rescued."

I looked at the guv'nor, and I nodded grimly.

"I knew it!" I said. "I knew it all along!"

"You knew what, Nipper?"

"That you had met with foul play, sir," I replied. "The Head was not alarmed at first, and he made out that you had simply gone off on a secret investigation. That's what I thought, too, just at the beginning, then I came to another conclusion. I thought that you had been collared by some rotters, and that you were being held up. And I was right, too; my uneasiness was justified!"

"I will just explain how it happened, my boys," said Nelson Lee. "By the way, is there any chance of trouble, from below?"

"Not a bit, sir," I replied. "There was only one man on guard, and we have made him quite helpless."

"Good!" said the guv'nor. "Well, my lads, it was this way. First, while I was in my study writing a letter, I was attracted by a somewhat suspicious noise in the Triangle. I was quite prepared for any ordinary matter—such as finding one or two of the boys breaking bounds after lights out. That, in fact, is what I thought was the truth. But I hardly got out into the open before I was attacked from behind, and a sandbag or a life-preserver was brought down on my head, and I was rendered helpless."

"My hat!" said Watson. "Were you hurt, sir?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, Watson, when one is sandbagged he is generally hurt, to some extent!" replied the guv'nor. "At all events, when I came to myself I was in this room, and here I have been ever since. There is really very little else to tell you."

"But who did it, sir?" I asked quickly. "Why were you brought here, and made a prisoner?"

"Fortunately, I am able to tell you that, too," said Nelson Lee, in a voice which denoted great satisfaction. "My captors were very obliging, and they even went so far as to tell me their plans. Of course, they did not think it was possible for me to escape, otherwise they would not have been so incautious. To be quite brief, these men are the agents of a big criminal organisation, and an extra big coup is arranged for to-night."

"Where, sir?" I asked.

"At Bannington Manor—the residence of Lord Banningstowe," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "In fact, this organisation intends to lift the whole of Lady Banningstowe's jewels—valued at twenty thousand pounds."

"Phew!" whistled Watson, in dismay. "And they will succeed, sir?"

"Not if I can help it, my lad," replied Nelson Lee. "These men think that I am helpless—that I can do nothing to frustrate their designs. But they will find that they are wrong. For I shall now make careful plans, and these rascals will be captured red-handed. It is extremely fortunate that you turned up when you did."

"Rather, sir!" I said. "In a way, you know, it was a compliment to you—to make you a prisoner. It shows that they were afraid of you, sir!"

"Exactly, Nipper," smiled Lee. "They told me, quite candidly, that they did not wish to attempt the job until I was safely out of the way. The plan was to keep me here, a prisoner, until a week had elapsed. By that time the rascals would have got completely away, and there would have been no chance of my getting on their track. Although it was a compliment to me, I did not particularly appreciate it. I shall lose no time in making my own plans."

"But what about Goodwin, sir?" I asked quickly.

"Goodwin?" said Nelson Lee. "Has anything happened to him?"

It only took me a few moments to put Nelson Lee in possession of the facts.

"H'm! It seems rather curious!" said the guv'nor. "In fact, Nipper, we are in the midst of quite a lot of mystery and excitement. Who are these captors of Goodwin? Why have they taken him away? Two kidnappings within the space of twenty-four hours is decidedly startling—eh?"

"Rather, sir!" said Watson. "We—we want to get on Goodwin's trail!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"And so we shall, my lad," he said. "I shall give Goodwin all my attention as soon as this other matter is settled. I have no doubt that we shall be successful. There is much to be done, and no time to be lost."

And Nelson Lee was right. There was, indeed, a great deal of work to be done. And it was quite clear to me that there would be a great deal more excitement before so very long.

But the problem which was worrying me more than anything was this—what had become of Dick Goodwin, and why had he been taken away? What was the mystery surrounding the boy from Lancashire?

It was destined that we should make many discoveries, and pass through many excitements before many hours had elapsed.

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

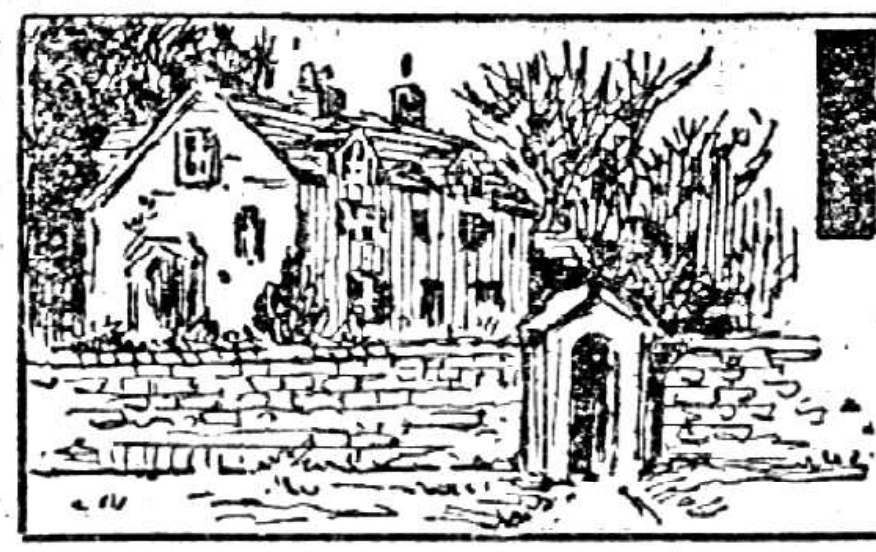
WHEN Nelson Lee's enemies thought to get the famous detective out of harm's way by trapping him and locking him up in the carefully prepared loft of the old mill, so that they could carry out their nefarious plans to commit a robbery at Lord Banningstowe's House, they had overlooked the existence of Nelson Lee's clever little assistant and his trusty friends, who were not going to rest until they had found the "guv'nor."

The rescue of Nelson Lee will mean consternation among the criminal gang who had anticipated getting away with Lady Banningstowe's jewels with comparative ease. It will also mean that Goodwin's kidnappers will soon have a sleuth-hound hot on their tracks.

Thus Next Week's Story, entitled "THE CLUE OF THE OIL TRAIL," will will be unusually exciting and full of dramatic situations. On this occasion, when trouble is brewing, we should find our cheerful friend, Mr. Josh Cuttle, in exceptionally high spirits. However, we won't ASK *him. We will take it for granted, and hope that he will be pleased with his portrait on the front page, at the same time regretting that we quite forgot to get him to append his autograph.*

THE EDITOR.

GRAND NEW DETECTIVE SERIAL JUST STARTED!



KIT & CORA

Mysterious Detectives

A TALE OF DETECTIVE ADVENTURE IN LONDON.

INTRODUCTION.

LIN FLEET, a lad of fifteen, wrongfully accused of stealing, loses his job at a motor garage. His parents being dead, he lives with an unscrupulous pair known as Uncle and Aunt Pawley, the former being better acquainted with the thefts at the garage than he would care to admit. Lin meets a stranger in a grey suit, who takes an interest in him, and the boy nicknames him "Mr. Mysterious." The stranger sends him on an errand to deliver a packet to a Mr. Crawson-Crake, who, behaves like a madman and threatens to shoot the lad unless he discloses the name of his employer, Lin escapes and in the following chapter recounts his experiences to "Mr. Mysterious," at the latter's house in Hampstead.

(Now read on.)

Mr. Mysterious.

IT began with a duel of the eyes.

The man caught sight of Lin and looked at him searchingly, though not without a rather pleasant twinkle in his keen grey eyes. But Lin did not like that twinkle. He thought that there was a suspicion of fun in it, and he was not going to be made fun of! He wanted to meet the gaze of those searching grey eyes with a bold, and perhaps rather defiant look; nothing rude or cheeky, but a firm, determined look, that would show the man he wasn't to be trifled with!

But somehow it was not a success. He held his head up and tried a hard, steady stare. But the keen grey eyes did not droop before it, or even waver. On the contrary, the twinkle in them deepened and looked like breaking into a downright smile. Lin gave it up and dropped his own gaze to the carpet.

He was beaten by a point in the first round.

The man nodded, pointing with his toasting-fork to a chair at the side of the table nearest the fire.

"Sit down and peg in!" he said crisply, if not curtly.

But Lin remained standing.

"I don't want to sit down," he said, in a tone that he meant to be firm and final. "I only came because I'd said I would. You wanted to know what that man said and did when he opened that packet. I only came to tell you that, and to give you your change."

He came to the table and laid four shillings and some coppers on its edge, then stepped back and stood stiffly upright as before, his cap in his hand, and a rather sullen look that was not often seen on his bright, animated face.

"I did want to know, and now I want to know more than ever, because I can see that it's going to be interesting!" said the man. "But it will do after tea. As for that money—put it in your pocket again. I may want you to do another little errand on two for me, and we can have a reckoning afterwards."

That roughed Lin up a little more; particularly the easy, assured tone of the man.

Another little errand or two! Just as though he was dead sure that he had got him—Lin—at his beck and call—like a dog!

"I don't want to stay," he said. "If you will let me tell you what you wanted to know, I'd like to get it over and go, sir."

"A few hurried words won't do; I want a full and detailed account. And you will do it better after tea," said the man, who had seated himself, and was busy with the smoking dish of ham. "Sit down!"

But Lin did not move. His lips drew together, his eyes were fixed upon the floor; his face hardened. It was hours since he had eaten. He was very hungry; and because he was hungry felt tired and cold. The steam of the hot, fragrant tea drifted to him on its way up the big chimney. So did the delicious smell of that grilled ham. And that big, comfortable chair at the end of the table near the fire looked very inviting! But he was not going to be ordered to sit down and eat! He meant to go, and he would go!

A hand—a small, white hand—was laid upon his arm. Its touch was gentle, but very, very firm. Before he quite knew how it came about he found himself seated in that chair.

"Don't mind him," said the girl, in a laughing whisper close to his ear, as she leant over the table and placed a cup of tea before him. "Don't mind my brother! Pretend he isn't here. Have tea with me."

Lin didn't mean to—but he did! He took a sip of that hot tea and felt better already. A plate of that savoury ham arrived somehow under his nose, and he began on it without thinking. It was simply grand! Then he had some of that big black sausage, that looked so queer and tasted so ripping. And sandwiches; lots of them—he didn't know how many—and all different. Then it got to little cakes, and fancy things, and——

Once, as he passed his cup for more tea, he happened to glance at the other end of the table, and for a moment the things didn't seem to taste as good. The man at the other end of the table had his head down over his plate, and Lin couldn't see his face; but his shoulders were shaking—he was laughing!

That was almost the last straw with Lin! But he had to stand it. He couldn't very well get up and stalk out of the room now, after having sat down and gone in like that for the tea and things.

He would sit it out, get his business over and go. And he would let that man know that he wasn't coming back to do any more errands!

The young lady offered him another sort of cakes. He wanted to decline in a dignified and rather stiff manner. But she was smiling—not laughing at him—but smiling so nicely, that he couldn't help taking one, and another cup of tea. After all . . . In spite of himself, he felt a nice, comfortable feeling creeping over him. He was no longer tired and cold. The fire glowed, purred, and crackled. It was rather jolly sitting there! He forgot to think about disagreeable things; in fact, he hardly thought about anything at all, but just sat there enjoying the warmth. He may have dozed a little. A fragrant whiff of tobacco-smoke roused him.

The man in grey was smoking a big black briar. He took this from his lips, nodded to Lin, and said:

"Now, we would like to hear all about your errand this afternoon. All, mind! We want the details, the little bits! No hurry; tell it slowly—and tell it all!"

This came rather as a shock to Lin. He had forgotten all about that errand; all about Mr. Crawson-Crake and the cardboard-box, and the pistol, and the watch—forgotten all those rotten, disagreeable things!

But he pulled himself together, and did his best.

It wasn't much of a best. He had no idea of putting dramatic effect into the tale; not even when he came to the part where he stood back to the wall, with the muzzle of that big revolver in a line with his eyes, waiting for the fifth stroke of the watch—and death!

He made no attempt to describe his feelings under that grim ordeal; but he went a little pale as he told it. Otherwise, it was merely a bald, dry account of the scene, as though it had happened to another boy, and he was telling it second-hand.

But perhaps his hearers could imagine the scene better than he could paint it. For they both listened with a close attention which might have flattered him, had he thought about it. The man, elbow on knee and pipe in mouth, leant forward, his eyes—but without any twinkle in them now—fixed upon Lin's face. At certain points he gave a little nod, as though he saw colour and meaning that the boy himself had missed. And sometimes he would ask a brief, crisp question. But that was the only break; the young lady did not speak.

But she, too, was watching the lad intently; and once, when he came to the ordeal of the pistol and the watch, there was a look of pity in her deep, soft eyes. And she murmured—but so softly that Lin did not hear:

"Poor boy! Poor boy!"

The man took a few slow puffs at the big black briar, then said:

"You have done this thing well, my lad! I have a use for a boy of your sort, and I do not intend to lose sight of you. By the way, what is your name?"

Lin stiffened again. There it was! The man spoke as though he had taken complete possession of him! He couldn't stand that! He did not answer.

The young lady gave a little rippling laugh, then exclaimed:

"Why, how funny! Here we have all had tea together like old chums, and all the while we didn't know each other's names! Our name is Twyford. That's my brother Kit, and I'm Cora. What is your name?"

Lin answered instantly.

"Lin," he said. "Lin Fleet!"

"Lin Fleet," repeated the girl. "A nice name—easy to remember."

The man in grey laughed.

"Its owner seemed to have forgotten it himself when I asked him," he said.

Then, turning to the boy and pointing to the other end of the room—the man's part, where there was only the bare floor, and a writing-desk, and a few odd old things, and stacks and stacks of books—went on to say:

"Lin, you see that row of big books on the lower shelf near the floor? Just go and pull out that thick one with the green back. Put it on the desk and hunt through it carefully, to see if you can find any face there like that of Mr. Crawson-Crake."

For a moment Lin thought of saying that he couldn't stay, he must go now, but it was put more like a request than an order, and he did not like to refuse. He went and got out the book, and was soon quite interested in his search.

Cora Twyford looked at him, then, leaning towards her brother, said in a low undertone:

"Kit, was it right to expose the boy to

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such a peril, and without a word of warning?"

"No—wrong, sis," answered her brother; for I should have remembered that desperate men are dangerous animals. Yet I do not regret it. This lad must be tried and tested in many ways, before we dare employ him in such work as ours. We dare not employ a tool that might break or bend under an unusual strain."

"That is true, Kit," said the girl thoughtfully.

"I knew that the boy had pluck of the dashing sort; that he could do a quick thing boldly in a moment of emergency," said Twyford, in the same low undertone. "I know now that he also has courage of the finer and rarer sort—courage that can stand a long-drawn strain and not give under it."

"That must have been a cruel ordeal, Kit!" murmured Cora.

And she stole another glance at the boy, as he bent over the big book on the desk at the far end of the room—a glance of pity, and of warm approval, too.

"It was, and he stood it well!" said her brother. "But he must be tried again. One more test!"

"Not of his courage, surely, Kit," said the girl. "You can have no doubts of that! And as to his honesty——" She pointed to the little pile of shillings and coppers, which still lay as Lin had placed it at the edge of the table. "It is not every boy who would have brought that money back, less only the few pence he had actually spent on fares, when he might so easily have kept it."

"Too trifling," said Twyford. "This boy's pride would not stoop to a common and petty act of dishonesty like that. He would withstand such a temptation easily—if he ever felt it. It was too easy to do, and required no courage at all. But would he stand a bigger and more dazzling temptation—something that appealed to his imagination, and dared him to do a bold thing?"

"I see your meaning, Kit," said the girl, "and I think he would."

"Yes, sis; but we must know. We must know to a certainty before we dare trust him as we may need to do," said Twyford gravely. "And, granting that he is capable of resisting such a temptation himself, is he strong enough to resist the influence of others less honest than himself? Is he strong enough to defend the thing entrusted to him against persuasion or threat?"

"Yes, I think so—even that!" said Cora.

"We must be sure! He must be tested!" Twyford said. Then, after another thoughtful pull at his pipe: "Cora, get that chain and pendant of yours—the thing that the Countess of Wraysfield would insist on your accepting after that affair of the robbery at Wraysfield Hall."

"The diamond pendant!" ejaculated Cora, under her breath. "Why, he is only a boy, Kit! He might be careless and lose it, not understanding its value; or have it taken from him by others who did!"

"Then he is not the boy for us!" said Twyford, "and we shall have learnt that in time. Better that the cost of the lesson should fall entirely on us. You may lose your diamond pendant, Cora, but I stand to lose a brighter jewel that I have long hoped to find—a boy of sterling courage, and the soul of honour. One whom I could train to work with us, and could trust as we trust each other—that is, absolutely—even if it be a matter of life or death!"

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"If he fails it won't be for my diamond pendant that I shall grieve, you may be sure, Kit! But he will not fail!" said Cora.

She went from the room, and presently returned with a small oblong, leather-covered case in her hand. Undoing the clasps, she opened it, displaying, on its satin bed, a slender chain of fine gold, and a pendant star of diamonds, that flashed with a myriad changing fires as she laid it on the table. She sighed, shaking her head. They whispered together over the gleaming jewel, and she murmured doubtfully:

"Beautiful! Yet there is something wicked in their gleam. Men have been led to murder by such witch-fires as these! Kit, I do not like to put this in his hands—a mere boy!"

"He must be tested," said Twyford. Then he called aloud: "Lin!"

His voice startled the boy, who, by this time had nearly got to the end of the big book with the green back. It was a queer book, and he had become quite absorbed in his search, though he had not found the face he looked for. There were hundreds, many hundreds, of faces in that book. Mostly they were photographs, but some were sketches—often only bare outlines, done with the pencil or fountain-pen. Yet the slightest of these gave him the idea somehow that it was a true and telling likeness of the person it was meant to represent. But though he had gone all through to the last page, he had not found in photograph or sketch the face of Mr. Crawson-Crake. And he rather thought he should know it if he did!

"Yes, sir?" he responded, looking up from the book.

"Have you found the face of Mr. Crawson-Crake?" asked Twyford, rising and strolling over to the desk. Then, as the boy shook his head, "No? Well, let us look together. It may be there yet, somewhere near the end."

He turned the leaves until he came to a page which Lin could have sworn was entirely blank. Yet when, after bending over it for a few moments only, he raised his head, and smiling, pointed with a stump of pencil to the page, a face stared from it at Lin—a mere dashing outline—but so vividly life-like that the boy actually recoiled with a little startled cry!

For it was the face of Crawson-Crake, just as it had glared at him above the revolver's muzzle as the watch chimed its fourth stroke!

"That's the man!" he cried. "And just as he glared at me when I thought it was all up and he would fire! Oh, how did you do it, sir?"

"There is no magic in it," smiled "Mr. Mysterious." "Your description was more telling than you thought. I had only to put myself in your place to see as you saw: The rest is just a matter of knowing how to sketch a little."

"It is very wonderful, sir!" exclaimed Lin, with admiration not unmixed with awe. "I wish that I could do it!"

"Oh, I shall teach you that, and a lot of other things, very probably!" said "Mr. Mysterious" easily. "Don't look glum, my lad. You will have some difficult, and some rather queer lessons to learn, but you will not find me a bad master."

(To be continued.)

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