No. 279.—ANOTHER SPLENDID STORY OF THE MISSING BOY OF ST. FRANK'S!

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THE DROPS OF OIL WERE DISTINCTLY VISIBLE NEAR THE GATEWAY.

The CLUE of the OIL TRAIL

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 Lancashire Lad," "The Mystery of the North Tower," "Missing from School," etc.

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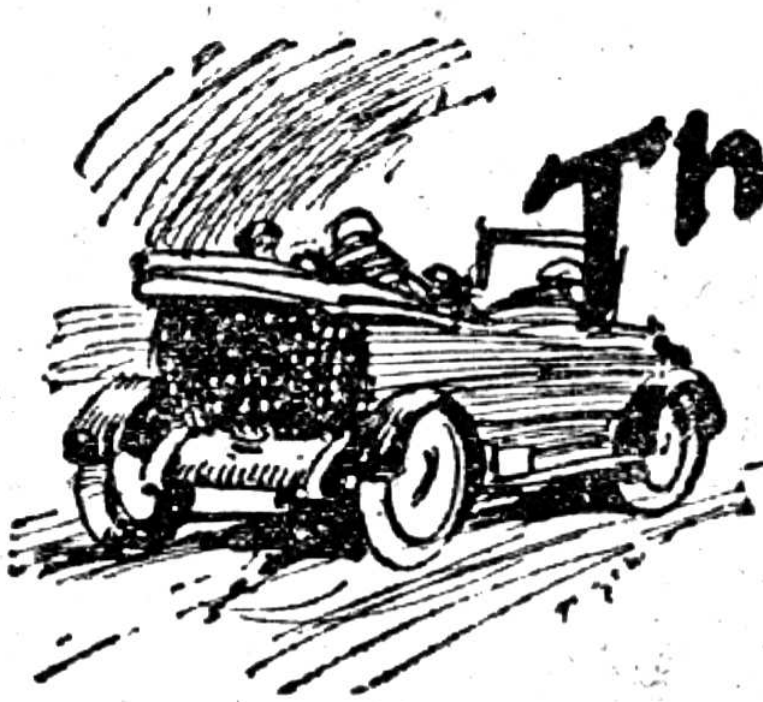

The Clue of the Oil Trail!

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

LEFT IN THE COLD!

TOMMY WATSON nodded.

"It certainly is a bit steep," he said thoughtfully.

"Steep!" I echoed. "I call it absolutely the limit, my son! Just think of it! We're left behind—left in the lurch! It's a bit offside of the guv'nor, and I'm disappointed in him. I don't reckon it's playing the game!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear old boy, it is frightfully painful to hear you runnin' down Mr. Lee," he said reprovingly. "After all, it's only right to suppose that Mr. Lee knows best. I'm shockin'ly cut up about it myself, but it's no good grumblin'. There's no sense in makin' a fuss, begad!"

"I'm not making a fuss, you ass; but just think of all the facts," I said warmly. "Just remember what has been happening to-night. And if you can say that the guv'nor has played the game you ought to be boiled in oil! Personally, I think that Mr. Lee has played a dirty trick on us."

"Hear, hear!" said Watson.

"Really, Nipper boy!" protested Sir Montie.

We were all sitting in Study C, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. It was evening—late evening; in fact, nearly bedtime. And quite a number of surprising and rather startling events had happened since we had sat down to tea.

The whole school was agog with excitement, for Dick Goodwin, the new boy in the Remove, had vanished. He was missing from school. To tell the exact truth, Goodwin had been kidnapped. The boy from Lancashire had been seized by two unknown men and spirited away.

"Think of all the facts," I repeated, rising to my feet and pacing up and down the study. "First of all the guv'nor vanished. That was last night. When we got up this morning we found that Mr. Lee was not in the school, and that he had been missing since midnight."

"But we didn't think much of that," put in Watson. "Mr. Lee had already told you, Nipper, that he might go off at a moment's notice, and be away for a day or two. Even the Head wasn't alarmed."

I nodded.

"That's quite right," I agreed. "But I know that the guv'nor was only wearing his slippers and was hatless, and that made me a bit uneasy. As you know, I suspected that he had met with a mishap of some sort."

"Well, you weren't far wrong," said Tommy.

"As it turns out, I wasn't," I said grimly. "Well, this evening Pitt brought the news that Goodwin had met with a mishap on your jigger, Watson. You lent him your bike to go out, and the next thing we knew was that Pitt and Grey had found all sorts of traces on the Bannington Road, proving that Goodwin had met with some

sort of an adventure. Investigations proved quite conclusively that he had been dragged from his bicycle and carted away somewhere——"

"And my jigger as well!" said Watson warmly.

"Well, that's not Goodwin's fault," I said. "I expect you'll get your bike back all right, Tommy. Well, as you know, we knew about that old mill, on the edge of Bannington Moor. We'd already had an adventure there, and we reckoned that Goodwin had been taken to the mill, and was being kept a prisoner on the top floor. So we went along there, not much more than an hour ago, to investigate matters."

"And we found Mr. Lee," said Sir Montie mildly.

"That's just it," I said. "We found the guv'nor instead of Goodwin. Then we discovered that Mr. Lee had been knocked down when he was in the Triangle last night and carried off, insensible, to this prison in the mill. He's been there all day, and hadn't any hope of rescue until we turned up. We found him by accident really, because we went to the mill to search for Goodwin."

"A bit of a mix up, in fact," remarked Tommy Watson.

"Yes; but that doesn't make any difference to the fact that we rescued the guv'nor," I argued. "And it's a jolly good thing we did, too, because he was collared by agents of a big criminal organisation, who intend to burgle Bannington Manor to-night. The guv'nor is laying all his plans, and he means to collar the whole crowd red-handed—at half-past twelve exactly. The guv'nor is in Bannington now, fixing things up with the police."

"And we've got to go to bed like—like good little boys!" said Tommy Watson disgustedly.

"I call it jolly rotten," I said, with feeling. "After we've rescued the guv'nor, after we've made it possible for him to round up this gang, he calmly tells us that we've got to come back to the school and go to bed in the ordinary way. He simply ridiculed the idea that we should go along to Bannington with him and join in the sport!"

Tregellis-West smiled.

"Well, after all, dear old fellow, I don't suppose Mr. Lee wants to be bothered with us," he said soothingly. "I don't suppose he would have objected to taking you only, but he didn't like to do that for fear of offendin' us."

"Oh, that's rot!" I said. "On a special occasion of this sort there's no reason why we shouldn't all be there. We made it possible for Nelson Lee to get on the track, and so I think we deserved to be recognised."

I was decidedly indignant, as a matter of fact. After all we had done, after rescuing the guv'nor from his prison, after making it possible for him to capture the gang, he had sent us back to the school, to go to bed!

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Dear old boy, there is only one thing that we can do," said Tregellis-West. "We must go to bed, and we must wait until the mornin'. By that time, perhaps, Mr. Lee will be back, an' we shall soon know all the facts. There's nothin' to be gained by keepin' up this argument, begad! Let's take a stroll out, an' hear what the other fellows are sayin'. It'll be bedtime in a minute or two."

"Hold on, Montie!" I said as Tregellis-West made for the door. "I've got something in my head, something I want to say."

"An idea?" asked Watson eagerly.

"Yes."

"Good egg!" said Tommy. "Trot it out, old son!"

"This coup of the guv'nor," I said slowly, "is to come off at exactly half-past twelve."

"We know that, dear old fellow," said Sir Montie. "Mr. Lee is goin' to spring a surprise on the gang, or somethin'. Anyhow, there will be some frightful doin's. There is no doubt on that point. There'll be a terrific lot of excitement at half-past twelve. But we shall be in bed then, old boy, an' probably fast asleep."

I shook my head.

"That's just where you've made a mistake, Montie," I said. "We sha'n't be in bed, and we sha'n't be asleep! We shall be in Bannington—on the spot!"

"Begad!"

"My—my only hat!" muttered Watson. "You—you mean——"

"I mean that we're going to break bounds!" I said grimly. "We're going to——"

"Sneak off after lights out?"

"Exactly!" I said. "That's my plan, Tommy. At half-past eleven we'll get

up, and we'll slip out of the school, and we'll make for Bannington. We can go on our bicycles, and we shall arrive at Bannington Manor well in time to see all the fun. That's my idea, anyhow."

Sir Montie shook his head.

"I don't approve of it, old fellow—I don't really!" he said. "It is frightfully wicked to break bounds after lights out, begad! Besides, Mr. Lee told us that we could not be there—and if he sees us—well, there will be shockin' trouble. An' he's bound to see us if we are there."

"You can leave it to me, Montie," I said. "I'll take all the blame. It's my idea, after all. And the guv'nor won't punish us at all. Just you see! I shall be able to wangle the thing beautifully. But I'm not jolly well going to be left out in the cold—I can tell you that. So we'll take French leave, and we'll slip out at half-past eleven. That will give us plenty of time to get to Bannington before the show starts."

"I'm game," said Tommy Watson promptly.

"Well, dear old boys, it is quite useless for me to say anythin' further," remarked Sir Montie, with a sigh. "It would be wise if we did not go upon this adventure; it would be better if we stayed in bed. But I must confess that I am frightfully interested, an' I must also confess that I am ready to risk anythin' if we can only be on the scene when Mr. Lee brings off his surprise. So, under all the circumstances, dear boys, I think we will put all our scruples aside an' go off on this adventure."

I grinned.

"That's the style, Montie!" I said. "In any case, it's the guv'nor's fault. He shouldn't have been so obstinate. He shouldn't have refused to let me go with him. I'm jolly well going to show him that I'm not going to be dished! And you never know—we may be able to lend a hand during the capture!"

It was decided, and when we left Study C a minute or so later, we were all feeling much more content. We had decided to leave our beds at eleven-thirty and to venture out. And when Nelson Lee brought off his surprise attack on the gang at Bannington Manor, we should be on the spot, watching and waiting, and ready to lend a hand if we were required. We were not allowed to think much on the subject once we had left the privacy of Study C, for out in the passage, and particularly in the lobby, crowds of juniors were excitedly discussing the disappearance of Dick Goodwin. It was the one topic of conversation throughout the school. The juniors, in particular, were all agog.

Edward Oswald Handforth, as usual, had a great deal to say. He was laying down the law, and he was trying to make the other fellows listen to him—a somewhat difficult task. The leader of Study D was not taken seriously.

"There's only one thing to be done," Handforth was saying in a loud voice. "There's only one possible thing to be done, you chaps. Search parties must be organised at once—large search parties. And they must be sent out in all directions with lamps and all sorts of things. Goodwin has vanished; he's been kidnapped, and so it's up to us to find him."

"Hear, hear!" said Church and McClure loyally.

It was up to them to agree with Handforth, even if nobody else did.

"It's no good standing about doing nothing!" went on Handforth. "That's a silly idea! What has been done so far? What has been done? Think of it! Nothing! Think of it!"

"How can we think of nothing?" asked Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm surprised at you, Pitt! You're the chap who first made the discovery that Goodwin had been kidnapped," said Handforth severely, "and now all you can do is to make silly jokes!"

"My dear chap, I don't see any reason why I should get excited and flustered," said Pitt calmly. "The Head has already taken certain measures. He has informed the police, I believe. And, even if a search for Dick Goodwin isn't in progress, sharp look-outs are certainly being kept in every direction."

Handforth snorted.

"Rot!" he said bluntly. "What's the good of keeping a look-out?"

"Well, it might be of some good——"

"There's only one way, and that's the way I outlined just now," said Handforth. "What we ought to do is to get up search parties, and go out in every direction, scouring the countryside. I'm perfectly willing to lead one party."

"But is the party willing to be led by you?" asked Somerton mildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cheap humour of this kind only makes me more determined," said Handforth grimly. "I know what I'm doing, and I know a lot of other things, too. I intend to go to the Head before long, and I'm going to state the whole thing before him in a straightforward manner. It won't take him long to see the reasonableness of my suggestions, and he will at once adopt them."

"Oh, of course!" said Pitt promptly. "That's a foregone conclusion."

"Rather!" grinned De Valerie.

Handforth nodded.

"When the Head hears my idea, he'll simply stare with admiration," said Handforth. "He won't be able to do anything else, you know. The plan is this: The Remove is to be divided into four portions, and these four portions will be sent out in different directions. The idea is to search the whole country, to examine every hole and corner, every hedge, and every ditch throughout the district. There will be search parties from the Fifth and Sixth, too. As a matter of fact, the whole school will be out on the job. Therefore it's quite obvious that Dick Goodwin must be found before morning. Don't you think my scheme is absolutely splendid?"

"I'm too dazed by it to say anything," exclaimed Pitt weakly.

"It's amazing, Handy—absolutely amazing!" said the Hon. Douglas Singleton. "How do you think of these things? How on earth do you manage to do it, old man?"

"I happen to have a keen brain," said Handforth, with some importance.

"Keen?" repeated Singleton. "My dear chap, I'm afraid I can't see where the keenness comes in. There's just one question I should like to ask. Supposing Goodwin has been kidnapped, and supposing he has been taken away in a motor-car to a spot fifty miles from here? How are your search parties going to find him?"

Handforth glared.

"What rot!" he said. "Just as if Goodwin would be carted off for fifty miles or more! That's arrant rubbish! Goodwin will remain in the district, of course! Why should he be taken out of the district?"

Singleton shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, when a chap is kidnapped, his captors generally want to get him as far from harm as possible," he exclaimed. "That's all! I don't suppose for a minute that Goodwin is in this district now, so any search parties sent out to scour the countryside would be rather a waste of time."

"You—you blithering idiot!" roared Handforth. "We'll soon see whether it will be a waste of time. I'm going to the Head now! I'm going to lay the whole thing before him, and when I come back you'll have to buck up. You'll have to get yourselves ready for making up the different parties."

And Handforth strode off, his jaws set grimly, and he meant what he said. He was going straight to the Head's study, and he was going to tell Dr. Stafford how to do the thing. Handforth did not seem to realise that his visit would not be welcome, and that his wonderful scheme would probably receive very scant attention.

Meanwhile, in the lobby, the juniors were grinning.

"Poor old Handy!" chuckled Watson. "What a marvellous chap he is with his ideas. I expect he'll come back with sore hands, or with a whole pile of lines to do. Anyhow, he'll get scragged for his terrific nerve."

"That's pretty certain," said Pitt. "But Handy doesn't seem to realise it. He goes blundering on, and somehow he always manages to dodge serious trouble."

A figure appeared in the Ancient House doorway. It was a thick-set figure, with exceedingly bandy legs. Mr. Josh Cuttle entered the lobby, and he shook his head with an air of utter misery and dejection. There was nothing new about this. Mr. Cuttle was always gloomy; he had never been known to smile. He had never been known to utter a cheerful word since his arrival at St. Frank's. He was gloom personified. But, for all that, the juniors rather liked Mr. Cuttle, and they certainly enjoyed hearing him talk.

"Hallo, Mr. Cuttle!" said Pitt. "What do you think of the latest news?"

Mr. Cuttle fixed his eyes upon Pitt.

"There was bad news, and there was good news!" he exclaimed, in his gruff voice. "This was bad news, Master Pitt. This news was so bad that there

ain't any telling how tremendously bad it really is. Master Goodwin was absent from school—he was gone—he was in the hands of willains! How do I know he was in the hands of willains? Ask me! Because there was nobody but willains who would take a boy away from school. Things was in a bad way!"

"And do you think Goodwin will come back, Mr. Cuttle?" asked Watson.

"There was times when a man couldn't form no proper opinion!" said Mr. Cuttle. "This was one of them times, young man. But there was no need to be worried. Even if Master Goodwin is murdered by his captors ——"

"Murdered!" gasped Owen major. "Do you think he'll be killed, then?"

Mr. Cuttle shook his head despondently.

"One was never able to tell!" he said. "When a boy was kidnapped, there was terrible danger of something awful happening. Something awful has happened—and Master Goodwin was missing. It was doubtful if he will ever be seen again!"

The juniors smiled to one another—they knew what Cuttle was. He always took an extremely gloomy aspect of everything, and therefore his remark was not at all surprising.

"There's no need to be quite so pessimistic, Mr. Cuttle!" remarked Reginald Pitt. "Nobody exactly knows what has happened to Goodwin yet, so there is no sense in making surmises."

Mr. Cuttle shook his head.

"There was words which a man don't understand," he said, in melancholy tones. "It was a dark night, and likewise it was cold. There was awful things happening on dark nights. Why was there? Ask me! Because on dark nights it was impossible for other people to see Master Goodwin was missing, and they believe won't be found for—weeks!"

"What do you mean—for weeks?" asked Watson.

Mr. Cuttle fixed his eyes upon Tommy Watson, and with a thoughtful, far-away expression in them.

"My words was plain, and my meaning was clear!" he exclaimed, with just a touch of relish in his voice. "Weeks was what I said—and weeks was what I meant. And how do I know? Ask me! When times has gone on, and when Master Goodwin was given up, it was likely that some of you boys may come across—bones!"

"Bones?" said Pitt, rather startled.

"A skeleton!" said Mr. Cuttle, almost cheerfully. "The skeleton of Master Goodwin! Down in the wood—hid by bushes and dead leaves. Skeletons was rum things to come across, young gents. There was a time when I come across one—once. But them times was only seldom!" said Mr. Cuttle, with a sad shake of his head. "There was very little in this life to cheer a man up! It was a empty world!"

"Well, there's nothing like being merry and bright," remarked Pitt drily. "I must say, Mr. Cuttle, that you're cheerful this evening! But, seriously speaking, what do you think has happened to Goodwin?"

Mr. Cuttle scratched his ruddy whiskers.

"That was a question, Master Pitt," he said. "It was a question what a man finds it difficult to answer. And why was it difficult to answer? Ask me! Because there ain't no hevidence. Master Goodwin was took from his bicycle, and there wasn't no more known. But things might have happened!" ended Mr. Cuttle darkly.

"Things?" repeated Pitt.

"All manner of things!" said Mr. Cuttle, with a wise nod of his head. "Maybe Master Goodwin was not insensible, and now he was lying cold and stiff somewhere. Maybe Master Goodwin was took off by kidnappers and thrown into a prison. And he was there now, unable to escape, starving, and brutally treated by them willains what took him."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West nodded.

"Well, it's always better to look on the bright side!" he remarked. "Begad! Poor old Goodwin must be goin' through an appallin' time—if Mr. Cuttle is anythin' of a prophet. Let's hope he isn't, dear old boys!"

"Rather!" said Pitt. "I believe Mr. Cuttle must have had a terrible blow in his youth—an awful tragedy, or something—and it's made him melancholy for the rest of his life!"

"There was nothing in this world to make a man happy!" said Mr. Cuttle. "This world was wicked, and it was bad. Why was it bad? Ask me! Because there wasn't enough excitement to make people smile. Where was the murders that there used to be? Where

was the crimes which made the newspapers interesting? There wasn't none nowadays! I oughter have lived two hundred year ago!"

"Why?" asked De Valerie.

"Them was the days of highwaymen!" retorted Mr. Cuttle, with relish. "Them was the days of pirates—it wasn't safe for no man to be out after dark—when it wasn't safe for no ship to sail the heccan. Them was the days, young gents! When men's heads was cut off afore you could wink a heye—when swords was used every day of the week, and when men was hung by the roadside! Which was a sight to cheer one hup!"

"It's a good thing you didn't live in those days, Mr. Cuttle," said Pitt. "I expect you would have been a highway robber, or a pirate, or something of that sort. And then——"

"Hallo!" interrupted Watson. "Here comes Handy!"

All the juniors turned and looked at Edward Oswald Handforth, who had just appeared. Mr. Cuttle was forgotten for the moment. And the very expression on Handforth's face was eloquent enough.

"Well?" I inquired. "What did the Head say?"

The leader of Study D grunted.

"I'm fed up!" he said. "I go to the Head with a first-class idea—a really ripping plan—and all he can do is to pack me off, and tell me not to be childish!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you cackling idiots——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm afraid your schemes aren't appreciated by the Head, Handy," I chuckled. "The best thing you can do is to leave this matter in the hands of Dr. Stafford and the police. I don't suppose it will take them long to find out what has become of Goodwin."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "If they'd only take my advice——"

Clang! Clang!

"Well, there goes the bell for bed!" said Pitt. "We can't stop here any longer, Handy—we've got to get up into the dormitory. Good-night, Mr. Cuttle!"

Mr. Cuttle gruffly bade the juniors good-night, adding that it would be a remarkable thing if the night passed without something awful taking place. And, a few minutes later, the Remove had passed up into the dormitory.

Strangely enough, Mr. Cuttle was passably right in his grim prediction, for that night many strange and exciting events were destined to take place!

CHAPTER II.

THE LIGHT IN THE WOOD.

"HALF-PAST eleven!" I said softly.

I was sitting up in bed, and the Remove dormitory was quiet and dark and still. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West, by all appearances, were fast asleep. I had told them that they could rely upon me to awaken them at half-past eleven. It was not necessary for them to worry themselves.

But now the time had come for action. We had just an hour to get to Bannington, and to be at Bannington Manor in time to witness Nelson Lee's coup. For the guv'nor was determined to round up the gang of criminals that very night. He was, in fact, planning to bring off a big surprise.

And I wanted to be on in that scene. I did not see any reason why I should be left out in the cold; there was to be some excitement, and I might come in useful.

With that idea in mind, I slipped out of bed, and was soon shaking Sir Montie's shoulder. He awoke at once, blinked at me for a moment or two, and then smiled.

"Dear old boy, what is the idea of this?" he inquired mildly.

"Get up, my son!" I said. "You know the arrangement."

"Nipper, dear fellow, you are departing from the arrangement—you are, really!" protested Sir Montie. "It was agreed that we should all start out at half-past eleven. Isn't that so?"

"Of course!"

"Then what is the idea of starting out now?" asked Tregellis-West. "The lights have only been out five minutes, so it can't be more than twenty minutes to ten——"

"My son, you have been dead asleep—that's certain!" I broke in. "It may

interest you to know that the time is now about twenty-seven minutes to twelve!"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "You're joking, dear old boy!"

"No, I'm not, you ass!" I whispered. "Buck up, and get your clothes on! We haven't got any time to waste!"

Montie was soon dressing, convinced at last that the time was actually after eleven-thirty. Tommy Watson did not much care for the idea of the trip now, but I was not having any of his nonsense. The suggestion that we should give up the whole project met with a very cold response. It would have met with a colder one—in the shape of the water jug, if Tommy had not jumped out of bed with alacrity.

At last we were ready, and we stole out of the dormitory, passed down the stairs, and at length got to the bicycle shed. Here we removed our machines, wheeled them across to the wall, and transferred them to the other side. We did all this without being seen, and without hardly making a sound. And then we stood out in the lane, ready to start on our journey.

"What about the lamps?" whispered Watson.

"We're not going to light them," I replied. "It's too risky, my son. We'll chance it; I don't suppose old Sparrow is about, anyhow. He's the only policeman in the district, and there isn't much chance of us meeting him."

"Perhaps it will be safer to go without any light, old boys," remarked Montie.

We mounted our machines, and were soon pedalling easy down the lane. We did not go through the village, but branched off, and passed along the little lane which ultimately led into the Bannington road.

It was rather uncomfortable, cycling along that narrow lane, for we had no lights on our machines, and the surface of the road was smothered with stones, ruts, and all manner of obstacles. It was a wonder that we didn't suffer from punctures and spills; but at last we turned into the main road, and we were glad. Here the road surface was, at least, perfectly smooth and clear—only in one or two places were there patches of mud.

"We're all serene," I remarked. "We can buzz along now, my sons!"

"I believe my tyres are all cut to pieces!" grumbled Tommy Watson.

"Well, it's not your bike, dear old fellow!" observed Sir Montie.

"Yes, that's one consolation!" said Watson, cheering up. "It's Pitt's jigger. Goodwin took mine, and goodness knows where it is now! I don't suppose Pitt will mind because I borrowed his—without permission."

We were now going along at a greatly increased speed, and the road in front of us was dark and deserted. We had not passed a soul since leaving St. Frank's—and we were not likely to encounter anyone during our trip to Bannington. The country people retired early, as a rule, and it was only on Saturday nights that one or two late birds were to be met on the main roads. Now, at nearly midnight, it was practically certain that we should not see a sign of any living person.

About halfway between Bellton and Bannington we entered upon a stretch of the road where the trees met overhead, in a kind of natural arbour, and here the road was thick with mud—half-dried mud. I recognised the spot on the instant.

"This is where Dick Goodwin was thrown off his bicycle," I remarked, as we pedalled along. "Just about here, you chaps. The rotters who attacked Goodwin couldn't have chosen a better spot. It's pitch dark, and, even though Goodwin had leapt from his machine, it was quite impossible for him to be prepared for any attack."

"Dear old boy, you are quite right," said Sir Montie. "I suppose it's no good stopping to look for clues?"

I shook my head.

"Not now, Montie," I said. "We haven't got too much time to get to Bannington—we can easily have a look at the road here on our way home. It's just possible that we may be able to find one or two indications—one never knows."

"You're a frightfully keen fellow, Nipper, and you might be able to see somethin' which other people have missed," said Sir Montie. "This place has been searched, I know, but it needs a trained detective on the job."

"Exactly!" I agreed. "And the guv'nor means to come back with us, and he will probably make investigations on the spot. Of course, he doesn't know that we are going to Bannington,

but he'll know soon after we get there, and I am quite certain that he will enter into this affair with gusto. He promised to have a look for Goodwin as soon as this burglary business was through."

We cycled on, and were silent for a short distance.

"It's jolly queer about Goodwin!" remarked Watson, at length. "I wonder what can have happened to him? He was pulled from his bicycle—we proved that; but where was he taken? What has become of him, and why was he attacked at all?"

"My dear chap, it's no good asking a dozen questions!" I said. "We all know that Goodwin has a kind of mystery surrounding him. He's been a queer customer ever since he arrived at St. Frank's, at the beginning of the term. In my opinion, he isn't far off!"

"That's what you said at first," remarked Watson. "And we went to that old mill, only to find Mr. Lee instead of Goodwin. I don't believe the chap is in the district at all—I think he's been taken miles and miles away!"

"Well, of course, there's no telling," I exclaimed. "But, at the same time, I believe that Goodwin is fairly close—he is being concealed on the moor, probably, or perhaps down in one of the caves, in the cliffs. It is really impossible for us to——"

I paused, and stared out across the hedge, over the dark meadows.

"What's the matter, dear old boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"I thought I saw a light just now—just a flash!" I said. "Over in that spinney. Can't you see it, Montie? That big clump of trees on the top of the rise?"

"I can see the trees, old boy," said Sir Montie; "but there is no light there—— Begad!"

Just for a second a flash of light had appeared—a flash which might have come from an incautiously used electric torch. Or it might even have been the striking of a match. In any case, it disappeared almost as soon as it made itself seen—and then came utter blankness. The light had appeared from the very centre of the little wood.

"That's queer!" I said slowly.

At the same time I applied my brakes, and dismounted from my machine. The others copied my example, and we stood there in the road, staring out across the meadows towards the little spinney. The wind sighed coldly through the trees overhead.

"What's the idea of this?" asked Watson. "I thought we were in a hurry to get to Bannington?"

"Never mind about Bannington now!" I said briskly. "Look here, my sons, I'm suspicious of this!"

"Suspicious?"

"Yes, I am!" I said grimly. "What is that light doing over there—in the wood?"

"It's no good asking me!" said Tommy.

"We all know that that spinney is deserted," I went on. "There's not a house in the district—not even a cottage for miles. We've explored all this country during half-holidays, when we have been for rambles, and we know that the spinney over there is as deserted as the centre of Bannington Moor. Who the dickens can be there, with a light? And at midnight! I tell you, you chaps, it's queer!"

"Begad! Do—do you think that Goodwin——"

"My hat!" said Watson.

"It's rather unwise to think anything," I said; "but we know that Goodwin has disappeared, and I have just been reckoning that he is not far off. It's more than possible that Goodwin has been taken into this wood. As you can see, it's quite close and handy to the road—to the spot where he was attacked. Don't you think it's likely that his captors took him straight across the fields, and concealed him in that wood?"

"But what for?" asked Watson.

"In order to lie low—until an opportunity occurred to take the chap out of the district," I said. "That's how I look at it, anyhow. And I mean to investigate this matter at once—the Bannington affair can wait."

"But if we waste any more time here, Nipper, we shall be late for the show—for Nelson Lee's coup!" said Sir Montie.

"That doesn't matter," I declared. "There's just a possibility—a bare chance—that we might be able to get on Dick Goodwin's track, and it would be perfectly ridiculous if we ignored it. We've got to investigate that wood at once, so we'll get busy."

"Anythin' you like, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie. "I'm game! Just give your orders, and we'll carry them out."

We had seen no recurrence of the mysterious flash of light; but I knew the exact spot—I had it fixed in my mind's eye. And, after we had placed our bicycles securely in the dry ditch, where they were concealed from the road, we passed through the gap, and made our way across the first meadow.

On the other side of this we found ourselves facing a ploughed field, and we skirted round this until at length we were close upon the wood. It was only a small clump of trees standing almost at the top of the rising slope. The trees were rather dense—thick and close together. And there were masses of undergrowth, too—rank weeds, bushes—until the place was well-nigh impenetrable. Nobody entered that wood from the first day of the year to the last. It was always deserted—it was always left completely to itself. Then why had that light appeared amid the trees? What could it mean, unless it was something sinister?

Just before we got to the wood, I remembered something else—something which added strength to my conviction that the mysterious light was somehow connected with Dick Goodwin's disappearance.

In the very centre of that spinney, surrounded by trees, there stood an old wooden hut. It was only a rough shanty, with a thatched roof. It had been lying deserted and useless for many years, and I suppose it had been used at one time by a solitary wood-cutter. In any case, it was unused now. I remembered that Sir Montie and Tommy and I had once picnicked near that little shanty.

Very cautiously I entered the wood, my chums following in single file close behind. And we moved carefully, picking every footstep. And this was necessary, for an incautious movement would cause a great deal of crackling noise, and that would certainly give the alarm to the enemy—supposing, of course, that an enemy existed.

We kept going, and at last I reckoned that we were nearing the centre of the wood, and the little hut would soon come into sight. The gloom here was intense; it was, indeed, pitchy dark, making it impossible for us to see even a yard ahead. We were compelled to pick our way—to feel our way, indeed.

And then, suddenly, after pushing aside a clump of bushes, I came to an abrupt halt. There, right in front of me, was a gleam of light! It was so close that I was practically taken by surprise. I had not expected to see it; but I knew what it meant.

There, only about ten yards ahead, stood the little hut, and the light was coming from the tiny window, which was covered by a thick piece of sacking, or a rug. One little crevice, however, was not covered, and through this the tiny gleam of light escaped.

There was somebody in the shanty!

"For goodness' sake be careful, you chaps!" I breathed. "Look! We're practically——"

"My only hat!" muttered Tommy Watson, staring before him.

"Be quiet, you ass—be quiet!" I hissed.

We all stood there, in a clump, watching. We hardly knew what to do now. No sounds had come from the hut so far, but we could not really tell. We had only just come to a halt, and our own movements had effectually concealed all other noises from our ears. But now we stood stock still, absolutely silent.

We waited for a moment or two, and then a voice came to us.

"It's no good, Naggs!" exclaimed the voice. "The kid won't say a thing—he doesn't mean to."

"He'll say something later on—don't you worry!" exclaimed another voice. "If he won't speak here, he'll speak when we get along to that old house. We've got him now, and we're going to carry out our plans. Nothing is going to stop me, I can tell you!"

I took a deep breath.

"Fine!" I whispered. "He's here, you chaps—Goodwin's here!"

There was absolutely no doubt on the point. Mr. Naggs was the man who had attempted to get hold of Dick Goodwin on one other occasion. He and his confederate, named Colmore, had even broken into St. Frank's. Colmore, however, had been captured, and he was now in the hands of the police. But Mr. Naggs had escaped, and it was quite evident that he had secured another helper.

If there had been any doubt on the

point, that doubt was dispelled a moment later, for another voice came to us—and this time it was the voice of Dick Goodwin himself.

"I dare say you think this is champion!" said the Lancashire lad bitterly. "But you won't get anything out of me, you rogues. By gum! If you think I'm going to be forced to speak against my will——"

"The best thing you can do, kid, is to keep quiet!" interrupted Mr. Naggs. "Keep your mouth shut, and then you won't come to no harm. We don't want any of your nonsense, my lad!"

Nothing more was said, and we listened for three or four minutes in vain. And during that time I had been thinking hard. I knew exactly what had happened.

There were two men in that hut with Goodwin—Mr. Naggs and another. It was quite obvious to me that Goodwin had been brought here into this wood until his captors deemed it safe for them to take their victim further afield. Mr. Naggs had intimated, indeed, that a prison had been prepared for the boy. But, for the time being, he was being held here, in this little hut, far in the depths of the wood. The men probably thought that it would be safer than venturing upon the open road in the comparative publicity of the evening. They intended taking Goodwin away at dead of night—when the roads were deserted, and when their movements would not be observed.

That, undoubtedly, was the scheme.

And I was thrilled by the whole affair. By sheer accident—by a piece of pure luck—we had got on the track of Dick Goodwin. We had left the dormitory in order to go to Bannington, and now we were in a position to rescue Goodwin at once, for I was grimly determined to make a desperate attempt to get the Lancashire boy away from his captors. I knew that it could be done. There were three of us—three strong juniors—and there were two men. It would be a big task; but, on the whole, the luck was on our side. We should attack by surprise, and it was just possible that we should be able to defeat Mr. Naggs and his companion without much difficulty. If it came to a fight, we should probably be beaten, for we could not very well hope to win in a battle with two powerful men, strong as we were. Still, we were game enough to make the attempt.

I whispered my plan to Sir Montie and Tommy, and they at once agreed. They were willing to do anything under my leadership.

"We shall have to creep up quietly," I whispered; "then, as soon as we get to the door, we'll burst in with a will—the three of us. Everything depends upon quickness. If we're lucky, we shall get Goodwin away at once."

"And what if we're unlucky?" asked Watson.

"Then we shall have to fight for it—and fight hard, too!" I said grimly. "These men won't allow us to win if they can possibly help it, so we've got to go all out. Come on!"

I knew very well that it would be better to get to work at once—without wasting any time, and without thinking too much of what we had to do.

But just then, as we were about to move forward, I paused, for I had heard something which caused me to alter my plans. For the second I was furious, but I knew that it would be quite useless to give way to anger.

Throb! Throb!

Clearly and distinctly there came to my ears the sound of the quiet throbbing of a motor-car engine. It came nearer and nearer, until at length the car itself could only have been twenty or thirty yards away. Then the throb ceased altogether, and the door of the little hut opened.

As it did so, the light was extinguished—probably a candle. I just caught a glimpse of a man's figure as he came out of the doorway, and then there sounded a crackling of the bushes near by. A moment later a man appeared, gloomy and indistinct.

"That you, Ratsby?" inquired Mr. Naggs sharply.

"Of course it's me!" replied the newcomer. "Who else do you think it would be at this time of night?"

"Well, it's just as well to be sure," said Mr. Naggs. "We can't be too careful at this game. We've got the boy here, and we've got to waste no time in getting him straight into the car."

"Oh, there's no hurry!" said Ratsby. "I want to come inside for a minute or two. I grazed my hand on the blamed radiator. It needs binding up."

The man entered the little hut, and

Mr. Naggs followed him in. And the door was closed once more. Then came the tiny streak of light, proving that the candle had been illuminated. All three men were now with Dick Goodwin in that old shanty, and the motor-car was left out in the open, alone.

"Well, this is a nice mess!" I muttered. "Just as we were going to rescue him, too!"

"Can't we have a shot at it?" asked Watson.

"My dear chap, it would be absolutely ridiculous to try!" I replied. "There are three men in there now, and we simply couldn't hope to win. They are powerful, brutal chaps, and we should be wiped up in less than five minutes. No, Tommy, we've got to think of something else."

"But what else can we think of?" asked Watson.

I couldn't answer at the moment—simply because I didn't know what kind of an answer to give.

CHAPTER III.

THE PUNCTURED OIL TANK.

SOMETHING had to be done—and quickly, too!

Within a very few minutes those three men would come out of the hut, and they would bring Dick Goodwin with them. And the kidnapped schoolboy would be taken straight to the waiting motor-car, and he would be driven right off into the night. It would then be impossible for us to follow—or, at any rate, even if we did follow, we should have no chance whatever of finding the ultimate destination of the car.

"This is a bit of a teaser!" I remarked thoughtfully. We've got to do something, my sons—and we've got to be quick about it. But it's difficult to decide what we can do."

"Dear old boy, you are quite right—you are, really!" observed Sir Montie softly. "We can't rescue Goodwin, simply because there ain't enough of us to do the job. And, once the car starts, it will go altogether too rapidly for us to follow."

"We might be able to follow its tracks on the road!" said Watson brilliantly.

I shook my head.

"No good!" I said shortly. "If I remember right, there's a little lane leading from this spot up to the main road, near Bannington. It's the main road across the moor. Well, that road, as you chaps know, is all tarred, and it will be as dry as a billiard table, and won't show any marks at all."

Watson scratched his head.

"Well, it seems that we are done," he said. "And that's pretty rotten, too. We've located Goodwin—here, within a yard or two of us—and we can't rescue him! We shall have to stand by and see him taken away!"

"We shall!" I replied. "There's no doubt about that; but circumstances are in our favour, I think, and, before we do anything else, it would be advisable to have a look at that car."

"Do you think we can conceal ourselves on it?" said Watson eagerly.

"I think I might be able to," I replied. "It's impossible for us all to try the trick—that would be disastrous, Tommy. But let's have a look at the car, anyway."

We crept away through the trees, and, although we went very slowly and cautiously, we made some slight sounds—the cracking of twigs, and so forth. But, fortunately, the men within the hut were not alarmed—they heard nothing.

And, after a short period of anxiety, we arrived at the edge of the wood, and now we found ourselves in a meadow. Running parallel with one hedge was a waggon track, which was generally used by farm carts, and such like, and there, standing without any light showing, was a big hooded motor-car.

"You fellows wait here!" I breathed. "I'll creep near—there might be somebody on guard."

I did not give Tommy and Montie time to protest. I left them, and crept forward as silently as a shadow, and, after a moment or two, I was right near the car. It did not take me more than two seconds to ascertain that it was deserted—that nobody had been left in charge. Naggs and his men apparently thought that they were quite safe and unobserved.

I walked round to the back of the car, and stared into the gloom.

"Hist!" I whispered. "It's all clear!"

Sir Montie and Tommy heard my words, and they joined me a moment later, and there we stood at the back of the car. I was rather disappointed to find that there was no carrier grating—nothing, in fact, to which I could cling. All thought of going with the car had to be put aside.

"Well, it can't be done," I murmured. "We shall have to think of something else—and goodness knows what we can think of! Within a few minutes this car will be going, and we shall have to stand by and do nothing!"

"That will be frightfully gallin', old boy!" said Sir Montie.

"It'll be rotten!" declared Watson bluntly.

"It will!" I agreed. "But surely there is something that we can do! If we could only do something to make the car leave a trail, we should be O.K. But all the tyres are plain—they are not even ribbed. This blessed car wouldn't leave any tracks on even a muddy road."

"Oh, we can't do anything in that line!" said Watson.

But just at that moment I gave a start. A daring idea had come to me—an idea which, at first, took me fairly by surprise. And then, as I realised the possibilities of it, I turned to my chums with gleaming eyes.

"A brain wave, you chaps!" I whispered.

"Begad!" said Montie. "Did it hurt, dear old boy?"

"There's no time for joking now, you ass!" I whispered. "Look at that can of oil!"

"Eh?"

"That can of oil, strapped to the back!" I went on. "Can't you see it?"

My chums stared in the gloom.

"Do you mean this gallon can of engine oil?" asked Watson. "It's——"

"Yes, of course," I interrupted. "That can is full—it's a spare supply, I suppose. And it is packed right at the back of the car, away from all observation."

"What of it, dear old boy?" asked Montie. "How will that can of oil help us?"

"In this way," I replied. "I have got a pocket screwdriver on me, and it won't take me one minute to jab a hole through the bottom of the can—where it can't be seen."

"A—a hole!" said Watson, staring.

"Exactly."

"But what for, you lunatic?" muttered Tommy. "What's the idea of puncturing that can of oil?"

"I'll tell you afterwards," I said. "There's no time to drive sense into your dense head just now!"

I produced my pocket screwdriver. And then, going down on my knees, I felt under the oil-can and gave a sharp jab upwards. The point of the screwdriver went through the thin tin at once, making a small hole. And, as I placed my hand there, I felt the oil dripping out steadily, and fairly rapidly. It was not a continuous stream, but a very quick succession of drops.

"Good!" I muttered. "That's all serene!"

"But what on earth——"

"Come on, we'd better get away," I interrupted. "Those men may be here any moment, and if we're spotted the whole game will be spoilt. We're going straight away, right across the meadows, back to the Bannington Road."

"Begad! What for?"

"To fetch our bicycles," I replied grimly. "I'll explain things as we go along."

My chums were quite puzzled, but I would not tell them anything until we had left the vicinity of the little wood. And then, when we were plodding along over one of the meadows I condescended to explain.

"Can't you understand what I have done?" I asked.

"Dear old fellow, we ain't so brainy as you are," said Sir Montie. "I am quite sure that you have done somethin' frightfully clever; but, I must say, it seems to be a bit spiteful, too. Why do you want to waste all their spare oil?"

"A jolly mad idea, I call it!" grunted Watson.

"You idiots!" I chuckled. "Look here, I've made a hole in that gallon can of oil, and the oil is now dripping out in a rapid stream of drops. It will take about an hour—perhaps an hour an a half—for all that oil to drip away. And a motor-car can travel a tremendous distance in an hour and a half—particularly at night."

"But——"

"Wait a moment," I went on. "My idea is this: As soon as that car gets on the main road—on the smooth, tarred

road—those drops of oil will be distinctly visible on the surface of the road. They will be left there in one long stream—a drop every yard or so. Don't you see the wheeze? The car will make a trail for itself as it goes along, unknown to its occupants. And we shall be able to come along at our leisure, following that car."

"Begad!"

"Well, my only topper!"

Both my chums were rather startled.

"Well?" I said. "Is that all you can say?"

"Nipper, old fellow, it's absolutely stunnin'!" declared Sir Montie. "It's a rippin' idea. It's a top-hole wheeze. Where do you get these brain waves, old boy? How is it that you have these marvellous flashes of genius?"

"Rubbish!" I interrupted cheerfully. "It was only a flash of commonsense—nothing more. I have simply provided us with a clue which we can follow without any trouble."

"By Jupiter!" said Watson admiringly. "The clue of the oil trail. What a wheeze!"

They both praised me up to the skies. But, after all, there was nothing particularly cute in what I had done. Almost as soon as I had seen the can of oil, the idea suggested itself to me.

It was a way out of our difficulty—it was a way in which we could follow the car containing Goodwin, and we could follow it to its destination. For I was quite certain that these men would not take the Lancashire boy very far away, probably not more than twenty miles, at the very most.

But, although the car would leave that trail for us to follow, it was necessary for us to waste no time. The sooner we got on the track the better. And so we hurried across the meadows, and at length we arrived on the Bannington Road again. Our bicycles were still in the ditch, just as we had left them.

"Come on, my sons!" I said, panting. "There's no time to stop for breath. We've got to hurry like the dickens!"

"Right you are, dear old boy—anything you like!" said Sir Montie. "We're hot on the track, and we're going to do big things to-night. Begad! I can feel it in my bones, you know—I can, really. Think of the glory that will cover our heads to-morrow, when we bring Dick Goodwin back, after the police have failed!"

"Ye gods and little fishes!" said Watson. "It will be worth quids!"

We soon had our jiggers through the hedge. And, once in the meadow, we mounted, and rode at a fairly rapid speed. But it was necessary to be cautious, for there were many ruts and hillocks, and it would be quite easy to have a serious spill.

However, we reached the other side of the meadow in safety. And then we were obliged to trundle our bicycles over the ploughed field—riding was quite out of the question. We were nearing the further end of the field when I came to a halt.

"Wait a minute!" I said sharply. "Listen!"

We all listened, and clearly on the night air, borne by the wind, came the steady throbbing of a motor-car. It grew fainter and fainter, and finally disappeared.

"They've gone!" I muttered. "Just as I thought, and we shall be on the spot within three minutes now."

We were.

And we found the little hut quite deserted, and the motor-car gone. This was quite good—exactly as we had anticipated. I only stopped in the hut for about a minute, looking round carefully with the aid of my electric torch. But there was nothing there which would serve as a clue—nothing at all. The men had not left a single article behind.

Then we went to the spot where the motor-car had stood. All was dark, and we could not see the ground distinctly, of course. However, this did not matter. We knew that the car had followed the waggon track until the road was reached. And so we went this way. Finally, we reached the narrow road, the little lane which ran from the village of Edgemore to the Bannington main road. This road, naturally, was not the one we had been recently following—another main highway.

By the time we reached it we had our bicycle lamps fully alight and showing a brilliant beam upon the road. It was quite safe to have our lamps alight now, for there was very little prospect of our meeting anybody. And Goodwin's captors, of course, were far ahead.

It was necessary for us to have the light, in order to folow the oil trail. And this was not at all difficult. It was in fact, far simpler than I had anticipated.

For there, on the road, were little drops of oil at regular intervals. At present

they were only about a yard apart. But a little further on the drops of oil were four or five feet apart.

"It seems to me that the supply is giving out," said Watson. "Anyhow, the drops aren't so close together."

"My dear fellow there is quite a natural explanation of that," I said. "The car gathered speed—that is all. The faster it goes, the fewer the drops. That's obvious."

"You think of everythin', dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "It's wonderful!"

We rode on rapidly. For there was no need for us to go slowly. The trail was clear in front of us—a trail which I had seldom had the pleasure of following before. It was quite a delight to know that we were on a dead certainty. As long as we kept in view of those little splashes of oil, we knew that the car had passed along this way.

We did not enter Bannington at all. The car had branched off just before the town was reached, had passed round several lanes, and had joined the main road to Helmford right along. Helmford was about eighteen miles distant, and was on the main road to London.

Our task had not been so easy in the little lanes—where the surface of the road was stoney and slightly muddy. But by going slowly we had made no mistake. And when the Helmford Road was reached, our task was again simple.

And so we went on, pedalling rapidly and steadily. Mile after mile was covered. Down hill and up hill we went, continuously, without a pause. We had forgotten all about the guv'nor and the affair at Bannington Manor. That was quite unimportant now. We were engaged upon a task which was altogether more to our liking. We were on the track of Dick Goodwin.

"I say, this is getting a bit steep, you know," remarked Watson, as we put our backs into it up a hill.

"What do you mean—this gradient?" I inquired.

"No, you ass!" said Watson. "I mean, it's getting serious. We've travelled about ten miles, you know. We are not so very far from Helmford. And it must be past one—getting on for two, in fact. When the dickens are we going to get to the end of this trail?"

"There's no telling," I replied. "We may have to go right on through Helmford, and then further on towards London. But we're going to stick to this trail until it gives out, or until we drop. I'm determined upon that, anyhow. We're going right on, my sons!"

"Well, it's the only thing we can do, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "Now that we are on the track it would be ridiculous to give it up. But I should enjoy the adventure much better if I had an engine on my bicycle."

We reached the top of the hill, and then went along a straight level stretch of lonely road. We knew it well, for we had passed that way during the day-time on many occasions—sometimes when we went by char-a-banc to Helmford College. bent on football. And this stretch of road was particularly lonely, even by daylight. At night it was a gloomy, dismal piece of country where not a soul was to be seen—there were no houses, and no cottages. At least, only a few—one dotted here, and one dotted there, at isolated intervals.

And very soon we passed one of these houses—one that I had seen many a time. It was a dilapidated old place, fairly large. And it had been standing empty for years, by the look of it. It stood some little distance from the road, surrounded by a big garden which was filled with trees and rank weeds. And just near the road a board announced to all in the country that the property was for sale. It had been for sale for many years, by the look of it, and it would apparently remain for sale for many further years; at all events, nobody seemed inclined to buy it.

We passed this old place at a good speed, and then continued on our way down the straight, level road. But we had not proceeded more than two hundred yards before I applied my brakes. Sir Montie and Tommy shot ahead. And by the time they had turned round I had dismounted, and was examining the surface of the road.

My chums wheeled their bicycles back to the spot where I was standing.

"What's the idea of this?" asked Tommy, wiping his brow.

"Look!" I said significantly.

I pointed to the road. It was smooth and clear, and perfectly dry.

"Well, what about it?" asked Tommy. "I can't see anything startling."

"It's not what we can see, it's what we can't see!" I said grimly. "Where are the spots of oil?"

"Begad!"

The oil trail, in fact, had vanished! We had been following it for so long

that we had not paid much attention to the road. Only here and there, as we pedalled along, we saw the spots of oil—and knew that we were still on the right trail. But soon after passing that old house I had noticed that the oil spots were no longer visible.

"By jingo!" I said gently.

I turned round and looked back along the brick road. I looked back towards that clump of trees and the gaunt chimney pots of the old building.

"Don't you remember?" I went on. "We heard one of the men saying that Goodwin was to be taken to an old house? My sons, this is the place! We've tracked the rotters to their den! Dick Goodwin is in this old house!"

"By jupiter!" muttered Watson.

Both my chums knew that I was speaking the truth. There could be no other explanation. The motor-car obviously had come along until it reached the gateway of the house, and had then turned in. It was now concealed among the trees, or probably it reposed in an old outbuilding. And Mr. Naggs and his two assistants were with Dick Goodwin in the house itself. It was necessary for us to make immediate investigations.

"Out with the lights!" I whispered. "they might be seen!"

Our lamps were extinguished at once. And then cautiously we made our way back along the road until we arrived at the dilapidated ramshackle gate. Here, on my hands and knees, I examined the ground which was fairly soft near the gateway. Quite distinctly I could see the marks of motor-car tyres, and they had passed only recently. To thoroughly clinch matters there were drops of oil, too. The car had passed into the old drive.

"Good!" I muttered. "We've tracked Dick Goodwin down, we've reached the end of the trail!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE RACE TO BANNINGTON.

SUCCESS!

My plan had succeeded, and I was delighted and rather excited. There was not the slightest doubt about the matter. Dick Goodwin was here—in this dilapidated old building—and his captors were there, too. The very fact that they had come here, and had closed the old gate after them, proved that they intended to remain. They had reached the prison which had been prepared for the schoolboy, and it was most unlikely that they would venture out again. They probably assumed that they would be quite safe there during the night, and during the whole of the next day, if necessary.

"This is splendid!" I muttered. "What do you think of it, you chaps? We've tracked the car down, and we know that Goodwin is here."

"It's simply amazing, old boy!" said Sir Montie. "The way you have handled this case fills me with admiration—it does, really! But will you let me ask one question?"

"A dozen, if you'll be quick about it." I said.

"Well, Nipper, how are we going to rescue Goodwin?" asked Sir Montie mildly. "We couldn't do it in the wood because we were three boys against three men. Well, the position is exactly the same, it hasn't been altered in the slightest degree. If we couldn't rescue Goodwin from the old hut in the wood, how can we rescue him from this house?"

"That's a poser!" said Tommy Watson.

"My dear chaps, you don't seem to understand the game at all," I said. "I don't mean to rescue Goodwin; I don't mean to even try the thing. We should fail; it isn't reasonable to suppose that we should succeed."

"Then what's the idea of coming?"

"Oh, haven't you got any sense at all, Tommy?" I said. "We knew very well that those men wouldn't keep Goodwin in the hut. It was only a temporary hiding-place. But this house is a permanent one, and if we go away for two or three hours we can be practically certain that Goodwin will be here when we return, don't you see? My plan is for us to race back to Bannington as hard as we can go, tell the guv'nor all about it, and he will come back, and probably the police will be with us, too. The whole thing will be as simple as A B C. Naggs and his friends will be collared, and Dick Goodwin will be rescued."

"Wonderful!" said Sir Montie. "So that's the way you've planned it out, dear fellow? There couldn't be a better idea. But we shall be frightfully tired to-morrow, begad! What with riding out here and ridin' back, and then comin' out again——"

"Don't worry about that!" I interrupted. "We've only got to race back to Bannington, and that won't be such a terrible task. We shall probably come out again the second time in a motor-car."

"And do you propose to start off now?" asked Watson.

"Not for a minute or two," I replied. "We'll just have a scout round and see if we can see any sign of the place being inhabited. I'm quite satisfied that Goodwin is here, but we might as well have a look."

We left our bicycles against the hedge, and then we slipped through a gap and found ourselves in the wilderness which had once been a garden. Then, creeping along, we made a detour until we were at the back of the old building. At first we could see nothing except blackness.

The old house was, indeed, half ruined. Many of the windows were missing altogether, and only black, yawning cavities greeted our gaze. In one part of the house half the roof was missing. Tiles were off, and the rafters were hanging down in dilapidation and decay.

"Cheerful looking place!" muttered Watson, with a slight shiver.

"Perhaps so, but it's just the place they were looking for," I said. "Who would dream that Goodwin would be imprisoned here? If we hadn't got on the track in this way I don't suppose the police would ever have found the poor chap. We've been lucky, and we're going to follow up our success."

We continued our examination, and then at last we met with success. One of the windows at the rear was very heavily shuttered—we discovered this by approaching fairly close to the building—and when we got to a certain angle we saw a tiny streak of light emerging where the woodwork was cracked and warped. That light was the first indication we had had that the old building was inhabited. But now there was no doubt left. The very presence of that light proved conclusively that Dick Goodwin and his captors were here.

"That's enough!" I whispered. "Now we'll buzz off like the wind. The quicker we are, the better. If we hurry we shall be in Bannington well within an hour."

Sir Montie and Tommy were excited, and they did not mind the exertion at all, although Watson grumbled somewhat; but that was only his nature. He generally grumbled at things, although he did not mean it. He was one of the most willing fellows under the sun, really.

Within five minutes we were mounted on our bicycles and were tearing along the road, putting every ounce of our energy into the pedalling, and mile after mile was covered rapidly. We went tearing along, fairly racing with every ounce of speed of which we were capable. Down hill we roared, reckless of mishaps, and at length we came within sight of the outskirts of Bannington. We did not go into the town, for this was unnecessary.

Bannington Manor, the home of Lord Banningstowe, was situated just on the outskirts, and not actually in the town. We were soon on our way to the big mansion, although we were not absolutely certain that Nelson Lee would be there. We only knew that he had planned to bring off a big capture there; but the time for that had already passed. However, it was just as well to go there at once.

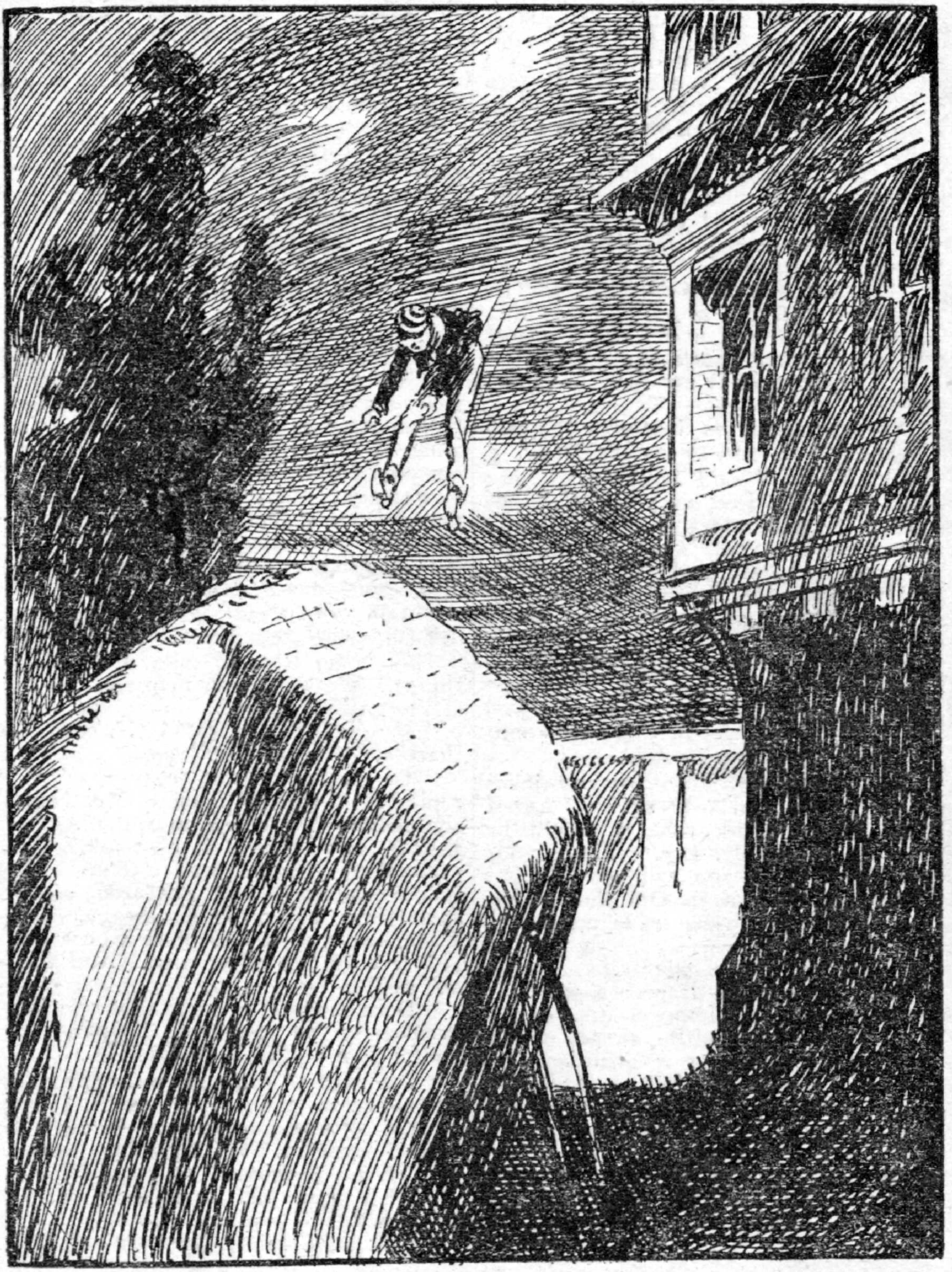
And we were not wrong.

For when we arrived at Bannington Manor we found everything there in a state of uproar. Practically the whole household was awake, and the big building was blazing with light from roof to cellar. Servants were running about, Lord Banningstowe himself was much in evidence, and Nelson Lee was there. The place simply swarmed with police, too.

"Well, we've arrived too late to see the fun, but that doesn't matter much," I said. "We've done something a lot better than watch the capture of these criminals."

Nelson Lee's plan had been entirely successful, and the gang which had planned to rob Bannington Manor had been captured red-handed. There were four men altogether, and they were now safely in the hands of the police.

Lord Banningstowe himself was very delighted with the whole affair, and he was extremely grateful to Nelson Lee for having acted so promptly and with such effectiveness. Of course, Inspector Jameson was there—he was, in fact, exceedingly pleased with himself. He appeared to imagine that all the credit of the capture was due to him, and yet,



Down Goodwin went, and then—.(*See page* 23.)

as a matter of fact, he had only carried out the suggestions which had been given to him by Nelson Lee. But that was just the inspector's little way. He hated to think that Nelson Lee—a mere amateur, in his eyes—should be able to do anything better than the police could do it.

We ran across Inspector Jameson before we could find the guv'nor, and the inspector stopped us as we were going up the drive. He gazed at us severely and frowned.

"What are you boys doing here?" he demanded. "Good gracious me! You ought to be in bed, and I don't expect your Headmaster knows anything about this! I shall make it my duty to report you——"

"Keep your hair on, inspector!" I said quickly. "We want to see Mr. Lee."

"Oh, indeed!" said Jameson. "You want to see Mr. Lee, do you? I do not suppose for a moment that Mr. Lee is anxious to see you. Take my advice, my boys, and get back to school as quickly as you can."

"Look here, inspector, you don't understand!" I declared. "There's something important—something vital—that we've got to speak to Mr. Lee about. He will probably want you and a good many policemen, too, later on."

Inspector Jameson stared.

"I don't want you to try any jokes on me, young man!" he said. "And I should hardly think that it would be advisable to see Mr. Lee. He is your Housemaster, and you will get into hot water if you are seen. But that makes little difference, because I intend to report the matter to——"

"Oh, rats!" I said gruffly.

I pushed past the inspector, and Sir Montie and Tommy followed me. Jameson was left there in the middle of the path, staring after us wrathfully. He called out something, but I took no notice, for at that very moment I had caught sight of the guv'nor. He was strolling down the terrace in the act of lighting a cigarette. He had just left Lord Banningstowe at the imposing main entrance of the mansion.

"Guv'nor!" I shouted, running up. "We've been looking for you!"

"Everywhere, sir!" panted Tommy Watson.

Nelson Lee halted and looked at us severely.

"Oh, so you have been looking for me!" he exclaimed grimly. "What is the meaning of this, boys? I have no doubt you are the ringleader, Nipper, and I shall be very severe with you. I distinctly told you that you were not to come here to-night."

I glared.

"And I distinctly told myself that I should come, sir!" I retorted. "Of all the nerve! We released you from that old mill, and then you refuse to let us come on this job with you. Rank ingratitude, that's what I call it! And, in any case, we arrived too late to see the fun!"

I thought I detected a slight twinkle in Nelson Lee's eyes.

"Allow me to inform you, Nipper, that you're decidedly cheeky!" he said. "You may regard me as your chief when it comes to detective work; but I am your Housemaster at St. Frank's, and it was against my wish that you should venture out to-night. If these escapades of yours are noticed by the other boys, they are liable to put a wrong construction upon your actions. Therefore I do not wish you to——"

"Oh, ring off, sir!" I protested. "There's no time to talk about these things. We want your help and the help of the police."

"My help?" repeated Nelson Lee sharply. "What for?"

"To capture three rogues, sir," I replied. "One of them is Mr. Naggs, the rotter who broke into the Ancient House one night last week. You remember, don't you? That other fellow—Colmore—was captured at the same time, but made his escape. Well, I can lead you to the place where he is hiding with two other men. And that's not all!"

"Dear me! It appears that you have been busy on your own, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "Well, go on!"

"I'm glad to see you've dropped that schoolmaster tone, guv'nor!" I said calmly. "And now prepare yourself for a little surprise. We have found Goodwin, of the Remove."

Nelson Lee did not seem at all impressed.

"You have found Goodwin—eh?" he exclaimed. "Well done, my lad! That is certainly very excellent news. And how did you manage to do the trick?"

I gave a grunt.

"It's never any good trying to surprise you, guv'nor!" I said disgustedly.

"Every time I've got something special to tell you, you simply stand there listening to it without moving a hair. It's a bit rotten, I think! You might look surprised, anyhow!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I'm awfully sorry, Nipper!" he smiled. "As a matter of fact, I am surprised—and very pleased, too. You have located Dick Goodwin, you say? Where is he, and how did you get on the track?"

"Goodwin is being held a prisoner by Naggs and two other men," I said rapidly. "They are in an old house on the Helmford road, about ten or twelve miles from here. It's a jolly lonely spot, and we followed Naggs' motor-car there, and we know that possibly the men intend remaining in the house for the night. All we've got to do is to go along with a batch of police and nab the whole crowd, and bring Dick Goodwin back to St. Frank's with us."

"Quite a nice little programme, Nipper!" said the guv'nor smoothly. "And now let me hear some details, please. I should like to know how you got on the track so promptly."

It did not take me long to explain all the details to Nelson Lee. Sir Montie and Tommy chipped in now and again, mainly to praise me for what I had done. They declared that the idea of knocking a hole in the oil-can was a stunning one, and that I deserved a putty medal for it.

Nelson Lee was delighted.

"Splendid, Nipper!" he declared, when I had finished. "I quite agree with Tregellis-West and Watson that idea of yours regarding the dripping oil was most effective. I am pleased to find that you retain your habit of acting with skill and decision in an emergency. But for that scheme of yours it would have been quite impossible to follow the motor-car, and then we should never have known what had become of Goodwin."

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

"There is only one thing to be done, Nipper, and that is to get off to this old house without a moment's delay," said Nelson Lee crisply. "I will interview Inspector Jameson now, and we shall probably be ready to start within twenty minutes. We will go there at once and raid the place."

"And—and shall we be able to come, sir?" put in Watson tentatively.

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"Well, boys, I ought not to allow, strictly speaking—you ought to be in your beds," he replied. "But after you have done so much—after you have brought this information along, I cannot very well refuse to allow you to see the game through. Yes, you may come along and join in the raid."

I nearly fainted in Sir Montie's arms.

"Oh, me!" I gasped. "I'm overcome! What marvellous generosity, guv'nor—what wonderful kindness on your part! It is almost too much for me!"

"You cheeky young rascal!"

"You condescend to let us come, indeed!" I exclaimed. "My only hat! I should think we will come, after we've done everything! We found Dick Goodwin, and we're going to take a hand in his rescue! It's not likely that we should travel back to St. Frank's now before seeing the thing through! By the way, guv'nor, how did this affair pass off?"

"Excellently, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "The scoundrels were fondly imagining that I was safe within that old mill, and they had no idea whatever of a police raid. They were captured red-handed, and now the gang is in the hands of the police."

"Thanks to us, sir," I remarked calmly. "It seems to me that we're doing all the work lately. We enabled you to come here and round up this gang, and we're going to enable you to rescue Dick Goodwin."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Precisely, Nipper," he agreed. "When I come to look at these things squarely, I begin to realise that I am something of a nonentity. It is you who are doing all the work; it is you who must obtain all the credit. Perhaps it would be just as well if you became the detective and I your assistant."

Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West grinned, and I grinned, too.

"Oh, chuck it, guv'nor!" I said. "Let's get busy on this job. I'm absolutely helpless without you, you know that. I may be handy now and again, but I couldn't wangle things the same as you do."

A minute later Nelson Lee left us, and he was soon in close conversation

with Inspector Jameson. And then, after a little delay, two motor-cars were got ready. The inspector did not seem particularly impressed with the story that I had told; he seemed to doubt its truthfulness. It was only because of Nelson Lee's insistence that Jameson consented to go on the trip.

"I hope the boys have told you right, that's all, sir," said the inspector at last. "If we have been taken on a fool's errand, I shall make it my duty to——"

"Come, inspector, wait until this effort has met with failure before you start uttering threats!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "There is no time to be wasted. The sooner we get off the better. We are taking a dozen men, I understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the inspector gruffly. "That is the number you suggested."

Five minutes later the two motor cars were bowling along the dark road in the direction of Helmford. Sir Montie and Tommy and I were in the leading car, with Nelson Lee. And we were all fairly excited.

We knew very well that this was no fool's errand, we knew that there would be a juncture at the end of it. And we should rescue Dick Goodwin from his enemy. I felt extremely pleased with myself that night, and I was delighted when I realised how smoothly everything was going.

When we got within a mile of the old house all the lights of the motor-cars were extinguished, and then we continued our trip cautiously. Six or seven hundred yards from the half-ruined building the cars came to a halt, and they were left on the grass beside the road, with one man in charge.

Nelson Lee, accompanied by Inspector Jameson, was leading the way on foot. I followed closely behind, with my chums. And the policemen marched along in the rear.

It would never have done to have taken the motor-cars straight up to the house, for Mr. Naggs and his confederates would have heard the engines, and they would have taken alarm.

It was Nelson Lee, of course, who planned the raid. He placed men in different positions, and very soon the whole house was surrounded. There was not a single portion that was not under observation.

And then Nelson Lee and the inspector with three other men moved on to the house with the intention of breaking in boldly.

There was very little chance of the three rascals escaping. The precautions were too strict.

Nelson Lee went straight to the front door to begin with, and he grasped the handle and pushed. To his surprise the door opened, without any trouble whatever. I was surprised, too, for I was just behind with my chums. And I gave them rather a significant look.

"Did you see that?" I whispered. "The door isn't even locked!"

"It's rather strange, dear old boy—it is, really!" murmured Sir Monty.

Nelson Lee and the inspector passed inside. And when they stood in the hall they remained absolutely silent and motionless—listening.

But the only sounds that came to their ears were quite natural sounds. The sighing of the wind in the trees outside, the ticking of one or two watches, the scraping of a branch against a window pane, somewhere.

It seemed that the old house was absolutely deserted.

The inspector gave an expressive smirk.

"Just as I thought!" he exclaimed nastily. "A wild goose chase—that's what it is, Mr. Lee! If I'd have known I wouldn't have come——"

"We have not searched the house yet, inspector!" interrupted Nelson Lee curtly.

"They were at the back, sir!" I whispered. "At the back, on the ground floor!"

But it was not long before we knew the truth. The house was searched from roof to cellar, and every room was examined—every cupboard was entered.

But there was not a soul in the building.

In blunt truth, the birds had flown. During our absence, during our hurried trip to Bannington, Mr. Naggs and his companions had gone, taking Dick Goodwin with them. I was greatly disappointed, for I had expected something very different.

Jameson, of course, was quite ready to believe that we had attempted to fool him.

But Nelson Lee soon put a stopper to this kind of talk. For there were many indications in the old house which proved

absolutely conclusive—that the place had been very recently occupied.

What was to be done now? What had become of Dick Goodwin?

CHAPTER V.

WHAT HAPPENED TO DICK GOODWIN.

"BY gum!"

The Lancashire boy stood in the centre of the room, and his fists were clenched. He was a prisoner, and he knew that there would be no escape for him.

He did not know where he was except for the fact that this house was an old, tumbled-down one. and that it was situated in an extremely lonely part of the country.

Goodwin, of course, was in the old house on the Helmford road. And, although he did not know it, at that very moment Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and I were setting off for Bannington, to give our information to Nelson Lee. While we were racing away to tell our story, Goodwin was imprisoned in one of the rooms, high up in the house.

He had been taken there almost at once, and the door had been locked upon him. It was a strong door, and two rough bolts had been fitted outside—so that it was quite impossible for the youthful prisoner to make his escape.

He had been left without any light, but this did not matter at all. The room was bare except for a deal table and a kitchen chair. There was no bed for Goodwin to lay upon—nothing but bare boards and bare walls. The ceiling overhead was in a bad condition, part of it being broken away, and the lathes showing.

"By gum!" said Goodwin again. "I'm in a rare fix now! I am that!"

He had no idea of the time, and he was aware of the fact that he felt vaguely hungry. This did not concern him much. All he wanted was his freedom —for he knew what these men were—at least, he was almost certain. And he knew what they were after.

He had not been left alone for long, and now he walked round the room, rather helplessly. He had already felt the door, and he knew that it would be impossible for him to break it down.

Even if he were quite alone in the house he could not do this, for he did not possess sufficient strength. And it would be no good using the chair as a battering ram, for the noise would instantly bring up his captors.

He went to the window, and found that it looked straight down upon a paved pathway. The wall was quite bare, there being no creeper, and not even a pipe. To drop from the window would mean death, probably, and certainly grave injury.

Dick Goodwin considered that it would be better to remain a captive than to risk his life in making a jump.

He was just about to move away from the window when he heard a sound upon the stairs outside.

He turned round and waited. A moment later a streak of light appeared under the door. The two bolts were shot back, and a man entered, carrying a candle. That man was Mr. Naggs, and in his other hand he held a plateful of sandwiches.

"Well, young man. I've brought some food for you," he remarked. "I dare say you're feeling a bit hungry, and you'll have these sandwiches if you only agree to what I want. You'll also have a comfortable little bed—it will be brought up soon."

Goodwin made no reply.

"Sulky, eh?" went on Mr. Naggs, lighting a cigarette. "Well, that won't help you, my lad. It's no good being sulky, and it's no use trying to be obstinate. The best thing you can do is to pay attention to what I say."

"I don't want to speak at all!" said Goodwin quietly. "Ay, and I'm not going to say anything, either!"

"You mean to say that you are stubborn?" asked Mr. Naggs.

"I am that!"

"Well, I don't suppose you will be stubborn for long," the man said pleasantly. "Look here, Goodwin, why can't you behave like a sensible boy? Why can't you realise that you are completely in my power, and that any resistance on your part will be useless? You might just as well speak now as later on —because it's quite certain that you will speak."

The man set the plate of sandwiches on the table, and then he sat on one corner of the latter.

"Now, look here, boy, this is what I

want," he said. "For some little time past you have been engaged upon some plans—plans of a machine: you know exactly what I mean. Well, what you have to do is to tell me where those secret plans are hidden—and to give them up to me"

"Nay, I'll never do that," said Goodwin, shaking his head.

"Oh, yes you will," said Mr. Naggs. "You don't know the position, my lad. Unless you do as I say—unless you tell me where those plans are, you will receive no food. You will be allowed to starve—until you submit."

"It won't make any difference," said Goodwin quietly. "I shall never tell you anything!"

"I think you will," said Mr. Naggs grimly. "After you have been starved—and you do not prove submissive, you will be placed on board a sailing vessel, and you will be removed to the other side of the world. In short, you will be kept a prisoner for months—and you will never return to England!"

"By gum!" said Dick Goodwin.

"That's made you think, ain't it?" went on Mr. Naggs savagely. "Well, you'd better think a bit more. If you'll only speak at once, you will be released before the morning—you will be taken straight back to St. Frank's."

"You are wasting time," said Goodwin. "I will never say a word!"

"You obstinate young puppy!" snapped Naggs. "I'll soon show you whether—— But it's no good getting cross, there's no sense in losing my temper. You'll probably be in a different frame of mind after you have been in captivity for a day or two—or a week or two. It doesn't matter to me. I'm in no particular hurry."

Mr. Naggs seized the plate of sandwiches and the candle.

"I'll leave you now—and come back when you're in a bit better mood!" he said. You won't have a bite to eat—or a drop to drink, until you consent to speak. Starvation is a very good way of making people say things they don't want to say!"

Naggs walked towards the door, passed outside, and then the bolts were again shot. Goodwin was left alone, and he had an uneasy feeling within him that Mr. Naggs had been speaking the absolute truth—he meant every word he had said. Goodwin was to be starved until he grew submissive!

But the Lancashire lad was not a meek and mild junior, he did not believe in accepting the position just as it was. He was a boy of action, and he proved that very shortly afterwards.

If only he could escape—that was what he wanted. But how? How was it possible to escape, when he was entrapped at the top of this high building, with a locked door, and with a window that was high from the ground?

"Ay, but it's a problem!" muttered Goodwin. "But there must be some way out—there must be, that!"

He had looked up at the ceiling while the light was in the room, but he had realised that it was impossible for him to do anything in that direction. There only remained one way—and that was by way of the window. This seemed hopeless enough, certainly. But Goodwin was not accepting defeat yet. He went to the window and opened it. Then he leaned out and stared down upon the ground.

Immediately below him was a paved yard, with a path. It was impossible to jump down there. Further along, right at the corner of the building, there was an old haystack, which had been probably standing there for years. It had been partially used, for the top was quite level. If only that haystack had been beneath the window Dick Goodwin would have risked a jump. For he was quite certain that he would not hurt himself much by leaping down in that way. But the haystack was altogether beyond reach—it was yards and yards away. The most expert professional jumper in the world would not be able to reach it from the window.

But then, as Goodwin was looking, he caught his breath in sharply.

"By gum!" he muttered.

For he had seen something that thrilled him. From the very corner of the building it would be possible to make the jump—to take a leap outwards, and to land on top of the haystack.

And there, quite distinctly, Goodwin could see a narrow ledge round the building. It lay immediately beneath his window, and went parallel with the wall to the corner. But it was only a narrow ledge, barely more than six inches. Would it be worth while to risk

his life by walking along that ledge? Would he be able to do it in safety?

Dick Goodwin did not wait to ask himself any questions. He did not consider the danger. All he wanted was to get out as quickly as he possibly could, and here was a chance—waiting for him to seize!

He did not waste a moment.

Lifting his feet out of the window, he lowerèd himself down until he was standing upon the ledge. Then, pressing his back to the wall, he edged his way slowly along. It was a difficult task—a perilous enterprise.

But Goodwin's nerves were steady, and his eye was good. Inch by inch he edged his way along that narrow stone ledge. But it still seemed a terrible way to the corner.

Goodwin refrained from looking down while he was walking along that ledge. He was quite sure of himself, and he knew that he would not turn giddy, but it was just as well to take no chances whatever. He kept his gaze fixed upon the corner of the house where the ledge came to an end. That was his destination.

At one place he fancied the stonework crumbled beneath his feet, and he expected to go plunging down to death—the next second. But, somehow or other, he passed the danger, and, at length, he reached his objective.

He stood at the extreme corner of the building, and now he gazed down. It was impossible to go farther, for the ledge did not extend right round the house—only upon this one face. And Goodwin, as he stood there, knew that there were two ways for him.

Either he could take the leap, and chance whether he injured himself by falling on the haystack—either that, or he could go back and re-enter his prison. It was one or the other. There was no alternative.

And it did not take the Lancashire lad any more than one second to decide. In fact, he had decided already—right from the very start. Never would be remain in that prison—never would he willingly be in the hands of Mr. Naggs and the other scoundrel.

Goodwin would rather risk injury than remain a prisoner.

He looked down.

The night was very gloomy, but, by this time, Dick's eyes had grown accustomed to the semi-darkness. He could distinctly see the top of the haystack below him, and some little distance out. It would be necessary for him to take a clean, powerful spring, in order to reach the haystack. Otherwise he would fall short, and would crash down upon the hard ground.

The wind was whistling somewhat through the trees, but there were no other sounds. It seemed to him as though the old house was absolutely and utterly deserted. He could hardly believe that Naggs and his confederate were somewhere below.

"Ay, I must make haste!" muttered Goodwin.

He realised that Mr. Naggs might come up into that attic at any moment, and, finding the boy gone, would naturally rush straight to the window. And if he saw Goodwin taking his plunge downwards, it would not be long before the lad was recaptured. So Dick clenched his fists, and took a deep, deep breath.

He tightened his muscles, and crouched there ready for the great spring. Then, with a little gasp, he looked outwards.

It was a magnificent jump.

Down Goodwin went—down and outwards. It seemed to him, during those fleeting moments, that he was going down to certain death. Now that he had started upon his perilous venture the lad realised that there was more danger than he had first thought.

Down he went, and then——

Thud!

He struck the top of the stack, staggered, and sprawled over. He lay there in a heap, silent and motionless. One leg was tucked under him, and his arms were outstretched as he lay face downwards. As a matter of fact, he was dazed and half-stunned; he hardly knew where he was, or what had happened.

But Dick Goodwin was not injured. The force of the blow, as he struck the hay, knocked him sideways, in a manner of speaking; but, except for one or two bruises, and a general stiffness, he was unharmed.

And he lay there, recovering, fervently thankful that he was safe. All he had to do now was to slip to the ground, make his way through the trees and out into the main road. In such a darkness as this it would be quite an easy matter for him to elude his pursuers—supposing that there was a pursuit.

Several minutes elapsed, and then

Goodwin moved. He sat up, and felt himself gingerly. His head was throbbing, and his heart was beating with great rapidity. He stood up, and he knew that he had come to no real harm; but, just as he was about to make a move towards the edge of the haystack, he heard a shout—a shout from the upper window.

Dick Goodwin caught his breath in, flung himself down, and crouched there, concealed among the hay—for he pulled a great deal of it over him. He was hidden, and he knew that it was his best course to remain there, silent and motionless. If he moved out now, he would probably be seen, and that would mean recapture. So Dick remained there.

Meanwhile, up in the attic, Mr. Naggs had appeared. He had gone up into the room, in order to question Dick Goodwin further; but, as soon as he had opened the door, he paused, and then uttered a fierce oath.

Dashing into the apartment, he looked round, holding the candle high. The room was empty—absolutely empty! The prisoner had gone!

"Well, I'm hanged!" snarled Mr. Naggs. "Where the thunder——"

He paused, for he had just caught sight of the open window. There was a kind of sickening feeling at his heart as the man rushed across to the window, for he believed that Goodwin had thrown himself out—and Mr. Naggs knew what that would mean.

He leaned out, but could see nothing in the gloom—after having stared at the candle at close quarters. Everything was pitchy blackness outside. No sound came to his ears, except the slight whistling and rustling of the wind.

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Naggs hoarsely.

He turned, stared out of the room, and then went down the stairs three at a time. Just as he got to the bottom, a door opened, and a second man appeared. He looked at Mr. Naggs in some surprise.

"Anything the matter?" he asked sharply.

Mr. Naggs took a deep breath.

"The matter!" he shouted. "The boy is gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes; the attic is empty——"

"But — but that's impossible!" gasped the other man. "Those two bolts on the door——"

"He jumped out of the window, you fool!" shouted Naggs.

"By thunder!" said the other man. "He jumped out of the window! Why, the boy must be lying there—dead! Either dead, or fatally injured! It's a terrible drop, Naggs, and he couldn't possibly have landed safely! This will mean an inquest, and inquiries—we might even be arrested for murder——"

"Oh, keep your mouth shut!" snarled Naggs harshly. "There's no need to get into a panic! We'll rush outside at once, and pick the boy up—he must be there!"

The other man entered the room, seized a storm lantern, and a moment later he and Naggs were making their way out of the back door. They hurried round, until at length they stood right beneath the attic window. They were in the paved yard, and they looked round them apprehensively, and with a dull feeling of terror in their hearts.

But there was no sign of Dick Goodwin.

The men looked round; they went from corner to corner of the yard. But the missing boy was not there; he had vanished—he had vanished as though into thin air! And at last both the men came to a halt, and stared at one another.

"He's gone—gone!" muttered Mr. Naggs. "Great guns! What can it mean, Williss? He must have jumped out of the window—there was no other way! But he's gone—he must have landed safely——"

"That's impossible!" interrupted the other man. "Why, such a drop as this would smash anybody's legs—and their ribs and arms and head, too! The boy is either up there still, hiding, or he's got to the ground in some other way."

The rascals were more startled than they cared to admit, and Dick Goodwin, on the top of the haystack, had heard every word that was uttered. He knew that Mr. Naggs and the other man were puzzled regarding his disappearance, and he did not think it necessary to make any movement in order to enlighten the rascals. He crouched there, breathing rapidly, and hoping against hope that he would not be discovered.

"We'd better look round again!" said Williss. "The boy must be here, Naggs—there's no other way for it.

He couldn't vanish into thin air, like a ghost. We must have missed him—perhaps he's in one of these bushes. He took a good leap outwards, I dare say, and——"

"Bring the lamp!" snapped Mr. Naggs.

Again the two men searched the yard—this time more thoroughly. They looked in every bush, in every corner, and they even went outside the yard itself, and searched among the weeds and shrubs near by. But their efforts were fruitless; they found no sign whatever of Dick Goodwin.

"It's a mystery—a blamed mystery!" said Williss, at last. "I tell you, Naggs, you must have made a mistake. The boy was probably in the room all the time——"

"You infernal fool!" raved Naggs. "How could he be there? You know as well as I do that there was no cover—nothing to conceal him; only a bare table and a chair. How could he conceal himself there?"

"He might have been behind the door when you went in."

"Nonsense — absolute rubbish!" snapped Naggs. "He wasn't there—I looked. And the window was wide open, I tell you. He jumped out of the window."

"By George!" said Williss, taking a quick breath. "I've just thought of something! Don't you think it's possible that he was only just outside the window, Naggs? There's a little ledge up there, you know, and he might have crouched along it, just out of your reach. And when you looked out into the pitch darkness, you couldn't see anything—you didn't consider the possibility of the boy being there, close to you, crouching under the window sill."

Mr. Naggs thumped his thigh.

"That might be the explanation!" he declared. "We'll go in at once—we'll investigate this!"

"Did you leave the door unbolted?"

"Yes."

"Then, by this time, the boy has got through the house, and has probably disappeared through the front door!" said Williss. "You oughtn't to have left that door open, you know——"

"Oh, be quiet!" snarled Naggs. "How was I to know? I thought he was gone—I thought he'd killed himself out of the window—and I didn't stop to bolt the door behind me! Everything is messed up, and, unless we're very careful, we shall be in a deuce of a hole. Come on! Let's examine the window, and we might be able to discover something!"

A moment later the two men reentered the house, and Dick Goodwin breathed a sigh of relief. So far he was safe—so far the rascals had not thought of the actual truth. But Goodwin did not move—yet.

Mr. Naggs and Williss hurried upstairs as fast as their legs would carry them, and, when they arrived in the attic, they commenced a systematic search; but this proved to be of no avail.

They came to the one possible conclusion that Dick Goodwin had made his escape by means of the window. That was quite obvious, since there was no other method which could have been implied.

Naggs leaned out, holding the lantern downwards. The light was rather bright, and it brought up the wall and that little ledge in sharp relief.

Dick Goodwin, below on the haystack, had been just about to make a move. But he remained perfectly still now—there was a chance of his being seen. It seemed that he would not have any opportunity of getting down from that stack.

He waited, with great anxiety, and at last the lantern was withdrawn into the room again, and the window became dark. Naggs and Williss had left the apartment, and were even then on their way downstairs.

The two men came out into the yard, and once more they began a search—knowing all the time that it would be quite useless. But there was nothing else for them to do. The mystery was absolutely unsolvable to them. They could not understand what had happened; they could not imagine how Dick Goodwin had gained his freedom.

The boy waited there—so close to them, and yet hidden.

And while he was wondering how much longer he would be compelled to wait, the third man of the little party suddenly came up. He had appeared from another portion of the old buildings, and he came along in a hurry.

"I'm glad you are here, Naggs!" he exclaimed, in urgent tones. "I've got something of importance to tell you!"

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE'S CONFIDENCE.

MR. NAGGS looked at the newcomer grimly.

"Something of importance, eh?" he repeated. "Well, I don't want to hear it. I've got quite enough trouble as it is, without listening to any more. You know what happened, don't you?"

"Do you mean about the oil——"

"Curse the oil!" snapped Naggs. "The boy's gone!"

The newcomer started.

"Gone?" he echoed. "Do—do you mean that he has escaped?"

"If he hadn't escaped he wouldn't be gone!" snapped Naggs harshly. "Of course he has escaped—only the deuce knows how! I put him up in that attic, and bolted the door on him; but he's gone now—he must have jumped out of the window!"

The other man shook his head.

"On to this paved pathway—into this yard?" he inquired. "That's impossible, Naggs! The boy couldn't have done that without killing himself!"

"That's what we said, Ratsby!" said Williss. "But we can't get over the fact, can we? The window's open, and the boy's gone—and he's not down in this yard. He must have gone down by a rope, or something."

Mr. Naggs uttered an oath.

"Talk sense, if you want to talk at all!" he exclaimed. "How could he get down with a rope? There was no rope up in that attic, and we searched it thoroughly. Besides, it would be left hanging, if he had used a rope! He must have jumped, I tell you. All our trouble has been for nothing—absolutely for nothing! I am sick of the whole thing! If we can't find the kid, we shall have to clear out of here as quickly as possible—or he will give the alarm, and bring the police!"

Ratsby nodded.

"In any case, I think we'd better clear out as soon as we can," he said. "I've just made a discovery on the car."

"A discovery?"

"Yes," said Ratsby, who was evidently the driver of the car. "I was having a look round just now, when I noticed that our spare can of oil—which is tied on at the back—has got a hole in it. That oil has been leaking for hours. Anyhow, it has practically all gone."

"Well, what the thunder does that matter?" demanded Naggs. "We've got plenty of other oil, haven't we?"

"Yes; but that's not the point," said the driver. "I noticed that there were spots of oil on the ground, just outside the shed. So I took the trouble to go out into the road, and there, as clear as daylight, there's a trail—a trail of oil drops. It goes right along, probably back to Bannington, where we started. It's a clear scent—a scent that can be followed by the eye, and not by the nose of a bloodhound. That trail leads straight to this house, and, if Nelson Lee is on the job—and that's very likely—he might be cute enough to follow that trail of oil drops. Take my advice, Naggs, and clear out as soon as you can. It's all the more essential, now that the boy has gone."

Mr. Naggs nodded.

"Yes, I suppose you're right, Ratsby," he said. "There's no sense in us remaining here. Get the car out as quickly as you can, and we'll be off—we'll clear straight away to London."

"Yes, that's the best thing," said Williss. "I'm about tired of this game, anyhow. Let the boy go—it'll only be waste of time to make any attempt to trace him. He's escaped, and there's an end of it. We'll get back to London!"

"Good!" said Ratsby. "I'll get the car ready at once."

He moved off, and Mr. Naggs and Williss re-entered the house.

Dick Goodwin, on the haystack, fairly hugged himself with delight. He was extremely glad, now, that he had not made a move. The rascals had not thought of looking on the haystack—they had not jumped to the obvious conclusion, as Goodwin had feared.

And they were off to London almost at once. Goodwin decided to remain where he was—in safety. And after the car had left, it would be child's play for him to slip down and walk back to Bannington. His adventure had panned out quite well, after all. Owing to his own efforts, he had gained his freedom.

The kidnappers were ready sooner than Goodwin had anticipated. Almost at once the powerful car came gliding round from the shed, and it passed quite near to the haystack, and went to the front of the old house. Then Good-

win waited, eager and anxious, and filled with joy.

He did not have to wait long.

Within four minutes the faint throbbing of the motor-car increased, and then it passed out into the roadway, and went roaring along in the direction of London. Standing up on the haystack, Goodwin caught just a glimpse of the car as it passed along the road. And he stood there, listening.

Throb! Throb! Throb!

The noise grow fainter and fainter, until at length it died away altogether. Only the faint sighing of the wind came to Goodwin's ears. He was left alone—absolutely alone in the grounds of the old deserted house.

Naggs and his fellow-rascals had gone—they were fleeing to safety.

"Ay, it's champion!" muttered Goodwin delightedly.

He passed to the edge of the haystack, breathing freely, and a moment later he had slipped to the ground. He decided that no good purpose would be served by entering the house. There was nothing of his there, and his best move would be to start to walk to Bannington without any delay. For he knew where he was now—he had overheard quite sufficient to tell him, roughly, the position of this old house.

Goodwin passed round the stack, and then went along towards the road, picking his way through the bushes and undergrowth. He was really in a part of the garden, and he knew that he would soon find himself on the weed-grown drive—for he was going round the building in a slight detour.

Pushing between two thick bushes, Dick Goodwin caught a glimpse of the drive. He almost felt like whistling, he was so light-hearted. Something loomed up in front of him—something dark and big—and at the same moment his shoulder was grasped, firmly and fiercely.

"Not leaving us yet, surely?" asked Mr. Naggs grimly. "There's no need to hurry away, my lad!"

Dick Goodwin staggered, and he gasped.

"What—what——"

"My dear, simple youth," said Mr. Naggs, "you surely did not imagine that we were going to let you escape? We adopted a little ruse—and it has succeeded. Hold him tight, Williss—Ratsby will be back within about five minutes. We won't enter the house again—we'll take the kid straight off!"

Goodwin struggled wildly; he struggled with the strength of desperation and fury, for in a flash he realised that he had been deceived. He knew that he had been caught in a trap, which Naggs had set for him, and the knowledge of this almost drove Dick Goodwin frantic.

But his struggles were useless, as he would have realised had he thought. It was quite impossible for him to escape from the grasp of two strong men. All he could do was to stay there, breathing hard, and wishing that the earth would open and swallow his captors.

Tricked!

He had been tricked quite easily, and he knew it now.

"Yes, it was pretty neat," remarked Williss. "You see, my lad, we didn't exactly know where you were, but Mr. Naggs was fairly certain that you weren't far off. We reckoned that you were hiding among the bushes, or up one of the trees, and so we arranged that little matter about all leaving for London at once. We spoke in pretty loud tones, so that you would have the benefit of the information. But only the driver went off in the car. We remained behind, watching and waiting. It was very obliging of you to come out of your cover so quickly."

Mr. Naggs chuckled.

"And so you were on the top of that haystack?" he asked pleasantly. "That was the game, eh? I can understand it now. You reckless young idiot! You must have crept along that ledge, and then jumped on to the haystack. You might have broken your neck."

"I was a fool not to have made a run for it when I had the chance," said Dick bitterly.

"You were," agreed Mr. Naggs. "You ought to have skipped off like greased lightning, and then you would have been safe. But it's not always wise to be cautious. I've found on many an occasion that the best thing to do is to run—run for it. By hanging about and waiting for an opportunity to come, you only get yourself into a worse mess than before. That's what happened to you, my lad. We're going to take you to a place that you won't escape from. I can assure you of that. But remember, if only you prove reasonable about those plans of yours,

you'll get your freedom at once. It rests entirely with you, Goodwin."

"I'll never speak a word—not a word!" shouted Goodwin hotly.

"We'll see about that," said Mr. Naggs. "After you have starved for a day or two, you'll alter your tone. Starvation is a queer thing, my lad. It makes people talk—against their own will. But I'm a kind man, and I can't bear to see anybody go hungry. No: in your own interest, you'd better speak up as soon as you can."

Dick Goodwin did not reply. He felt too miserable, too utterly downcast. After his hopes had been raised to the highest pitch, after he had taken it for granted that he had escaped and would be able to get back to St. Frank's, this had come—this disaster! He was a prisoner; he was in the hands of Naggs and the other man, and Dick fully realised that he would have no other opportunity of getting away. The men would make quite certain of that.

Less than five minutes later, Ratsby drove up in the car. He was delighted when he heard the result of the little stratagem, and he nodded.

"I thought it would work, Naggs," he said. "Well, I think we'd better be getting along at once, and this time we sha'n't leave any trail of oil-drops behind us. You know where to make for, don't you?" asked Naggs.

"Yes, of course," said the driver—"the village of Bramley, on the coast."

"Not exactly the village," said Mr. Naggs. "You've got to branch off before you get to the village and go down a little lane which leads to Bramley Gap. This gap leads right down on to the beach, and once we're there the kid won't have any chance of getting away."

Dick Goodwin listened, wondering what these men were going to do to him. He had never heard of Bramley or of Bramley Gap. But Mr. Naggs's words were quite plain enough. Goodwin was to be taken to the seashore, and probably into a boat, or something of that kind.

"Now, lad, into the car!" said Mr. Naggs sharply.

Goodwin had no alternative but to obey. He realised that it would be the better plan for him to do as these men bid. It would save him trouble, and he would receive fewer knocks. There was no sense whatever in resisting when the odds were so great.

So Goodwin opened the door of the car and passed into the roomy tonneau. The large hood was in position, and it was quite dark inside the car. For a moment Goodwin wondered if it would be possible for him to slip out by the opposite door, but he soon dismissed this idea.

He couldn't possibly do it without being seen or heard, and it would only mean recapture again. And then, quite probably, he would be bound up and gagged. It was far better to remain as he was. Escape, in any case, was impossible at this stage.

So Goodwin sat there, numbed with misery, and furious with himself for having fallen into the trap so easily. Ratsby got into the driver's seat, and William and Mr. Naggs stood talking for a moment or two before entering the car.

And suddenly Dick Goodwin had an idea.

It was put into his head by the fact that a small scrap of paper was lying on the seat of the car; he had put his fingers upon it quite by chance. It was just a torn piece of newspaper, and of no importance to anybody.

But, quick as a flash, Dick Goodwin took the stump of a pencil out of his pocket, then, placing the piece of paper on the hard cushion, he scrawled a few words.

At that very moment Mr. Naggs opened the door, in readiness to enter.

"By gum!" muttered Goodwin.

He rolled the paper round the little piece of pencil, and the next moment he tossed it out into the road, without his action being observed.

It was just a chance—a slim chance.

Goodwin had done everything in his power, and now he must accept his position. He did not believe for a moment that anybody would ever find that piece of paper round the stump of pencil, but if it was found there was just a chance that he might be rescued. But Goodwin put all these thoughts out of his head. He did not think that any good would come of his quick action.

A moment later the car started off, and it soon gathered speed, and went purring away into the night. The old house by the roadside was left dark and deserted.

It remained in this condition for, per-

haps, ten or fifteen minutes; and then, along the road, came many forms. They advanced with great caution, and they entered the grounds of the old house.

Of course, these people were Nelson Lee and the police, to say nothing of Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. We had arrived.

And, as I have already recorded, we found that the birds had flown.

After a thorough search of the old house, it was made quite apparent that Mr. Naggs and his confederates were not there. And Dick Goodwin had vanished, too. This was quite contrary to what I had expected, for I had assumed that the junior would be held captive there during the whole of the night.

I did not know, of course, what had been happening, or I should not have been puzzled.

Inspector Jameson was very sceptical, even after Nelson Lee had pointed out several obvious facts to him. For example, there were one or two candles there which had been used quite recently. But the inspector stated that it was not possible to tell whether they had been used that night, or a week earlier.

However, Nelson Lee bowled out the inspector on one point. There was a storm lantern there, which had evidently been left behind in the hurry to get away, and the oil container was distinctly warm.

"I think you will admit, inspector, that this lantern has been used within the last half-hour," said Nelson Lee smoothly.

"Well, it certainly appears to be so," admitted the inspector grudgingly. "But where are these men now? Why did they go away?"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"Really, it is quite useless asking me those questions, Jameson," he said. "I do not know why the men have gone; I only know that they have gone, and they have taken Goodwin with them. It is our duty to get on their track, and as soon as possible."

I found an opportunity to have a word with the guv'nor after a moment, and I tapped him on the arm.

"Just a minute, sir!" I said.

"Well, Nipper, what is it?"

"These men have gone off in that car," I said. "They didn't remain here long, and it's quite possible that that oil-can is still leaking—if they haven't discovered the hole in it. That's not likely, because it's so dark. Don't you think we might be able to follow that oil trail again?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I have been thinking of the same thing, Nipper," he said. "It is quite possible that we may be able to follow the trail for some distance; but that supply of oil cannot last for ever, remember. However, we will do our best. To begin with, we will go out upon the road, and we will examine the surface by the aid of our electric torches. We might be able to discover something."

"Yes, it's quite likely, sir," I agreed. "Come on!"

We passed outside, leaving the police to their own devices, and, with Nelson Lee leading the way, we went out into the road and then slowly moved forward, carefully examining the surface as we passed along.

The drops of oil were distinctly visible near the gateway, where the car had turned in on its original journey; but, search as we would, we could find no signs of any oil beyond the house—on the way to London. This indicated that when the car had restarted its journey the leakage had been stopped.

"This is as I feared," said Nelson Lee. "No, Nipper, that idea of ours is useless. We cannot follow the car by means of the oil-drops."

"That's rotten, sir!" I grunted. "I had been hoping that we might be able to——"

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "I wonder what this is, dear old boys?"

He was bending down and staring at something which lay in the road—a tiny, white slip of paper, which appeared to be rolled up. I flashed my torch upon the object and then picked it up. It was certainly a roll of paper, and there was a stump of a pencil inside.

"Why, look at this, sir!" I said. "I wonder who dropped this piece of paper and the pencil?"

I unrolled the paper, took the pencil out, and then saw that there were some words scrawled on the little scrap of paper. These words were in pencil, and they were written right across the printing, making it rather difficult for the words to be read. However, after examining the paper closely under the light of Nelson Lee's torch, I made out

the words, and I was filled with excitement.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "Look—look at this, sir!"

"There is no need to get excited, Nipper——"

"But there is, sir! Goodwin wrote this!" I shouted.

"Goodwin!"

"Begad!"

"My only hat!"

Nelson Lee took the paper from me and scrutinised it.

Sir Montie clutched at my sleeve.

"Dear old boy," he pleaded, "I'm simply dyin' with curiosity! What does it say on that paper?"

"Only a few words," I said. "Just these: 'Help! Being taken to Bramley Gap by scoundrels. Please come.—R. Goodwin.' Those are the words, Montie. What do you think of them?"

"Begad! It is simply amazin'!" said Tregellis-West.

"Bramley Gap is a little opening in the cliffs, only a mile away from Bramley Village," said Nelson Lee. "It is situated on the coast, about sixteen miles, roughly, from here. My dear lads, if this information is correct--as it no doubt is—we shall be able to effect Goodwin's rescue pretty quickly."

"And what about the police, sir?" asked Watson. "Will they help us?"

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"I do not think I shall bother about the police," he said after a moment.

"Hear, hear!" I exclaimed. "We don't want that old idiot bothering about, sir!"

A few moments later, Inspector Jameson had been informed by Nelson Lee that we required one of the cars and that we were going on, in an endeavour to find out what had become of Goodwin. The inspector could not very well refuse, and, very shortly afterwards, Nelson Lee was at the wheel of the car, and we were speeding away through the night.

We went on through the darkness, and at length, when we had nearly arrived at the little fishing village of Bramley, Nelson Lee turned off, and we went down a narrow little lane, which led to the Gap itself. By this time I was feeling exceedingly thrilled, and I wondered what the next few moments would bring. Should we be able to rescue Dick Goodwin, or should we meet with absolute failure?

At length we came to the opening, where the gap extended out on to the beach itself. We had been passing down along a deep gully, with frowning cliffs on either side of us. It was steep, too, and it led straight down on to the shingly beach.

The place was bare and bleak indeed. There was not a sign in any direction of any human being or human habitation. The lights on our own car were, of course, out, so there was no chance of our being seen, and the noise of the sea effectually concealed the power of the motor.

Nelson Lee was not long in coming to a decision.

"Boys, we must go back to St. Frank's," he said quietly.

"But why, sir? Goodwin was brought here——"

"It is quite likely that Goodwin was brought here," agreed Nelson Lee. "But we can do nothing now, my lad; we can do nothing in this darkness.

But, as a matter of fact, just between ourselves, I might as well admit that on the morrow there were to be some extremely interesting happenings. Nelson Lee was not going to have everything his own way. Sir Montie and Tommy and I were destined to play quite big parts in the stirring events which were due to take place before many hours had elapsed.

THE END.

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 recounts his experiences to "Mr. Mysterious," at the latter's house in Hampstead.

(Now read on.)

The Diamond Pendant.

FOR Lin's face suddenly lost that bright look of frank boyish wonder and admiration, and became hard and almost sullen again. He resented that easy tone of proprietorship, and that word "master" was too much for him!

"Hang it! Why, he speaks as though I were a puppy which he'd found in the street, and was going to keep and train to do little tricks to amuse him! I won't stand it!"

He meant to say so, and was thinking how to put it so that it would sound firm, final—and a bit stinging—when the man himself coolly said:

"You want to go now? Very well. Put that money back in your pocket. It is only for your fares and little expenses of that sort. As I said, we will talk of payment later on. Be here to-morrow evening at about the same time. I think we can find a very interesting little job for you! Good-night, Lin!"

And he actually strolled out of the room, pipe in mouth, as though the thing was all settled, and Lin could not possibly have even a remark to make about it!

The boy's cheeks flushed. There was only one things to do—walk out of the house at once, and never come near it again! That would show the man!

With all dignity that he could muster he walked to the door, not venturing to look toward the other end of the room.

"Lin!"

It was the girl's soft voice. He had to turn and look. She beckoned to him, smiling. He tried to say, "Good-night, miss! I must go!" But somehow he couldn't.

He went back.

"Lin," she said, "I suppose you are going home now. Where do you live? In London?"

"Yes, miss. Just off Blackfriar's Road," he answered.

"Oh, then, it wouldn't be so badly out of your way to make a little call at Shenstone's, the jewellers, in the Strand, would it?" said Cora.

She took the diamond pendant from its case and held it up, smiling as the boy stared at it round-faced, and fairly blinked at its dazzling brilliancy.

"See, the catch is loose," she said. "I want it made secure. If you mention my name, Miss Twyford, they will know whom it is from, and will probably do it at once, while you wait—it is only a few moment's work."

"Very well, miss," said Lin. "But it is rather late, and the jewellers might be closed. If they are, shall I bring that—that thing back here?"

Cora Twyford turned away; a troubled look of hesitation or doubt shadowed her face.

"No," she said; "do not bring it back here to-night, in any case. It is so far, and will make it so late for you. If the jewellers are not open, you must keeep it for to-night. Take it to them in the morning, and call for it in the evening, on your way here."

"Those are real diamonds, aren't they, miss? Is it—is it very valuable?" asked Lin, looking at the glittering thing as she laid it again in its satin nest.

"Yes, those are real diamonds, and it is—well, rather valuable," Cora answered. "But I know it will be quite safe with you, Lin," she added. "And now I will show you the way to the gate, for you'd never find your way by yourself through 'Kit's Jungle,' as I call that awful garden of ours." And she laughed.

She led him by that queer, corkscrewy path to the watch-box entrance-gate. There she slipped into his hand the money he had

left behind on the table, and had bidden him "Good-night," and was gone before he had time to refuse it.

Once outside the house, Lin felt like one awakening from a powerful spell. He began to think furiously, and his reflections were not at all flattering to himself.

"Hang it all!" he muttered almost savagely. "What a rotten, weak-kneed chump I've been! I meant never to have anything more to do with that man. He isn't straight; he's too mysterious, and I hate dark, underhand things that I don't understand! I meant to tell him so, that's what I really came for, and now hanged if I haven't booked myself to go there again! But he sha'n't send me on any more mysterious errands, and talk about teaching me things, and not being a bad master! He is not going to be my master! I don't like him, and his dark, mysterious ways! I wouldn't go back there at all, only I must now, because I've got this blessed diamond thing!"

He tapped his breast, where the diamond pendant, in its case, made quite a bulky object under his coat, in the inner pocket where he had placed it for safety.

At first he had felt rather proud to be entrusted with such a thing. But now he wished that he hadn't got it to look after. Real diamonds, and awfully valuable! A big responsibility! But the young lady was so jolly nice—especially in the way that she had asked him, that it seemed rough and bearish to refuse. Of course, it would be all right if he didn't find the jewellers were closed when he got there. Because then he would get it off his hands for the night, and not have to take it home with him.

For Lin Fleet's home was—well, a peculiar one in some respects, and he did not wish to take that diamond thing there. The very idea made him feel uncomfortable, and very, very anxious to get to the Strand in time.

To increase his impatience, he happened to be "between times" for the 'buses, and had to wait for one several minutes; and then the thing crawled—or he thought it did. Apart from his anxiety and impatience, it was not a pleasant journey. The 'bus had filled up on the way, and was now packed, outside and in, by the time it arrived at Charing Cross. Lin's seat was a back one, right in the corner, on the roof; and two heavy-weights, a man and a woman, had squeezed into it, pinning him there.

He knew that Shenstone's, the jeweller's shop, was not far up the Strand, and he wanted to get off before the 'bus started again and carried him past it. He tried to wriggle out of his corner first, but his two bulky neighbours got up before him and blocked the gangway effectually. It was a running—or, rather, a crawling fight, to try to get past them, because they, too, like every passenger on that 'bus, or any other 'bus that ever ran on wheels, were also in a hurry and wanted to get off first.

Lin got past them at last by climbing over the backs of the seats; but it was worse getting down the steps, and worse still on the footboard below, where the "insides" were struggling to get out, and three times as many would-be passengers as the vehicle could possibly hold, were fighting just as fiercely to get in.

It was the usual selfish rough-and-tumble; and Lin himself, anxious and excited, did not stand on ceremony.

He fought his way to the step at last, and sprang off, with his jacket unfastened, and that precious case half out of the inner pocket. Hastily thrusting it back again, he buttoned his jacket tightly over his chest; then, pushing through the knot of people still clinging to the 'bus like blue-bottles round a bone, dived into the Strand, running for all he was worth.

His leap from the 'bus was followed by quite a dramatic little incident. As the vehicle started, and the struggling knot of people around it fell away, a middle-aged lady in furs, white, wild-eyed, and with her hat all on one side, was seen on the lower step—or, rather, half off it, clinging to the rail on one side, while the conductor supported her on the other by a catch-as-catch-can grip on her furs. She was screaming at the top pitch of a very shrill voice:

"Stop the 'bus! Call a policeman! I've been robbed! That boy! St-st-st-stop hi-m-m-m-m!" The quaver at the end being due to the jolting of the 'bus.

Lin knew nothing of this. There was some shouting behind him, but he was too intent on getting to Shenstone's to turn and look back. A man did try to seize him by the arm, and another made a grab at his collar; but Lin, who thought he might have jostled them, or that it was merely a lark, dodged both and ran on, zig-zagging through the traffic across the road, and not stopping until he stood outside the jeweller's door.

The shop was closed!

"I was afraid so! Bit of bad luck!" he ejaculated ruefully. "Now I shall have to take the thing home! It's a bother that the case makes such a bump under my jacket. They may notice, and want to know what I've got there. But Uncle Ben will be round at the Friar's Head at this time in the evening; and Blimber will be with him; or, anyhow, gone off for the night. There is only Aunt Harriet, and if I can dodge her and slip up quietly to my own room, it will be all right after all!"

And so it might have been, only that his calculations were at fault in one respect—the whereabouts of Blimber.

He was quite correct as regards his uncle; who was trying to make a bit of money off a stranger in the smoky billiard-room at the Friar's Head, and was not likely to return home until the place closed, or he or the stranger were "cleaned out."

But Blimber was not with him, although, as his choice and particular crony, he might have been. It so happened that a little bit of business had taken Blimber to St.

(Continued on page iii of cover).

Martin's Lane that evening. He was one of those men who have "little bits" of business" which take them to all sorts of places at odd times, and that particular evening he went to St. Martin's Lane.

It was quite an affair of chance; but out of it arose big trouble for Lin Fleet!

The Fires of Temptation

LIN'S Uncle Ben—Benjamin Pawley—was a jobbing printer in a small way. He had a small business in a small shop, in a small street off Blackfriar's Road. It was a dirty little shop; the grimy window filled to obscurity with dust and fly-spotted specimens of his art as a printer, from posters to bill-heads and memorial cards.

The printing business was so small that it could not possibly have kept him in bread and cheese, to say nothing of beer, which he regarded as a prime necessary of life. But he was not a man bound hard and fast to one line. He could do other things besides printing, many other things—as will appear in the course of this story. And he was clever at them all; so clever that, among the set best acquainted with his peculiar abilities, he had long been known as "Fakes."

Such was Uncle Ben. Then there was Aunt Harriet—his wife.

Aunt Harriet was tall, angular, and hard of form and feature. She took hard views of life, and professed a hard form of religion, the principal aim of which seemed to be to make everyone so uncomfortable in this world that they would be glad to leave it for another, better or worse, for the sake of a change.

Mr. Benjamin Pawley was rather younger than his wife, whom he had married less for love than for the bit of money left her by her first husband—she being a widow. The money had long since vanished; no money ever did stay long once Benjamin Pawley got hold of it. But its memory remained with Aunt Harriet, and she was fond of reminding him about it, which often led to warm words and the flight of crockery, and even knives and forks, across the meal-table, making it very uncomfortable for Lin at times, as both were uncertain in their aim.

Also, it might have been a bad example to their children; but that, fortunately, they had none.

The only other member of the household—and he did not belong to it in the regular way—was Blimber.

Blimber had come into the picture, years ago, when Lin was a mere toddler, as 'prentice to Benjamin Pawley. But Blimber, being a sharp lad, and quick to learn, picked up a lot of other things besides the art of printing from Mr. Pawley, and soon passed from the humble position of 'prentice to that of confidential assistant, and finally a sort of crony partner to his former master.

Blimber had occasionally drifted away, and was absent for quite long periods—a great relief to young Lin, who hated him; but he always came back again, and took up his position as partner in the "business" and one of the family.

Lin had always hated Blimber, as far back as he could recall.

Blimber used to love to give him cruel pinches on his little, bare legs, or stick sharp things into him, to make him cry out, and bring Aunt Harriet down upon him, Lin being then only a little chap, and Blimber a short, but heavy and strong lout of fourteen or so. And as Lin grew up and became a boy, he improved on these methods of torment, and did his best to make Lin's life unbearable.

But Lin was growing up, though Blimber did not seem to notice it; and one day he surprised his tormentor by turning on him suddenly, and hitting him squarely in the middle of his pasty, grinning face. Blimber bled frightfully at the nose, and swore like a bargee. But he did not offer to fight, and from that hour he kept his hands off Lin.

But he had neither forgotten nor forgiven, and Lin Fleet had a spiteful enemy in Blimber.

Lin, however, did not worry much about Blimber that evening, as finding the jeweller's closed, he set off instantly, almost at a run, out of the Strand by the first side-turning, along the Embankment, and over Blackfriar's Bridge towards home. He thought only of Aunt Harriet, and his chances of getting safely up to his own room with that diamond thing, without encountering her.

For she might notice that bulge under his jacket. Aunt Harriet had sharp eyes, as well as a sharp tongue. And then she would demand to know what it was, and want to see it, and there wouldn't be any putting her off!

(To be continued.)

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