No. 316.—FINE STORY OF THE WONDER CRICKETER OF ST. FRANK'S

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THE MATCH OF DESTINY.

A Story of School and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's College, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Golden Image," "The Demon Cricketer," "The Mystery Men of the East," etc.

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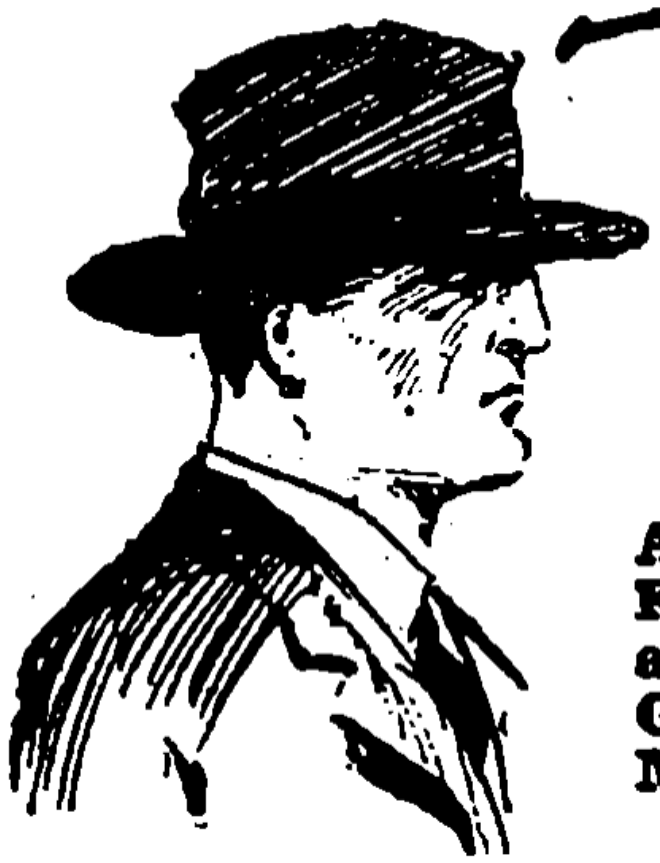

The Match of Destiny.

A Story of School and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's College, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Golden Image," "The Demon Cricketer," "The Mystery Men of the East," and many other Stirring Tales.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

HANDFORTH'S GRIM DISCOVERY!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH entered Study D in the ancient House at St. Frank's with a heavy, forbidding frown upon his brow. He wasn't angry—that frown merely denoted that he was in a thoughtful mood.

He failed to observe that the table was set already for tea. The bread and butter was cut, the cakes and pastries were arrayed in an appetising way, and Church and McClure were sitting down at the table.

They looked up as Handforth entered.

"About time, too!" said Church. "You told us to have tea ready prompt at five, and you don't turn up till ten past. What's delayed you, Handy?"

Handforth made no reply. He walked straight before him, progressed as far as the window, and then turned round. He stared at the tea-table unseeingly. And Church and McClure watched him with growing interest.

"What's the trouble, Handy?" asked McClure.

"Poison!" said Handforth absently.

"Eh?"

"The question is, what does it mean?" went on Handforth. "Poison! There's something sinister about this—something grim and terrible! And it's up to me to find out the truth, and——"

Handforth came to an abrupt halt, his eyes gleaming with a sudden new light. His face flushed, and he clenched one fist. Then he brought the fist down with terrific force upon the tea-table.

"By George!" he shouted. "I've got it!"

Whatever he had got, it was quite certain that Church and McClure had received something, too. Church's cup of tea danced in its saucer, wobbled about precariously for a moment, and then toppled gracefully over into Church's lap. He sprang to his feet with a yell.

"Yow-ow!" he howled wildly. "I'm scalded! You—you silly ass——"

"My only hat!" gasped McClure. "What the dickens——"

He had saved his own cup of tea by a masterly effort, but half of it was already spilt over the tablecloth.

"He's mad!" snorted Church indignantly. "I'm soaked! What's the matter with you, Handy? What's the idea of coming in here and causing all this havoc?"

Handforth saw his chums for the first time.

"What's that?" he snapped impatiently. "Oh, don't bother me now! I'm thinking—I'm in the middle of an intricate problem!"

"You've soaked me with hot tea!" snorted Church fiercely. "Why can't you keep your hands still? A fellow

who's got hands like sledge-hammers ought to be more careful!"

Handforth sighed.

"And you two chaps are supposed to be my chums!" he said bitterly. "All you can do when I want to be quiet—when I want to concentrate on a murder case—all you can do is to interrupt with silly remarks about tea! What do I care about tea—what do I care whether you're scalded or not? I'm on the track of a terrible crime!"

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned McClure. "He's got the detective fever again! This'll mean the end of all our peace!"

"Detective fever—rot!" said Handforth grimly. "There's no fever about it. I've made a discovery—just that, and nothing more. And it's set my mind into a train of thought. When you hear this theory of mine, you'll be amazed at the way I've reasoned it all out. It's the smartest thing I've ever done."

"Good!" said Church sourly. "Oh, go on—we're listening!"

"It came to me in a flash—in a sudden burst of brilliant light!" went on Handforth. "I'd been groping in darkness—trying to piece the threads together. And then, all of a sudden, the blackness went, and I saw the truth!"

"Ripping!" said McClure. "When you grow older, Handy, you'll make a fortune at lecturing. Or did you read that out of a book?"

Handforth thumped the table again—although not so hard.

"Listen to me!" he said grimly. "You're trying to be funny now—you're trying to sneer at me. I know it! But I'm going to make you change your tone—I'm going to make you see this thing as I see it. This case I'm investigating is connected with Dodd, of the Remove."

"Oh!" said Church. "So Jerry Dodd's in it! Is he the murderer, or merely the victim? You'd better get your handcuffs ready, old man——"

"Will you listen or not?" thundered Handforth. "I'm not going to be treated in this way by my assistants!"

"Your what?" asked McClure.

"My assistants!" repeated Handforth firmly. "You're not Remove chaps now. I'm a detective—and you're my assistants—understand? We're going to do this thing properly. Well, about Jerry Dodd. Ever since he came I've been puzzled about him. There's been something fishy connected with the chap—something that I couldn't fathom."

"Marvellous!" said Church. "Is there anything you can't fathom, Handy?"

Edward Oswald ignored the sneer.

"Just think of Podge and Midge," he continued. "Who are they—what are they?"

"A couple of escaped lunatics!" said McClure promptly.

"A pair of prize idiots!" added Church.

Handforth curled his lip.

"That only shows how you've been spoofed!" he said. "Podge and Midge are detectives—as keen as mustard. You may not think so—but that's where you've been hoodwinked. Podge and Midge have made themselves look ridiculous; but that's only part of their plan. Actually, they are all alive, and waiting for the right moment."

Church and McClure looked at one another rather wearily.

They were used to this sort of thing. At intervals Handforth would have these attacks, and they generally came suddenly, without any previous warning. It was something like a man who is subject to fits or seizures. And when Handforth was attacked in this way nothing could stop him.

Church and McClure had no difficulty in recollecting Messrs. Podge and Midge—the two extraordinary gentlemen who styled themselves the Deadliest Sleuths on Earth. They were supposed to be detectives, and they had been concerned in one or two ludicrous incidents during the last week or so. Most of the fellows knew that Messrs. Podge and Midge were in the neighbourhood for the express purpose of keeping their eyes upon Jerry Dodd.

The new boy in the Remove certainly had a mystery connected with him. And Podge and Midge had apparently received instructions to protect him. They were about as much use in this capacity as a couple of lost sheep.

"Podge and Midge are here because Jerry Dodd is in some danger—or because he's threatened with danger," went on Handforth. "We know that, don't we?"

"But what is the danger?"

Handforth held up a finger.

"Aha! That's just it!" he said mysteriously. "What is the danger? Until a few minutes ago I didn't know.

and I was puzzled about it. But now I do know. I placed my finger on the key of the mystery just before I came into this study."

"Bravo!" said Church. "Good old Handy!"

He and McClure were proceeding with their tea. But Handforth needed nothing. The very thought of eating and drinking never entered his head.

"As you chaps know, Dodd's uncle is at present at St. Frank's," he continued. "Mr. William Dodd came here a day or two ago, and he's staying until to-morrow, I believe. Why did he come?"

"To see his nephew, I suppose."

"Ostensibly, yes!" agreed Handforth.

"My hat!" said Church. "That's a good word!"

"You—you ass!" snorted Handforth, glaring. "I repeat—ostensibly, yes! On the face of things, Mr. Dodd came to St. Frank's just to see Jerry. Who is he? We don't know! We are simply aware that he came from Australia."

"Rats!" objected McClure. "Uncle Bill—as Dodd calls him—is a member of the Australian cricket team, that's going to play in the test matches. He's a well-known batsman——".

"That's what he says," interrupted Handforth. "But we don't know whether that's the truth or not—and we can't take anything for granted. To my mind it's queer that he should come here and stay two or three days. Other chaps' people don't do it!"

"No—because they don't live in Australia."

"A quibble!" said Handforth contemptuously. "Mr. William Dodd has come to St. Frank's for a sinister reason. You may not believe me now, but I'll soon explain. We all know that Dodd's pater is worth pots of money."

"I fancy he's a millionaire," said McClure.

"Exactly—a millionaire!" hissed Handforth dramatically, as he leaned across the table. "Jerry is his only son. When Dodd's pater dies, Jerry comes into all the money. That's right, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," said Church. "But what on earth——"

"Wait!" snapped Handforth. "Now, this is significant. Where will the money go if Jerry Dodd dies at once? Who will be the next of kin?"

"Blessed if I know," said McClure.

"Why, the uncle, of course—the man who's here at St. Frank's!" said Handforth triumphantly. "Do you see now? Once Jerry Dodd is out of the way, the uncle's path will be clear. He'll only have to murder Dodd's pater, and he'll come into everything! Don't you call that a masterful piece of deduction?"

Church and McClure had stopped eating, and they were staring at their leader in blank amazement. Handforth's face was flushed, his eyes were blazing with excitement, and he fairly quivered with the terrific nature of his disclosure.

"Great Scott!" gasped Church. "Do—do you mean that Dodd's uncle has come to St. Frank's to—to kill him?"

"Yes!" rapped out Handforth.

"Oh, you prize lunatic!" groaned McClure. "You better not let anybody hear you say anything of that sort, Handy! Why you'd be sacked for even less——"

"Sacked!" snapped Handforth. "What do I care about that? I'm going to reveal the truth—I'm going to expose this blackhearted scoundrel in his true colours! Uncle Bill is a wolf in sheep's clothing."

Church rose to his feet rather alarmed.

"Look here, Handy, this is a bit too much for you!" he said gently. "You mustn't get so excited—your brain won't stand it! Mr. Dodd is a gentleman—one of the best of sorts—everybody likes him. It's absolutely ridiculous to suggest that he's come to St. Frank's to—to——. Oh, I can't say it!"

"You're off your rocker, Handy!" declared McClure.

Handforth cooled down in his sudden abrupt way. He became icily calm, and looked at his chums with withering scorn.

"Of course, I expected you to take it like this," he said with contempt. "You don't understand—you haven't got sense enough to see the truth when it stares you in the face. I don't blame you—I didn't expect anything else."

"But—but what's put this idea into your head?" demanded Church.

"Ah, you want to know, don't you?" said Handforth, in a tense whisper. "I'll tell you! Jerry's uncle means to poison him!"

"Poison him!" gasped Church.

"Yes!"

"But—but——"

"I'll explain how I made the discovery," said Handforth, leaning forward. "Just before I came into this study, I was walking along the passage.

I had passed Dodd in the lobby, so I knew that he wasn't in Study F."

"Obviously," said McClure. "He couldn't be in two places at once."

"But as I was coming past Study F I saw that the door was ajar," said Handforth. "I didn't take particular notice at first. Then I caught sight of the mirror over the mantelpiece. And, reflected in the mirror, I could see the form of Dodd's uncle."

"I suppose he was in the room?" asked Church breathlessly.

"Of course he was, you ass!"

"Ah! A clue!" said McClure.

"If you're going to be funny, I won't say another word!" roared Handforth. "You don't seem to realise that this matter is deadly serious. I saw the reflection of Dodd's uncle. And what was he doing?"

"Standing on his head?" suggested Church.

"No, you babbling lunatic, he wasn't," replied Handforth. "He was standing there, with a little bottle in his hand!"

"Good heavens!" said Church. "You mean he was helping himself to a swig of whisky——"

"The bottle was a tiny one—a phial!" said Handforth significantly. "It was blue, and there was a label on it. And, printed on this label, in red letters, was the word 'poison'! Now do you understand?"

"And how did you see all that as you walked by?"

"I paused, of course," said Handforth. "I knew at once that something was wrong—I smelt a rat. And I could see the word as clear as I could see you. Dodd's uncle was holding up a bottle of poison."

Church and McClure were slightly impressed.

"Is that all?" asked Church.

"Well, isn't it enough?" demanded Handforth. "What should he be doing with poison—alone in that study? It means that he's got designs on Jerry's life. There's no other explanation."

"Oh, rats!" said McClure. "In the first place, you may have been mistaken—the stuff may not have been poison at all. Even supposing it was, there's no necessity to think that Dodd's uncle means to use it on the chap."

Handforth snapped his fingers.

"You don't understand these things," he exclaimed. "You haven't got the faculty of putting two and two together, and making four!"

Church shook his head.

"That's just where you fail, Handy," he said. "When you put two and two together, you generally make four hundred! The true explanation of what you saw is probably as simple as a.b.c., and you go and jump at conclusions. What proof have you got that Mr. Dodd has evil designs upon his nephew's life? No proof at all except that which has come into your own mind."

"Rubbish!" said Handforth. "The whole thing is as clear as daylight. There's no other way to look at it. I'm not going to explain it all again, because you don't seem to understand. But I know what I'm talking about, and I know that Jerry Dodd's life is in danger. We're going to save him."

"Save him?" repeated Church. "How?"

"By exposing his uncle in his true colours."

Handforth's chums were now really alarmed.

"Do—do you mean to say that you're going to accuse Mr. Dodd of making an attempt to—to poison his nephew?" gasped Church.

"Yes."

"Oh, you prize ass!" gasped McClure. "You'll be sacked—the Head'll be in a tearing fury, and he'll expel you on the spot! You can't do it, Handy—you'll absolutely let yourself in the cart if you interfere——"

"By George!" ejaculated Handforth suddenly. "Look!"

He pointed with a quivering finger through the window. And Church and McClure, gazing in that direction, saw Jerry Dodd strolling across the Triangle with his uncle. They were relieved, for, from Handforth's tone, they had half expected to see Jerry's lifeless form lying out there.

"You gave me a scare!" said Church. "What's the matter with you?"

"Can't you see?" hissed Handforth.

"Yes, I can see Jerry Dodd and his Uncle Bill——"

"They're just going out together—it's what Mr. Dodd has been working up to," said Handforth. "He's luring Jerry away from the school, and unless we stop him going, he'll never come back!"

"Oh, do dry up——"

"We've got to go out and rescue

him!" said Handforth grimly. "Come on!"

He dashed to the door, and before Church and McClure could interfere, he was hurrying down the passage. The two juniors gazed at one another in alarm. In spite of Handforth's little ways, his chums were very fond of him, and they did not like to see him running his head into a pile of trouble.

"Oh, the hopeless fathead!" groaned Church. "What shall we do?"

"We'd better follow him, and drag him away by force," said McClure desperately. "It's the only thing to do. Come on!"

They dashed out, and they arrived in the lobby just in time to overtake Handforth. The latter was already making his way towards the door, and he did not pause as his chums came up. But they made a dive at him, and grabbed hold of his jacket.

"Come back, you ass!" said Church fiercely.

"Leggo!" snapped Handforth. "I've got to do my duty——"

"But—but——" Church broke off. "They're coming back," he added. "Dodd and his uncle!"

Desperately, Handforth's chums grabbed hold of him, and forced his back against the wall. Under no circumstances would they allow him to make his mad accusation against Mr. William Dodd. He was quite capable of confronting Jerry's uncle, and then the fat would be in the fire.

Church and McClure succeeded in holding him back by sheer force. It was not often they were capable of doing this, but just now they were filled with wild anxiety. It would certainly mean expulsion for Handforth if he had his own way.

Jerry Dodd appeared with his uncle—a fine, handsome, well-built man of about thirty-five, with a bronzed, clean-shaven face.

"Say, I'm awfully sorry, Uncle Bill," Jerry was saying. "I don't reckon I've had toothache, so I can't properly sympathise."

"That's all right, Jerry, don't you worry," said Mr. Dodd. "Toothache is a painful and annoying complaint—but there's nothing in it. A touch of my special cure will soon make it better. I left the bottle on the study mantelpiece. I've had the toothache rather severely since I came to England—the climate I suppose."

"Lemme go!" hissed Handforth thickly. "I—I——"

"Hold him tight!" gasped Church.

They did hold him tight.

"Why, yes, uncle, I remember seeing the bottle in the study," said Jerry. "It's marked poison, isn't it?"

Mr. Dodd smiled.

"Strictly speaking, it is poison, but most toothache cures are," he replied. "It's the finest stuff I've ever used. The tiniest drop on a piece of cotton wool is enough to stop the most raging ache within a few minutes."

Jerry's uncle passed through the lobby, and went along towards the junior passage.

Church and McClure were no longer capable of holding their impulsive leader. The strength had completely gone out of their muscles. They fell back against the wall, and apparently went off into hysterics.

"Ha, ha, ha!" they howled uproariously.

Edward Oswald Handforth looked rather dazed.

"Toothache cure!" he muttered feebly. "And—and I thought——"

"Oh, Handy," sobbed Church. "My sides will ache for a week! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" shrieked McClure.

Jerry Dodd turned in astonishment, and looked at the mirthful ones.

"By jings!" he exclaimed. "That joke must be a darned good one!"

But he never knew what it was. Church and McClure were incapable of speech. They howled until they were sore—they couldn't control their laughter. And Handforth seemed to swallow something with difficulty. He walked down the passage towards Study D with a sickly expression upon his face.

The bottom had fallen out of his wonderful theory with a terrible crash, and Handforth felt faint and giddy as he realised how narrowly he had escaped making a ghastly blunder. He had Church and McClure to thank for his salvation.

But Edward Oswald wasn't grateful to his long suffering chums. He remembered their hyæna-like laughter, and he set his teeth grimly. What happened shortly afterwards need not be set down in full.

But fifteen minutes later Church possessed a beautiful black eye, and McClure

rejoiced in a decidedly swollen nose. And the way in which they were sobered was quite wonderful.

Handforth's methods were certainly effective.

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CHAPTER II.

THE ADVENTURE ON THE RIVER.

"FEELING better, Uncle Bill?" Jerry Dodd asked that question as his uncle came out of the Ancient House doorway. Jerry was waiting on the step, in the evening sunlight. Mr. William Dodd smiled and nodded.

"Much better thanks, Jerry," he replied. "Toothache is a nuisance, but it can't be avoided sometimes. We figured on going to the river, didn't we, to have a row downstream?"

"Sure, uncle," said Jerry. "We'll get right along."

"No, not just yet," said Mr. Dodd, glancing at his watch. "It's not far from six—and I've just remembered I have an appointment with Dr. Stafford at six o'clock. I can't very well miss that, young 'un!"

"An interview with the Head?" repeated Jerry.

"Sure thing—about you."

"Oh!" said Jerry quickly. "I guess you mean—cricket?"

"You can bet you're right," said Mr. Dodd. "Now look here, Jerry, we'll just have another chat, and I'll have my facts clear before I beard the Head in his den. To-day is Thursday, and I must leave quite early in the morning—I'm booked to play in an important match in Kent to-morrow. Strictly speaking, I ought to go to-night, and perhaps I shall."

"I'll be darned sorry to let you go, Uncle Bill," said Jerry regretfully.

"You can't have me here all the time, young fel'," said Uncle Bill, patting Jerry on the shoulder. "Now, let's have the facts. You're not allowed to play cricket here?"

"That's right, uncle."

"Hard lines—but we can't blame the school people," said Mr. Dodd. "Your father arranged with the Head that you were not to play cricket. His idea was for you to stuff your head with knowledge. I won't tell you my personal opinions—I don't like being rude to my own brother. But it's an infernal low-down trick on you, Jerry. Cricket is the breath of your life, and to be barred from it—well, it must be torture. I'm going to make an alteration."

"By jings! I hope you can!" said Jerry eagerly.

"We'll see," smiled Uncle Bill. "The day after to-morrow—that is, on Saturday—there's an important fixture here, at the school. The juniors of Helmsford College are coming over to play against you. Well, you'd like to be in that match, wouldn't you?"

"I'd give anything!" declared Jerry Dodd.

"Well—you'll play, you can take my word for it," said Uncle Bill. "I'm going to speak to the Head and bring him round to my point of view. You can rely on me making everything all right, Jerry."

His tone was full of confidence, and Jerry was bucked up to a wonderful extent. It was fine to have a big uncle on the spot to help him in his difficulties.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

The old school clock was chiming the hour, and Mr. Dodd came to a halt.

"I'll go now," he said briskly. "Wait for me out here, old fel'."

Jerry felt rather anxious as his uncle went off. Within two minutes Mr. Dodd was tapping upon the door of the Head's study. He was invited to enter, and he found the Head ready to welcome him.

"Come in, Mr. Dodd—come in!" said the Head genially. "I've not had much opportunity of chatting with you, since your arrival. We are proud to have such a distinguished guest under our roof."

"Say, it's very kind of you, Dr. Stafford," said Uncle Bill. "It's my way to get straight to the point, and I'm generally rather blunt. I'd like to have a few words with you about my nephew."

"I hope the lad has not been complaining?"

"Oh, no—nothing like that," said Mr. Dodd. "He's quite content at St. Frank's—except for one thing. That's what I mean to speak about. Jerry loves playing cricket—he loves outdoor sports of all kinds. He's been used to it all his life. But here, at this school, he's forbidden to——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted the Head. "I feel very sorry for the boy, for I know that he is particularly keen on sports. And I must say that I admire him greatly. Mr. Lee has already told me how well Dodd is getting on with his studies. Although he dislikes the work,

he has set himself to it with a strong will, and has succeeded beyond all expectations. It is a matter of great regret to me that he should be debarred from playing in the regular school games."

Mr. Dodd nodded.

"Now, see here, sir," he said firmly. "Can't we make an alteration?"

"I'm afraid not.",

"Oh, that's rather hurried, isn't it?" smiled Uncle Bill. "Jerry is fairly dying to play in the cricket match on Saturday—it's going to be a big affair, I understand. Couldn't you let him play, Dr. Stafford? It won't make any difference—in any case, he won't do any studying on Saturday afternoon——"

"That is hardly the point, Mr. Dodd," interrupted the Head painfully. "I will agree with you that it is extremely galling to the boy to be forbidden cricket. If it were in my power I would give him permission at once—willingly and freely. Indeed, he would not find it necessary to ask. Unfortunately, however, I am not in a position to alter the present situation."

Mr. Dodd looked astonished.

"But you're the Headmaster," he said. "There's nobody higher than you, I reckon. I don't quite understand, Dr. Stafford."

"Then it will only take me a moment to enlighten you," smiled the Head. "You see, Mr. Dodd, when the lad came to St. Frank's his father made a firm stipulation that he should devote his time to studies, and that he should not play football, cricket, or spend any of his time at sports. Naturally, he was to take exercise, but by walking, riding, swimming, and such like. Games, in your brother's opinion, were to be avoided."

"But why?" asked Uncle Bill blankly. "What's the matter with cricket?"

"It is one of the finest games a boy could play," said the Head. "But you must admit, Mr. Dodd, that it occupies a great deal of time. It will generally be found that the members of the school Elevens are not particularly brilliant in the classrooms. Boys, at a big school like this, are divided into two big classes—those who do well at sports, and those who succeed in their studies. It is not often that a first-rate sportsman is also a first-rate scholar. And your brother wanted Jerry to devote all his time to lessons—with a view, I believe, of studying for the Bar."

Uncle Bill snapped his fingers.

"I reckon my brother was daft," he said bluntly. "Jerry—reading for the Bar? What absolute nonsense! He's not suitable for that kind of life. But we are straying from the point, Dr. Stafford. I want you to give Jerry permission to play against Helmford on Saturday!"

"I am very sorry, but I cannot give that permission."

"But, see here, sir——"

"Really, Mr. Dodd, I must be quite firm," said the Head. "Were it a personal matter I would give it at once. But I made a binding agreement with your brother that Jerry should not play in any of the school fixtures. You will surely realise how impossible it is for me to break my own word. I simply could not think of such a thing, Mr. Dodd. I should be breaking faith in the most flagrant manner. I am very sorry, but your nephew cannot play."

"Can't you take it from me that my brother wouldn't be angry?"

"No—that would not be honourable," said the Head quietly.

"I guess you're right—and I'm sorry," said Uncle Bill. "If you gave a definite promise, Dr. Stafford, you can't very well back out of it. Say, this will be a terrible disappointment for the lad."

And it was.

When Uncle Bill returned to Jerry, and gave him the report, the Australian junior was dismayed. He and Mr. Dodd strolled through the playing-fields towards the river, and Jerry heard all about the interview.

"Oh, Uncle Bill, and I thought you'd do the trick!" he said sorrowfully. "What darned hard luck! I can't play, after all—unless Nipper gets up to some more of his tricks," he added, with a touch of hope. "I told you how we dished everybody in the Bannington match, didn't I?"

"Yes, that was great!" smiled Mr. Dodd. "But that can't be done again—particularly in a home match. No, Jerry, I'm afraid there's no hope. I've done my best, and I've failed. But don't be miserable, young fel'—let's enjoy ourselves for this evening. There's a whole day clear before Saturday, and something might turn up."

Jerry was not very optimistic, but he cast his gloom aside, and in a short time he and his uncle were seated in a long, speedy rowing boat, gliding

down the river. It was a glorious evening for such enjoyment as this.

Uncle Bill was seated near the bows, rowing, whilst Jerry sat in the stern, steering.

He had been looking forward to this hour on the river, but all the enjoyment had gone out of it. He tried to keep smiling, but it was a great effort. Jerry's disappointment was keen. He had looked upon it as certain that he would play in the Helmford match, and now he knew that it was impossible.

But the junior was not allowed much time for brooding, for a rather startling incident took place within the next few minutes. It was something which came totally unexpectedly, and was a surprise to both Jerry and Uncle Bill. Moreover, it was to lead to a mishap which would mean a great deal to the latter.

They were going down stream, and, after rounding a bend, they came within sight of a very pretty stretch of water. Willows grew in clumps on either bank. Grassy meadows, gaily filled with wild blossoms, stretched away on either hand, and, just near by, the dense bulk of Bellton Wood loomed up.

"You'll have to duck your head soon, uncle," said Jerry. "Keep a sharp look-out—that bridge is very low."

The river was surprisingly full, for there had been quite a lot of rain recently, and the water, consequently, was higher than usual at this time of the year. A rustic bridge spanned the river just a little further down.

It was not used much, and could hardly be described as a powerful structure. The bridge was very low, and when boats passed beneath, it was necessary for those within the craft to crouch down. There had been some talk of taking the bridge away, but this had never been done.

It was undoubtedly picturesque, for the parapets of the bridge were high, and composed of rustic trelliswork, with tangled masses of wild creepers growing in profusion, forming thick walls. The juniors frequently played japes on this bridge, for they could crouch there without being seen from the river. Many a boatload of fellows had been pelted from those rustic parapets as they passed beneath.

"Get ready now, Uncle Bill," said Jerry. "Swing your oars in."

Mr. Dodd obeyed, and the boat glided slowly under the bridge, both its occupants bending low, in order to avoid being caught on the brambles and creepers which hung down. Uncle Bill, being in the bows, was naturally under first, and he could not very well see what was happening to Jerry—not that he expected anything to happen at all. But something did take place—swiftly and unexpectedly.

Jerry had his gaze upon his uncle's feet, and he certainly did not think of looking upwards. Then a pair of strong, lithe arms reached down. They caught the junior just under the armpits.

He gave a startled gasp as he was lifted clean out of the boat. Just for a moment he dangled in mid-air, wondering dazedly what had occurred. Then he was swung upwards. The old rustic work creaked, and he found himself on the bridge.

A hand was clasped over his mouth, but, in spite of this, he managed to make a slight outcry—a muffled gasp. He could see that he was in the grasp of a powerful man with dark skin—an Indian! And another man of the same race was near by, helping to hold him down. This incident had been so unexpected, so swift, that Jerry could hardly realise what it could mean.

Uncle Bill, meanwhile, was nearly as startled as the junior. And this was not surprising, for he had just caught a glimpse of Jerry disappearing upwards out of the stern of the boat. Jerry's legs dangled for a second, and then he completely vanished. Mr. Dodd stared in complete amazement.

"Say, Jerry!" he shouted. "What's the idea?"

For a moment he thought that the boy himself had done something. He could scarcely realise that there were any other human beings near the spot; but he knew it a moment later.

Jerry fought desperately with his captors, but he knew instinctively that he would never be able to defeat them. They were unseen from the river, and it was only necessary to drag him swiftly across the bridge and they would all be swallowed up among the trees. Uncle Bill would never know what had happened. Jerry would have been kidnapped before his eyes!

The junior recognised the Indians. They were the same men as before—the men who had attempted to get hold of him near the old mill on Bannington Moor. Jerry was lying on his back, and

one of the men drew a piece of cotton material from a small metal box. He moved as though to clap this to Jerry's face.

He knew what it meant—a drug!

And for a second Jerry fought like a tiger. He used all his strength, kicking, struggling, and wriggling. He would never have got free, but Providence came to his aid in an unexpected fashion.

Crash!

As Jerry swayed to and fro, his back came into contact with the rotten old rustic work. The wood could not withstand the strain, and it splintered and cracked with a loud series of minor crashes. The next second Jerry went plunging backwards through the opening he had made, to fall with a tremendous splash into the water.

The Indians disappeared as though by magic. They had failed, and they knew it.

To Uncle Bill, all this seemed very extraordinary. He had not seen the strangers, and he did not know what had happened to Jerry until he saw the boy plunge down into the river.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Mr. Dodd.

He wrenched at his oars, and then a disaster occurred—for him. He used rather too much power, and the oar snapped off clean. Uncle Bill went crashing over against the side of the boat, catching his right wrist between his hip and the woodwork. For a second his face was screwed up with pain, and his wrist fell as though it were broken.

As it happened, he needn't have worried at all, for with a few strokes Jerry reached the boat, and hauled himself on board. He was none the worse, except for a soaking, but his eyes were blazing.

"By jings!" he gasped. "Did you see them, uncle?"

"I didn't see anything—I don't know what happened," replied Mr. Dodd. "All I know is that my wrist is out of action—confound it! That oar must have been old—it cracked like a carrot!"

"Say, it doesn't matter about the oar," said Jerry breathlessly. "Thank goodness the old bridge busted up! Those Indians had got hold of me, and in another minute I should have been unconscious. They've gone now, of course; but they didn't get me!"

Uncle Bill forgot his wrist for a moment.

"Indians?" he repeated, staring. "What are you talking about?"

"Why, didn't you see?"

"I've already told you that I saw nothing——"

"As we were passing under the bridge somebody leaned over and grabbed hold of me," explained Jerry. "I figure they tried to kidnap me, Uncle Bill. And if it hadn't been for that bridge breaking, they would have done the trick. By jings! In open daylight, too!"

"My dear Jerry, all this is double Dutch to me," said Mr. Dodd. "Indians? I think you must have been mistaken, Jerry."

"But I wasn't mistaken," declared the Australian junior. "They're the same men who tried the game on before. It's a queer business, Uncle Bill. I can't understand what it all means, and why they should trouble themselves over me."

Mr. Dodd winced slightly as he moved his wrist up and down.

"Well, we needn't discuss matters now," he said. "You're soaked through, young man, and I imagine you'll be better off in dry clothing. How can we get back to the school?"

"I suppose it'll be quicker to get ashore, and then go across the meadows at a run," replied Jerry. "But there's no danger of me catching a cold, I figure. I'm hardy enough, and the air's as mild as August."

It was not long before they were ashore, and then they set off at a trot across the meadows. By the time they arrived at St. Frank's, Jerry was in a glow, and he left his uncle in Study F while he went upstairs to change. He soon came down, after a complete alteration of attire.

"That's all right now, Uncle Bill," he said, as he entered Study F. "We can talk, and I can tell you about those Indians. I guess I'd like to have a word with Mr. Lee, too. Say, he's a fine man—Mr. Lee. Why, by jings! What's the matter?"

Mr. Dodd was holding his right arm in a curious position, and then Jerry noticed for the first time that his wrist was swollen and puffy.

"It's nothing much, but I'm afraid it's done for me temporarily," said Uncle Bill ruefully. "A sprained wrist, young fel'—twisted rather badly.

That infernal oar, you know. I shall be no good to-morrow."

Jerry looked alarmed.

"But—but what about your match?" he asked.

"They'll have to do without me," replied Mr. Dodd. "Fortunately, I am not the only man in the team, and I expect the Australians will get on all right without my aid. I couldn't handle a bat in this condition—or bowl, either. I should be a nuisance to the eleven."

"What blamed hard lines!" said Jerry. "Oh, but say! Maybe you can stay?" he added suddenly. "Perhaps you can see the Helmford match on Saturday?"

Uncle Bill nodded.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't remain here a day or two longer," he agreed. "I certainly will, Jerry; and if I can do anything to get you into the St. Frank's team, I'll be only too glad to oblige."

Jerry was sorry that his uncle was hurt—but, at the same time, he could not help feeling pleased. For that slight sprain, insignificant in itself, would mean that Mr. Dodd would remain at St. Frank's until the end of the week.

"Now, about these Indians?" said Uncle Bill.

Jerry lost no time in explaining. He told how an attempt had been made to take him away a day or so earlier. Mr. Dodd had heard nothing about it, for Jerry did not like to speak of the subject. As a matter of fact, the junior knew very little.

"Of course, I've told Mr. Lee all about it," explained Jerry, "and I think he knows more than I do. Anyway, he's pretty keen on the case, uncle. He's asked me all sorts of questions, and that sort of thing. I figure it would be a good idea for you to have a chat with Mr. Lee."

Mr. William Dodd nodded.

"No time like the present," he said briskly. "I'll go right along now."

CHAPTER III.

NELSON LEE'S SCHEME!

NELSON LEE, as it happened, was just coming along the passage when Uncle Bill turned the corner. The famous schoolmaster-detective guessed at once that Mr. Dodd was going to his study.

"Say, this is great!" said Uncle Bill. "I was figuring to have a few words with you, Mr. Lee—providing you're not too busy. But if I'm butting in, just say the word, and I'll await your convenience."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"My dear sir, I am only too delighted that you have come," he replied. "To tell you the truth, I am rather anxious to have a chat with you. I particularly want to do so before you leave."

"Well, that's real good," said Uncle Bill.

He followed Nelson Lee into the study, they sat down, and lighted cigarettes. Lee quickly noted the condition of his visitor's wrist, and made a concerned inquiry regarding it.

"A sprain—not much, but more than I care about," said Mr. Dodd. "No cricket for me to-morrow, or for a few days."

"I'm sorry," said Lee. "This will be bad for your eleven."

Uncle Bill smiled deprecatingly.

"I don't reckon I'm so valuable as all that," he said. "I've been fairly successful, particularly at bowling; but we can't always be fit. I shall remain at St. Frank's until Monday next, I expect. I've a mind to see the match against Helmford College. Schoolboy cricket isn't to be scorned."

"It will be a good game, I fancy," said Nelson Lee.

"But, to get to more important matters," went on Uncle Bill. "I got this sprain on the river, through a very queer incident which occurred to my young nephew, Jerry. To put it short, Mr. Lee, two Indians attempted to get hold of him."

Nelson Lee became suddenly alert.

"Indeed!" he said quietly. "May I hear of this affair?"

Mr. Dodd lost no time in describing what had happened, and Nelson Lee listened with great interest.

"I didn't actually see the Indians, but Jerry swore that they were Hindoos, or something of that kind," concluded Uncle Bill. "But he's a sharp youngster, and he wriggled away, ending up by falling in the river."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"I am glad you have spoken of this, Mr. Dodd," he said. "It is the very subject I wished to broach. Perhaps you do not know of the curious events which have been taking place at St. Frank's since your nephew's arrival?"

"I reckon I'm feeling in the dark," replied Uncle Bill.

"Then I shall be most pleased to give you the facts," said Lee. "At first there was no indication that anything was different; then one day the boy came to me with a curious story of a dream he had had. In this dream he had met an Indian in native costume; he had been taken to a cavern; he had gazed into a crystal; and he had finally awakened in a dazed condition."

"That was a bit of a nightmare," suggested Mr. Dodd.

"On the contrary, the thing actually took place," said Nelson Lee grimly. "It was no dream, as Jerry imagined, but a real happening. I had positive proof of this at the time. While in this cavern, the boy picked up a little golden idol, and he slipped it into his pocket. Later on, at the school, he found this idol; but it had no significance. He had forgotten his dream completely."

"That was strange," said Uncle Bill.

"Very strange," agreed Lee. "Well, I came to the conclusion that your nephew had been placed under the influence of some Eastern drug. This drug was injected by means of a tiny dart, probably projected through the air from a blowpipe."

"Good gracious!" said Uncle Bill. "I can't quite believe it, Mr. Lee!"

"I will admit that it sounds farfetched and preposterous, but it just happens to be the truth," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Jerry went through a similar experience shortly afterwards, and twice since then these mysterious Indians have tried to kidnap him."

"But why? What can their game be?"

"I am quite in the dark," confessed Lee. "But I am doing my utmost to get at the truth, Mr. Dodd. I must also tell you that these Indian gentlemen have broken into the school on two occasions—with the object, no doubt, of recovering the golden image. But I have retained it, for obvious reasons."

"Quite so," said Uncle Bill. "But have you any theory, Mr. Lee? Can you suggest why these Eastern men should wish to get hold of my nephew? The whole thing seems fantastic to me, and I can only conclude that they are madmen, or that they are making some extraordinary mistake."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"It is hardly feasible to suppose that these Burmese, or Indians, should make a mistake over such a matter," he said. "No, Mr. Dodd; I am convinced that there is some grim reason for all this, and I am taking great care to see that Jerry is protected. I have already warned him that he must not venture out alone—and you will see the necessity for this when you remember what occurred this evening."

"By George, yes!" said Mr. Dodd. "Burmese! What does it mean?"

"That is what I am trying to understand," said Nelson Lee. "I hope you won't think me personal, Mr. Dodd, but I should like to ask you one or two questions—family questions. Your arrival at St. Frank's interested me greatly, and I at once decided that I would not let you go until I had had a confidential chat."

"Quite right, Mr. Lee—quite right," said the visitor. "You can fire ahead as soon as you like—I'll answer any questions I can. There are no skeletons in our family cupboard that I know of."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I was afraid there might be one," he remarked. "Now, about your brother—Jerry's father. Do you know whether he has ever had any connection with India or Burmah? The presence of these Eastern men here—the fact that they are trying to get hold of Jerry—clearly proves that there must be something behind it all. Can you provide that missing link in the chain?"

"No, I am afraid I can't," said Uncle Bill slowly.

"To your knowledge, your brother has never visited the East?"

"Somehow, I've got an idea that he did," said Mr. Dodd, scratching his ear. "He's much older than I am, Mr. Lee—ten years, at least. When I was about twelve—a mere boy—my brother left Australia on a trip. Our parents were always quiet about that trip, and when my brother came back he was different—quieter and more settled in life. Previously, he had been rather harum-scarum."

"Ah, I see!" said Nelson Lee. "Do you know where he went to?"

"That is the point," said Uncle Bill. "I don't know. I've asked Jerrold himself—of course, he has the same name as his son—but he would never give me any satisfactory answer. Once or

twice, however, a reference to Burmah had crept out, and in the face of all these events, I am now convinced that it was to Burmah that my brother went. But that was over twenty years ago."

"Obviously," said Nelson Lee. "I am glad you have told me this, Mr. Dodd. "It coincides exactly with my own theory. As you will imagine, I have been looking up this subject most diligently, and have gained some very instructive information regarding Burmese religion—sects, castes, and so forth. It is not my intention to discuss the subject further now, but I fancy I shall soon have the mystery well solved."

"That's good hearing, Mr. Lee," said Uncle Bill heartily. "I reckon I hate a mystery—particularly about a member of my own family. And, say! Now I come to think of it, somebody from the East visited my brother on his ranch, not so very many months ago."

"A merchant from Rangoon?" said Nelson Lee. "Jerry told me."

"Yes. And it was just after that that the boy was sent to England," went on Mr. Dodd. "I was in Sydney at the time. Say, I was surprised a lot! I'd never had any notion that my brother Jerrold would send his son to an English school. It strikes me that he had a reason for doing so—he was afraid of something."

"Precisely," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, that can be the only possible explanation. Mr. Dodd sent his son to England to get him safely out of the way; but, contrary to your brother's hopes, these Indians got to know about it And they are here — they have tracked the lad to this school. It is apparent that your brother feared that this might occur, for he evidently instructed a firm of detectives to watch the place. There are two men in the district now—hopeless duffers, I believe, although I have never seen them."

"Why, in wonder's name, couldn't he take me into his confidence?" asked Uncle Bill impatiently. "That's the worst of Jerrold—he was always secretive and pig-headed. He might have saved himself a lot of trouble if he had asked me for advice. It's a good thing you're here, Mr. Lee—on the spot."

The detective smiled.

"Well, I'm hoping to be of some use," he said. "And now, there is just another question I should like to ask you, Mr. Dodd. I had intended to ask Jerry, but did not do so. Do you know if his fifteenth birthday is near at hand?"

Uncle Bill considered for a moment.

"Why, yes!" he said, in surprise. "It'll be his birthday next week—on the fifteenth of the month! How did you guess that it was near?"

"It wasn't actually a piece of guesswork," said Nelson Lee. "I had reasons for suspecting that such would be the case. So Jerry will be fifteen on the fifteenth? I am glad to know that for certain. It will be necessary to protect him very carefully on that day."

Uncle Bill was rather puzzled, but Nelson Lee did not explain precisely what he meant. And very shortly afterwards his visitor departed, Nelson Lee remained very thoughtful.

I knew nothing of what had taken place at the time; but at tea, on the afternoon of the day following, Tubbs presented himself in Study C, and announced that my presence was requested in the Housemaster's study at once.

"Hallo!" said Tommy Watson. "What have you been up to?"

"Oh, dozens of things," I said. "But the guv'nor doesn't want to haul me over the coals, I'll bet. I hope he won't keep me long—I want to be on Little Side within twenty minutes."

"Yes, dear old boy, this is our last chance of practice before the Helmford match," said Sir Montie. "Begad! I'm afraid we're in for a lickin' to-morrow."

A minute or two later I left the study, and went down the passage. I saw Jerry Dodd in front of me, and he turned as he heard me coming along.

"Say, Nipper, I'm glad you've come," he said anxiously. "I guess I've got to go to Mr. Lee's study, and I'm wondering if he's going to give me lines. He caught me sliding down the bannisters ——"

"Oh, don't worry about that," I said, with a chuckle. "Mr. Lee is one of the best. I'm going to his study, too. It seems he wants us both together. We'll soon know the worst."

We entered the guv'nor's study, and found Nelson Lee sitting in his chair, looking quite calm. But there was a gleam in his eye which did not escape my attention. I knew that gleam. Something special was "on."

"Good!" said the guv'nor. "Close the door, Nipper. Now, boys, I wish to speak to you. In the first place, Nipper,

I want you to devote the next hour or so to a special mission I have for you."

"Bang goes the cricket!" I said. "Right you are, sir."

"You both know the main facts concerning these Indians who have been seen in the district of late," went on Nelson Lee. "There is no secret about the fact that these men have been making a special attempt to get hold of you, Dodd."

"That's right, sir," said Jerry. "I'm kind of puzzled all up."

"I wish to make a test—a kind of experiment," said Nelson Lee. "I want to give Nipper a chance to investigate. I cannot undertake this inquiry myself, as you will presently understand."

"What do you want done, guv'nor?" I asked curiously.

"Dodd has been in the habit of going to a certain spot near the river," replied Lee. "He has been there many times—and twice these Indians have found him there."

"That's true enough, sir," said Jerry. "But I haven't been there since you gave me the tip to keep away. I don't fancy having those darts stuck into me."

Nelson Lee came to the point.

"To be exact, my little scheme is this," he said. "I want you, Nipper, to impersonate Dodd."

"By jings!" said Jerry.

"To—to impersonate him, sir?" I repeated.

"Precisely. You are to become Dodd for an hour or so," said the guv'nor smoothly. "I will perform the necessary make-up. Then, Nipper, you will go straight out with your books, and you will place yourself on the river bank, at this spot where Dodd has habitually stayed. It is quite possible that you will not be disturbed; on the other hand, it is far more likely that these Indians are watching, and they will seize what they believe to be a good chance. In short, Nipper, you are to be kidnapped."

"By jingo!" I said enthusiastically. "That's a ripping stunt, sir. You mean I'm to let myself be collared, and then find out everything I can?"

"That is the exact idea," agreed Nelson Lee. "It may be a risky task, Nipper, and that is why I am commissioning you to do it. Dodd will remain here, in this study, during your absence. It will not be possible for two Dodds to be about the school at the same time."

Jerry opened his eyes wide.

"But—but these Indians are dangerous, sir!" he protested. "Say, I don't like the idea—it's too risky. These Indians will throw one of their darts ——"

"I am prepared for that," said Lee. "By careful experiment, I have discovered the nature of this peculiar drug. It will be of no interest to you if I go into full details. But I have an antedote for this drug—a certain lotion which immediately destroys the effect. If you are pierced by a dart, Nipper, you will feel it at once—you will experience a distinct sting. It will only be necessary for you to apply this lotion at once, and you will not become unconscious."

"Good!" I said. "That makes it easy."

"But the Indians will know at once, sir," objected Jerry. "They won't touch him as long as he remains himself."

"Oh, that's easily remedied, old son," I grinned. "I've spotted the guv'nor's wheeze. My game will be to spoof the enemy—pretend to go to sleep, and all the rest of it. I know what happened to you. I shall wake up after a bit, and pretend to be dazed, and then I shall be taken along to this mysterious cavern. But I shall have my full wits about me, and I shall know everything."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I am glad you have jumped to the plan, Nipper," he said. "I don't quite like setting you this task, but it is impossible for me to do it myself. I warn you to be very careful, and not to take any unnecessary risks. If these Indians discover the deception, they will not deal with you lightly."

We discussed the plan a little longer, and I was only too delighted to give up the cricket. This was to be an adventure after my own heart—a real detective investigation, with a slice of danger in it.

Jerry Dodd was rather astounded, and he couldn't quite understand how we should do the thing. And then Nelson Lee commenced work upon me. It was his task to make me into an excellent replica of Jerry himself. To begin with, I practised the voice, and within a very short time I was able to imitate Jerry's tone and method of speech. Nelson Lee, with a few deft touches

here and there, with the assistance of false hair, and so forth, completed his own part of the work.

And, in the end, Jerry Dodd found himself looking right into the face of another Jerry Dodd. There was only one difference—and that was a difference which no amount of make-up could alter. The colour of Jerry's eyes did not quite coincide with the colour of mine; but we had to chance this.

"Now, Nipper, I think you will do," said Nelson Lee, at length. "It isn't necessary for me to give you instructions a second time—you know exactly what you have to do. Just go straight off and do your best—and good luck."

"Thanks, sir!" I said. "I'll report later on."

I turned to Jerry Dodd.

"Well, good-bye, chum!" I said easily. "By jings! I've got a sort of idea that this is going to be a darn good stunt!"

Jerry could only stare. My voice was exactly the same as his own. And a minute later I left the study, and walked briskly along the passage. As luck would have it, I encountered Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West in the lobby.

"Seen Nipper?" asked Watson, as I came up.

With difficulty I kept myself from grinning.

"Why, yes, chum," I replied. "I reckon he's somewhere around."

I passed out before I could be questioned further. My own chums had been deceived—they did not know the difference. In the Triangle I had a few words with Handforth, another few with Pitt and Grey, and then I felt that my disguise was impenetrable. Nobody had suspected the truth.

I had some books under my arm, and I set off towards the river by way of the road, for I wanted to give the Indians every chance of seeing me. I knew well enough that there were grave risks attached to this game, and I felt very proud. Nelson Lee had entrusted the affair to me, and I meant to justify his confidence in my capabilities.

But, before I got fairly started on the adventure, two more people mistook me for Jerry—and their attentions were by no means welcome. I had not been walking down the lane for more than three minutes before I became aware of the fact that I was being shadowed.

There were two men in the meadow adjoining, and they were following me up. I pretended to take no notice. Just for a moment I fancied the gentlemen from the East were already on the track.

Then I grinned to myself as I realised the truth.

The trackers were Messrs. Podge and Midge!

That remarkable pair had obviously been watching, and, seeing me emerge, they had at once mistaken me for Jerry. And now they were following me up. I certainly did not want their protection. They would be far more trouble than they were worth.

I pondered for a moment as I walked, and grinned again.

"All right, my beauties—if you want to get on my track, I'll give you something to do!" I murmured. "I'll send you off on a wild goose chase, just to prove how tremendously cute you are at the detective game!"

I still remained quite unconscious of their presence—at least, so it seemed to them. I passed across a meadow, but took care not to go in the direction I ultimately intended taking.

Podge and Midge followed, kidding themselves that their movements were quite unseen.

I did not once look back, but I was aware of their movements all the time. I took it quite leisurely, strolling along as though I had the whole evening before me. From one meadow to another I went, and then Podge and Midge lost sight of me behind a thick hedge.

During the last few moments I had been active. They assumed, naturally, that I was continuing my slow saunter. Instead of that I ran swiftly, and by the time they came cautiously through a gap, I was nowhere to be seen.

"Remarkable—remarkable!" said Mr. Podge, staring round. "How has the boy got out of sight so quickly, Mr. Midge?"

"Presumably he ran!" said Mr. Midge mildly.

"Quite so—but why?" demanded the fat man. "The boy feared nothing, and he was unaware that we were following. This is most unsatisfactory, but we are not defeated. It will be an easy matter to pick up the lad's trail!"

"Undoubtedly, Mr. Podge—undoubtedly!"

They looked round them closely. The curious pair were certainly not like the normal type of detective. Mr. Podge was huge, and clothed in a check suit which was too small for him, and a soft hat which sat upon his perfectly bald head inviting every wind to blow it off. Mr. Midge, on the other hand, was a diminutive individual, with his head thrust forward after the manner of a bird. Unlike Mr. Podge, his clothing was distinctly on the large side.

"Aha! What is this?" said Mr. Podge suddenly. "What have we here, Mr. Midge?"

He went down on his knees, produced an enormous magnifying lens, and carefully gazed through it at the ground. A piece of notepaper was lying there. It was not soiled, it was quite obviously fresh. Mr. Podge picked it up with a murmur of satisfaction.

"A most important clue!" he declared. "I have no doubt that Dodd left it here, having flung it carelessly away. Let me see."

He turned the piece of notepaper over, and could see some pencilled words upon it. And these words were extremely significant. They ran in this way:

"To J.D. Meet me Monk's Bay, Caistowe, at 7-30. Most important. The Monk's Cave will be the very spot for the afternoon's work.

"SINGH."

"Good gracious!" puffed Mr. Podge, in a startled voice. "Do you see this, Mr. Midge? Do you realise what this means? This was written by an Indian, and it is quite clear that Dodd has gone off to the sea coast!"

Mr. Midge was full of excitement, and he read the letter with gleaming eyes. Both he and his big companion regarded it as a most important document. They certainly did not suspect that it had been left there for their especial benefit.

Mr. Podge pulled out a large scale map of the district. Opening this, he quickly scanned it, and then pointed a fat forefinger at a certain spot.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Here we are, Mr. Midge. Monk's Bay—about one mile this side of Caistowe. And the boy is to meet this Indian there at 7-30. We must go at once if we are to save him from his murderous enemies!"

And, a moment later, the deadly sleuths were hurrying away, en route for the coast. They had been tricked with the greatest of ease, and I was completely relieved of their unwelcome attentions.

What actually happened to them when they arrived at Monk's Bay I never knew—but it was quite certain that they discovered nothing of any importance. And, in the meantime, I was leisurely making my way to the spot near the river where Jerry Dodd usually studied.

There was a feeling of half-excited anticipation within my breast. I wondered whether anything would come of this experiment.

It was not long before I had all my doubts dispelled.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BRANDING IRON.

THE evening was not particularly warm, and the sky was somewhat overcast. I felt a little anxiety regarding the morrow. It would be rough luck if it turned out to be a wet day, considering that we had an important cricket match on hand.

I found my thoughts wandering like this on one or two occasions—for, of course, I was paying no particular attention to my books, although I seemed to be immersed in them.

I was on the alert, listening for any unusual sounds, and keeping my eyes well open for any visible evidence of the enemy's proximity. But I seemed to have the whole scene to myself.

The only signs of life were those of the birds and the rabbits. There were plenty of the latter, hopping about near the wood, dodging from hole to hole, and sitting on their haunches, and looking sharply in all directions.

I kept my eye on these rabbits, for I knew that if any strangers approached in a stealthy manner, the little animals would give me warning at once. They would know even before I could.

But they gave no sign—they seemed quite peaceful and at rest.

Never for an instant did I relax my vigilance. It was rather a trying ordeal, for I was expecting all sorts of queer things to happen. And yet nothing did happen. And it was quite likely, I told myself, that nothing whatever would take place.

Possibly the Indians would not be active on this particular evening. It's generally the way of things, when you

lake great pains to a certain end. In any case, they would not get hold of the real Jerry, since he was safely in Nelson Lee's study, and he would not be released until I arrived back. At the present moment he was not supposed to exist—for I was Jerry Dodd.

Now and again a slight increase in the breeze would cause the willows to bend and sway, and the leaves of my book to flap wildly over without permission for me. About ten minutes had passed, and I was beginning to think that I should meet with nothing but failure.

Surely the Indians would have acted before now? There was no reason for them to delay——

"Ow!" I muttered suddenly.

I clapped my hand to the back of my neck. It felt exactly as though an extra spiteful gnat had stung me. I had heard nothing unusual, and had seen nothing out of the common. For a few seconds I actually thought that the pain had been caused by a fly. I felt no dart sticking in my flesh, and no sign of any fly, if it came to that.

But it was far better to be cautious.

Without looking round, I pretended to be still engrossed in my book, rubbing the spot on my neck gingerly once or twice—as one would rub a gnat bite. Then, taking a tiny bottle out of my waistcoat pocket, I removed the cork and soaked a little of the liquid on my handkerchief. The stuff was pale green in colour, but did not smell strongly of anything in particular.

Then, with the same air of unconsciousness, I put the handkerchief to my neck, and pressed the damped spot to the sting. The next second I nearly let out a yell of agony.

The pain was excrutiating.

It was really astonishing how that "lotion" of the guv'nor's bit. It seemed like fire, and its application was ten times more painful than the original sting. It was only by a great effort that I kept the handkerchief pressed to my skin. And I soon found that the pain rapidly grew less—until, after about two minutes, only a faint throb remained.

Nelson Lee had already told me what to expect, but I had not credited that the stuff would smart so much. According to his instructions, the Indian drug had now been completely nullified, and I should suffer from no effects.

I removed the handkerchief, and placed it in my pocket. Then I continued reading, although I did not grasp a single word of the printed page. I was thinking of that sting, and the antidote I had applied. I was sure, now, that the original prick had been caused by a little dart. And the lotion, penetrating into the almost invisible puncture, had caused this terrific burst of pain.

But it was gone now, and I was thankful. I continued my pretended reading, deciding that it would be better for me to drop off to sleep about five minutes later. It would not do to act too quickly. Moreover, more careful acting would be required here.

I instinctively knew that some keen eyes were watching me—most probably from the rear. So it was necessary for me to be very careful in whatever I did. The slightest mistake on my part—the smallest self-conscious movement—would probably give me away. For those eyes were sharp and alert.

I think I did it rather well.

I kept reading for a little time, then nodded once or twice, and allowed the book to sag down. I shook myself, and went on reading as though to drive away the drowsiness. But again my hands sagged, again my head nodded, and I lay down in an easier position.

It was then only a matter of moments before I allowed the book to slip out of my hands. I gave a deep breath, and stretched down on the grass. And there, with my head resting on my crooked arm, I lay apparently fast asleep. The drug had taken effect in its usual way.

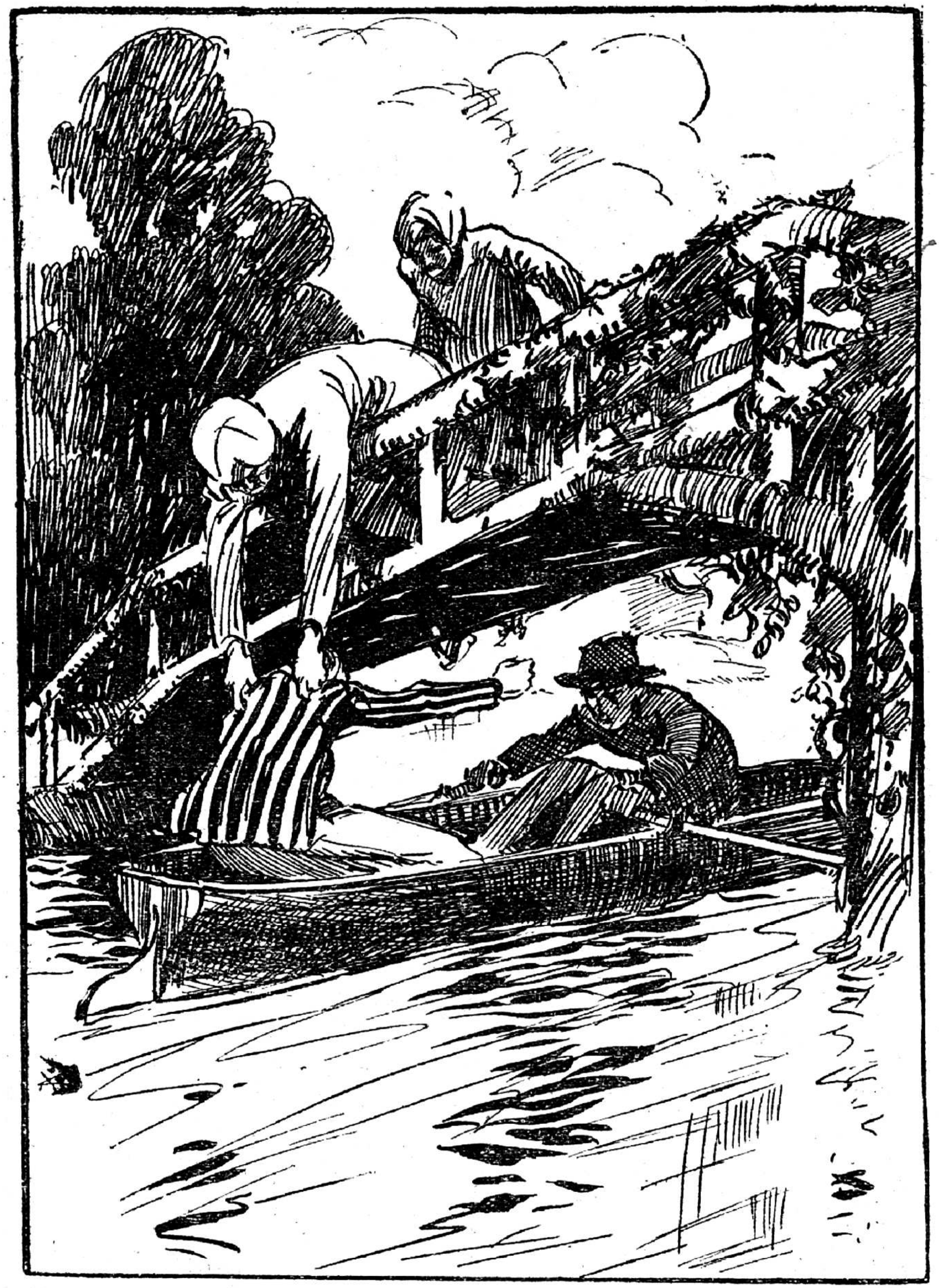
Strictly speaking, of course, I was wide awake, with all my nerves on the stretch.

I waited now, with a thrill of excitement running through me. At any moment I might expect the approach of the mysterious Indians. They would not waste much time.

And I was right.

As I lay there, still and silent, I became aware of stealthy footsteps. I did not venture to open my eyes, although I risked moving the lids just a trifle. And through the invisible slits I caught a hazy glimpse of two forms approaching me. They did not seem to be Indians by their attire, and my eyes were not sufficiently opened for me to distinguish any details.

Then I was picked up. One man seized my feet, and the other grasped me under the armpits. At a trot I was carried across the meadow—rather a feat for my captors, for I was not exactly a feather-weight.



A pair of strong arms reached down, and, with a startled gasp, Jerry was lifted clean out of the boat.

The wood was soon reached. It provided a kindly screen for these dusky individuals who were paying so much attention to Jerry Dodd. They apparently did not guess that I was not the right fellow. My disguise was good enough to deceive them.

Our progress was much slower as soon as the wood was entered. But I was not set down. Instead, I was carried onwards until we reached a tiny clearing, right in the heart of the trees.

It was quite dim here, and distinctly chilly. I was laid down on a bank of ferns, and allowed to remain there. The two Indians talked together in low voices. It was not necessary for me to look at them now—I could tell by their very conversation that they were Eastern.

Naturally, I could not understand a word. I half expected that they would search me, and I was really afraid of this. I didn't want such a thing to happen. 'True, I was wearing Jerry Dodd's clothing—Nelson Lee had made us change suits. The guv'nor was always careful about the details.

But I carried a revolver in my hip pocket—only a tiny thing, but quite effective in an emergency. And I also had that little bottle of Nelson Lee's special fluid in my waistcoat pocket.

I didn't want these things to be found.

Fortunately, I was not searched. My captors took it for granted that I was Jerry Dodd, and they did not make any close examination. Of course, it was better for the deception—these men being Indians. They were not so liable to notice a slight difference, if there had been one. In just the same way, one Hindoo looks very much like another to Western eyes.

I knew that they were waiting for me to recover consciousness—to awaken. The peculiar effect of the drug was to send me to sleep for a short period, after which I should awaken in a kind of trance, and all my will power would have practically vanished. I should be compelled to obey all orders without question.

I now knew that the guv'nor's antidote was effective. I felt no desire to sleep: I was not even drowsy or dizzy. My brain was as clear as it could possibly be. And the two Indians stood over me, watching.

After a short while, they spoke together, and bent closer. They seemed rather surprised, and I gathered that they were discussing me. It was not long before I took the hint.

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" I thought. "I'm just about due to come round. I'd better oblige."

I did not awaken all at once. At first I moved an arm, and then stretched one of my legs. After that I turned over as though uneasy in my sleep. And, finally, I sat up, blinking in a dazed kind of way.

I opened my eyes, closed them again, yawned, and looked about me dreamily. I didn't seem to notice the Indians at first, but gazed past them, into the trees. Then, when I reckoned that I ought to be more alert, I caught sight of the two figures for the first time.

My mouth opened, and I drew in my breath.

"By jings!" I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

I leaned forward, rather unsteadily, and I allowed a look of greater intelligence to come into my gaze.

"Say, chums—who do you happen to be?" I asked in bewilderment.

Both the Indians salaamed.

"We greet thee, O son of greatness!" exclaimed one of the men. "Mayhap thou dost know me—my name is Rahzin."

"Know you?" I said. "How should I know you?"

"Has thy memory failed thee?" asked the Indian solemnly.

"Memory?" I repeated, with a puzzled frown. "I can't seem to get hold of things. I reckon I'm kind of messed up inside. What happened before I came here? Where is this place? I can't sort of grasp things."

Rahzin smiled.

"Thou art in good hands, O my son!" he said. "It is necessary that thou shouldst obey all my orders without question. Remember that I am thy slave but thou must also remember that it is for you to do my bidding now. It is for thine own good. I would do thee a wonderous service."

This struck me as being rather strange, and it certainly did not look as though these men were intending any real harm to Jerry Dodd. And my feelings were exultant. They were being tricked wonderfully.

"Come!" said the Indian. "Thou must accompany us as we direct. And, remember, O son of greatness, that thou must do as thou art bid. Rise to thy

feet, and follow. Make no attempt to leave my side."

"I will obey!" I said dully.

I rose unsteadily to my feet, and followed Rahzin and the other Indian out of the little clearing. I saw that both the men were wearing native costume—but they also carried mackintoshes. By donning these they could hide their Oriental clothes, completely.

We went through the wood without anything being said. At last, we arrived at the edge of the trees, and Bannington Moor stretched out before us. We were at the nearest point to the old quarry. So I was to be taken to that cavern. I was rather surprised that the Indians were still there, after what had occurred. They must surely have known that Nelson Lee and I had escaped from that pit. I am referring to the incident when the guv'nor and I had been flung down to what seemed certain death.

The moor was quite deserted and bare, and it looked chilly in the light of the dull evening. The sun was not shining now. With only a short rest, we walked on, over the moor, until we finally arrived at the quarry.

I was meek and obedient.

I made no attempt to get away, or to do anything that would arouse suspicions in the minds of my captors.

We went down the quarry by the winding path. And, at length, we arrived at the foot. Here we picked our way through the boulders until we came to that little crevice which provided an entrance to an unknown cavern. Even quite close up the entrance was not visible, but cunningly concealed by the formation of the rock.

"I will go first, O wise youth, and thou wilt follow," said Rahzin. "But thou wilt not escape. Obey!"

"I will do as you tell me," I said quietly.

We passed into complete darkness. But a pause was soon made while a torch was lit. And, by the aid of this, we made our way through the great rock fissure until we arrived at a low cavern. This was illuminated by means of peculiar lamps, which somehow reminded me of a pantomime performance of Aladdin. There was a brazier, too, containing red-hot charcoal. A strong smell of pungent incense was in the air.

I looked about me with great curiosity, and much wonder. I took in all the details. That such a place as this could exist within a mile or two of St. Frank's seemed preposterous. But it was true—I was seeing the thing with my own eyes.

There were other Indians here—three of them. One was an old man with a grey beard—evidently the chief of the lot. It rather pleased me to think of him as the High Priest, although he was probably nothing of the sort. He looked like one.

"Thou art here among thy brethren, O son of my brother!" said Rahzin.

According to this statement, this dark-skinned ruffian was Jerry Dodd's uncle! But, of course, it was merely a picturesque style of address. I knew that well enough, and took no particular notice.

"Thou art now in the presence of friends!" went on the Indian. "Whatever happens, thou must not reveal fear. Thou art brave, and thou must show bravery now. It is written that thou must undergo the great test."

"Test?" I repeated. "I—I don't understand."

"Thy ordeal will be a grim one, and thou wilt soon realise the truth," said Rahzin, showing his teeth in a smile. "Be thou of good heart, O my son, and all will be well. Remember, I have warned thee."

He salaamed to the High Priest, and spoke rapidly for a few minutes. Then another unexpected thing happened.

Three of the Indians seized hold of me at the same moment. I was forced to the floor, and then ropes were tied round my wrists and ankles. I was bound securely. This did not please me in the slightest degree.

It was quite contrary to all my calculations.

I had been prepared to produce my revolver if things got rather too hot, and to fight my way out, if there was no other course. But I had had no chance of doing this. They had bound me up before I knew what their intention was.

I felt rather angry with myself for having allowed it to happen. But it was best policy, perhaps, to remain obedient and listless. In any case, I could do nothing now. It was my only course. No matter what took place, I would have to keep up the pretence of being Jerry Dodd. Otherwise——

Well, I pictured to myself a sudden and horrid death. If these Indians discovered that I was not the real article, and they had been tricked, they would

show me no mercy. The end of the adventure would be swift.

"Have no fear, O fair youth—thou wilt not suffer," said Rahzin, as he bent over me. The pain will be slight—just a sting for the moment, but nothing more. Thou must bear this pain well."

I was filled with curiosity and dread, but I asked no questions. Then, bound as I was, I was laid back upon a bare rock. My waistcoat was torn open, and my chest exposed. Then one of the Indians went across to the brazier, and withdrew a peculiar iron from the charcoal fire—an iron with a white hot end. This end was shaped a curious way, something after the style of a seal.

With a choking sense of horror, I realised the truth.

It was a branding iron.

These fiends were about to brand me—thinking I was Jerry Dodd. My position almost made my brain reel. If I attempted to explain the truth, I should be killed—done to death brutally. And if I said nothing this ghastly ordeal faced me.

Nelson Lee had never dreamed that I should be compelled to face such a situation. It made me feel sick with horror. But I could not explain—I could make no outcry. To do so would be to sign my own death warrant.

I clenched my teeth, and waited—rather pale, I believe, but prepared for the worst. What a fool I had been to let them bind me up! I could have escaped—I could have got away by the use of my revolver.

Then I caught my breath in, and clenched my fists. The branding iron was over me, glowing hot, held steadily in the hand of the impassive Hindoo. He came nearer, and I could feel the heat radiating from the red hot metal.

I felt that I wanted to shriek, but I choked back the inclination. Closer and closer came the iron, until, at last, I could feel its scorching heat upon my skin. But I made no complaint—I uttered no sound. I looked up at my captors with an assumed air of cool indifference. But they could probably see that my teeth were clenched, and that I was forcing myself to face this ordeal.

I did not even close my eyes. The iron came nearer. Then the moment arrived. It was withdrawn—just as I had been expecting it to sear my skin. The Indian laughed, and all his companions joined in. Words which sounded like those of approval passed round. Rahzin salaamed low.

"Thou hast stood the test well, O brave youth," he said. "Fear not—the time has not yet come when thou must really bear the iron upon thy flesh. This has been a test of thy courage—and thou hast come through well. Thou art a courageous youth, O son of greatness!"

"I thought you were going to burn me!" I said simply.

My relief was unbounded. But these men were unfeeling wretches, nevertheless. I was swiftly unbound, and allowed to stand upon my feet. I felt more confident now.

"Thy bravery has stood thee well, O fair youth," went on Rahzin. "But thou art to remain here with us now—thou wilt be kept here until the supreme moment arrives. But a few nights will pass before the great moment is at hand, and thou wilt remain here, in the keeping of thy friends. Thou wilt obey."

"It is for me to do what you tell me," I replied listlessly.

But I didn't feel listless—not a bit. I knew the truth now—I had discovered something of the utmost importance. For some reason of their own, these fanatical Indians were planning to brand Jerry Dodd with their ghastly iron. But they didn't want to do it just yet. They thought I was Jerry, and it was their plan to keep me in their power until the moment should come. They thought that I was under the influence of their drug. And I quickly realised that my only chance was to seize this one opportunity.

I didn't hesitate a moment.

Fortunately, my back was towards the exit. With three swift steps I arrived there. The next second I whipped out my revolver, and levelled it.

"Now then—hands up!" I shouted fiercely. "Every mother's son of you! If you attempt any tricks—I'll shoot—and this revolver is loaded!"

The change in my voice must have been startling. It was my own voice—not an imitation of Jerry Dodd's. And my whole attitude had changed, too. I was full of springs—full of activity.

Just for one moment the Indians stared at me without moving. I saw their faces change. The High Priest muttered some rapid words. And almost at the same moment one of the other Indians leapt at me sideways.

Crack!

I pulled the trigger, and the revolver spat fire. The report was deafening in that confined space. I had not aimed at my assailant, but at the roof of the cavern—my only object was to scare the heathens.

The result of my action was staggering.

Following the report there was a splittering crack, and a large portion of the rock roof came thundering down. The uproar was tremendous. I had a brief glimpse of the cavern being filled with a blinding cloud of dust. But I knew that all the Indians had been clear of the falling rock. They were not even scratched.

But my retreat was made easy.

The choking dust and the intense confusion gave me time to speed along the passage to the exit. I had no light, but I remembered the route. And, at last, breathless and triumphant, I emerged into daylight. Here and there my clothing was torn, and I had lost several pieces of skin, owing to sudden contact with the jagged rocks.

But I was free, and I had defeated these Burmese rascals.

However, it was not my policy to linger. I fled with all speed up the quarry, and rushed away for St. Frank's.

CHAPTER V.

THE MISSING CRICKETERS.

NELSON LEE nodded with approval.

"I must congratulate you, Nipper, upon your astuteness," he said, patting my back. "You have done very well indeed, and your escape was executed as neatly as one could wish for."

"Well, it was the only thing I could do, sir," I replied. "Do you think my information will be of any use."

"My dear boy, it is of the greatest importance," replied the guv'nor. "We now know that these Indians are attempting to get hold of Dodd for the purpose of branding him. Why they should want to do this remains a mystery. But the lad's danger is apparent."

"It was rather too unpleasant for my liking, sir," I remarked. "I thought they were going to print their blessed pattern on my chest. I've strong objection to that sort of thing."

I was alone with Nelson Lee in his study. Jerry Dodd had gone, and he did not actually know what had taken place in the cavern. It was better that he should be kept in ignorance of the real truth. I was feeling more myself now—although I don't mind confessing that my nerves were a bit on edge.

"Your method of escape was certainly drastic, Nipper, but I rather fancy you did the best thing under the circumstances," went on Nelson Lee. "We must be careful in the immediate future—we must take particular care to see that Dodd is kept safe. After what has happened this evening it is most likely that the Indians will change their headquarters. And if they succeed in getting hold of the boy they may wreak their deadly work before we can locate him. In any case, Nipper, there is no need for you to worry. You have done your part—you have done it well. And now you can devote your time and thoughts to cricket. I hope this experience will not put you off colour for to-morrow."

"Not likely, sir," I replied cheerfully. "I'll be as fit as ever in the morning."

And my statement was quite correct.

When the next day dawned my experience in the Indians' cavern was only like a dream in my memory. I felt in fine condition, and ready to do wonders in the big match that afternoon.

Spirits were dampened somewhat by a steady fall of rain during the morning. Many anxious eyes were directed towards the class-room windows, for the sky was leaden and overcast.

The rain was not heavy—just a mere sprinkling, but it was steady, and the leaves were dripping on all sides. Gloomy prophets declared that conditions would get worse and that there would be no cricket.

But before morning lessons were over a change came about, and spirits rose like rockets—not only junior spirits, but those of the seniors as well. The first eleven was playing Bannington Grammar School that afternoon—away. But this did not interest the junior school. The only cricket at St. Frank's worthy of notice was that provided by the junior eleven. At least, this is what the Remove thought.

The clouds broke in many places before the bell rang for dismissal. The sun even appeared, and the rain ceased. By the time we all trooped out into the Triangle the ground was drying up, and

the sunshine was brilliant. It had been close all the morning, and now it was getting sweltering hot. Quite a number of fellows decided to bathe—for, of course, swimming was a regular daily pastime at this period of the term.

After dinner there was a general rush up into the dormitory, particularly by the cricketers—to change into flannels. And then the fellows sallied out on to the playing-fields.

The match against Helmford College was an important fixture—even more important that the Grammar School match. We were fairly confident of being able to defeat Helmford on our own ground. In any case, it would be a close match.

Our visitors arrived in good time, and by then, I was feeling somewhat anxious. The match was due to commence as soon as the Helmford eleven had changed into their flannels. But, for some unaccountable reason, several members of my team were not to be found.

"Anybody seen De Valerie?" I asked, approaching a group of fellows in the Triangle. "The Helmford chaps are changing, and if they go in to bat first I shall want all my men for fielding."

"I've been looking for De Valerie myself," said Somerton. "I can't make out what's happened to the beggar."

"What about Pitt?" asked Watson. "I've looked everywhere, and he's not to be found. Pitt and Grey are both missing."

"There's something queer about this," I said frowning. "Pitt—Grey—De Valerie! Three of the most important chaps in the eleven! And the match is just about to start, and they're not here!"

"They weren't in to dinner, either," put in Tommy Watson. "And what about Griffiths and Armstrong? They're both away——"

"Never mind them," I interrupted. "It doesn't matter if they don't turn up all the afternoon. But I must have the others. We sha'n't stand half a chance if I'm compelled to put in three reserves. Why, there's nobody to take their places!"

Jerry Dodd strolled up.

"Anything wrong, chum?" he asked, looking at my anxious face.

I briefly explained, and Jerry became serious.

"By jings! That's bad!" he said. "But there's no need to worry—they must be about somewhere. I reckon they'll turn up before the start. I'm going to watch this match, Nipper."

"Rats!" put in Owen major rudely. "What do you know about cricket, you Australian ass? This is a serious matter, so don't butt in."

Jerry Dodd smiled.

"Don't lose your temper, chum," he said, good-naturedly. "As it happens, I believe I was talking to Nipper!"

Owen major sniffed, and turned away. Then I heard a hail from Little Side. The Helmford fellows were ready. We couldn't afford to wait, because if the innings were long drawn out we should only just have time to finish the match.

"If those chaps appear, buzz them on to the field," I said, as I left. "Keep a sharp look-out."

I hurried to the pavilion, and explained the position to the Helmford junior captain—a short, stumpy, genial fellow named Walford. He was very sympathetic, but I had an idea that he thought I was trying to pull his leg. Perhaps we believed that we were aware of our inferiority, and were attempting to make excuses. But I convinced him at last. . . .

"It's beastly rough luck!" he said. "Three of your best men, too. You see, this is the first time I've been to St. Frank's, so I don't know any of you chaps. What shall we do? Make a start?"

"I suppose there's nothing else to do," I replied. "But if the missing chaps turn up after the game's begun will you allow me to make some alterations in the eleven?"

Walford grinned.

"My dear chap, you can do just as you like," he replied. "I'm not particular—I'm not one of those fellows who refuses to allow a change. If your men turn up soon, they can take the places of the reserves."

I thanked him, and within a few minutes I had my team ready. It was made up as follows:—Tregellis-West, myself, Watson, Handforth, Church, Christine, Yorke, Nation, Owen major, Hubbard and Talmadge. The latter three were the reserves I had been compelled to put in at short notice. They were not brilliant by any means, but I had no better material to choose from. The loss of Pitt, Grey and De Valerie would be positively disastrous.

I hoped against hope that I would win the toss. I could then elect to bat

first. This would give a chance for the missing ones to turn up. But I was not surprised when the spin of the coin favoured Walford, and he, of course, decided to open the batting. It was only natural that he should do so.

"This is a fine state of affairs!" I said to Sir Montie, as we went on to the field. "I don't know what the fielding will be like, but we can only hope for the best. And both Pitt and De Valerie are two of my best bowlers."

"It's frightfully unfortunate, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "Somethin' must have happened—an accident, I suppose. They wouldn't keep away for any ordinary reason, begad!"

Quite a crowd of fellows had gathered round the ropes to look on, and everybody knew that the position was looking bad for St. Frank's. With three of our best men absent we couldn't expect to do much—and this had an effect on the eleven. The best of the chaps had the confidence knocked out of them. When a team feels it is going to lose it doesn't stand much chance of winning.

Jerry Dodd was one of the spectators. It was something of an ordeal for him. Here was a wonderful chance for him to play—to partially fill the breach, so to speak. But it couldn't be done. Cricket for him was forbidden.

"By jings! What a darn shame," muttered Jerry, clenching his fists.

The game started.

Black and Alton, of Helmford, went in to open the innings. They looked very businesslike as they strolled on to the pitch. It was necessary for me to keep my eyes well open, and to set the field in the best possible way. But until I knew what the batsmen could do a great deal had to depend on chance. I only knew one or two of these visitors, for the Helmford team had undergone a great change since their previous visit, during the last season. Parnell and Hatch were two of the fellows I knew, and I also was aware of the fact that they were hot batsmen.

In the ordinary course of events I should have put on Christine and De Valerie at bowling. De Valerie was a splendid bowler, and what we should do without him I didn't like to imagine.

Under the circumstances, I opened the bowling with Christine. There were really no other juniors in the team who were skilful enough at this branch of the game. Handforth claimed to be a bowler, and I had given him a test the previous week. After he had nearly succeeded in braining two batsmen I decided that his claims were not justified.

I could not help feeling rather bitter when I thought of Jerry Dodd—not bitter against him, of course, but against his father. What a tremendous help he would have been to the side! His inclusion in the team would have helped us enormously. His bowling was amazing, and his batting fairly staggering.

But it was no good thinking of the impossible.

Alton broke his duck with a neat hit in the long field, which resulted in two runs. I was bowling this over, and I was putting all I knew into my work. Alton scored another three, and then Black made a somewhat spectacular four—a boundary. The visitors were getting settled down.

The St. Frank's fielding, upon the whole, was not bad—but it certainly could have been improved.

During the second over, when Christime was bowling, Black sent the leather skywards. The crowd immediately set up a roar.

"Catch!"

"Get it, Hubbard!"

Hubbard—one of the reserve men—was the only fellow who could reach the ball. He did so, and it dropped neatly into his palm. But the roar of cheering was choked as the ball was seen to slip out of Hubbard's hand. Pitt or Grey, in the same position, would never have missed that catch.

"Butter-fingers!"

The crowd was disappointed, and it plainly said so. Hubbard picked up the ball with a scowl, and tossed it back to Christine. He couldn't quite understand why he had missed that catch, for it had been an easy one.

Black and Alton continued well, batting steadily but not with any particular brilliance. And then, after Black had notched seventeen runs, I succeeding in removing his leg stump.

"Oh, good man!"

"Out!"

Out it was, and Black returned to the Pavilion. The next man in was Parkes, the Helmford wicket-keeper. He was a great man in his own speciality, but not much of a batsman. He scored a pair of two's from my bowling, and then delivered the ball very neatly into the waiting grasp of Handforth.

"How's that?" yelled the leader of Study D.

"Out!"

"Twenty-eight for two wickets!" said Tommy Watson, as he strolled up. "Not so bad, eh? We ought to do fairly well; I think."

"Don't you be too sure," I said. "Some of these other men won't be so easy to dismiss. I wish those bounders would turn up!"

I stared across towards the Triangle anxiously, but there was no sign of the missing trio. And by now we had ceased to hope for their arrival. The next man in was Marler, a long, skinny junior, with knock-knees. There were many grins as he took up his position on the crease.

But these grins soon vanished when Marler commenced operations. He was a regular slogger, and startled the onlookers by scoring two boundaries, one after the other. That made the end of the over, and I had the bowling again.

The first ball I sent down accounted for Alton. He misjudged the ball, and allowed it to slip under his bat. The leather only just grazed the wicket, upsetting the bails. But this was enough to satisfy me.

Alton was out, having made fourteen runs for his side. Three wickets were now down, and the total stood at forty-three. Marler had made eight of these runs. He was presently joined at the wicket by Maitland, a junior with plenty of confidence, to judge by his attitude, but he didn't do much to begin with.

But the Helmford fellows took the game seriously, and were all out to do their best. For a long time we tried hard to get rid of the batsmen, but the bowling of Christine and myself only resulted in a greater accumulation of runs. Somehow, we couldn't touch the wickets.

To make matters worse, an epidemic of catches took place. Marler had quite a habit of sending the ball high—and always in the same direction. I set the field accordingly. Marler ought to have been out three or four times, but Owen major, Church and Yorke, all muffed catches which ought to have been simple.

Then, when Marler's score stood at twenty-six, he was caught out by Tregellis-West. The batsman received a great ovation as he returned to the pavilion. He had done well.

Jerry Dodd stood watching with mixed feelings. As a cricketer, he was full of criticism—but he kept it to himself.

"By jings! I'd like to have been bowling against that darned fellow who's just been dismissed," he muttered. "Twenty-six runs! I don't reckon he ought to have made six!"

Jerry looked round suddenly as a tall figure approached. The junior's face broke into a smile as he recognised his uncle, who, true to his word, had remained at St. Frank's to witness this match. His wrist was still painful.

"What do you think of it, Uncle Bill?" asked Jerry.

"Not so bad—although it might be a lot better," replied Mr. Dodd. "To tell the truth, young fel', I'm rather disappointed."

"This game ain't what it ought to be," declared Jerry, shaking his head. "Those three men being absent make all the difference. Barring Nipper, they're the best cricketers in the eleven. The side hasn't got any fire left in it."

Mr. Dodd understood, and he watched with interest as the game proceeded.

The next man in was Lewis—quite a small junior who looked as though he could be dismissed without the slightest trouble. As events turned out, he provided some of the most spectacular batting of the match.

He swiped away at everything with perfect judgment, and with extraordinary force. In two overs he knocked up twenty-three runs, and then continued his innings with the same brilliance.

Christine knocked Maitland's wicket sideways at last, after that batsman had scored nineteen. Lewis was still in with thirty-seven to his credit.

"I'm afraid St. Frank's will have a pretty stiff task," remarked Uncle Bill, shaking his head. "These youngsters are putting up a formidable performance, Jerry. One hundred and eighteen for five wickets. That's splendid. And I rather fancy they've got some good batsmen yet."

"Sure thing!"

Kemp joined Lewis, but didn't get much of the batting at first. When he did get it he kept his wicket intact without attempting to score. It wasn't necessary—Lewis was obtaining all the runs. His personal score now stood at forty-two, and he seemed properly set.

Then the unexpected happened. He met one of Christine's balls with terrific force, and everybody looked for a

boundary. The ball was missing for a second—until it was found in my hand. The leather had come like a bullet, and it was more by luck than anything else that I stopped it—and held it. My hand tingled painfully as I tossed the ball into the air.

"Out!"

"Oh, well caught!"

"Good old Nipper!"

Lewis was dismissed, and then Parnell came in. We didn't know what he was like at the time—but we soon found out. He batted like a professional, knocking up runs at great speed. Kemp was soon out--for nine—and Hatch came in as Parnell's partner. Between them, they proceeded to make the field perspire.

I tried two or three fresh bowlers, but nothing could be done. The score mounted higher and higher. After Parnell had knocked up his fifty I felt absolutely gloomy. I was afraid to look at the scoring board. The Helmford "tail" was providing the best cricket of all.

Hatch was dismissed at last for twenty-four, and then Hall came to the wicket and contributed nineteen. In the meantime Parnell attempted to get one run too many. Watson fielded the ball like lightning, and took a chance. Parnell's wicket crashed before he could reach the crease with his bat.

"Out!"

Parnell received tumultuous cheers as he retired. He had made the best score of the innings. The last man in was Walford, the captain. He did splendidly, adding forty-five to the score in splendid style. He would probably have knocked up double this number, only Hall was a bit too venturesome and hit out at an inviting ball. It went skyward, and dropped into the hands of Bob Christine.

A sigh of relief went up. Helmford were all out, and they had set us a well nigh impossible task. Their total score was 281, and the thought of obtaining an equal number of runs seemed out of the question.

But we should do our best.

We didn't know what a dramatic event was to happen during our innings.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SUPER CRICKETER.

DISASTER overwhelmed St. Frank's at the beginning of our innings. There had only been a comparatively short interval, during which we partook of tea. Still there was no sign of the absent trio. Their disappearance was a complete mystery. And we were obliged to commence our innings with the same eleven.

I sent in Yorke and Nation to open the battle for the Remove. Yorke was clean bowled with the first ball, which had been delivered by Kemp. This junior had not performed wonders at batting, but he soon proved his value as a bowler.

Yorke looked very glum as he carried his bat out. He was followed by Bob Christine, of whom I was expecting great things. Christine was an excellent batsman, and generally mounted up a high score before being dismissed.

To-day he failed utterly. The second ball of the over resulted in no runs, and the third ball, sent down by Kemp at lightning speed, sent Christine's wicket crashing over. Bob was more surprised than anybody else.

"My only hat!" he gasped in dismay.

A yell of derision went up from the ropes.

"Play up, St. Frank's!"

"Yah!"

"Who said you could play cricket?"

Christine came in gloomily.

"Awfully sorry, Nipper——" he began.

"My dear chap, don't apologise," I interrupted. "These things can't be helped. That chap Kemp is a terror."

Church was the next batsman, and a little sigh of relief went up as he sent the leather on its journey for a single run. The St. Frank's eleven had broken its duck. But Nation now had the bowling, and my heart fairly sank when he launched out and delivered a swipe which sent the ball high.

I knew what was coming. Nation was caught out—for nil.

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned Handforth. "Three wickets—one run! We look like whacking Helmford, don't we? We've only got to get another 281 to win!"

"It's too awful for words!" said Watson.

"Well, thank goodness a decent batsman is going in now," said Handforth, as he strapped on his shin guards. "If I don't knock up a century, I shall be surprised!"

"And if you do, we shall all faint!" said Owen major.

As it happened, Handforth put some

life into the game, for he proceeded to knock the bowling into the middle of next week. He scored a boundary, a two, and then a three. Then Church had the bowling for a short while, added three more to his score, and then managed to get his leg in front of the wicket. The umpire promptly declared him out.

"Another disaster!" I grunted. "Oh, this is glorious!"

Tommy Watson took Church's place, and he did not feel very confident. The poor showing of his predecessors did not tend to make Tommy particularly cheerful. He scored exactly two runs.

All the spectators round the ropes were now laughing with derision. The game was a farce. For some reason or other everything was going wrong, although we were trying to do our best. If I had only had De Valerie or Pitt to send in, matters would have been different.

"For goodness sake, Montie, put up a decent show," I said seriously. "We can't let this sort of thing go on—it's too ghastly for words. Something must be done to stop the rot."

"Dear old boy, you can rely upon me to do by best," promised Sir Montie.

Further groans went up when Handforth jumped at a ball, missed it, and turned round just in time to see his middle stump flying out of the ground. He had scored twelve runs—instead of his promised century.

"By jings! Did you ever see anything like it?" groaned Jerry Dodd, his face keen with anxiety. "Oh, Uncle Bill! Six wickets down—and only eighteen runs! Why, they'll be all out for a couple of dozen at this rate! St. Frank's will be the laughing stock of all the schools!"

"I'm afraid you're right, Jerry," said Mr. Dodd. "Your friends have made a terribly poor showing—but they've had ghastly luck, I will admit. On another occasion these very same juniors might hit up a big score. I'm afraid the game is hopelessly lost."

"It's impossible to save it now, uncle," said Jerry gloomily. "Oh, it makes me feel bad! I've got a kind of pain right inside, and I'll guess I'll take a stroll. I don't fancy looking on any more!"

He was disgusted with the luck, and he thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and lounged away towards the Triangle. Eighteen runs for six wickets! It was too awful for words.

My own feelings can easily be imagined. The game was lost now—not only lost, but the Helmford juniors were openly laughing. I didn't blame them.

"You'd better go in next, Owen major," I said wearily. "Try and knock up a couple before you come back. If only we had Pitt here, or De Valerie—they'd do something. I shall go in myself next, I think."

There was scarcely any life left in one of us, but I talked to the remaining batsmen seriously. At all costs we wanted to avoid being routed. An honourable defeat wouldn't matter much, but to be literally wiped up was wicked.

Owen major was a long time getting ready. I didn't hurry him. We might as well drawl out the innings a bit longer, if only for the sake of appearances. In the meantime Jerry Dodd noticed that Nelson Lee was hurrying on to Little Side. The detective waved his arm as soon as he caught sight of the Australian junior.

Jerry wondered what the reason could be, and he hurried forward. Nelson Lee held an envelope in his hand, and he was smiling.

"Good news for you, my boy," he said briskly.

"For me, sir?" exclaimed Jerry wonderingly.

"Yes—I have just received this telegram from your father—read it," replied Nelson Lee. "It is in reply to a cabled message of my own which was despatched two days ago. I think you will be interested."

Jerry took the cablegram with a fast-beating heart. It was from his father, but he could not imagine what it contained. He opened out the flimsy sheet of paper, and read the following words:

"Permission heartily granted.

"DODD."

Jerry looked up in astonishment.

"Say, sir, I don't catch on!" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps you will when you read this," replied Nelson Lee. "This is a copy of my message to your father."

Jerry took it in the same puzzled way, and read the words. As he did so, his face flushed. His eyes gleamed with excitement until they were fairly blazing, and the sheet of paper shook in his grasp. For this is what he saw:

"Jerry studying hard. Excellent results. Feels cricketing ban keenly. Refined cruelty to the boy. Urge you send permission for him play regularly for school. Please cable reply.

"LEE, (Housemaster.)"

It was almost more than Jerry could believe—and to come at such a time as this, it seemed to him that he must be dreaming. But the bare facts were clear and precise.

Nelson Lee had cabled to Mr. Dodd asking for his sanction for Jerry to play regularly in the school eleven, and Mr. Dodd had complied! It was the most glorious piece of news that Jerry had ever received. He could hardly find his voice for a moment.

"By jings! I—I—does this mean that I can play, sir?" he gasped at last.

"Certainly it does, my boy," smiled Nelson Lee. "You see, I thought something ought to be done, and so I acted in this way—without the Head's knowledge. But Dr. Stafford knows everything now, and he agrees that I did the best thing. From now onwards, Dodd, you'll be able to take your rightful place in the school cricket."

Jerry could find no words to thank Nelson Lee for what he had done. He was so excited that his mind almost refused to operate. Then, as he gazed dazedly across the field, he saw Owen major just leaving the pavilion.

And Jerry's mind became clear in a flash.

He didn't wait to say another word—he only remembered one thing. The junior eleven had met with disaster—six wickets had fallen for eighteen runs—and the position was practically hopeless.

"Perhaps I can help!" thought Jerry feverishly.

He raced across the pitch, charged full tilt into Owen major, and forced him back to the Pavilion. Then, in a series of gasping sentences, he blurted out his news. When I fully realised what he meant the gloom seem to rise from my shoulders, I became alert and eager.

"At the eleventh hour!" I said tensely. "Doddy, old son, you're going in now! Rip off those things, Owen—you won't be needed until later. Hubbard you're out of the eleven—Dodd will take your place."

Owen major and Hubbard were staggered.

"Dodd!" shrieked Hubbard. "You're going to put that fathead in instead of me?"

"He can't tell a cricket bat from a lawn-mower!" roared Owen major.

"You must be mad, Nipper!"

"Clean dotty!"

A wild chorus filled the air. But Handforth was more excited than myself—he knew what Jerry Dodd could do, and he saw the present possibilities.

"Great!" he shouted. "Doddy won't be able to save us, but he can probably knock up a century! That'll save us from being disgraced!"

Within three minutes Jerry was in readiness. He had already been attired in flannels, and now I thrust Bob Christine's bat into his hand, and squeezed his arm.

"It rests with you!" I said grimly. "Play up, old man!"

Jerry didn't say anything. He walked out with a springy stride, and Uncle Bill opened his eyes very wide as he saw his nephew. The crowd simply yelled. They didn't know what Jerry Dodd could do—he was regarded as a rank duffer.

Within five minutes everybody was almost faint with amazement.

For the Australian junior played in the most astounding manner. The sheer joy of handling a bat thrilled him through and through. The fact that he was playing for the school spurred him to tremendous efforts.

Kemp was bowling, and everybody expected to see Jerry dismissed with the first ball. Instead, the leather travelled a very long way. Jerry Dodd's bat flashed, there was a sharp "clack," and the ball simply disappeared. It was found, after the match, in a corner of the Triangle.

The new ball had no rest. Jerry created a record by scoring five boundaries one after the other. The Helmford juniors were sitting up by this time. Walford could say nothing—he could raise no objection—for he had given me permission to alter my eleven if I chose.

The enthusiasm was terrific after Jerry had been batting for ten minutes. He was as cool as ice, and alive to every opportunity. His wicket was charmed. He simply slashed out at everything that came. And his batting was masterly; it was the most amazing performance that had ever been seen at St. Frank's.

The onlookers were now tense with excitement. Tregellis-West hardly got a look in, for Jerry Dodd did exactly as he liked. His judgment was remarkable. The last ball of an over he would send away for three runs, and thus get the bowling again at once.

Jerry's score mounted by leaps and bounds. He obtained his fifty before anybody realised it. During this time Montie had contributed five. Two minutes later the score stood at eighty-two.

"My hat! The chap's a marvel!" I said. "He's batting better than a professional—and the bowling isn't easy, either. If we want to win, we've got to get another two hundred, and with six wickets down that doesn't seem very probable. But if Jerry goes on like this——"

I didn't dare to voice the thought which was in my mind. I watched the play with my heart thumping against my ribs. For twenty-five minutes the Helmford juniors were run off their feet. They didn't have a moment's rest. The leather was sent into every corner of the field. The batsmen, on the other hand, were quite fresh. They didn't do much running, for boundary hits were constant.

Jerry was as fresh as paint. During that twenty-five minutes he gave a display which attracted hundreds.; Seniors came over to Little Side by the score, and stood looking on in a dazed kind of way. They could hardly believe their eyes. Such enthusiasm had never before been seen at a junior cricket match.

At last there was a deafening cheer.

"Hurrah!"

"Well played, Dodd!"

"Go it, Doddy—we'll beat 'em yet!"

"Hurrah!"

Jerry had scored his hundred, and it seemed that he would go on for ever. He added another thirty-five to the score before Tregellis-West was dismissed. Montie was caught out by Maitland.

Owen major went in next, with instructions from me to make no attempts to score. All he had to do was to keep his wicket intact. With Jerry in this mood it would be ghastly if the rest of us were caught out or bowled.

Owen major didn't obey my instructions. He had only been in five minutes when he tried to make a hit. His leg stump was whipped out of the ground. Talmadge went in next—the tenth man. The crowd waited tensely, and a sigh of dismay went up when Talmadge's wicket fell.

The score now stood at 164.

And the last man was just going in—myself. If we were to win it would require a herculean effort, for we had a deficit of well over a hundred to make up. We couldn't afford to lose another wicket now, for that would end the game.

At first I was very guarded, and allowed Jerry to continue his brilliant innings. Then I began to feel more certain of myself, and commenced hitting. I knew what the bowling was. and my confidence grew.

Then we treated St. Frank's to a display of the most thrilling description. Without boasting I can say that I did fairly well, contributing forty-six to the total score. But every run I secured, Jerry obtained two.

The Helmford bowlers could do nothing with him—or with me. In despair, Walford changed his bowlers time after time, and, minute by minute, the score increased—230—240—250.

Terrific cheers went up when this figure came on the board. And still Jerry Dodd was knocking boundaries with the regularity of clockwork. When at last his score reached two hundred, I thought the crowd had gone quite mad. Such cheering had never been heard before.

And now the total stood at 268. Immediately afterwards I knocked a pair of twos, and then a three. It was destined to be the last over of the match—a match which was to lead to amazing results in the near future.

Jerry nearly secured a boundary with the next ball, but it was fielded smartly, and only resulted in two runs. But the score was 277. Victory was within sight. Only a stroke of terrible misfortune could rob us of it now.

Kemp sent down the last ball—a stinger. Jerry Dodd caught it at the precise second, and I thought the impact would have broken his bat. The ball went soaring away like a shell. Off it went into the distance, towards the school. A crash sounded—and those fellows with sharp eyes could see a gaping hole in one of the dormitory windows.

"Hurrah!"

"Six!"

"St. Frank's wins!"

"Well played, Dodd!"

What happened after that I can hardly remember. Both Jerry and myself were surrounded. Jerry received the ovation of his life—he was the hero of the hour. He had performed a feat which everybody had thought to be impossible.

And we discovered that the three missing members of the team had turned up, with a woeful story, but quite a simple one. With several others they had gone to the coast to have a sea bathe before dinner. They had taken a boat out to one of the rocky islets, and the boat, left unattended for a moment, had drifted off, marooning the bathers. In spite of all their attempts to attract attention, they had been obliged to wait over three hours before they were taken off. Pitt and Grey and De Valerie had been nearly mad with anxiety, but their relief was unbounded when they learned how Jerry Dodd had filled the breach—how he had won the match off his own bat.

If we had only known what this match was to lead to, our surprise would have been considerable. It was certainly a Match of Destiny!

THE END.

A CAMERA MYSTERY

A Short Complete School Story by a Popular Author.

CHAPTER 1.

The Young Photographer.

JEREMY minor was no good at lessons, but he was a thorough sportsman. On the afternoon in question he was suffering extreme agony. A perfectly ripping brand-new white ferret had bitten through his finger to the bone, just as he was explaining its beauties to Lathom minor, and he was due up at French Form without the vaguest notion of the meaning of one single word in the whole lesson.

Mr. Bryant, who took the French class, was a man of irascible temper, and an unhappy knack of crude sarcasm, which was peculiarly galling to Jeremy.

A licking he could understand, and take without a murmur in the ordinary course of events; but when he was ordered to stand on his hind legs before the whole class, and Mr. Bryant talked at him and round him, and pointed out with unerring exactitude the precise enormity of his offence, his ignorance, and—most trying of all—the slovenliness of his personal appearance, Jeremy's soul rose in revolt, and he saw red.

He wasn't really an untidy or slovenly boy, but a chap can't look after a couple of ferrets and a terrier—kept surreptitiously at the farm half a mile away—feed them, clean them, and clean himself as well, all in the short space of time between school and lunch—or lunch and fagging out at the nets or junior game.

At least, that was Jeremy's point of view.

Mr. Bryant, on the other hand—who, in spite of being French master, and of a highly nervous disposition, was really a very good sort—regarded Jeremy as an untidy little pig, and dwelt on his opinion with force and emphasis. But then, he knew nothing about the ferrets.

Naturally, his luck being out, Jeremy was put on to construe in the first ten minutes. His finger was hurting pretty badly, and wrapped up in a grimy handkerchief; and he knew exactly two words out of the first ten in the sentence—one of them meant "yes," the other "and"—but they hardly helped him to give a free and easy translation of what Mr. Bryant chose to call "an excellent example of Voltaire's most pungent style."

He spent an unhappy quarter of an hour, and sat down with two hundred lines—an hour's detention—and his ears tingling with Mr. Bryant's remarks, and the accompanying titters of the Form, who rather enjoyed the fun, as it lessened their own chance of a ragging.

Having sat down and weathered the worst of the storm, he began plotting vengeance—and drawing imaginary pictures of Mr. Bryant on his knees grovelling for mercy in abject terror.

Lathom minor was his particular friend, and though neither of them had yet attained to the dignity of a study, they had sufficient standing in Lower School to have annexed for their own particular use one of the recesses, which no other junior boy dare enter uninvited. And there they enjoyed a certain amount of privacy and revelled in cocoa and sardines.

"You got it a snorter to-day," said Lathom encouragingly, after Form. "I was jolly glad for myself, I can tell you. Old Matches"—Mr. Bryant—"had his goggle-eye on me, and if he hadn't started raggin' you I should have come in for a share, hot and strong."

Jeremy snorted in lofty disgust.

"I'm going to give Matches beans before term's out, you see if I don't. What was it he called me?"

"A disreputable little rapscallion, with an utter lack of self-respect," chuckled Lathom. "And Holroyd laughed like anything; he's always trying to suck up to Matchee."

For a long two weeks Jeremy nursed his wrongs in silence, not even taking an interest in a brand-new snapshot camera and outfit, sent to Lathom by a kind-hearted uncle.

One day, however, he was seized with an ambition to get Lathom to take a photograph of himself with his ferrets. After two plates had been exposed, he suddenly became desirous of more information.

"Can you take things movin'?" he asked suspiciously. "Could you take me, say, grabbin' Tommy here, and get him wriggliu' as he goes into the bag?"

"Of course I could, you idiot! This is

an instantaneous thing. I took a ripper of Houston major at the nets last week."

"Fire ahead, then!" said Jeremy.

Lathom focused, and put in a new dark slide.

"Ready?" he asked.

Jeremy loosed Tommy, the pink-eyed ferret, and Lathom, watching his chance, snapped the shutter.

Then they adjourned and developed the photographs in the cupboard under the stairs.

"Comin' out well, aren't they?" said Lathom, with all the pride of a newly-fledged photographer.

Jeremy eyed the slowly blackening plates doubtfully.

"Looks a jolly mess!" said he bluntly.

Lathom went on with the development in stony silence, his feelings considerably ruffled; but when he produced some wet bromide prints and heard Jeremy's unstinted praise, his artistic temperament was soothed.

Jeremy fairly pranced with joy.

"Rippin'—positively rippin', old man! Look at my collar all rumpled, and my hair's just any way; and Tommy has come out fine. I say, can you always do this sort of thing—can you depend on it?"

"You bet!" said Lathom airily.

"Well, look here, old man, you lie low with your camera for a bit—don't go gassing about it, I've got an idea—never mind now—but just keep your plates an' things handy, ready to start when I say 'Go!'"

Mr. Bryant was a man of extraordinary and immaculate neatness. In the whole history of the school no one had ever seen him with a single hair out of place. He had a weakness for white waistcoats, which he wore both winter and summer, and which were invariably spotless. His trousers were always beautifully creased down the centre, as if they had just come from the tailor's, and he habitually wore varnished boots, of which he was very proud.

Being irritable by nature, his whole soul revolted at the slightest symptom of disorder or untidiness in Form. A pile of books laid down crooked upset him for the afternoon, and an untidily written paper drove him to despair.

The weather had been pretty hot, and what with one thing and another, he had made himself more than usually trying. In a moment of rashness he had called both Jeremy and Lathom "untidy slovens," and had bullyragged the whole Form with petty restraints and restrictions till they were on the verge of open mutiny.

Now, besides immaculate neatness, Mr. Bryant had one other hobby—he was an enthusiastic photographer; so enthusiastic that, with the Head's permission and at his own expense, he had erected a green-painted dark-room, some eight feet square.

The interior of this was as immaculately tidy as his own hair. Bottles in orderly rows, dishes so clean you could have eaten your dinner out of them, and negatives stored in neat little boxes on neat little shelves. These facts were known and taken note of by Jeremy, and they entered largely into his scheme of vengeance.

No boy was allowed to so much as poke his nose into the dark-room, under pain of death; another fact which Jeremy was perfectly aware of. Nevertheless, on several successive evenings, he retired there, armed with an old pocket-knife, and returned with a paper-bag full of shavings.

This went on for the best part of another week, by which time there were half a dozen artistically jagged holes in the floor and sides of the dark-room, all well out of sight.

The following evening he purloined a handful of cheese from supper, and spread it abroad liberally. Then he borrowed two shillings from Lathom. On the Thursday he disappeared after morning school, and returned just as second dinner-bell was ringing—hot, flushed, and perspiring, but grinning with triumph and carrying a sack from which proceeded strange noises, and which was carefully smuggled into the cupboard under the stairs. Inside the sack was a wire cage—inside the cage were a round dozen of healthy, youthful, enterprising rats.

Chapel over in the evening, he plunged once more into the darkness of the cupboard, and emerged carrying the wire cage. In half an hour the deed was done, and a dozen energetic rodents had been turned loose in the wood pile adjoining the dark-room, eager for the cheese which they could smell somewhere near.

CHAPTER 2.

Mr. Bryant is Amazed

THE next day Mr. Bryant was visibly perturbed in Form. He overlooked the untidy state of Jeremy's collar without a single scathing remark. He even accepted a blotted composition paper from Lathom without a murmur, and seemed generally out of sorts.

Jeremy made it his business during the afternoon to take a stroll round by the dark-room. The door was open, and Mr. Bryant was stooping down, peering anxiously about under cupboards and shelves. He caught sight of Jeremy and beckoned to him.

"Here, young man, here's a job after your own heart. I fancy some animals—mice or something of the sort—have intruded on my privacy here; but I have failed to discover where they got in. You, being more agile and less careful of your—er—personal appearance, will doubtless be more successful. Please look under those shelves for me."

Jeremy went down on hands and knees.

nothing loth, and prowled about, poking a finger here and a finger there, and at every available spot he put fresh lumps of cheese for bait.

"They're not mice, sir," he said, rising at last, dusty but happy. "They're not mice at all—they're rats. I can see signs of them all over the place. There are half a dozen different holes. I expect they came out of the wood-pile!"

"Rats!" said Mr. Bryant. "Good heavens, it's scandalous—positively scandalous! Fancy rats in my dark-room! Good gracious, I might be bitten, or anything! Nasty verminous beasts! I shall have the wood-pile removed at once."

Jeremy looked grave.

"I shouldn't do that, sir; I shouldn't do that in any case. If you do, they'll be sure to bolt under the dark-room itself, and then you'll have the deuce of a job with them."

"Don't say deuce, Jeremy!" snapped Mr. Bryant. "Do you mean to say, really, that these pests would take refuge under my property?"

"Well, sir, I know a bit about rats, and I should say there wasn't a doubt of it. Of course, I——"

"Of course you what?"

"Nothing, sir. It was only an idea of mine."

"What do you mean—only an idea? Why can't you speak out?"

"I'm sorry, sir. What I was going to say is, that I think I know where I could borrow a pair of ferrets and a dog, sir; and, of course, if you want to get rid of rats, that would be the best way."

"Want! Of course I want! Don't be silly. When could you get these—er—animals?"

"I might manage it by to-morrow afternoon, sir. But I should want you to be here to help and to look after your things, for if the rats got on the run they might knock some of those glasses and chemicals over."

"Very well," said Mr. Bryant. "I shall be there at three. I'm much obliged to you, Jeremy"—the last with an obvious effort.

"At three, sir," said Jeremy gravely, and went hurriedly away, lest he should explode prematurely.

There was much mysterious whispering in Form that night, and Lathom, in the privacy of his cubicle, was busy for over an hour inspecting his camera and plate-changing apparatus.

The next afternoon, Mr. Bryant, coming to his dark-room, was surprised to see a knot of half a dozen small boys in waiting, all armed with sticks; whilst in front of them stood Jeremy leading a terrier on a string, and carrying in his right hand, which was encased in a heavy leather glove, a disreputable-looking sack, which quivered uneasily.

"I thought I'd better get some of the other fellows to help, sir," explained Jeremy; "then we can make sure of the lot."

Mr. Bryant nodded coldly, and opened the dark-room door.

"Better have a stick to wong them with, sir, in case any come inside," said Jeremy.

Mr. Bryant took off his coat, folded it, and laid it on a shelf; then, rolling up his sleeve, he accepted the proffered bludgeon.

"Ready, sir?" asked Jeremy.

"Yes," said Mr. Bryant.

"Look out, you chaps, then! Mind none of them get away, and 'ware ferrets."

He dived his gloved hand into the sack, and, catching Tommy firmly by the neck, hauled him out and thrust him into the wood-pile. The second ferret was started working at the far end.

A breathless minute ensued, broken only by the squeaking of the ferrets and the impatient whimperings of the terrier.

Then, as was natural, and as Jeremy had foreseen, the rats got on the move, and, by common consent, made for the dark-room.

There came a yell from Mr. Bryant as three of them appeared at once from different quarters, a dull thud, and the smashing of glass wholesale.

At this critical juncture the terrier was also turned loose, and plunged headlong for the wood-pile; whilst more terrified rats made for the dark-room, and Mr. Bryant, in an ecstasy of rage and fright, hit out wildly in all directions.

"Come and help, you young idiots!" he cried. "One of them's bitten me on the instep!"

Nothing loath, three boys darted forward and joined in the fray. Now the havoc which three able and willing boys and one full-grown man armed with sticks can produce in an eight-foot-square room is quite unimaginable. For three minutes pandemonium raged.

The climax was reached, however, when Mr. Bryant emerged smeared from head to foot with chemicals—pyro liberally daubed over his white waistcoat, his collar sticking up under one ear, a jagged cut on his forehead where a stick had grazed him, and two hopelessly terrified rats clinging on to him, one on his trousers, the other to the third finger of his right hand. A more ludicrous object it would be hard to conceive. And just as he was prancing madly about with the pain of the bites and the blows liberally

(Continued on page iv of cover.)

showered on imaginary rats all over him, Lathom emerged from the shrubbery, camera in hand, and took three successive snapshots unobserved.

It was a fine, actinic light.

That evening Lathom and Jeremy, acting under his instructions, were unusually busy with private concerns.

The next morning at Form time each boy, on going into class, was handed by Jeremy a sealed envelope, with instructions to open it at a given signal and not before.

Mr. Bryant was in a sour, bad temper, with a piece of sticking-plaster over his left eye. Before going to Form, Lathom had spent ten minutes in making Jeremy's collar as unsightly as possible. Mr. Bryant saw it, and fell into the trap at once.

"Sloven!" he snarled, using his favourite expression.

Jeremy was busy opening his envelope whilst Lathom passed the signal.

"The surest sign of a sloven," continued Mr. Bryant, "is the untidy state of his collar, and neglect of personal appearance. You—— What on earth are all you boys tittering about? Here, you, Lathom, what's that you've got in your hand? Show it me?"

Every boy in Form had a neatly mounted quarter-plate photograph before him. It was a really fine photograph, and showed Mr. Bryant at his best, or worst.

Lathom handed his up, and as they watched Mr. Bryant's face, a roar of laughter went up which there was no stopping.

"Pass all those things up to me at once. You will do me two hundred lines apiece."

But though he said so little, he understood the lesson, and kept a check on his flow of personalities for the future.

THE END.

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