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THE CLUE OF THE BENT SPIKE

This Week's Grand Long Complete Story of St. FRANK'S College.

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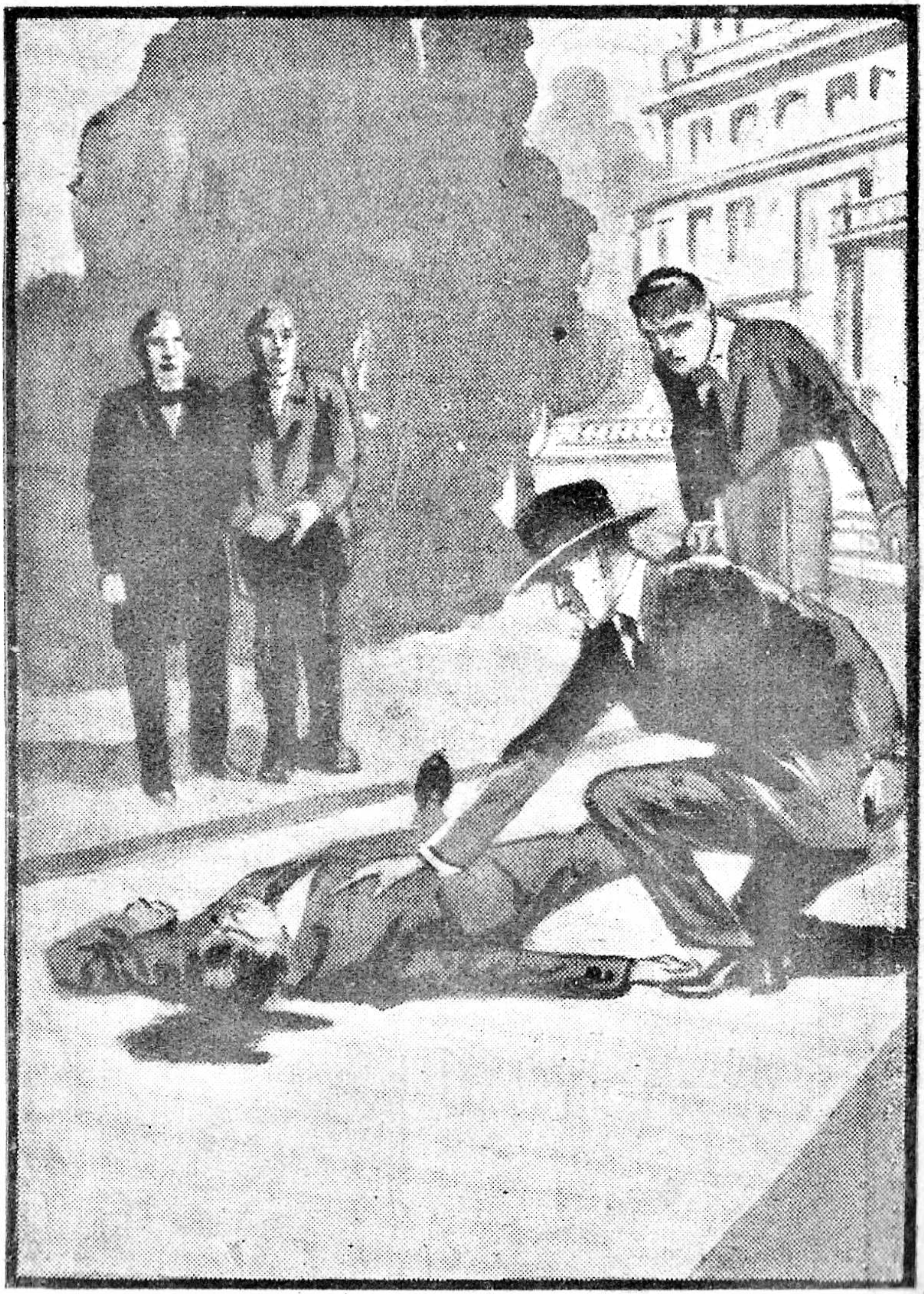


Lee knelt upon the gravel path, and made a quick, searching examination. He had only to touch the body to assure himself that life was extinct.

THE CLUE OF THE BENT SPIKE.

A Splendid Long Complete Story of School and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's College, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Famous Characters at St. Frank's By the Author of "Fullwood's Fortune," "The Price of Folly," and Many Other Fine Stories.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW OF A CRIME!

"HI! Hi! Stop, sir! For Heaven's sake stop!"

Nelson Lee whipped out the clutch of his car, and pressed on the brakes. And the automobile swiftly came to a halt, and stood in the road, quivering slightly. And the man who had shouted out the urgent request came hurrying up, panting for breath, and looking wildly agitated.

We were on the Helmford road—about halfway between Bannington and Helmford, to be exact. It was a Wednesday afternoon, and the St. Frank's Junior Eleven were booked to play Helmford College that day.

It was not usual for the Junior Eleven to travel by a motor-car on trips of this sort.

And, as a matter of fact, only a proportion of the eleven accompanied Nelson Lee. In addition to myself, there were five fellows—Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Reginald Pitt, Handforth, and Church, and McClure. Tommy Watson had gone on by bicycle, with a number of other fellows.

As a matter of fact, there had been a bit of trouble with Handforth. And rather than make an unnecessary delay, Tommy had started off by bike. And so we were enjoying the luxury of travelling to Helmford College by car. It so happened that the guv'nor had some business in the town, and

he was starting at about the same time as ourselves. He was only too willing to take us with him.

We were quite hopeful of beating Helmford on their own ground.

We had had one or two victories this season—although it had not been a complete season. This was because a large number of fellows had arrived late for the term, and so football had been rather slack. But we were bucking up wonderfully, and the Eleven was in good fettle.

And just recently we had had a bit of trouble with Ralph Leslie Fullwood.

He had appointed himself captain of the Remove during my absence, and had tried to retain the position. But at last, owing to various circumstances, he had resigned. I might mention that he was practically compelled to resign. And he had been somewhat subdued for some days.

And now the Remove was going along in the same well ordered course. And this afternoon we fully intended to enjoy ourselves. It was a fine, clear autumn day, with a touch of sharpness in the air which was exactly right.

The countryside was looking splendid, most of the trees touched with brown, and the roads were littered with fallen leaves.

And on a particularly quiet stretch of road, down in a little dip, a man had suddenly appeared on a bicycle—an ancient "old iron," which rattled like a lot of old tins.

The man had come from a side lane, and as soon as he saw us he jumped off his machine, and waved his hands. And he shouted out urgently for us to stop. Nelson Lee could see at once that something was wrong.

"What's the idea of this?" demanded Handforth, from the rear. "We've only just got time to get there, and we can't bother about with this chap."

"Dash it all, Mr. Lee must ask what he wants!" said Church.

"By the look of it, the old chap's in a stew!" observed Pitt.

"By jingo, yes!"

I was looking at the stranger closely.

He was a man of about fifty-five, with a bent back and great, gnarled hands. Both his thumbs were pressed right back, as though deformed. But I could see at a glance that the old fellow was a gardener. This was not much of a deduction. His bent back, and his curious thumbs, were a sure indication of his calling. A man who has been potting plants all his life generally gets rounded shoulders, and his thumbs grow in a peculiar way.

He was attired just as one would expect a gardener to be attired, in rough, old clothing, and heavy boots. It must have been a labour for him to ride the ancient old bike.

He came up to the car now, wheeling his rattling machine and panting wheezily. His face spoke of great, inward emotion—emotion which I judged to be a mixture of consternation and terror.

And this was most peculiar on such a fine, clear day.

"What is it, my man?" asked Nelson Lee. "Is anything wrong?"

"There be a great deal wrong, sir!" exclaimed the man hoarsely. "My name's Russell, sir. I'm the gardener up at the Hawthornes."

"I am no wiser," said the guv'nor, smiling.

"The Hawthornes be the big house in Little Haddow, sir—about two mile down this 'ere lane," said the old fellow. "I've bin gardener to Mr. Jonathan Black for ten year past—ever since he come into the district. An' now the poor master is a-lyin' there, dead!"

"Dead!" I echoed.

"Great Scott!"

"What—what happened?"

"How did he die?"

"Boys—boys!" protested Nelson Lee. "You will only make confusion by all talking at once. Now, Russell, let me hear what is wrong. Perhaps I may be able to do something in this matter."

"That's why I stopped ye, sir!" exclaimed the gardener hoarsely. "I thought mebbe you'd go for a doctor, sir! I was just off on me old bicycle, but I reckon you'll do it in a quarter the time in that great car!"

"Certainly I will instruct a doctor to go to the Hawthornes at once!"

"A doctor!" muttered Handforth. "What does he want a doctor for?"

"To look at Mr. Black, I suppose," said Church.

"But Mr. Black's dead!" said Handforth. "What's the good of a doctor to look at a dead man? He can't bring him back to life——"

"But a doctor must see the body, you ass!" said McClure.

"Look here, my son——"

"Dry up, Handy!" muttered Pitt. "This looks serious!"

Handforth dried up—not because Pitt had warned him to do so, but mainly because he wanted to hear the conversation between Nelson Lee and the old gardener.

"An' arter you have told the doctor, sir, I reckon you'd best go for the police, sir," said Russell shakily. "For this be a police job, if ever there was one! The poor master lyin' there dead—right on the garden path! Killed by a horrid blow on the head! He was murdered, sir—that's what he was!"

"Murdered!" muttered Church. "Oh, my goodness!"

All the juniors were now looking serious and half scared.

Nelson Lee got down from the car and looked up at me. He could tell that this matter promised to be intricate. It had come suddenly, but that did not make it any the less dramatic.

"Boys, please keep as silent as possible," he said quietly.

"All right, sir!"

"We won't interrupt, sir!"

The guv'nor turned to Russell.

"Try to calm yourself, my man, and do not get in a flurry," he said. "If your master is dead, there is no hurry about a minute or two. And quite possibly I may be able to help you at once. I will certainly send for a doctor and the police, as you desire——"

"I'm that a-feared sir, I'm all of a tremble!" said the gardener huskily. "I don't rightly know what to do."

"My name is Nelson Lee, and it is my business to look into cases of crime," said the guv'nor quietly. "I am also a House-master at St. Frank's College——"

"Oh, ay, sir!" interrupted Russell quickly. "Sakes alive! Then you be Mr. Lee, sir! Why, the pore master was only a-tellin' me about you a month ago come Sunday! Said as how you was a wunnerful man, sir, as could beat the police any day. I reckon it's mighty lucky you come along, sir—for this business is real bad."

"I am quite pleased that you have heard of me, Russell," said Nelson Lee. "That makes the position better. But before I do anything else, I should like to know the exact nature of this trouble."

"Mr. Black is dead, sir—murdered!"

"You told me that before."

"Did I, sir?" said the man. "I be that scared I dunno hardly what I'm a-sayin'! An' the master was all right this morning, too—he was all right no more'n half a hour ago. And then, when I looks round, I sees him there—lyin' in the pathway wi' blood—blood——"

The old man paused, shivering, and his eyes shifted uneasily.

"Come, come!" said Lee sharply. "Pull yourself together, man. Are you quite sure that your master is dead?"

"I never see a man look more dead, sir," replied Russell. "I ain't a doctor, sir, but I don't reckon that Mr. Black could live after that fearful blow. I ain't touched him, sir—I dareen't!"

"That, perhaps, is just as well," said Nelson Lee. "And I think I have heard enough to warrant my remaining here. I will come with you at once, Russell, and investigate personally."

The old gardener looked startled.

"But--but I wanted ye to tell the doctor, sir—"

"That will be all right," said the guv'nor. "Nipper, you will take the wheel, and drive to Helmford as quickly as possible. There is only one small village lying between, and I do not think it boasts of a doctor—and certainly the only policeman is a drowsy rustic constable."

"All right, sir; it'll only take me a few minutes longer to get into Helmford," I said briskly. "I'll do it in record time. What shall I say?"

"Find the first doctor you can, and——"

"I reckon as the lad had better fetch Dr. Whittaker, sir," put in Russell. "He's looked arter the master this seven year past. Dr. Whittaker lives just inside the town, sir—one o' the fust houses on the main road."

"That is a very useful piece of information," said Nelson Lee. "Remember it, Nipper. Having told the doctor to hasten out at all speed, go on to the police-station. Tell them that some kind of a tragedy has occurred at the Hawthornes, Little Haddow, and ask them to send at least two reliable men. After that your duty will be done, and you can go on to your football match."

"Right you are, sir," I said crisply.

"And you need not worry about speed limits," added Lee. "If you are stopped by the police, I will take the consequences. And now hurry!"

"Right, sir," I said. "Hold tight, you chaps!"

I was already in the driving seat, and I shoved in the low gear, and allowed the clutch to slide home. We shot forward, and in a few moments we were speeding along at a smart pace."

And I opened the throttle wider, until we were fairly roaring.

Pitt had climbed into the seat beside me, and he was looking very keen and alert. But he did not speak until we were on a clear, straight stretch of road—and humming along at about forty miles an hour.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"Looks serious!" I shouted, above the roar of the wind. "I feel like chucking up the match, and going back as soon as we've told the doctor and the police. But I don't think we'd better."

"I feel like that, too!" said Reggie. "By Jove! A murder case—right here in this little sleepy spot! But perhaps that old gardener chap was making a fuss over nothing."

"There's no telling—although I fancy the thing's pretty bad," I said. "After all, it would be rather a dirty trick on the Helmford chaps to put the match off. We shall have to play. But later on we can have a look in."

"That's what I was thinking——"

"Hi—hi! Stop—stop!"

I was rather startled for a second. Handforth was leaning over from the rear, and he shouted the words right in my left ear. I half turned my head, and saw that he was looking flushed.

"Stop!" he roared.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Anything happened?"

"No—you ass! I want to go back!"

"Go back?"

"Of course!" shouted Handforth frantically. "I called you ages ago—only those fatheads held me back! The silly idiots!

We've wasted all this time—and we're going along at two miles a minute!"

Pitt glanced round, and saw that Church was holding his nose, and McClure was tenderly feeling his front teeth. Apparently they had held Handforth back with success for a certain time, but had then failed. And they had suffered the consequences. I had certainly noticed a little commotion from the rear, but had taken no heed of it.

"Can't you stop, you fathead?" howled Handforth wildly.

"No, I can't!" I replied. "We've got to hurry—and I can't see any adequate reason why you should go back, anyhow."

"You—you babbling ass!" snorted Handy. "I want to investigate!"

"What!"

"I'm going to help Mr. Lee on this case!" went on Handy importantly. "He can't deal with a murder case on his own! So I'm going back to put him on the right trail, in case he goes wrong!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell you—— Whoa! Great pip!"

Handforth clung desperately to the car as we shot round a curve. We were going at a high speed, and I could not afford to take any notice of his nonsense. I was certainly not going to stop.

"If you like to jump out, you can go back!" I shouted out. "But you'll probably hurt yourself, old man. In fact, it's quite likely there'll be another tragedy. You'd better stick where you are."

Handforth danced with rage.

"I—I tell you I've got to go back!" he hooted. "I've been waiting for weeks and months to investigate a real mystery! And now that I've got a chance, you're ruining it!"

"You'll have plenty of time afterwards, old son!" said Pitt soothingly. "And what shall we do at Helmford without you? You don't want us to use a reserve in goal, I suppose, do you?"

"By George!" said Handforth. "I'd forgotten that!"

"It would be rotten if we got whacked by about twelve goals to nothing!" went on Pitt gravely. "And that's quite likely to happen if you desert the team. Why, without you, Handy, we shall be all to pieces!"

"Well, of course, that's true enough!" said Handforth, never dreaming that his leg was being pulled. "A chap's liable to overlook things like that! I'm torn, you know. But I suppose duty comes first."

"Of course!" said Pitt. "And you can easily go on with the investigation after the match. Mr. Lee won't have done much in that time—and you'll arrive just at the right moment to get on the trail of the murderer."

Handforth was pacified, and said no more. And we sped on towards Helmford in order to deliver our urgent calls for aid.

CHAPTER II.

A REMARKABLE MYSTERY!

NELSON LEE filled his pipe as he thoughtfully walked along the little country lane to the accompaniment of the jangle from old Russell's bicycle.

"I understand that the Hawthornes is about two miles distant?" he asked.

"Nigh on that, sir," replied the gardener. "Little Haddow lies just beyond, about a mile further on. There ain't no doctor there, nor a policeman neither, else I'd ha' gone that way."

"Little Haddow is a small place, then?"

"It ain't what you can rightly call a village, sir," said Russell. "Just a few cottages, an' the Thatcher's Arms. The Hawthornes stands quite to itself, sir, and is that private a soul might well think he were cut off from the world."

"And Mr. Jonathan Black?" asked Lee. "He was a good master?"

"The best I ever worked under, sir—an' that's the truth!" declared the gardener emphatically. "A right good master, he was, sir. I can't rightly think as he's no more. It's terrible, sir—fair terrible!"

"Sudden and violent death is always terrible, Russell," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I should like to gather a few details as we walk along. We might as well utilise the time."

"I'll tell ye everything I can, sir."

"Do I understand that Mr. Black lived alone?"

"Alone in a manner o' speaking, sir," replied Russell. "He didn't have no wife or family, if ye understand, sir. Just himself an' the servants."

"How many servants?"

"Four, sir, not counting meself," said Russell. "I live in the little place over the coach-house, me not wantin' many comforts at my time o' life. Still, I was one o' the household, as you might say."

"And the other four?"

"Well, there's the housekeeper, Mrs. Shanks, and the butler, Mr. Howard, and there's Jane an' Martha—them being two housemaids. They've been with us for over two year now, an' it's got to be a good place afore housemaids will stay that time. The master was allus kindness itself."

"He was not in the habit of going out much?"

"Why, the master scarcely ever set foot outside the walls, sir," replied the gardener. "Not but what he wasn't kep' acquainted with the local happenings. An' there wasn't a charity or a subscription but what he didn't subscribe to handsomely. Well respected, sir."

"Did he ever entertain guests?"

"Never, sir—not during the whole time I bin there," replied Russell. "Mr. Black was queer in them kind o' ways. Folks

about here used to call him the hermit. And many's the tale that's got about. But them's all gossip, sir. The master was one o' the kindest hearted gents I ever knowed. Money in plenty, sir—allus any amount of it."

"And did your master do nothing with himself?" asked Nelson Lee curiously. "I mean, how did he occupy his time? It must have been somewhat monotonous for him to live alone, year after year, without going out, and without entertaining guests?"

"Bless your life, sir, the master used to enjoy hisself wunnerful," said Russell. "Fair eaten up wi' his books, he was, sir."

"Ah, he had an extensive library?"

"That he had, sir. Why, the library at the Hawthornes is that full o' books, you can't hardly turn. Old books mostly, sir—an' valuable, too. And there was allus others comin' from Lunnon. Mr. Howard told me as how the master was a great collector of old volumes—not as I know much about that sort of thing."

"Oh, obviously a keen collector, as you say," said Nelson Lee. "And I can quite understand such a man being thoroughly content to remain alone. Indeed, visitors would no doubt bother him."

"They would, an' that's a fact, sir," said Russell. "Many's the time people have called—gentry from round about mebbe—an' the master was fair on the jumps till they was gone. Often as not he wouldn't see anybody."

"I should like you to give me a few details concerning the tragedy itself," said Nelson Lee. "But to begin with, how was Mr. Black's health?"

"Never a healthier man trod the earth, sir," said the gardener. "Why, the master ain't 'ad a day's illness during the last five years. And in the fine weather he used to spend his time between the garden and the library. Allus in the garden, he was—like as not with a lot o' books round him."

"Where did your master come from before living at the Hawthornes?"

"Ah, I dunno that, sir," said Russell. "Some say as he used to live abroad, in furrin parts, but that I don't rightly know. Like as not the master did come from some furrin country—although he's real English. There I go! I'm speakin' as though the pore master is still alive!"

Old Russell sighed, and continued walking moodily along.

"Tell me precisely what happened today?" said Lee.

"Well, it was this way, sir," said Russell. "I was over by the chestnut trees, a-sweeping of the leaves. There's plenty o' leaves fallin' at this season, sir, as mebbe you know, an' a garden looks reg'lar untidy with leaves lyin' all over the paths."

"Quite so," said Nelson Lee. "You were sweeping the leaves up?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what time would that be?"

"I reckon that must h' bin about half-past-one, sir," said Russell. "I knowed that the master would soon be goin' in for his lunch."

"Mr. Black was out in the garden, then?"

"He was, sir, a-walkin' up and down the big gravel path," said Russell. "That was a reg'lar habit of his, sir. Sometimes he'd get thinkin'—about his books, I dessay—an' he'd walk up and down the path between the arbour and the trellis. I see him there takin' his walk, and didn't notice him particular, seein' as I was busy with them leaves."

"How far were you from your master?"

"Well, I suppose that would be nigh on thirty or forty yards, sir," replied Russell. "An' I couldn't see him rightly, because of the laurel bushes—there's a whole row a-growin' beside the lawn. Well, I happened to come through them bushes, arter some leaves what had blowed away. An' it gimme a fair shock to see the master lyin' full length on the path."

"One moment. Did you hear anything previous to this?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Are you quite sure that your master was alone?"

"As far as I know, sir," replied Russell. "That's the rum part of it—that's what makes me fair sick wi' worry. There weren't nobody there, sir. Not a soul! An' yet there he lay, struck down."

"You went to Mr. Black at once, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. An' there he lay on the path, all huddled up. I took hold of him, and pulled him round. An' then I nigh fainted, sir. For there was a fearful mark on his head, sir, as though he'd been hit by some big stick. And there was blood, too. Fair made me go queer, sir!"

"Was your master breathing?"

"I was that flustered, sir, I ran into the house like I was dazed!" said the old man. "I shouted out for Mr. Howard and Mrs. Shanks. An' then they come out, too, and we all looked at the master, regular scared. And there wasn't anybody else to be seen."

"Did you move the body at all?" asked Lee sharply.

"Not arter I first touched it, sir," replied Russell. "Mr. Howard said as I should send for the police an' a doctor at once—an' we was to leave the master just as he lay."

"That was very sensible of Howard."

"Mebbe you're right, sir—although it do seem heartless cruel to leave the poor gent out there on the path," said the gardener. "Mr. Howard would have gone hisself, but his left foot is that bad he can't hardly walk. That's why I come along on me bicycle, sir."

"I can't quite understand that, Russell."

said Nelson Lee. "Do you know if your master has ever mentioned any possible enemies?"

"What, you mean people what would 'arm him, sir?"

"Yes."

"The master allus used to say as there wasn't a soul in the world as he was afraid of," replied Russell. "Still, it do seem a bit queer. Mr. Howard used to say sometimes as he reckoned there was some rum secret in the master's life what never got spoke of!"

"That appears to be quite likely," agreed Nelson Lee. "Well, Russell, I do not think it would serve any purpose to question you further. The next move will be for me to examine the ground personally. And before long the police and the doctor will be here—indeed, very soon after us."

And Nelson Lee hurried on as quickly as possible. For he wanted to be on the scene some little time before the police. He knew that he would not have much time—for the police would come by car, and there had been some delay in this walk.

But Nelson Lee was glad of it, because he was now in possession of nearly all the facts.

And for the rest of the journey he walked along silently, turning over the details which Russell had given him.

They soon arrived, coming within sight of a great, high wall which arose from among the trees over to the right. Of the house beyond there was very little sign—merely a glimpse of a roof and chimney stacks. The greater portion of the building was hidden by high trees.

And Nelson Lee noted that the whole place was built on a rising hill. It was something after the fashion of a castle of the Middle Ages—and stood out on top of the rise.

The wall was very high—at least twelve feet, and even at this distance Nelson Lee could see that the top was guarded by long, wicked-looking iron spikes. They were sharply-pointed, and set closely together.

"Does that wall surround the entire property?" he asked.

"It do, sir," said the gardener. "That wall goes right round the fruit garden and the kitchen garden and the lawns, and everything. There never was seeh a private house in the whole county, sir!"

"Entrance, I presume, is effected by means of a gate?"

"There's two gates, rightly speaking, sir," said Russell. "There's the big main gate, which is nearly allus kept locked, and the tradesmen's gate. This 'ere's a smaller one, sir, and it only leads into the yard. So that nobody could get into the garden, even if they was in the yard—not without they went through the house. You see, sir, the yard itself is surrounded by them walls."

"Quite a little fortress, Russell," said Nelson Lee. "I am greatly interested. I had no idea such a place existed here. But then, one cannot know every house in the district. And this place is tucked away in a very isolated spot. Did your master build this house himself?"

"No, sir—he bought it as it stood."

"And the wall?"

"There allus was a wall sir, but the master made it a rare lot higher, and he had them spikes fixed on," replied the gardener. "A rare lot o' comment, there was, too, among the folks. But I says as a gentleman can do what he likes wi' his own property."

They walked on, Nelson Lee turning these new facts over in his mind.

It was quite apparent to him that Mr. Jonathan Black had shut himself up to live the life of a recluse. It may have been that he was simply absorbed in his books, and did not wish to be disturbed by the outer world.

But it seemed far more likely that he was in fear of some strange menace. Lee had come across similar cases in other parts of the country. And he had once recognised the details.

A man—presumbably coming from abroad—buying an old house, and converting it into a kind of inaccessible fortress. It seemed to be fairly evident that Mr. Black was afraid of some enemy from abroad. There was a secret chapter in his life which even those closely associated with him knew nothing of.

But, after all, it was quite useless to make any idle conjectures.

There was just a chance that the affair would turn out to be very simple. Perhaps Mr. Black had simply fallen down. Perhaps he was far from dead. Nelson Lee knew how these simple domestics could be deceived by an unconscious form and a show of blood.

But he would soon know now.

For they had come within sight of a gateway which was set in the high wall. Further on Lee caught a glimpse of the main gates—high, iron gates which were set between solid posts. And the gates, as far as Lee could see, were boarded at the back, so that no inquisitive passer-by could stare within.

The small gate was similarly protected. And as they approached a short, stoutish man appeared. He was dressed in sombre-looking black—the garb of a butler. And he limped on one foot. Nelson Lee set this down to a touch of gout—which seemed to indicate that Mr. Howard knew a great deal about his late master's wine cellar.

"Is this gentleman a doctor, Russell?" demanded the butler.

Nelson Lee quickly explained his identity, and assured Howard that a doctor and the police would soon be on the scene. The butler seemed quite relieved, and ushered Nelson Lee in at once.

"A terrible affair, sir—a shocking affair!" he said. "Neither me nor Mrs. Shanks have got over it, yet. But there's no doubt about the master being dead. And he was murdered, too."

"I should like to see Mr. Black at once," said Nelson Lee.

He was taken through a kind of passage, and then into the house. He saw two scared-looking housemaids whispering together as he passed through. And also caught a glimpse of Mrs. Shanks— a kindly-looking old soul, who was weeping silently to herself.

The household was really in a kind of panic, but was doing its best to keep calm.

Howard led the way through a sumptuously-furnished hall, and then they came out upon a terrace, with a lawn beyond. There were many rose-trees, and, altogether, the place was a delightful one.

And there, on a broad, gravel path, lay a huddled-up form.

Both Howard and Russell hung back as Nelson Lee advanced. They were strong, healthy men, but they seemed to be in awe of that still figure, lying there in such a sinister way.

Nelson Lee took one quick glance round as he walked towards the body. All his instincts were alive—all his old detective senses were on the alert. Here, it seemed, was a case after his own heart.

He knelt upon the gravel path, and made a quick, searching examination. There was an ominous brown stain upon the gravel, near the head of Mr. Jonathan Black. Lee had only to touch the body to assure himself that life was extinct.

His examination led to one conclusion.

Mr. Black had been struck a terrible blow almost on the top of his head—a blow which had fractured the skull, and probably caused instantaneous death. The fact that he had uttered no cry seemed to show that death had been swift and sudden.

The gardener had been working only a short distance away—concealed by a row of laurel bushes. Nelson Lee pursed his lips as he tried to reconstruct the crime.

The whole thing seemed impossible.

This old fellow had been struck down mercilessly by some unknown assailant. And yet that assailant must have entered the garden without Mr. Black's knowledge —must have crept up behind his victim, and then delivered the fatal blow.

And after that he had escaped. And all the time Russell had been there, with only those laurel trees intervening. At any second he might have looked up—at any second he might have seen the intruder.

And yet Russell had seen nothing—heard nothing.

It was all the more inexplicable because the wall was so inaccessible—so fearfully high. There was a possibility, of course, that the murderer had concealed himself in the grounds—and that he had concealed himself again after committing the crime.

The detective put the ladder against the wall and mounted. His attention was directed to one of those iron spikes.

But this seemed highly improbable.

In the first place, how could any stranger conquer that great wall, with those terrible spikes guarding its summit? They were not ordinary spikes—but a treble row—the centre ones pointing straight upright, and the other rows leaning over at a sharp angle on either side of the wall.

Even with the assistance of ropes, or a ladder, scaling that wall would have been an extremely ticklish task. And for this to be done in broad daylight, in clear view of the house windows, was quite out of the question. For Lee could see that every part of the wall was visible from the house.

There was no weapon whatever to be seen. The murderer had taken it away with him. Again, Lee scouted the idea that Mr. Black had fallen over and caught his head against some rough projection. No fall could have caused such an injury.

And to clinch matters, the gravel path was quite smooth, and there was nothing but soft turf on either side.

No, Mr. Black had been struck down by some powerful assailant, who was armed with a heavy weapon—something, it seemed, with a sharp edge. Lee did not overlook the possibility that some object might have fallen out of a high-flying aeroplane—he had dealt with such a case on one occasion.

But if that was so here, the object would be lying near by. And there was nothing. Moreover, Russell had positively stated that no aeroplane had flown overhead that day. Lee had particularly asked the question.

The great detective did not overlook the fact that he had only the gardener's word to rely upon. Russell had been near by at the time of the crime—and he, if anybody, should have known the truth.

Yet Russell said he knew nothing. Was Russell speaking the truth? That was the big question which Lee asked himself. Did the gardener know more than he had stated?

In fact, was there some conspiracy here—some plot between Russell and one of the other servants—Howard, for example—which had resulted in the death of Mr. Jonathan Black?

It certainly seemed impossible that any outsider could have committed the deed.

Nelson Lee's keen eyes had noted one little thing in connection with the gardener—and for some time he had been turning the point over in his mind. Was it significant of something grimly sinister?

On Russell's sleeve there was a dark, ugly patch—a stain of fresh blood!

CHAPTER III.

BY WHOSE HAND?

CLANG—clang!

Somewhere from within the big house an old-fashioned bell was jangling. Howard, the butler, hurried indoors as fast as his lame foot would allow him. Nelson Lee wondered if there was anything significant about that foot. But after a brief consideration he dismissed it.

No doubt the doctor had arrived—or perhaps the police. Lee was glad that he had arrived on the scene first. He was genuinely interested in this case, and fully intended making a complete investigation.

It was not often that he interested himself without any specific invitation. But in this affair he had been practically dragged into it, and, having gone so far, he would see it through to the end.

With regard to Russell, he left his mind quite open. There was no actual reason why the old gardener should be suspected—although it seemed extraordinary that Mr. Black should have been struck down by some unknown hand. This garden was so absolutely enclosed that it was a matter of sheer impossibility for any outsider to gain entry. And it was still more impossible for him to escape. For he would have to do these things in broad daylight, in view of many windows.

It was just possible, of course, that Russell would benefit by his master's death. Perhaps Mr. Black had made a will, leaving substantial legacies to the members of his household staff. In that case they would be interested in his decease. But Lee could not bring himself to believe that these servants would deliberately kill their master for such a purpose for suspicion would instantly fall upon them.

While Lee was still thinking, four new figures appeared. They came out of the house in a group, and they were looking grave and solemn. Three were in uniform, the other attired in a black morning coat and striped trousers. He was elderly, and Lee at once set him down as the doctor.

One of the newcomers was known to Lee—Inspector Payne, of the Helmford police. There was also a sergeant and a constable.

They advanced towards Nelson Lee.

"I heard that you were here, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, as he shook hands. "Nipper told me, and at first I thought the youngster was trying to play a joke. But it seems to be a pretty grim business."

"Yes," said Lee. "Obviously a case of murder."

"Mr. Jonathan Black is quite dead?" asked Dr. Whittaker gravely.

"Quite."

The doctor moved over towards the body, bent down, and made an examination. And while he was doing this the inspector stood looking on. His two men waited near by, clearly aware of their own importance. And, hovering in the offing—as Archie would have said—were Russell and the butler. From the windows Lee caught a glimpse of Mrs. Shanks and the two maids.

The doctor looked up at last.

"Death was apparently instantaneous," he said quietly. "That, at all events, is a blessing. The poor gentleman had no pain. He was struck down with one fearful blow."

"Can you suggest the weapon?" asked the inspector.

"I am greatly puzzled," replied Dr. Whittaker. "By the nature of the wound I should say that the weapon employed was a bar of iron with a sharp edge—or, possibly, a heavy, wooden club—very hard wood."

"H'm!" said Inspector Payne. "Who could have done such a thing? What's your opinion, Mr. Lee? Have you gathered any facts since your arrival?"

"Quite a few," replied Lee. "It seems that the gardener was working behind those

laurel bushes at the very time of the murder. He saw nothing, heard nothing, and is willing to swear that there was no stranger in the garden."

"But, hang it all, man, the murderer must have been here," protested the inspector. "If he had thrown any kind of missile, it would still be here. The fact that such a weapon is absent proves that the crime was committed at close quarters."

"I should suggest that you set your men to making a careful search," said Nelson Lee. "There is a bare possibility that a heavy stone was employed—that it struck Mr. Black, and then glanced off."

"That, of course, is possible," agreed the inspector.

He gave some orders to the sergeant and the constable and they at once commenced a systematic search of the immediate surroundings. Every clump of flowers was probed into—every bush was examined.

And while this was going on Inspector Payne motioned to Russell.

"Let me hear your story," he said curtly. "Tell me everything you know, and don't omit details. There's no need to look frightened, my man—you won't come to any harm. When did this tragedy occur?"

Russell, who was obviously upset and bewildered, told the inspector exactly the same story as he had already told to Nelson Lee. Payne put question after question, and made notes in his bulky pocket-book.

And then, suddenly, the inspector fixed his gaze upon the gardener's sleeve.

"You positively declare that you were alone in the garden with your master at the time of this tragedy?" he asked.

"As far as I know on, sir," replied Russell. "But seein' as the pore master was killed, I reckon as there must ha' bin someone else."

"You mean the murderer struck your master down here—on this path?"

"That must ha' bin so, sir."

"Has it struck you, Russell, that it is very extraordinary that your master did not cry out?"

"Mebbe he didn't see the villain, sir."

"That is quite out of the question," snapped the inspector. "The blow struck him on the top of the head, slightly towards the front. Therefore, the assailant must have come upon Mr. Black in full view. If such a stranger attacked your master, he would certainly have cried out."

Russell scratched his head.

"That certainly do seem so, sir," he admitted. "I hadn't thought o' that afore. That makes it all the more queer, as you might say."

The inspector nodded.

"It is very queer," he agreed grimly. "If your master did not cry out it seems there must only be one reason. He knew the man who faced him, and had no reason to suspect him of violence."

"But there waren't anybody here, sir, 'ceptin' me."

"Precisely."

"But I tell ye I were over by them laurels!" exclaimed Russell. "I never heard nothin', sir! It fair beats me, it do."

"The whole thing is most remarkable," said Inspector Payne. "You were alone with Mr. Black at the very moment of the tragedy. There was nobody else in the garden—not another soul could have entered, for the place is like a fortress. I scout the idea that any members of the household staff could have committed the deed. But you were with Mr. Black—alone."

The old gardener started back, his eyes staring.

"Sakes alive!" he muttered hoarsely. "You—you ain't suspectin' me, sir?"

"What is the meaning of that stain on your sleeve?" rapped out the inspector sharply.

He pointed dramatically, and Russell stared in a fascinated kind of way at that ugly smudge. Nelson Lee had been expecting something of this kind. But he was powerless to take any action. He was quite unofficial, and, after all, a mere spectator.

"Good heavens!" muttered Dr. Whittaker. "So Russell did this? I always thought the old fellow to be true to Mr. Black——"

"Please wait, doctor," whispered Nelson Lee.

The old gardener suddenly changed. The dazed expression left his eyes, and he drew himself up, and stared at the inspector with defiant anger and indignation. It was not the attitude of a guilty man.

"That stain?" he repeated. "So ye suspect me, do ye? Ye think I should strike down the master what was good to me, an' throw meself out of a job? Is that what ye think?"

"I want you to answer my question," said the inspector. "How did that stain get on your sleeve?"

The old gardener laughed harshly.

"Man, ye're daft!" he shouted. "Why—why shouldn't it be there? Ain't I told ye that I come runnin' over as soon as I see the pore master was lyin' still? I was that worritted I hardly knew what I was a-doin'. I dessay I touched the pore gentleman's head by accident-like."

Nelson Lee nodded to himself.

"That is hardly satisfactory," said the inspector. "But you need not get excited, Russell. I've not accused you yet. I merely wish to find out the truth. You have a bloodstain on your sleeve, and it demands an explanation."

"Ay, an' I've give it to ye!" growled the gardener.

The inspector pursed his lips, and looked round.

"By the way, I should like to have a word with Howard," he said. "Timson, bring the butler out here, please!"

The sergeant saluted, and went towards the house, and appeared a moment later with the butler—who had been busy preparing a little refreshment. Howard was still looking agitated and pale.

The Inspector took him aside, and licked his pencil.

"What do you know about this matter, Howard?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir," said the butler.

"Nothing?"

"I was indoors at the time, sir, and the first I knew was when Russell burst in, shouting for help," replied the butler. "I thought the old man was mad at first, but then I ran out and saw Mr. Black on the ground."

"How do you think he met his death?"

"That's for you to find out, sir," replied Howard. "I'm absolutely mystified. It's a terrible affair, and——"

"Have you thought of Russell as the culprit?"

Howard stared.

"Russell?" he repeated. "You mean that the old man struck the master down? I don't think so, sir. No, sir—not that! Russell was devoted to Mr. Black. You're quite wrong, sir."

"I hope I am," said Inspector Payne. "At the same time, Howard, the whole thing looks very suspicious. Russell was the only man out in this garden at the time—and we have proved that no stranger could have been present. The gardener could easily have struck Mr. Black down——"

"And so could I, if it comes to that," said Howard gruffly. "You don't suspect me, I suppose?"

"No, no——"

"You're quite wrong, sir—Russell knows nothing about it," said the butler. "Why, the poor old man was nearly mad with grief and fright, when he came in. You weren't here, and so you can't judge. Besides, why should Russell do such a thing? It means the loss of a steady job, and a good home. And such jobs aren't easy to find nowadays."

"That is a point I wished to raise," said the inspector. "Do you happen to know if Mr. Jonathan Black made any will recently?"

The butler started.

"Well, he did make a will, sir," he admitted. "That would be about six months ago, and he called us all together, and told us that he had *not* forgotten us."

"Ah!" said Payne. "Let me hear more about this. Did he leave any specific amount to Russell?"

"Yes, sir," said the butler. "Mr. Black told us that he had remembered us all in his will. Russell would receive a legacy of two hundred pounds, and I should get three hundred. But it never crossed my mind, sir. I've been so worried that I didn't even think of the money. I'd rather master was alive, so that things could go on as usual. I'll never get another place so good."

Inspector Payne made some rapid notes.

"We are now supplied with a motive!" he muttered. "So Russell will get two hundred pounds? To a man in his position, that is a very considerable amount. Men have been murdered for a few pounds before now. This information is very important, Howard—very important indeed."

Nelson Lee had been standing quite near, listening to the conversation without comment.

"You heard, Mr. Lee?" asked the inspector, turning to him.

"Yes; but I do not think Russell is the murderer," replied Lee quietly.

"All the same, he'll be required to give a pretty careful account of himself," said the inspector. "Well, what is it, Timson? You've found something?"

"This, sir," said the sergeant.

He had just come up, and he was carrying a heavy broom. And he held the head of it upwards, so that the others could see. And upon one end of the thick head there was a dull, brownish smear.

"Blood, sir," said Timson significantly.

"Good gracious, so it is!" exclaimed the inspector. "Without a doubt, this is the weapon. And it proves beyond question that Russell is guilty! He struck his master down with this broom!"

"I wouldn't like to say that, inspector," put in Dr. Whittaker. "I will admit that a heavy broom of that type may have caused such an injury, but it is very doubtful, to my mind."

"You say that this broom could have caused the injury?"

"Well, yes."

The inspector's eyes gleamed.

"That's good enough for me," he said crisply. "We have found the weapon, and we have found the murderer. The whole affair is strikingly simple. Russell killed his master for the sake of the money which would come to him after the will has been proved."

He turned, and pulled some handcuffs out of his pocket.

"I shall have to arrest you Russell," he said grimly. "Take my advice, and go quietly. It won't do any good to resist. If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear. And I'd better warn you that anything you say now may be used in evidence against you."

The old gardener staggered back.

"Ye're goin' to arrest me?" he shouted hoarsely. "But—but——"

"It's all right, Russell—take it quietly!" said Nelson Lee, placing a hand upon the old man's shoulder. "It won't do any good to object now. But you can rely upon me to clear you of this charge."

The old man gazed at Lee dazedly.

"They—they think I did it, sir!" he panted.

"Yes, yes—but you didn't," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "You can trust me, Russell, to see this thing through. Go quietly, and I can promise you that you will soon be a free man."

"Come, come, Mr. Lee, this won't do!" snapped Inspector Payne curtly. "I can't allow it! You mustn't speak to the man any more! Timson, you will take charge of Russell, and convey him at once to Helmford."

"Yes, sir!" said the sergeant, with importance.

The old gardener, still looking dazed, was led away. And Inspector Payne closed his notebook with a snap. He looked round with an air of great satisfaction, but frowned as his gaze fell upon Nelson Lee.

"I'm sorry you thought fit to interfere, sir," he said gruffly. "This matter is one of the simplest I have ever handled. The gardener is the murderer—he's the only man who could have killed Mr. Black."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I must beg to differ, inspector," he said smoothly. "It is not my place to tell you your duty, but I can certainly see no reason why Russell should have been placed under arrest."

"No reason!" echoed the inspector, staring.

"In the first place, that broom could never have inflicted such a wound—with due respects to Dr. Whittaker," said Nelson Lee. "Mr. Black's skull was fractured, and the blow was struck by means of a hard, sharp instrument. A blunt thing like the end of a broom could never have caused such an injury."

"On edge, perhaps," said the doctor. "I mean, if the broom had come down on one of its edges——"

"Even in that case, doctor, such a wound could never result," declared Lee. "Russell's account of how the blood got on his sleeve was quite plausible. And there can be no question that Russell ran up with the broom in his hand, and flung it down near the body. It is in no way surprising that the broom itself was stained in such a grim manner."

And Lee pointed to the ugly patch upon the garden path.

"You mean the broom fell in that spot?" asked the doctor.

"Precisely."

"It's all very well, Mr. Lee—it's all very well," said the inspector impatiently. "Russell's the man, and he'll have to answer."

"And yet he had nothing to gain, and everything to lose by the death of his master," said Nelson Lee. "I attach no importance to the two hundred pounds legacy. Only a madman would have killed his master for such an object—and Russell strikes me as being a hard-headed old countryman. If he had planned such a crime, his first thought would be that he must safeguard himself. And yet you calmly believe that he chose a moment in the middle of the day—in broad daylight—when he was known to be alone with Mr. Black. To have killed his master under such circumstances was simply asking for trouble. No, inspector, you've got the wrong man——"

Payne shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Indeed!" he snapped. "Then where is the right man?"

"I shall hope to deliver him up to you in the very near future," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "I will admit that I am greatly puzzled myself—I do not know how the murder was committed, and I have no inkling as to the identity of the murderer. But I can safely tell you that Russell is quite guiltless."

"It's very good of you to take all this trouble, Mr. Lee, but I am quite satisfied with my own conduct of the case," said Inspector Payne tartly. "It will be better, perhaps, if you withdraw from it."

"I am very sorry to disappoint you, inspector, but I have no such intention," said Nelson Lee sweetly. "I may be outraging all the known rules of the police, but I am prepared to take the consequences of that. We will defer this little discussion until later."

And Lee strolled off, lighting his pipe. He paced up and down the garden paths, puffing away vigorously. And the inspector, with another shrug, turned towards the house, and proceeded to make himself a terrible nuisance to the household. He questioned them one after another—until they hardly knew what they were saying. It was the inspector's plan to collect all the facts.

In the meantime, Nelson Lee was busy.

While he walked slowly up and down the paths, and zigzagged across the lawn, the body of the unfortunate Mr. Black was carried indoors. And very soon Lee found that he was quite alone in the garden.

Not that this was of any benefit to him—he did not want to perform any action in secret. He had no objection to the inspector seeing all his movements. And, to tell the truth, Nelson Lee was greatly puzzled.

Search as he would, he could see no trace.

He looked in every bed for signs of footprints. There were none. He skirted the entire wall, in the hope of finding some mark which might lead to the discovery of the spot where the murderer had climbed over.

But there were no such marks.

At last, however, Nelson Lee's eyes suddenly gleamed. He was standing up, craning towards the top of the wall—and staring at the line of spikes which stood out formidably from the summit.

Then he looked round, and caught sight of a ladder which was tucked away behind a potting shed. He fetched the ladder, placed it against the wall, and mounted. All his attention was given to one of those iron spikes.

"H'm!" he murmured. "Most interesting and instructive!"

His whole attitude had changed now. At last he had found something definite—something which might lead to further results. He tested one of the other spikes, and found that the iron was fairly soft and bendable.

These spikes were very long, and there was a treble row fixed on top of the wall. The two outer rows leaned over, making any scaling of the wall a very difficult, if not impossible, task. The central row stood quite upright, pointing towards the sky.

These spikes were about eighteen inches long, and set close together in one continuous line. But here, at this spot, the tip of one certain spike was sharply bent over.

Nelson Lee took out a powerful magnifying lens, and carefully studied the bent portion of the iron spike. It had recently received a hard knock, and Lee detected one or two traces of foreign matter on the iron. With exquisite care he brushed these traces of foreign matter into an envelope. This he folded up, and tucked away in his waistcoat pocket.

He seemed highly pleased with one fact—although it was a most remarkable one. It may be thought that he had discovered the spot where the murderous missile had come hurtling over the wall to strike death to Mr. Jonathan Black.

But this could not be the case—for the spike was bent outwards! In short, the object which had caused this sharp bend had been flung out of the garden, and not into it!

But, judging by the glint in Lee's eyes, he was quite satisfied.

CHAPTER IV.

PLAYING THE GAME!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE adjusted his monocle and smiled placidly.

"Well, here we are, what?" he observed. "I mean to say, right on the jolly old spot! The field of battle, and all that sort of thing."

"Of all the nerve!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "Fancy you coming over in a giddy car, Archie! Where did you pinch it from?"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "In other words, old companion, dash it with considerable force! I mean, where did I pinch it, what? Kindly understand, laddie, that this car belongs to me!"

Archie was somewhat indignant. He was sitting in a little two-seater car—a very neat little affair in slate grey. It was Archie's own car, but he never used it much.

However, he had brought it out to-day, because he was taking a keen interest in football, and was most anxious to see this match against Helmford College Juniors. Cycling was out of the question—going by train was too much fag—and so he had trickled along, in his own words, in the jolly old buzzer.

And now the little car was just against the ropes of the junior playing-field at Helmford College. And Archie was sitting there, quite content and at peace. It formed a splendid grand stand, and he would be able to see the match with comfort and enjoyment.

"Well, I must say you're a lucky bounder, Archie!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "Coming here in your own giddy car, and lolling about as though you owned the whole place. Why don't you join in the game?"

"Gadzooks!" said Archie. "You mean, get into some of those bally bathing costume things, and dash about the old field? A sound scheme, laddie, but frightfully strenuous. I mean to say, deucedly trying for the old tissues!"

"Why, it would buck you up wonderfully," grinned De Valerie. "But I'm very doubtful if Nipper would like the idea. Football is hardly your line, Archie. You're not built for the game."

"Absolutely not!" agreed Archie. "At the same time, old horse, I can be most dashed energetic at times. Absolutely! I mean to say, I wouldn't mind having a stab at it!"

"But I think the rest of the team would mind!" chuckled Jack Grey. "You're best where you are, Archie—looking on."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie, yawning.

It was nearly time for the game to start. We had arrived in plenty of time—after delivering the urgent messages to Dr. Whittaker and the police. And although I was keen on the match, I was very anxious to get away—to the scene of that strange, mysterious crime at Little Haddow.

Of course, I knew very few details—I'd only heard the somewhat disjointed account given by old Russell as he stood by our car. I didn't even know—as I stood on the football field—that the old gardener had been arrested.

I could imagine that Nelson Lee was fairly revelling in his investigation, and I wanted to be by his side. And I half thought of putting one of the reserves in the team, and hurrying off to the Hawthornes.

But this was an important match, and I decided that I'd better not do it. I would consume my impatience until later.

And so I said nothing to Barlowe, the Helmford Junior skipper, when we met. And I advised the other fellows to keep it quiet about the murder. It would only tend to distract them from the game if they talked.

And now the game was just due to commence.

It was an animated scene. All the Helmford juniors who were not playing in the match were collected round the ropes.

And quite a few St. Frank's spectators were there, too.

Archie had come over especially—for, although he pretended to be so slack, he was really greatly interested in the king of winter games. Even if he couldn't play, he could watch.

Handforth was the only fellow who caused a little trouble.

"It's all very well to stick here," he growled, as he stood with Church and McClure, waiting for the game to begin. "But it's wrong—it's a pity they can't do without me."

"I'll take your place in goal, if you like," said Church.

Church wasn't playing, and he was attired in Norfolks. But McClure and Handforth were already in their football togs—for McClure was playing right-back. The team, in fact, was exactly the same team which had beaten Eastwold Junior Eleven at St. Frank's the previous week. It had done so well that I saw no reason to make any alterations.

Handforth accepted Church's offer with scorn.

"You in goal?" he sneered. "My dear chap, we want to win this match—and if you kept goal, we should lose by about a hundred! I quite see that I'm necessary—the team can't do without me."

"No fellow is indispensable," said Church. "Even a Prime Minister could be replaced."

"Easily!" said Handforth. "You fathead! Fancy comparing a Prime Minister to a goalkeeper! Any ass could be a Prime Minister, but it takes a jolly clever chap to keep goal! I'd like to see a Prime Minister between the sticks! He'd make a rotten mess of it!"

"I didn't mean in that way, you chump!" grinned Church. "But we won't continue the argument. You're goalie, old man, and you've got to play."

Handforth nodded.

"But it's a pity," he said, frowning. "I know that I'm needed elsewhere. There's that murder mystery to be cleared up! How the dickens can Mr. Lee do it on his own? I want to be there—conducting the inquiry properly. I—I feel like Nero!"

"Nero?" grinned McClure.

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth. "You know, fiddling while Naples was burning!"

"That's not right, you ass——"

"Well, Pompeii!" said Handforth impatiently. "Nero played the giddy violin, and all the time Pompeii was being smothered in lava from Mount Etna!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're horribly mixed, Handy!" grinned Church. "It was Mount Vesuvius that smothered Pompeii. Besides, Nero fiddled while Rome was burning. And, anyhow, what's it got to do with us?"

Handforth sniffed.

"Of course, I don't expect you chaps to have any sense!" he said witheringly. "But I feel just the same! Here I am, messing my time away playing football, while that murder needs investigating!"

Handforth found himself confronted by the wiry stranger in the brown suit. "Well, young man, what's the idea?" asked the stranger pleasantly.

"Oh, I see!" said Church. "But Mr. Lee's on the spot, and so are the police! I dare say they'll be able to manage without you, Handy."

"Oh, do you!" said Handforth grimly. "Well, I don't! I don't want to boast, or brag, but it's only fair to say that when it comes to an intricate detective mystery, I'm the best chap for the job. I can tell a criminal at once, directly I see one, I get a sort of thrill."

"A kind of fellow feeling?" suggested McClure.

"Exactly," said Handforth. "That's just it—a fellow feeling—— Why, you—you insulting rotter! Do you mean to suggest—— Hi!"

But McClure thought it far safer to mix with the throng. Handforth would have no hesitation in committing assault and battery on the spot, if he got the chance. So McClure didn't give him a chance.

And soon afterwards the game started.

Handforth was kept too busy to enter into any further discussions concerning the murder at the Hawthornes. The Helmford juniors played a vigorous game, and kept us hard at it.

After about fifteen minutes play the home team scored. Handforth was leaning against one of the goalposts, gazing straight out at

the field. But he seemed to be quite indifferent about the game.

One of the Helmford forwards had got the ball, and was streaking for goal. McClure and Armstrong were at sea, and the enemy got through with the leather. Then, steadying himself, he let fly.

The ball whizzed into the net, and Handforth still leaned against the post, oblivious of his surroundings.

"Goal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Goal!"

Handforth started, and gasped.

"Why, what——"

"Are you mad?" I shouted, running up. "You could have saved that, Handy! What's the matter? You didn't even attempt——"

"I—I was thinking!" panted Handforth. "About that—that murder, you know! I was just wondering if the assassin could have bored a tunnel underground, and then whacked Mr. Black over the head——"

"You—you day-dreaming ass!" I said angrily. "You'll lose us the match! If you're going to keep this up, I shall ask Barlowe's permission to play a substitute!"

Handforth gulped.

"No, no!" he said frantically. "I shall be all right now! Sorry, old man! Blow the murder! I'll push it out of my mind until afterwards. Buzz ahead with the game. I won't let any more goals through!"

And Handy kept his word.

Having pulled himself together, he played a glorious game. Time after time he saved the most difficult shots. He felt that it was up to him to redeem that early blunder.

He played like a fellow possessed, and not once did the Helmford fellows have the satisfaction of seeing the leather pass the custodian. On the other hand, we scored twice.

It was a fast, keenly-fought game, but the Helmford Eleven was not up to our standard. They were particularly good in their defence, and we had great difficulty in getting through.

Pitt, with his usual skill, sent in the most glorious centres with unfailing regularity. But we could not turn them to account—owing to the skill of the home backs and the goalkeeper.

At half-time, however, we were level.

I managed to score from a corner-kick, which had been forced by Pitt. The ball dropped near the goalmouth, and I got my head to it just before the goalie could free himself from the scramble.

So when the whistle blew a few minutes later we were on equal terms.

The second half was just as strenuously fought. The Helmford fellows were determined to force a win; but, although they beat our backs time after time, they could not get the ball past Handforth.

After half an hour's play Reggie Pitt scored our second goal. He sent in a long, oblique drive which had the goalie guessing all the time, and beaten at the finish. He tried to save, but just missed.

Helmford tried valiantly to equalise, but it was too much for them. Strictly speaking, we ought to have beaten the home side by two—nil. But we easily forgave Handforth for his little slip.

And when the final whistle blew we left the field the victors. I was enormously glad that the finish had come—for I was anxious to be off to the Hawthornes.

I didn't guess that strange events were to happen close at hand!

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER!

HANDFORTH changed in record time.

I was putting on a good speed on my own account. For I wanted to hurry back to the Hawthornes without delay. I had explained to Barlowe that I wanted to rush off, and asked him to excuse me.

"What's the hurry, Handy?" I asked, when I was nearly ready.

"You know!" said Handforth, with a significant look at the others. "Don't want to talk too much. But I must get off!"

"Hallo, what's the mystery?" asked one of the Helmford fellows.

"Oh, nothing," said Handforth. "No mystery at all. And I'm not going to jolly well tell you, anyway!"

"If there's no mystery, there's nothing to tell, is there?" asked the other.

"Well, no," admitted Handforth. "I've got to buzz off quick. They can't do without me."

"Who can't?"

"Why, the police——"

"What?"

"The police, you ass!" said Handforth firmly. "I've got to help—— That is—— I mean What's the idea of bothering me like this?" he demanded warmly. "I'm not going to help the police at all!"

"I can quite believe that," said Pitt cheerfully.

"Do you mean to imply that I shall hinder 'em?" roared Handforth. "Why, I bet I'll investigate this crime, and—and——" He paused, and glared round. "Why can't you chaps dry up?"

He was asked all sorts of questions, but as he was practically dressed, he managed to get away at once, and finished buttoning up his waistcoat outside. He found Church and McClure waiting for him near the ropes of the Senior Side. The Helmford Senior Eleven had not finished their match yet.

"Oh, here you are," said Church. "McClure was ready five minutes ago.

What shall we do now? Go and get some tea, I suppose——"

"Then you suppose wrong," said Handforth.

"But we must have some tea——"

"Blow the tea!" said Handforth firmly. "There's something very important to do. I've got to dash off to the Hawthornes."

Church and McClure exchanged glances. And a man who was standing watching the game gave a sudden start. It was very small, but perceptible. He looked at the chums of Study D in a strange kind of way.

The man was about forty years of age, dressed in a lounge suit, and he wore a wide-brimmed Stetson hat. He had on a loose shirt, with no tie, and looked bronzed and wiry.

Apparently, he had just wandered in to watch—for the public could come in as they chose to see the Helmford games. It was, of course, just the same at St. Frank's. Anybody was welcome to look on.

"You're going to dash off to the Hawthornes?" repeated McClure.

"Yes."

"Are you still dotty on that scheme?" asked Church. "Chuck it up, Handy—they can do without you. The police are there, and they've probably got the murderer by this time."

"Likely!" sniffed Handforth. "It's a big mystery, and I mean to investigate it. I'm going to buzz off at once——"

"If you're so determined, you'd better wait until Nipper goes."

"Rats to Nipper!" said Handforth. "I can't wait for him."

"Then how are you going—on somebody's borrowed bike?" asked Church. "You know we came in that car, and Nipper will soon buzz off in it. We'd better all go at the same time."

Handforth started.

"By George!" he said. "I'd forgotten that. Yes, of course. That's right—we shall have to wait until Nipper appears. But the fathead is so slow! I want to get to the scene of the murder."

The stranger had lounged a little nearer, and was now listening intently to everything that the juniors said. He had lost all interest in the match.

"Look here, Handy, the best thing you can do is to leave everything to Mr. Nelson Lee," said McClure. "He's on the spot and if any discoveries are made, Mr. Lee will make 'em."

"It's a chance in a thousand, and I'm going to take it," said Handforth firmly. "It's no good you chaps arguing—I'm going. Mr. Lee is a jolly clever man, and he's done some marvellous things. But it needs me to clear up this mystery. So I'm going!"

Church and McClure said no more. But they noticed that the wiry-looking stranger had been taking more than a casual interest in the conversation. Church, in fact, was quite impressed.

"Did you notice?" he said, in a soft voice.

"Notice what?" demanded Handforth loudly.

"Don't, you ass—keep quiet!" whispered Church. "There's a chap standing just near by—that fellow in the brown suit. He seems tremendously interested, and he started when Mr. Lee's name was mentioned."

"He started!" repeated Handforth.

"Yes—looked scared for a minute!"

Handforth gazed across the field dreamily.

"My hat! That was a jolly good pass," he said, pointing.

But while he was doing so he squinted out of the corner of his eye at the stranger. The latter looked at the game just then, and Handforth was able to obtain a clear view—without the man knowing it.

Undoubtedly his move had been a cute one.

"By George!" muttered Handforth. "I—I wonder if—— But I don't suppose that's possible! Anyhow, this chap's behaviour is jolly suspicious. He may be a confederate——"

"Don't shout!" whispered McClure.

"A confederate!" went on Handforth. "That's about it, you know! I expect there's a whole gang of 'em. And this chap is one of the rotters who helped to kill that poor chap at the Hawthornes."

"Go easy, Handy!" said Church. "Cheese it! There's no need to guess things like that—it's sheer rot! I don't suppose this chap knows anything about the murder, but simply took an interest in what you were saying."

Handforth shook his head.

"No fear!" he said firmly. "I can tell the chap by his very looks! He doesn't belong to Helmford at all. He's not one of these country people—he must have come from London!"

"More likely from abroad!" said Church keenly.

"Well, perhaps so," admitted Handforth. "Anyhow, he's a suspicious character, and I mean to look into the matter. I've a good mind to go up to him and ask if he knows anything about the murder!"

His chums seized him.

"You—you ass!" gasped Church. "You can't do that! Oh, thank goodness! He's moving off now!"

"Is he, by George!" said Handforth. "Good! I'll shadow him!"

"But—but what about going to the Hawthornes——"

"That can wait until later!" interrupted Handforth. "It seems to me that this matter demands investigation first. Why, this stranger may be able to lead us on the very track! Anyhow, I'm not going to leave things to chance. I mean to follow him and see where he goes to!"

But his chums still held him.

"It might cause trouble, old man——" began McClure.

"Leggo!" snapped Handforth. "You—you fatheads! I shall lose him in half a minute! I'm going on the trail!"

And Edward Oswald shook himself free, and went off after the stranger. And it must be admitted that Handforth acted shrewdly for once. As a rule, he made the most fearful blunders.

As a detective, he was a bit of a joke. But there could be no denying that it was a keen move on his part to follow the stranger. For the man had shown such unusual interest that it seemed possible that he already knew something about the Hawthornes murder. The start he had given at the mention of Nelson Lee's name was certainly very significant.

"Oh, the ass!" said Church. "He'll only get himself into trouble."

"Let him!" said McClure callously. "It'll do him good! He's so jolly pig-headed that he needs a lesson or two to bring him round!"

"I wish I hadn't mentioned about the the chap now," went on Church. "Handy wouldn't have noticed anything if I hadn't spoken. Still, I don't suppose he can come to much harm. We might as well let him have on."

And Handforth's chums continued to watch the senior game.

And in the meantime Handforth was following the stranger. He was doing this in his own peculiar way. As a matter of fact, Handforth was not particularly smart as a shadower—although he thought he was.

"I'll keep on his track all right," murmured Handforth. "It won't take me long to find out who he is, or where he comes from! And then I shall have something definite to take to Mr. Lee!"

The stranger was walking ahead, about fifty yards in advance. And now he was stepping out briskly. He did not once glance behind, but kept on at the same pace, as though bent upon a definite object.

Handforth kept his distance, and adopted one or two little tricks in case he was observed. These were really unnecessary, because the stranger did not even glance round.

At first, Handforth turned up his coat-collar, and then crossed to the other side of the road. He went along in this fashion for some little way, and then altered his appearance by taking off his cap, and stuffing it in his pocket. He really thought that he was doing a great deal to disguise himself. But, as a matter of fact, he only succeeded in drawing the attention of casual passers-by.

But it didn't seem to matter much, because Handforth's quarry had evidently no thought of being shadowed. He kept no lookout—he did not turn at all. He was making for the centre of the town.

Helmford was a fairly large place—a good deal larger than Bannington. And Handforth was now beginning to be somewhat alarmed. Once the man got into the very centre of the town, it would be most difficult to keep him under constant observation. For there would be plenty of traffic, and a large number of pedestrians.

So Handforth increased his pace, and reduced the distance between himself and his quarry. He was now only twenty or thirty yards behind.

And then, just when he was least expecting it, the wiry stranger turned into a bye-lane. It was a quiet, little roadway, and he paced along this at a smart stride. Handforth was rather dismayed to find that there were no other people in the lane.

So if the man happened to turn, he would at once see the schoolboy—and he would recognise him. Handforth clung to the wall as much as possible, and tried to conceal himself by the overhanging bushes. He now saw that this lane led towards a kind of backwater.

In the distance ahead there were no houses, but plenty of trees and waste land. And it seemed to Handforth that the lane was a blind one, for it did not appear to lead anywhere in particular.

However, he was mistaken.

For within a minute or two a few posts appeared round a bend—and beyond these posts there was a wide footpath, with hedges on either side. This footpath seemed to lead to another section of the town. It was a kind of short cut from one suburb to another.

The man in front continued his brisk walk. It was surprising, perhaps, that he did not once look round. A keener fellow than Handforth might have been somewhat disturbed by this fact.

But Handy had not much experience at shadowing, and he took the man's behaviour to be a very good sign. For the fact that he walked straight onwards surely proved that he had no suspicion that a determined shadower was on his track.

So Handforth thought, and he congratulated himself that he would be able to complete this investigation with entire success. Now and again the disturbing thought came to him that he was wasting his time.

But he thrust it aside.

"After all, a detective must take chances now and again!" he told himself. "Even Mr. Lee has shadowed the wrong man before now. He's gone off on wild-goose chases that led nowhere. But I'm a bit keener than

tinat. And I'll bet this thing will lead to something good."

And so he made himself firmly believe that the man in front was closely connected with the murder of Mr. Jonathan Black. And, remarkable to relate, Handforth was not so very far wrong in his surmise! For, by a sheer piece of chance luck, he had stumbled upon the right track.

And he continued his walk, still wondering where he would be ultimately led to. The footpath seemed to go on interminably. It twisted and turned, and hardly another soul was met all the way. Now and again a solitary pedestrian would come along, but only very occasionally.

The footpath was still a long distance from its end when the stranger suddenly vanished. This caused Handforth to rush forward in a momentary panic. He didn't want to lose his quarry now.

But he needn't have worried.

For he came to a break in one of the hedges which led into a kind of field. It dipped down sharply, and there were many clumps of trees dotted about. Further away, behind these trees, a glimpse could be seen now and again, of some allotments, with rows of cottages behind.

But just here all was peaceful and quiet, with only these trees. And the man had vanished amid the first clump. Handforth hurried forward. If he had been at all cute, he would have suspected something.

If he had had any experience of detective work, he would have known that this business looked rather significant. For there was no adequate reason why the man should have left the path—why he should have come amongst these secluded trees.

And the amateur detective of the Remove walked blindly on.

Then, just as he turned round a number of thick bushes, a form suddenly strode forward, right into his path. Handforth found himself confronted by the very stranger in the brown suit.

"Great pip!" said Handforth blankly.

For one second he thought about turning and dashing away, for he did not want this fellow to recognise him. But it was too late now, and Handforth knew it. He saw that the bushes surrounded them, and there was scarcely any manner in which their movements could be observed.

"Well, young man, what's the idea?" asked the stranger pleasantly.

CHAPTER VI.

RUN TO EARTH!

"YES, it looks pretty queer!"

I muttered those words to myself as I stood near the Senior Football ground at Helmford College. I had just been looking at the little incident which had caused Handforth to hurry off on the track of the stranger.

I had come out of the junior pavilion, and had looked round for the leader of Study D. I had no difficulty in spotting him, for he was standing near the ropes, talking with Church and McClure.

I had approached them so that I could hear their conversation. And it did not surprise me in the least to find Handforth was talking somewhat loudly about the murder at Little Haddow. It was just like him to do something incautious of that nature.

But then, just as I was about to move forward, I noticed the stranger in the Stetson hat.

He had certainly given a very perceptible start when Nelson Lee's name was mentioned. I was in a much better position to observe the man than Handforth and Co. were. For I was almost hidden behind the other juniors.

And I saw a strange, grim look come into the man's face—a look which was combined with a certain amount of fear. And I was struck by the fact that he was obviously a complete stranger in the district—possibly a Colonial. Why, therefore, had he displayed such acute interest when the guv'nor was mentioned?

My mind was made up as soon as Handforth commenced hurrying away after the fellow. I decided that this warranted a little closer investigation. And I determined, then and there, to follow them.

Handforth was shadowing this stranger, and I was shadowing Handforth. I felt sure that the man would soon be aware of Handy's attentions. But he would have to be very cute before he discovered that I was on the track.

I don't wish to boast, but I think I can safely say that I'm fairly good at shadowing. After all, I've had plenty of experience, and the guv'nor has frequently said that I'm pretty keen on the job.

So I do not think I was so very optimistic in believing that this stranger would have no knowledge of my little attentions. At the same time, he would almost certainly get to know that Handforth was interested.

And so, partly for Handforth's sake, and partly because I was interested, I followed. If anything happened to Handforth, I should be near by to help him. And I particularly wanted to see what became of the stranger.

It was quite possible that I was all wrong—that this man knew absolutely nothing of the Hawthornes murder. If so, I should be wasting my time and that wouldn't matter a great deal, because my time wasn't valuable. And it attracted me to do something on my own in this way.

And so I shadowed the pair of them.

I saw them going along a footpath—but I'll guarantee they did not see me. I wasn't rash like Handforth. I didn't keep close behind. And at the first opportunity I left the footpath altogether, and went

along parallel with it behind one of the hedges.

And then suddenly I dropped flat.

For a little distance ahead of me the stranger had appeared. He had left the footpath, too, and was making towards some clumps of trees which grew in a little hollow. But he didn't see me.

I was too quick for him.

I flattened down in the grass, and watched. And, sure enough, Handforth came along a minute or two later. He went straight towards the trees boldly.

"The ass!" I muttered. "I thought he'd do that!"

Foot by foot I crept nearer, and I soon arrived at a spot where I could see just what was going on—between two of the bushes.

Handforth faced the stranger, and tried to collect his scattered wits together. He was still rather staggered by the fact that the man had turned upon him. He had believed that the fellow was totally ignorant that he was being followed.

"Well, what's the game?" repeated the man.

"I—I—— That is, I—I was just coming along, you know!" said Handforth. "How the dickens did you know that I was close behind?"

"I didn't need to be a pretty smart fellow to know that!" said the other. "Now, I'm an easy-going sort of chap, and I guess I'm pretty amiable. But I'd just like to know why the thunder you're following me?"

"Following you?" repeated Handforth blankly. "How—how did you know—— But that's rot! I was just coming along this footpath to get to—to the other part of the town!"

"That won't wash!" said the man. "I saw you on that football field, and you've been crawling along behind me ever since. I thought I'd like to know what the game is. Hand it over, sonny!"

"Hand what over?"

"The yarn," said the other. "You've got to bring it out pretty straight, too. I've strong objections to being watched."

"Oh, have you?" said Handforth. "All right—I'll tell you! I know more about you than you like!"

"Oh!" exclaimed the other. "All right—trot it out!"

Handforth took a deep breath. He had made up his mind, on the spot, to act boldly. There was nothing like it. He wouldn't beat about the bush—he wouldn't give this fellow any chance to get out of it. Handforth always acted forcibly, and he believed that that method would pay now.

"I'll tell you why I've been following you!" he said. "Yes, it's right! I've been shadowing you—and it's only by a bit of luck that you found it out——"

"Luck!" jeered the stranger. "Say, sonny, I reckon you want some cleaning. You're just about choked up with cobwebs. I knew from the very start that you were on my trail."

"What!" said Handforth blankly. "You—you knew?"

"Sure!" said the man. "And I came along this way on purpose to get you where I wanted you. And that's here—on this spot—and I'm not standing any nonsense. You'll bring out the truth, or I'll do a few things!"

Handforth glared.

"You'd better try!" he said threateningly. "I know who you are—I know everything. You murdered Mr. Jonathan Black at the Hawthornes——"

He paused, for the man had suddenly drawn back with a snarl.

I was watching, and I held myself in readiness to act. The stranger's action was extremely significant. The colour fled from his cheeks, and his eyes glittered with an expression which indicated amazement, fury, and alarm. Then, pulling himself together, he uttered a harsh laugh.

"Say, you're mad!" he shouted roughly.

"Am I?" demanded Handforth. "We'll see about that! Why did you go all white just now? I'm more certain than ever! You're connected with the murder of Mr. Black, and before long I'll jolly well expose you to the police! No, you'd better not——"

The man had suddenly reached to his hip-pocket, and I jerked forward. I was filled with alarm, for I believed that the fellow was about to produce a revolver. If he was indeed the murderer, it would be nothing to him to commit a second crime of a similar nature. And no better spot than this could be found. The report would never be heard.

But Handforth was ready.

"You—you rotter!" he shouted. "Take that!"

Biff!

His fist crashed into the man's face. And then a tremendous struggle took place. But it was so brief that I had absolutely no chance of joining in, even if I wanted to.

Handforth was absolutely fearless when it came to a scrap. But this wiry stranger was a bit too much for him. After a few scuffles, he managed to get home a blow which caught Handforth in the chest with a thud which sounded loudly.

And Handforth staggered back, gave one howl, and pitched backwards into a deep, muddy ditch. The man ran off, disappearing among the trees. He knew well enough that by the time Handforth extricated himself it would be too late to follow.

But I was there.

And I saw with one glance that Handforth was in no danger. He was probably bruised a bit, and he would be able to drag himself out of the ditch without much trouble.

And so it was not necessary for me to remain.

I could do nothing by stopping behind to help Handforth out. But I could do quite

a lot by following this stranger—whom I began to suspect of being very closely connected with the Hawthornes murder.

And so, without delay, I shot off at a tangent, and Handforth didn't even know that I was in the vicinity. My object was to follow the man. And, sure enough, after emerging from behind a clump of trees, I saw him hastening away towards the allotments.

I could see that a small footpath ran along, and joined up with the road further on. I also noted that it would be possible to gain this very same road by taking another route.

I chose the latter course, for it would have been very unwise to follow the man direct. He would certainly be on the lookout—half-believing that Handforth would come along.

I reached the road, and then kept a sharp lookout.

Standing behind a post, I could see the whole stretch of this quiet road, and in about two minutes the figure of the man in the Stetson appeared. He came walking briskly up the road in my direction. I'd hardly bargained for this, and I quickly looked round.

Just behind me there was a wooden fence, which probably shut off some waste land. And I could see that the fence did not quite reach the ground. There was a space of about nine or ten inches.

And, without hesitating, I wormed my way backwards through this opening. And then, crouching down, I waited.

The stranger came by with a swinging stride.

He certainly did not know that he was being watched or shadowed. And when I emerged I was just in time to glimpse him passing round a corner in the distance. I raced along the road at full speed.

When I got to the corner I found that the next road was more populated. There were a few shops, and people were walking about. And in the distance I could see a Stetson hat.

It was the only one of its kind in the whole town, probably, and so I knew that I had made no mistake. The man was visible to me, but at such a distance he would find it quite impossible to know that he was still being followed.

I could see the hat turning round now and again, and I knew that the man was anxious to find out if he was being followed. But he would never be able to know the truth.

It was quite easy for me to keep him in sight, and I did so.

And as I walked along I wondered what his course would be. Handforth had been very rash in accusing the fellow boldly. It would probably make him scared, and would cause him to flee.

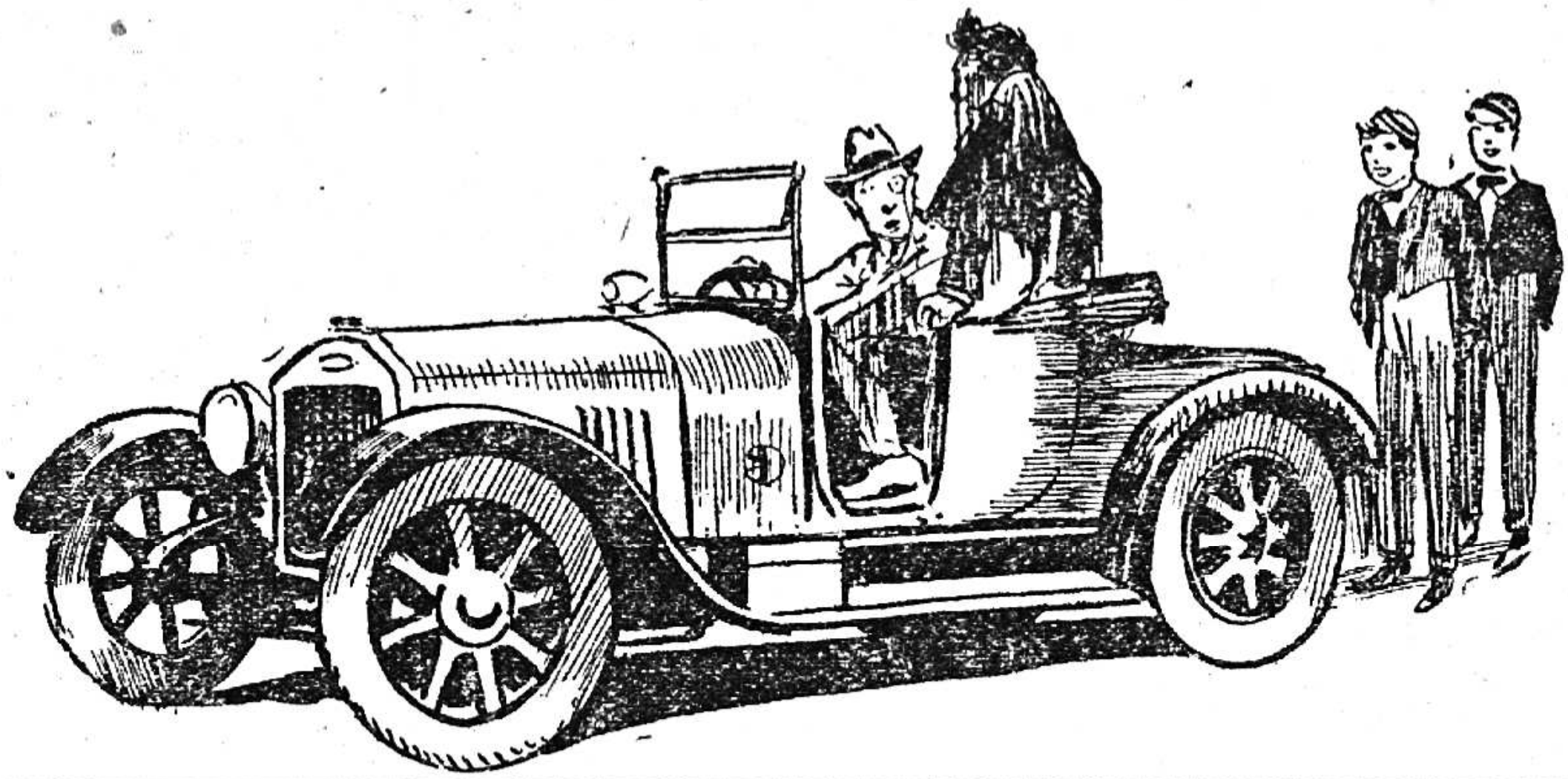
At the same time, he might not take Handforth's words seriously. The very fact that he had been content to drop Handforth into the ditch seemed to indicate that he did not look upon the matter in a serious light.

All the same, it was rather disturbing.

And I was quite determined to follow him to his destination. As it happened, it was not long before I discovered what this was. I had been half-expecting him to make for the railway-station.

But he didn't.

In fact, he was going off in a direction towards the other outskirts of the town. And I still kept him in sight—but only by



"Help!" gasped Archie. "Stop, dear laddie! The old cushions, don't you know! They'll get fearfully dirty——"

reason of his Stetson hat. He would not have worn that distinctive headgear if he had realised how useful it was to a shadower.

I kept trying to place the man, and I came to the conclusion, at length, that he was either a New Zealander or a South African. He had certainly lived out there quite recently, and it was most unlikely that he had business in Helmford.

I tried to picture him as the murderer of Mr. Black. If he had committed the crime, surely he would have hurried away from the scene—as far away as possible?

The murder had happened that noon or just after. And here was this man calmly looking at a football match in the afternoon. It did not seem very probable that he was guilty.

At the same time, I felt convinced that he was connected with the matter.

And then I received a bit of enlightenment. I discovered why he was in Helmford, and also why he had made no attempt to leave the place.

For presently I could see a large number of big tents in a field, to say nothing of numerous caravans. And some glaring posters near by attracted my attention. In that field there was a circus!

I saw the posters—Bristowe's Gigantic Circus. It was visiting the town for a couple of performances only. And this was the last day. Obviously, there was no afternoon show— or "Mr. Stetson" would have been present. For I was quite certain that the fellow was a performer.

But passing another bill, I glanced at it and made certain. There was an afternoon show, and this was only natural. The man with the Stetson probably came on early, and had had time to go to the football match later.

The fellow had disappeared into the circus field, and I did not think it necessary to follow him any further. Indeed, it would have been most unwise, for he was probably on the watch.

It was far better for me to turn back now, and I did so.

He was a Colonial, and just the type of man one would expect to find performing in a circus.

So I did not carry my investigations any further.

But I studied one of those circus bills carefully, and in fairly big type was the following announcement:

"JIM ROGERSON, THE STOCK-WHIP WONDER."

And underneath this was a paragraph in smaller lettering, describing the amazing feats which Jim Rogerson performs at every show.

"He's the man right enough," I concluded. "There's nobody else on the whole bill who'll fit into the description. Besides, he looks it to the life. He's the stock-whip wonder, or I'm a Dutchman!"

And now I turned back, making all haste to get to the waiting motor-car—which was at the Helmford College ground. My object was to speed away to Little Haddow. I wanted to consult with Nelson Lee at the earliest possible moment.

I believed that I was on the track.

CHAPTER VII.

THE UNCONQUERABLE SLEUTH!

"BY GEORGE!" said Handforth thickly. "By George!"

He stood up somewhat unsteadily, and there was every reason for his half-suffocated remark. He had nearly vanished beneath a coating of thick, black mud. From head to foot, Handforth was smothered. He was absolutely soaked to the skin in the fearful, clinging mud.

Even his face had disappeared. He tried to scrape the mud away, and only partially succeeded. He had just hauled himself out of the ditch, and his fury and indignation knew no bounds.

"The rotter—the horrible ruffian!" he shouted. "Of all the nerve! Chucking me in that ditch like that, and then buzzing! But I'll get him! He needn't think he's going to escape!"

Handforth looked round rather wildly—and somewhat blearily. But, although his vision was impaired by the mud, he saw quite sufficient to convince him that any chase was out of the question.

He would never be able to follow his unknown assailant. The man had vanished—he had succeeded in getting completely away while Handforth was extricating himself from the ditch.

For a few minutes Handforth stamped up and down, and then he cooled somewhat. He came to the conclusion that his best plan would be to get back to his chums without delay. There was certainly no sense in remaining here.

"Yes, that's it!" he muttered. "I must get to the scene of the crime!"

The idea appealed to him. He wanted to get to the Hawthornes—to the spot where the murder had been committed. Such was his optimism, he fully expected to find numerous clues awaiting his arrival.

"That rotter was the murderer—no question of it!" Handforth told himself grimly. "If he wasn't, he wouldn't have turned on me like that. But I'll get even with him! I'll jolly well make him sit up!"

And Handforth staggered through the bushes towards the little lane. But he paused for a short time to roll himself in the long, dry grass. This certainly had the effect of rubbing some of the mud off him, but it didn't greatly improve his appearance.

His chest was feeling rather sore, and at first he wondered why. Then he remembered that thudding blow he had received. The man in the Stetson hat had a punch like the kick of a mule. Even Handy's famous right was feeble compared to it.

And this made Handy respect him in a certain way. Any fellow who could punch like that was worthy of respect. All the same, Handforth didn't mean to relinquish his efforts.

Having emerged from the lane, Handforth found himself going along the main roads. He cared nothing about the stares of the populace. It didn't matter to him now they looked at him. He was a detective—on the trail! And all the people of Helmford could go and eat coke!

Once or twice a policeman nearly spoke to Handforth, but he didn't seem to observe them at all. His one thought was to get back to the football field. He still thought he might be able to go in the motor-car. Or, at any rate, he would borrow a bicycle.

He noticed a paper boy coming along the road, shouting. But he was so absorbed in thought that he didn't take much notice. However, when the boy was near, Handforth couldn't help hearing the words.

"Paper! Shockin' murder at Little Haddow!" yelped the boy.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "It'll give some details in there."

He managed to get out a muddy penny, and he handed this over to the newsboy, and got a paper. He took no notice of the boy's facetious remarks concerning the penny's condition, and he didn't see any necessity to answer the query as to whether he had been on a visit to the sewers.

He opened the paper feverishly, and stared at the chief news page. The thing was only a rag, but it had the information that Handforth wanted—the information that all Helmford was talking about.

The account gave a very inaccurate description of the crime. Only a certain amount of details had come in, and the reporters had not been able to get anything like the full story into press. But there was quite sufficient to cause a sensation in the town—and that was all that really mattered.

And there was one portion of the account which interested Handforth more than any other.

It was this:

"Owing to the astuteness of Inspector Payne, who is well-known in the town, an arrest has already been made. The man in custody is named Russell, and for several years he has been gardener to the unfortunate gentleman who now lies dead at the Hawthornes.

"Inspector Payne has stated that there is a large mass of convincing evidence, and there can be no doubt that some very startling revelations will be made at the inquest. This has been fixed for to-morrow at the Thatcher's Arms in Little Haddow."

Handforth stared at the paper rather blankly.

"So—so the giddy murderer has been collared!" he exclaimed. "That's queer! I thought that chap was the murderer—that chap who chucked me into the ditch! Anyhow, he knows something about it."

Handforth felt a big shock of disappointment. He had been looking forward to startling the entire police force of Helmford by announcing that he knew exactly who the murderer was.

He realised there was a drawback in the fact that he couldn't tell the police where the murderer had got to. But, after all, that was a detail. Still, it wouldn't matter much.

Perhaps there was another murderer—or somebody who had taken an active part in the crime. Anyhow, according to Handforth's reasoning, it was up to him to get to the Hawthornes with as little delay as possible. It was already growing dusk.

In the meantime, Mr. Jim Rogerson had seen the evening paper—and, judging by the expression on his face, he seemed extremely satisfied with his pennyworth. The news concerning the Hawthornes murder seemed to fill him with the greatest possible satisfaction.

Handforth came within sight of the Helmford College ground at last. And he was just breaking into a run when he saw two juniors hurrying towards him at full speed. He recognised them at once as Church and McClure. Instinctively, he pushed up his muddy sleeves, and he protruded his lower jaw.

Then he took a firm stand in the middle of the pavement and waited—his right fist clenched.

Church and McClure, coming up, easily recognised the ominous signs. They paused a few feet away from their extraordinary-looking leader.

"I say, no larks, Handy!" said Church cautiously. "What the dickens have you been up to? You're in a fearful state! It's a wonder you had the nerve to come along the public street like it!"

Handforth glared.

"You rotters!" he said bitterly. "You traitors—you funks!"

"What?"

"Leaving me in the lurch—"

"Look here—"

"Letting me go off after that rotter on my own!" roared Handforth. "Do you call that being pally? Do you call that standing by me? You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourselves!"

"But you didn't tell us to come—and, besides, we should only have been in the way," said Church. "We thought it a

lot better to let you go on a careful detective investigation by yourself."

Handforth grunted.

"Well, I suppose that's right enough," he admitted. "But I'm not going to stand any rot now. I've got to rush straight off to the Hawthornes. I've had a brush with the murderer!"

"Yes, you look it!" said McClure.

"You fathead! I couldn't help it!" roared Handforth. "The rotter sprang out at me, butted me in the giddy chest, and I fell into a ditch full of mud. Before I could climb out, the scoundrel had gone!"

"Ha, ha!—— Ahem!" gasped Church. "I—I mean—— Sorry! The fact is, Handy, you must have made a bloomer."

"What do you mean—a bloomer?" snorted Handforth.

"Well, the murderer's caught," put in McClure. "Haven't you seen the evening paper? The poor old chap was killed by his own gardener. So there's no need to go into the matter——"

"Do you think I take any notice of the paper?" demanded Handforth witheringly. "I expect it's all a pack of lies! And, anyhow, there might have been two murderers! I know jolly well that chap in the trilby hat had something to do with the crime!"

"It wasn't a trilby hat!" said Church. "It was a Stetson!"

"I don't care if it was a bowler!" howled Handforth. "What the dickens is the good of quibbling about a rotten hat? Blow the hat! I'm buzzing off to the Hawthornes! I've got to find all sorts of clues."

"All right—we're not stopping you," said Church. "But don't you think you'd better have a wash first? If I were you, I should go to Barlowe and ask him for the loan of a bath. Then you can borrow a new rig-out, and change——"

"And waste about two hours?" sneered Handforth. "Two hours! And the discovery of this murderer rests with me! I tell you there's no time to waste! Can't you realise it's important?"

As a matter of fact, Church and McClure could see nothing important in it whatever. They were quite certain that if Handforth went to the Hawthornes, he would only get himself into further trouble. But it was quite useless to argue—indeed, it might stir up unnecessary strife.

"Of course, you know best," said Church. "But how do you intend to get to the Hawthornes?"

"I shall go in Mr. Lee's car."

"You can't—it's gone!"

"Gone!" shouted Handforth.

"Of course—Nipper went off in it about ten minutes ago—just before you turned up."

"Confound it!" snorted Handforth. "I shall have to go by bike, then!"

"Most of the fellows have gone home," said McClure. "We told Nipper we'd stay here until you turned up—we made sure you'd come back to this place. He's coming later with the car——"

"By George!" shouted Handforth suddenly. "Good!"

He was staring up the road, and his chums turned round, and looked in the same direction. A small two-seater was approaching at a sedate speed. Behind the wheel sat Archie Glenthorne.

"My hat!" grinned Church. "Are you going to commandeer Archie's car?"

"Yes, of course."

"He'll probably object——"

"Let him!"

"But it's a bit thick, you know, getting into a lovely car like that, with all that mud——"

"Do you think I care anything about mud when there's a murderer at large?" demanded Handforth fiercely. "Hi, stop! Stop, you ass!" he shouted, running out into the road.

"Gadzooks!" exclaimed Archie, applying his brakes suddenly. "I mean to say, old dear, dashed disconcerting, and all that! Staggering out into the old highway right in the track of the juggernaut, as it were!"

"I want this car!" said Handforth grimly.

"What? I mean to say, what?" said Archie. "Well, as it were. I'm frightfully sorry. Pray accept a few lumps of regret, old darling. There is, to be exact, nothing doing! In other words, nix!"

"We'll soon see about that!" declared Handforth. "I want this car, and I'm going to have it!"

"But, dash it all," exclaimed Archie. "Look here! Dash it all! Pray be somewhat reasonable, old horse! It's hardly the thing to take a chappie absolutely by surprise, and make a few fearful demands, what? It simply can't be done, old sport. Sorry to disappoint you——"

"I'm not disappointed, because I'm going to have the car!" said Handforth. "There's not a minute to waste. I'm on the track of a murderer!"

"Well, of course, there you are!" said Archie. "Somewhat inclined to make a chappie feel frightful, and so forth. A murderer, what? The whole thing sounds most dashed poisonous. At the same time, darling, it can't be done. You see, I'm just trickling off home——"

"That's all right—it's all on the way," said Handforth. "Little Haddow is only a short distance off the main road——"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "But, I mean—to be quite exact. Well, don't you know! The old clobber, and what not! Somewhat inclined to be grimy, if you grasp the old trend. I mean to say, the request is deucedly steep!"

"Why the dickens will you argue?" demanded Handforth, opening the side door. "Now then, drive on——"

"Help!" gasped Archie. "Kindly sound the S.O.S.! Stop, dear laddie! The old

cushions, don't you know! They'll get fearfully dirty——"

But Handforth was already in, and he sat down on the immaculate cushion with a kind of squelch. The sound made Archie shudder.

"This, I mean to say, is not only foul, but fearful!" he exclaimed faintly. "I'm a good-natured sort of chappie, but when it comes to smothering the old buzzer with mud—well, the blood of the Glenthorne's surges up! Absolutely surges, dear boy! I must request you to remove the carcase elsewhere!"

"Better drive him with you, Archie!" suggested Church. "He's always like this, and he won't be satisfied until he's got his way. And there'll be trouble soon if you don't start off."

"There will!" said Handforth grimly.

"But—but I mean!" protested Archie feebly. "You've put me all into a dither, don't you know. The good old tissues are positively wilting! The fact is, old dear, I'm going all hot and cold and goosey! Mud always has that effect on me. Absolutely! But there you are! I suppose I've got to submit. It's dashed frightful, but what is a chappie to do?"

Archie could see that it was hopeless, and he drove off. Church and McClure remained behind. In any case, there was no room for them in the two-seater. They could have climbed on at the rear, perhaps, but they were not exactly eager for it. They wanted Archie to have Handforth all to himself.

"I say, this is something like a fearful predic.!" murmured Archie. "The lads of the village have deserted me. I'm left alone with the bally mudster! Absolutely! And it's all fearfully fearful!"

"What's that?" demanded Handforth.

"Nothing, old lad—absolutely nothing!"

"Well, don't mumble!" growled Handforth. "And put some speed on! I suppose you can do about seventy miles an hour, can't you?"

"Well, hardly, laddie—but I'll have a stamp at it!" said Archie. "That is to say, we shall probably whizz along the old trail at something like thirty. One never knows. It might even be thirty-two!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "This car can do double that speed. Just let me get into the driving seat——"

"Pray forgive me, old lad, but there's a terrific desire for life in the old breast!" interrupted Archie. "I mean to say, I don't particularly want to buzz across the line just yet! In fact, I'm absolutely keen upon living!"

There was not much fear of Handforth insisting. But Archie put on greater speed as a kind of safeguard. And as soon as they were clear of the town, they hummed along at well over thirty miles an hour Archie was a good driver, but not a reckless one.

And in spite of all Handforth's urgings, he would not go faster than it was wise. If he had taken Handy's advice, the car would have been involved in a terrific smash-up.

But even at thirty miles an hour the distance was soon eaten up.

And, at length, that part of the road was reached where the little side-lane branched off. Handforth clutched at Archie's arm as soon as the lane came in sight. And it was only by a piece of luck that the car was prevented from diving head first into the ditch.

"Gadzooks!" panted Archie. "That was fearfully injudicious, old onion! I mean to say, we nearly trickled off the turnpike, as it were. Kindly cease from using the digits——"

"Stop, you ass!" shouted Handforth. "We turn off here!"

"What-ho!" said Archie. "I grasp the scheme, laddie. Down this little lane what? It shall be done, and—— Hallo, hallo, hallo! This, so to speak, is dashed priceless!"

Archie jammed on his brakes, and there was a feeling of immense relief in his voice. For at that moment another car came out of the lane. And Archie had instantly recognised its occupants.

They were, as a matter of fact, Nelson Lee and myself.

"Why, what's this?" I exclaimed. "Here's Handforth and Archie, sir! And Handforth hasn't had a wash, by the look of it."

I had had practically no opportunity of telling anything to Nelson Lee about my adventures. Until a short time earlier he had been in the company of Inspector Payne, or a reporter, or one of the other people who were now swarming about the Hawthornes. I had been telling Nelson Lee about my adventures in the car. We were bound for Helmford.

And now, suddenly, we had come upon this other car.

Handforth dashed out, and came running across to us.

"This is rippling, sir!" he exclaimed. "I was wondering if I should be able to catch you. I've made some big discoveries about the murder, sir."

"Indeed," said Nelson Lee gravely. "That's very interesting, Handforth. What are your discoveries?"

Handforth went into an account of his adventures, and described how he had been thrown into the mud, and all the rest of it.

"And I know jolly well that the chap has got something to do with the crime, sir," said Handforth. "I'm just going on to the Hawthornes now, sir, to make a few investigations."

"I don't think!" I grinned.

"I don't suppose I shall be very long, sir," went on Handforth with supreme confidence. "It'll only take me a little while to look round, and find a few dozen

clues. After that I shall report to the police."

"This is all very interesting, Handforth, but I am afraid I must disappoint you," said Nelson Lee gently. "As it happens, you are somewhat late for the fair. All the necessary investigations have been made. Moreover, I have a dim idea that your presence will be required at St. Frank's for calling over."

Handforth stared.

"Calling over!" he repeated blankly. "But—but what does it matter about calling over when a chap's on the track of a murderer? I'm going along to the Hawthornes, sir——"

"Come, Handforth, please do not be absurd!" said Nelson Lee. "I forbid you to go to the Hawthornes under any circumstances. You must return to St. Frank's at once, and I want no further nonsense."

"But—but——"

"You're a perfect disgrace!" went on Nelson Lee sternly. "You are in a shocking condition, and I am ashamed to see you on the public highway."

Handforth turned red under his mud.

"I—I didn't think it mattered about the mud, sir," he said in dismay. "This—this other matter is so important, you know——"

"I will admit, Handforth, that the other matter has a certain amount of importance," interrupted Lee. "And I congratulate you upon your astuteness in following the man in the Stetson hat. Frankly, I did not suspect you of having such acumen and enterprise."

"I suspected the chap at once, sir," said Handforth confidently. "And it was only right that I should follow him."

"Precisely," agreed Lee. "I regret that you should have met with such a disastrous mishap. However, you are not particularly hurt, my boy, and all is well. You will now leave this affair in my hands, and return to school."

"But I want to investigate——"

"You must not argue with me, Handforth," said Nelson Lee firmly. "If you disobey my orders—if you dare to visit the Hawthornes after what I have said—I shall have no alternative but to inflict a very severe flogging and to confine you to gates for at least a fortnight."

Handforth was dismayed.

"Oh, my hat!" he gasped. "You don't mean that, sir?"

"I most certainly do," declared Nelson Lee.

Handforth went all limp, and I really felt sorry for him. He had been heart and soul in this affair, and it came as a great blow to him to throw it all up. He turned away, very crestfallen.

"And that," observed Archie mildly, "is most decidedly that!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW IT WAS DONE!

"POOR old Handy!" I said, as Archie's car disappeared round a bend in the main road. "He's a decent chap, sir, although he does get such queer ideas."

"There is not very much wrong with Handforth," smiled Nelson Lee. "At the same time, I cannot allow him to indulge in these strange fancies of his. Well, Nipper, you were telling me about the man in the Stetson hat."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I've been jolly interested in what you've told me. Of course, it's just like the police to go and make a bloomer. You're pretty sure that Russell didn't kill the old gentleman?"

"I'm certain of it," replied the guv'nor.

"Have you got any idea as to who did, sir?"

"Well, yes," said Nelson Lee. "I judge him to be an active man, wiry, with plenty of power in his arms. Indeed, I should say that his arm muscles are singularly developed."

"Why, sir?"

"Well, I have reasons for making the statement," said Lee evasively. "I further suggest that he is either a music-hall artist or a circus performer!"

"What!" I gasped, staring.

"My dear Nipper——"

"But—but this chap I followed, sir!" I shouted. "He belongs to a circus!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"That is very interesting," he said calmly.

"But fancy you knowing, sir!" I ejaculated. "I hadn't mentioned a word to you about the chap being in a circus—I hadn't got to that! It's little short of marvellous that you should know all this!"

"Not at all—merely a little deduction."

"I'll bet you can't tell what the chap does in the circus," I said.

"No?" smiled Lee. "In all probability he gives an exhibition of remarkable feats with a number of stock-whips——"

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed in amazement.

"Am I right?"

"Of course you are, sir!" I said, taking a deep breath. "That's just what he is—Jim Rogerson, the stock-whip wonder. He does other things, too."

"That is quite likely," said Nelson Lee. "But you need not be very astonished, young 'un. Later on I will tell you exactly how I came to my conclusions. There can be no doubt whatever that this Jim Rogerson is the man who murdered old Mr. Jonathan Black."

"Then he'll have bunked by the time we get to Helmford, sir."

"It will not matter much if he has," said Nelson Lee. "He won't get far—and after I have given all my information to the police, they will spread their net. It can only be a matter of a day or two before Rogerson is laid by the heels."

"But it's jolly marvellous all the same, sir," I declared. "Why, I thought I was coming to you with some big discoveries—and I find that you know them all the time!"

"I am very sorry to disappoint you, my lad, but that is the fact," smiled the guv'nor. "I should have lost no time in going straight to this circus, and I should have found my man within a couple of minutes. Indeed, I am rather sorry that you boys ever had anything to do with the man. As you have said, he may have been scared off. Without interference, we should have trapped him easily."

"But still, we'll hope for the best," I said philosophically.

And we sped towards Helmford with all speed. Arriving there, we found that the circus performance was about to commence. It was very dusky outside—except in the front, where a glare of powerful electric lights gave the scene a gaudy dazzle. People were streaming in for the show.

But we did not go by the main entrance. It was Nelson Lee's intention to find the proprietor's caravan, and to put a few questions to him as a preliminary. But just as we were turning round one of the smaller tents, we saw a man emerging from a small caravan to the left. He was coming out backwards, and did not see us.

Even in the gloom, something about the fellow attracted me.

He was a wiry-looking individual, attired in a grey suit, with a mackintosh, and he had a tweed cap on his head. In his hand he carried a suit-case. He appeared to be ready for a journey.

We stood still, quite still, watching.

And the man acted strangely. He peered about him, as though anxious that his movements should not be observed. Then, suddenly, he caught sight of us. Nelson Lee moved forward at the same moment.

"Mr. Jim Rogerson, I think?" he said curtly.

"Who the thunder are you?" demanded the man.

"My name is Nelson Lee, and——"

Rogerson made a quick dive to his rear.

"I should not advise you to pull that revolver!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "I have you fully covered through my coat. Up with your hands, or I'll drop you as you stand! Quickly!"

Rogerson paused, panting heavily. But there was something in Nelson Lee's tone which compelled obedience. He raised his hands—and I dived forward, and in a few moments I had withdrawn a revolver from

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his hip-pocket. He snarled at me like a cornered animal.

Nelson Lee came up close, and now his revolver was in his hand.

"I think we had better go inside," he said quietly. "There are one or two questions I should like to ask you, Mr. Rogerson. Napper, will you please fetch a policeman without any delay."

But before I could move, and before Rogerson could reply, a big, stoutish individual came from between two of the caravans. He was dressed in breeches and a glaring red coat, to say nothing of a white top-hat.

"What's all this—what's all this?" he demanded. "Who the blazes are you? Eh? Strangers aren't allowed——"

"Am I addressing Mr. Bristowe?" asked Lee.

"You are."

"I shall be pleased if you will join us," said the guv'nor. "I have a rather unpleasant duty to perform regarding one of your artists, Mr. Bristowe."

"Oh, have you?" said the circus proprietor. "Why, bless my soul! What's this—what's this? You ought to be almost ready for the ring by now, Jim! What's the idea of getting dressed up like that?"

The Colonial had quite recovered his composure.

"I guess I'm sorry, Mr. Bristowe, but I was—leaving," he said quietly.

"Leaving without any notice!" shouted the proprietor.

"Circumstances compelled me to keep rather mum," said Rogerson dryly. "You will hear all about it soon. It'll probaby be a bit of a shock to you, old man—but this is a queer world!"

"I always thought you were a decent feller, Jim not a skunk who would leave a man in the lurch!" said Mr. Bristowe curtly. "How do you think I'm going to fill your turn? You'll have to appear to-night——"

"I regret that it will be impossible," put in Nelson Lee. "In a very short time, Mr. Bristowe, this man will be in the hands of the police."

"The police!" shouted the circus proprietor. "What nonsense is this? Have you been up to anything, Jim?"

Rogerson laughed harshly.

"Well, quite a lot," he said. "This gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee. I think he's got some reputation as a detective. He's been infernally clever over this business, anyway too clever for me."

"We don't want to talk out here—let's get inside!" said Mr. Bristowe.

We all entered the caravan, and a switch was turned, and the little place was flooded with electric light. Mr. Bristowe's circus

(*Continued on next page.*)

was well fitted up with every modern contrivance.

The interior of the caravan was quite comfortable, and surprisingly roomy. Jim Rogerson sat down on one of the little seats, and fingered his cap. He knew that it was quite hopeless for him to escape, and he was accepting the position coolly. He was just the type of man I should expect to act in that way.

"Now, what's the trouble?" asked Mr. Bristowe. "You'd better be sharp, because I shall be wanted in the ring soon."

"Rogerson committed a very serious crime this morning, Mr. Bristowe," said Nelson Lee. "To be brief, he murdered Mr. Jonathan Black, of the Hawthornes, Little Haddow."

The circus proprietor stared in amazement.

"That's a darn lie!" he burst out. "Jim wouldn't do that——"

"Cut it, boss!" said Rogerson.

"You did do it?" shouted Mr. Bristowe.

"I guess it's no good yelping!" said Jim. "I did it—and I'm glad!"

For a moment or two there was silence, Mr. Bristowe was looking very staggered, and he had gone quite pale. But Jim Rogerson was calm, and there was a queer little smile playing about the corners of his lips.

"I guess you don't know how it was done?" he said, looking at Nelson Lee.

"I think I do," replied the guv'nor. "You used a boomerang!"

"Say, that's real smart!" exclaimed Rogerson, in surprise.

"A boomerang!" I repeated. "My hat! But—but I can't see——"

"I sure thought I was safe!" went on the murderer. "I'll tell you just how I got to work, gentlemen. It might interest you to know that I was on the point of going to the police-station—to give myself up."

"Are we to believe that?" asked Lee keenly.

"I guess it doesn't matter a bean to me whether you believe it or not!" replied Rogerson. "But I saw in the evening paper that the old gardener feller was arrested. It's not my way to let another man pay for what I do. So I was just off to lay a few facts before the police. I didn't want to bother you, boss—no need to upset you without reason."

"Good heavens, man, I can't believe it!"

"It's true enough, anyway," said Rogerson. "I joined this darn circus for the sole purpose of searching about the country. And at last I found the man I wanted—Jonathan Black, of the Hawthornes."

"You mean that you deliberately killed him?" asked Mr. Bristowe.

"Sure," said the other. "I made a few inquiries, and went to the place, and looked round. That was yesterday. To-day I got busy on the job. I dare say this gentleman knows how things are fixed round that house. Say, old Black was in mortal terror of me, you can bet your life! The place was like a prison—high wall, spikes, and everything. I couldn't get in, not if I was as small as a grasshopper!"

"Then how did you do it?"

"Well, I figured it 'all out yesterday," replied Rogerson. "I knew there was no chance to get right in and do the job thoroughly. Besides, I've got a fair fondness for my own skin—and I reckon I wanted to preserve it. It would be sure certain to plug the old dog with a gun—but that didn't suit me."

"So you chose a boomerang instead?" asked Nelson Lee.

"That's it, sure," agreed Jim. "A pretty, tidy kind of weapon, eh? I come from Australia, sir, and I learned all I know about boomerangs from the natives. I guess I'm pretty smart at the game."

"You certainly are," agreed Nelson Lee grimly.

"I guess I went round that high wall three times," said the murderer. "But there was nothing doing. Then I hit upon the idea of——"

"Climbing into one of the high trees on the edge of the spinney?" suggested Lee

"That's right—sure!" said Rogerson in surprise.

"I found your footmarks in the grass," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I also found other marks up the tree itself. I gather that you climbed this tree, fixed yourself firmly in the highest fork, and then hurled your boomerang. From that position you were able to see into the garden of the Hawthornes."

"Right in!" said Jim. "Well?"

"You threw the boomerang with astonishing accuracy," said Nelson Lee. "Had it been an ordinary throw, the stick—as you would call it—would have come back into your own hand. But as it struck a solid object during its flight, its powers of returning were naturally destroyed."

"I guess you know a good deal about those sticks!" said Rogerson grimly.

"Well, a fair amount," admitted Nelson Lee. "I gather that you put a certain twist to your boomerang, hoping that it would not fall sheer to the ground after striking your victim. And your throw was a clever one. The boomerang, having felled Mr. Black, shot off at a tangent, and just cleared the top of the wall where it fell to the grass outside."

"Say, were you watching?" asked Jim queerly.

"Not at all," said Nelson Lee. "But I found one of the iron spikes bent outwards proving that some powerful object had struck it. I also found on the spike a few shreds of the wood. Upon examination I recognised what wood it was. And I came to the conclusion that the murder had been committed by means of a boom-

crang. The very nature of the wound itself added to my conviction."

"Yes, you're a smart guy," said Jim admiringly.

"Having come to that conclusion, my next move was to look for the place where the murderer had stood to throw this weapon," went on Lee. "There was only one likely spot—and that was from those trees. My suspicions were fully justified. And I came away determined to look for a man who was probably somewhere in the neighbourhood—a man from Australia or New Zealand, with extraordinary power in his arm. I set him down as a music-hall artist or a circus performer, and one who earned his living by the use of his arms—possibly by giving exhibitions with the stock-whip. Such whips are well calculated to develop the muscles. And it needed a man with extraordinary strength to throw a boomerang with such effect——"

"I say, it's marvellous, guv'nor!" I interrupted. "Why, you knew the whole thing, right from the start!"

"I am pleased that my deductions have proved accurate," said Nelson Lee. "I am deeply sorry, Rogerson, that you were so insane as to commit this brutal crime. You are hardly the type of man I should suspect——"

"I guess you don't know the facts!" interrupted the Australian gruffly. "Say, that skunk deserved nothing better! Oh, yes, I know that he was a kindly old feller here, in England. I reckon he had a conscience, and was trying to make things right for himself in the next world. But in Australia, when I was a kid, he was a dirty hound. But I guess you're not interested."

"I am—very!" said Nelson Lee.

"It won't take long!" said Rogerson bitterly. "That blamed dog killed my father, and stole his gold claim—during one of the big rushes. And my mother died through grief only a month later, leaving me—a kid of sixteen—alone in the world. Say, my mother made me promise that I'd make Black pay the full penalty for what he did. Well, I found him—but what could I do? Do you think I could have had him hanged for a crime he committed over twenty years ago? No, sir! So I took matters into my own hands—and performed the execution that he deserved. I guess that's all. And now I've got to go through the same darned game myself. Well, I don't care—I've done it! And I'm glad—darn glad!"

"Somehow, guv'nor, I can't help feeling a bit sorry for him," I said, some little time later, as we walked away from the circus. "He was a fool to go and kill Jonathan Black like that, but he's not the ordinary kind of murderer."

"I agree, Nipper, but no man has a right to take such a thing into his own hands," said Nelson Lee gravely. "Rogerson committed a foul crime, and he must pay the full penalty. And now we shall have a little pleasant task. It is my intention to effect the release of old Russell."

"I'm still wondering how the dickens you managed to reconstruct the whole crime so cutely, sir," I said, filled with admiration. "There were practically no clues at all, and yet you put everything together, piece by piece."

"Which, after all, is merely the simple art of deduction," smiled the guv'nor. "The facts were there, Nipper, or I could not have reconstructed what took place. But it is over now, and we shall get back to St. Frank's as soon as we leave the police-station."

I took a deep breath.

"It was like old times, sir!" I exclaimed. "My hat! And all this happened since dinner-time!"

"Exactly," smiled Nelson Lee. "Quite a crowded afternoon, young 'un!"

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

MY DEAR READERS,—You cannot fail to have noticed in the above story the distinctive methods of Nelson Lee as a crime investigator as compared with the hasty and superficial conclusions of Inspector Payne. In Russell's case there was a strong motive, it is true, but the probability of a man committing a crime under circumstances in which escape would be impossible is poor deduction, and this must have occurred to Nelson Lee when he discredited Payne's theory. Next week, I am giving you another stirring yarn of school and detective adventure. Its title, "THE MYSTERY OF THE 6·10 LOCAL" is enough to make anyone want to read it, and I can assure you that you will not be disappointed.

Nelson Lee is going quite strong nowadays, for he is also appearing next week in the first, long episode (as they say on the films) of a wonderful detective drama, entitled, "THE MAYFAIR MYSTERY!"

I was delighted to receive so many letters from amateur detectives on "The Thurlingham Hall Robbery." It has been even a greater delight to discover what a lot of latent talent for detection exists among my correspondents. Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR

Nipper's Magazine

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Advice by Reginald Pitt.

DON'T enter Study D too suddenly, as you are always liable to receive a sudden punch on the nose or another portion of your anatomy. It generally happens that Handforth's fists are flying about somewhere in that apartment.

* * *

DON'T rush out of the Ancient House on a frosty day. De Valerie did this recently, and he cleared the steps in one leap, and didn't find the gravel suitable for his complexion. Sticking plaster is rather expensive.

* * *

DON'T expect to borrow any grub from Study L five minutes after the regular tea-time. Of course, if Fatty Little is late there might be a chance, but this is a very big "if." A volcano in the Triangle is far more likely.

* * *

DON'T be surprised if you hear gentle snores in the north-west corner of the form room. Remember that Archie Glenthorne occupies a desk in that section; and five minutes' work of any kind is always enough to lull him off.

* * *

DON'T play football in the lobby on a wet afternoon. You might get a couple of goals, but you are far more likely to get a couple of hundred lines.

ALWAYS be kind to Church and McClure. Remember, they have to put up with such a lot from another source that it is only fair for us to make some kind of a compensation.

* * *

ALWAYS be very careful to stand well away from the door of your study when you are talking about something very private. It is doubtful if walls have ears, but there's a certain ear in the Remove that is very fond of keyholes. It won't take you Long to guess who I mean.

* * *

ALWAYS leap out of bed the very instant the rising bell rings. On these cold mornings the sensation is most exhilarating and beneficial. Only don't all rush for the cold bath at once, because I shall possibly be in it. But it's far more probable that I shall be still in bed.

* * *

TO FATTY LITTLE: A shilling in hand is worth two in Mrs. Hake's till.

* * *

TO THE DUKE OF SOMERTON: A stitch in time saves many a draught.

* * *

TO RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD: A horse may sometimes win, but your money is always lost.

* * *

TO THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON: An ass and his tin are soon parted.

* * *

TO ENOCH SNIPE: It's never too late to spend.

THE THORNTON HEATH MYSTERY

A Thrilling Adventure of Trackett Grim, the Famous Criminal Detective.

By EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH.

PART TWO.

Within the Villain's Lair.

IT will be remembered that we left Trackett Grim hurtling through the skylight of the mysterious building in the centre of Thornton Heath. Fog enshrouded the surroundings, and Splinter waited on duty in the cold.

Trackett Grim was determined to find Mr. Hankerspike's diamonds, and he knew that they were here. And as there were no windows to this building of mystery, he had thrown himself on the roof.

Crash!

The famous detective shot through the skylight, and dropped like a ton of lead. He alighted upon some extraordinary piece of machinery—something which was whirling round. Brilliant illumination filled the building, and consternation filled Trackett Grim.

For even as he alighted, the machinery whirled faster. Then, to his horror, he saw that this thing was a kind of aeroplane—a hellcopter. It was a machine which is designed to rise vertically from the ground, with a propeller on the top. This great thing was fully twenty feet wide, with vast blades. And Trackett Grim clutched at the blade as he whizzed round.

To his horror, it went faster and faster.

Within a trice it was revolving at about five thousand revolutions a minute. And still Trackett Grim clung there, like grim death. His head was in a whirl, but, in spite of this, his brain was as cold as ice.

The Hankerspike Diamonds.

Then, suddenly, Trackett Grim's fingers could stand the strain no longer. He released his hold, and was shot off with such velocity that he crashed feet foremost through the side of the building. He broke through the wooden wall as a clown will break through a paper hoop.

And Trackett Grim, by some miraculous chance, alighted on his feet, and found Splinter holding him.

"Steady, guv'nor!" said Splinter concernedly.

"I am not scratched!" snapped Trackett Grim. "Don't you understand that I came through on purpose? This hole can now be used as a doorway!"

And Splinter stared, filled with wonder at his master's cleverness.

Trackett Grim strode through the hole in the wall, and by this time the propeller had ceased. And now the great detective could see that there were two men there, and also a lady. She was attired in costly furs, which covered her neck to her chin. And there, upon her white, bare chest sparkled a magnificent diamond necklace of scintillating beauty.

In a flash, Trackett Grim's revolver was out.

"Hands up, you scum!" he thundered. "I have come here for the Hankerspike diamonds. Cough 'em up, or I'll jolly well slaughter you!"

At this, the lady in furs fainted. As she fell, Trackett Grim snatched the diamonds. The lady crashed over with a thud, but Trackett Grim had the necklace.

"At this the lady in furs fainted."

"You fool!" shouted one of the men. "This lady is the Countess of Inkwell, and she is financing my marvellous new aeroplane. She came here to-night to see a secret trial. Those diamonds are the Inkwell heirlooms!"

"Rot!" said Trackett Grim. "You can't spoof me! When I——"

"Hold!" cried a dramatic voice from the rear.

And Mr. Joshua Hankerspike strode in, his face glowing. He carried a great portmanteau—and, opening it, revealed masses of precious stones.

"I have found the diamonds!" he cried gladly. "They were strapped on to my car, and must have dropped off. I came across them ten minutes ago."

Trackett Grim hauled Lady Inkwell to her feet, and pushed the diamond necklace into her pocket.

"I never make mistakes!" he declared. "It was just a little joke. Mr. Hankerspike, I will trouble you for my fee—the case is over, and I shall rank this as one of my greatest successes."

And Mr. Joshua Hankerspike forthwith wrote out a cheque for fifty thousand pounds. And even this was poor compensation, considering Trackett Grim's amazing achievement!

NEXT WEEK!

HOW TO KEEP YOUR BICYCLE FIT!

A Few Hints by BOB CHRISTINE.

MR. CROWELL'S LAPSE!

By JACK GREY.

THE KIDNAPPED GOALIE!

A Grand, Complete Story of the Famous Detective, NELSON LEE, and his Clever Assistant, NIPPER.

The Bookmaker's Offer.

ON a bleak moorland road, about a couple of miles from the great northern manufacturing town of Warpington, two men stood talking together.

For over half an hour they had stood there, and, although it was an exceedingly raw afternoon in mid-December, neither seemed to feel the cold.

Drawn up on one side of the road was a small motor-car. In it the elder of the two men had driven from Warpington. He was a red-faced, stoutish man of about forty, somewhat loudly dressed, and with a profusion of jewellery about his person. His name was Mark Lockton. He was a professional betting man; was, in fact, one of the leading bookmakers in Warpington.

The man with whom Mark Lockton was conversing was Jim Clulow. Of powerful physique, yet lithe and agile in his movements, he looked what he was—a professional footballer.

For the past eight years—the last three of them with the Warpington United, to which famous club he had been transferred at a stiff figure—Jim Clulow had been one of the best goalkeepers in the First League.

At the beginning of the season, however, the "United" had unearthed locally a still better "goalie"—a young fellow named Dick Rendle. As a result, Clulow had been practically superseded in first-team matches.

And now on this December afternoon the bookmaker and the professional footballer stood conversing on the bleak moorland road.

It was an odd place for an appointment. For, that the two men were here by appointment could not be doubted. Jim Clulow had walked out from Warpington, and, reaching the two-mile stone, had halted, glanced at his watch, and had then looked back expectantly along the road. A few minutes later the small motor-car had arrived at the spot, and out of it had stepped Mark Lockton.

Why had the pair come, and come separately, to such a lonely place, and on such an unpleasantly cold afternoon? There could be only one reason. Bookmaker and professional footballer did not wish to be seen hobnobbing with one another. For Clulow to have called at Lockton's house, or vice versa, would have been to cause comment and suspicion in Warpington.

Here, on this deserted road, there was nobody to see them, nobody to overhear them. So, as we have said, for half an hour they had stood, heedless of the cold, taking over the matter which had brought them hither. And still the long confabulation showed no sign of coming to an end.

Jim Clulow's heavy, somewhat sullen face, looked troubled, and he shook his bullet head doubtfully.

"I don't like it, Mr. Lockton," he was saying. "I don't like it a little bit!"

"You've got to like it, Jim, or else—well, no need to go over the old ground again. I've told you my terms, and you've agreed to 'em."

"Aye, but they're mighty hard terms."

"Hard! Well, if that ain't cool, I dunno what is! Here have I been fool enough to let you go on backing horses on the nod, till you owe me over two hundred pound. And now, when I tell you how you can wipe that debt out and be fifty quid in pocket besides, you've got the nerve to tell me I'm hard!"

"And I tell you so again, Mr. Lockton! Think o' what it means if I'm found out! It's me as is runnin' all the risk—not you."

"Risk be blowed! There's no risk if you

do your part o' the job cool and clever. You used to be cool and clever enough at savin' goals, so I reckon you can be the same in losin' 'em—eh Jim?"

"I'll have to be!" was the grim reply. "If they tumble that I'm purposely lettin' the ball go past me into the net, I'm done for!"

"But they won't tumble to it, Jim! You're too wily a bird for that. You'll so work things on Saturday afternoon that Pitborough Rovers will score just one—or mebbe, two goals more than Warpington United."

"And if the Rovers beat us you'll give me fifty pound?"

"Fifty o' the best, Jim, besides writing off as paid that two hundred odd you owe me over the gee-gees."

"And no hurt'll come to Dick Rendle?"

"No hurt at all. He'll be well treated by the two chaps I've told you about. But why are you so mighty anxious about him, Jim? Blow me if it ain't comical to hear you! Anybody 'ud think you loved Dick Rendle like a brother, whereas——"

"Stow that talk, Mr. Lockton!" broke in Clulow, his eyes suddenly blazing. "Rendle's no pal o' mine! I hate the sight of him! 'Tis him that's pushed me out! All this season he's kep' goal for the United, while I—I'm just a reserve!"

"What's it matter, Jim? You get your wages all the same."

"Aye, but it's bitter to be stood down after playin' reg'lar for the first eleven for three seasons."

"Well, then, seein' that Rendle's the cause of it, why are you so precious anxious about his not bein' hurt?"

"Because I don't want to run any bigger risk than I'm doin'. If them chaps you're puttin' on the job knock him about, it'll mean years o' quod for you an' me, as well as for them."

"Bah! We shall never be found out. However, you needn't alarm yourself. Dick Rendle won't be handled rough—unless he proves troublesome. In that case, of course, Cowler and Purton will have to be-er-firm with him. But I don't fancy Rendle will have a chance to give 'em much trouble. He'll be put to sleep by quite a gentle method. No bashing over the head, or anything of that sort. Just a whiff of dope, and then—well, then it'll be easy to tie his arms and legs so as to prevent him getting away."

"Sounds simple enough, Mr. Lockton, but I'm thinkin' they'll find Dick Rendle an awkward handful. He's within a few pounds o' my own weight, and he's a mortal tough chap."

"So's Cowler, and so's Purton!" returned the bookmaker, with an evil chuckle. "Both of 'em have been heavy-weight bruisers in their time. Trust them to carry the thing through without a bloomer. They're used to jobs of this sort.

"By the way, Jim," went on Lockton, as a sudden thought seemed to strike him, "I s'pose you're absolutely certain to be called on to play when Rendle doesn't turn up?"

"Aye," was the sullen answer, "they'll have to fall back on me certain sure. There's nobody else they can put in goal."

"What about Sam Denby?"

"Sam Denby!" snorted Clulow. "Think they'd pick him afore me? I ain't such a back-number as all that—yet!"

"All right, Jim, don't get huffy! I meant no offence. And now I reckon we've said all that's to be said, so I'll be gettin' along home."

Mark Lockton turned, walked towards the small car, and started the engine.

"Jump in, Jim!" he said, as he seated himself at the driving-wheel, and prepared to slip in the clutch.

"Not me!" returned Clulow. "I'm walkin' it."

"Oh, better have a lift part o' the journey. I can put you down just before we reach the town."

"I'm walkin' it!" repeated Clulow doggedly.

"Don't be a fool, Jim! We sha'n't meet a soul, I expect."

"I ain't riskin' it, Mr. Lockton. A two-mile walk's nowt to me."

"Very well—please yourself! So long, Jim! Trust Cowler and Purton to get Dick Rendle safe out o' the way between this and the end o' the week. Ta-ta!"

The next moment the car was rolling swiftly towards Warpington; while Jim Clulow, with hands thrust deep into his overcoat pockets, and his eyes fixed on the ground, followed slowly on foot

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The Goalie's Disappearance.

"TWENTY minutes to twelve, Nipper! Just time for us to get round to the station, bolt a sandwich, and catch the mid-day express to London."

The speaker was Nelson Lee, the famous detective. He and his young assistant had just emerged from the Warpington Assize Court, where they had on this Thursday morning given short but highly important evidence in a case with which our present story is not concerned.

"Right-o, guv'nor!" answered Nipper. "The station's only about three minutes' from here. Not worth takin' a cab, even if there was one in sight, which there isn't."

But they were not destined to catch the noon express to King's Cross. For even as they reached the railway-station and made for the booking-hall, a tall, well-dressed gentleman of middle-age came hurrying towards them, and accosted Lee.

"Excuse me, sir," he began breathlessly, "but you are Mr. Nelson Lee, I believe?"

The detective nodded.

"I heard you were in Warpington for the

Assizes," explained the gentleman, "and I went to the court in order to see you. But the usher told me you had just left; so I ran on here, thinking perhaps you might be intending to catch the London express."

"That certainly was my intention," said Lee with a smile.

"Then I hope you won't carry out your intention, Mr. Lee. Are you obliged to go to London to-day? Would it be possible for you to put off your return for a day or two?"

"It would be possible," answered Lee; "but whether I can agree to do so depends on circumstances. May I ask you to kindly explain why you wish me to postpone my journey south?"

"I am anxious to secure your professional assistance, Mr. Lee. My name is Densham. I am a director of Denshams, Limited, and I am also a director of the Warpington United Football Club. It is in the latter capacity that I wish to consult you."

Lee looked at Nipper with a whimsical smile.

"I'm afraid the express must go without us, my boy," he said. Then addressing Mr. Densham: "Perhaps you can suggest some quiet place to which we can adjourn? This is scarcely an ideal spot for a consultation, is it?"

"It certainly isn't!" laughed Mr. Densham. "My office is quite near. If you wouldn't mind coming there, we could talk without interruption."

Clulow extended his hand to Nelson Lee almost reluctantly.

They soon reached Mr. Densham's office, and that gentleman lost no time in coming to the point.

"Mr. Lee," he said, "one of the Warpington United's best players has most mysteriously disappeared. I want you to find him for us."

"But surely that's a matter for the local police to——"

"Oh, they're too slow!" broke in Mr. Densham. "Besides, I'd rather the affair wasn't made public yet. You see, there

may not really be anything in it. There may be some quite simple explanation of young Dick Rendle's absence."

"Dick Rendle, eh? Isn't he your goalkeeper?"

"Yes—the finest goalkeeper the United have ever had the luck to get hold of!"

"And when did he disappear?"

"Nobody seems to have seen anything of him since the day before yesterday—Tuesday. On the morning of that day he put in half an hour's practice on the ground with other members of the team. Then in the afternoon he walked over to Heppleby, the little village where his mother lives. She is a widow, and every Tuesday—provided, of course, there's no match on—Dick pays her a visit.

"Well, we have ascertained that he reached Heppleby about half-past two, had tea at his mother's cottage, and started to walk back to Warpington shortly after six o'clock. The evening was very dark, but Dick was born and bred at Heppleby and knows every yard of the road between that village and Warpington. There was no danger of his missing the way. He could have made the journey blindfold."

"And he didn't reach Warpington?" asked Lee.

"No—at any rate, he hasn't returned to his lodgings. His landlady, Mrs. Phipps, after keeping some supper hot for him until nearly eleven, went to bed, leaving the front door of the house unlocked, so that Rendle would be able to let himself in with his latchkey.

"Next morning—yesterday, that is—she found that her lodger had not been in all night. His bed had not been slept in, and the glimmer of gas left burning on the landing had not been extinguished.

"She was not in the least alarmed at the discovery, for on more than one occasion young Rendle had stayed the night at his mother's cottage, returning to Warpington on the following day.

"But when the day passed, and evening came, and there was still no sign or word of her lodger, Mrs. Phipps began to grow uneasy. So she sent her son round to the house of Sam Trafford to ask if he knew where Rendle was. Sam is the United's trainer, and to him a player usually reports any contemplated absence from the town.

"Trafford, however, could throw no light on the matter. He had seen nothing of Rendle since Tuesday morning's practice, and knew nothing about his subsequent movements. He could only surmise that Rendle was for some reason remaining at Heppleby with his mother.

"To test the accuracy of his surmise, Trafford at once cycled over to that village, which is only a five-mile journey. There he ascertained from Mrs. Rendle that her son had started to walk back to Warpington early on the previous evening.

"This information greatly disturbed Trafford, although, of course, he concealed his fears from Mrs. Rendle. He did his best to reassure the poor woman, and then returned to Warpington and called on me at my private house just as I was on the point of going to bed.

"On learning the nature of his errand, I put on my hat and coat, and, accompanied by Trafford, went to the lodgings of various members of the team. In every case we got the same answer. None of the players had set eyes on Rendle since the previous day's practice game.

"By the time we had finished our round of calls, it was past midnight; so, after a final visit to Mrs. Phipps, to make sure that her lodger had not returned, Trafford and I parted for the time being.

"We met again at eight o'clock this morning, and resumed our inquiries in the town. All without result, however. We could glean no news whatever of Dick Rendle.

"About an hour ago I heard, quite by chance, that you were in Warpington for the purpose of giving evidence in a case at the assizes. The idea instantly occurred to me that you might be willing to assist us in finding our missing goalkeeper. So I went round to the Assize Court, and, finding you had just gone, hurried after you to the railway-station.

"There, Mr. Lee," concluded the director, "that's the whole story. I sincerely hope you will pardon me for having caused you to miss the London express, and that you are sufficiently interested to take up what, for you, must be a very insignificant case."

"No case of mysterious disappearance can be termed insignificant until it has been investigated and solved," returned Nelson Lee. "The explanation of Rendle's absence may, of course, prove to be quite a simple one. He may merely have gone away for a few days without troubling to communicate his intention to anybody. On the other hand, he may have met with foul play—may have been overpowered and kidnapped on the dark road between Heppleby and Warpington."

"Kidnapped!" exclaimed Mr. Densham. "But what would be the motive for doing a thing like that? Everybody likes young Rendle. There isn't a more popular player in the League. I shouldn't think he has an enemy in the whole world!"

"That may or may not be; but, even if it is the case, there may be some motive other than personal enmity."

"For the life of me I can't imagine one!"

"Not one, Mr. Densham?"

"No—not one!" declared the club director.

"Oh, come!" smiled Lee. "You know better than I do what dangers are opened up when the professional gambling fraternity fasten on to a sport and exploit it for their own ends. They will stick at nothing to gain those ends."

"Ah, I see what you are hinting at now

Mr. Lee. Your theory is that some shady betting man is at the bottom of Rendle's disappearance?"

"I won't call it a theory yet," answered Lee, "but simply a possibility. Now tell me, Mr. Densham, who are Warpington United playing against in their next match?"

"Pitborough Rovers."

"At home or away?"

"At home."

"And, strictly on form, speaking without bias, who do you expect to win?"

"Oh, we ought to win fairly easily. We are much higher up in the league table than the Rovers, and we recently beat them by 2—0 on their own ground."

"I see. So since the match on Saturday is to be played at Warpington, your team are sure to be favourites?"

"Yes—hot favourites. Personally, I hate betting, Mr. Lee; but, of course, it's impossible to shut one's eyes to what goes on in connection with the game. It's safe to say that anybody who wants to back United for this particular match will have to lay two or three to one on them—in fact, I happen to know that only yesterday a certain tradesman in the town betted a hundred pounds to fifty twice on United winning the game."

"Whew! Do they really gamble on that scale hereabouts?"

"Oh dear, yes! You see, Warpington is full of money these days. Even the mill operatives risk pounds, where formerly they only staked shillings or half-crowns."

"Then some of the local bookmakers must be pretty prosperous?"

"Prosperous! I should think so! Why, several of 'em have made so much money out of racing and football during the last two or three years, that they've been able to invest largely in house property; and, as you know, that requires no end of capital nowadays.

"Mind you," went on Mr. Densham, "I'm not for a moment suggesting that they've made this brass dishonestly. A bookie with an extensive connection has no need to resort to crooked methods. It pays him to go straight. Backing is a mug's game; the bookmaker is always certain to win in the long run."

"None the less," said Lee, "there is a certain type of bookmaker who simply can't go straight. Not content with legitimate profits, he will resort to any shady dodge in order to fleece his clients. A man of this description loves to lay heavily against a horse which he knows is not to be allowed to win. Such an animal is termed a 'stumer,' or a 'dead 'un.' Before the race it has been 'made safe.' To lay against it is 'money for nothing'—for the layer. The backer has no chance of winning."

Mr. Densham smiled and shook his head.

"Horse-racing and football are two rather different things," he said. "A dishonest trainer, by hocussing a horse, or a dishonest jockey, by 'pulling' it, can prevent the animal from winning. But in a football match there are eleven men against eleven, and, unless several of the players have entered into a conspiracy, it is impossible to say that either side is absolutely certain to lose."

"Absolutely certain, I agree," replied Lee, "but even without several players conspiring together I think it is possible to make the result tolerably certain. There is one player on each side who can, if he be so minded, bring about the defeat of his team."

"You mean the goalkeeper?"

"Exactly!" nodded Lee. "It is a poor side, indeed, whose forwards don't in the course of a match get a few chances of making a shot for goal. Very well, then! A 'squared' goalkeeper purposely allows the ball to beat him on as many of these occasions as is necessary, and the thing is done. If the goalie is a clever hand, he manages the losing business artistically; if he isn't, his little game may be detected, and his career as a player is ended. But, artist or bungler, he has done what he has been bribed to do—purposely allowed his opponents to score.

"Now, Mr. Densham," went on Lee, after a moment's pause, "in the event of Rendle not being available for next Saturday's match, who would keep goal for the United?"

"Jim Clulow."

"An old hand, isn't he? His name seems very familiar."

"Yes, he's been a professional footballer for nearly ten years. He came to us four seasons ago, and kept goal regularly for our first team until young Rendle came along and proved himself a better man."

"So Clulow is somewhat of a 'has-been'—eh?"

"Oh dear no! He's still a fine goalkeeper, is Jim. More than one League club would be jolly glad to get him; but as we happen to be a pretty prosperous organisation, we prefer to keep him ourselves as a reserve."

"Always found him straight?"

"Yes; I've nothing to say against Jim Clulow. He's a rather grim, taciturn sort of chap, and he has never been exactly popular with the crowd; but he's done excellent work for the United in his time."

"How does he get on with Rendle?"

"Oh, I don't think they see much of each other; but, so far as I know, there's never been bad blood between them. Naturally, Clulow didn't much relish having to stand out of the eleven, but I never heard that he bore any grudge against the youngster who superseded him."

"Then you don't think Clulow is in any way mixed up with Rendle's disappearance?"

"Frankly, Mr. Lee, I don't! As I said just now, Jim isn't an over-genial sort of chap; but all the same, I think he's

straight as a die. I can't believe that he'd allow any bookmaker to 'buy' him."

"Well, perhaps you're right," said Lee. "You know Jim Clulow, and I don't. Perhaps if I saw him I should be of your opinion. Would it be possible for me to see him to-day?"

"Nothing easier, Mr. Lee! There's a practice game due to come off this afternoon at three o'clock. Clulow is sure to be there. Sam Trafford and I met him in Market Street this morning, and Trafford then told him to turn up in case he should be wanted."

Lee looked at his watch.

"Very well, Mr. Densham," he said, rising to go. "It's just half-past one now. Can you meet me at the gates of the ground just before three, and introduce me to Clulow and the other players—not in my real name, of course, but as, say, Mr. Smith, a friend of yours?"

"With pleasure!" assented the club director.

And on that understanding Nelson Lee and Nipper departed.

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Nelson Lee Gets Busy.

AFTER partaking of a light luncheon at the Golden Fleece Hotel, the great detective and his assistant still had nearly an hour to spare before they were due to meet Mr. Densham.

Nelson Lee made good use of the interval. In the smoking-saloon of the Golden Fleece there chanced to be a number of local "sports"—well-to-do young tradesmen for the most part. They were discussing football in general and the Warpington United team in particular.

Lee was a past-master in the art of adapting himself to any company, and very soon he was taking part in the discussion. At the first opportunity he skilfully introduced the name of Jim Clulow, in the hope of eliciting some information as to the reserve goalkeeper's character and private life.

Nor was the detective disappointed in that hope; for when presently he left the hotel, and, accompanied by Nipper, set out for the football-ground, he was in possession of three facts concerning Clulow, of which, apparently, Mr. Densham was in complete ignorance.

Fact number one was that Jim Clulow was a heavy and unsuccessful backer of racehorses.

Fact number two was that he owed his bookmaker—a man named Mark Lockton—a considerable amount of money.

Fact number three was that he had recently been drinking more than was good for him, and was growing more morose than ever.

"Those facts," remarked Lee to Nipper, "may or may not have a bearing on the disappearance of Rendle."

"You mean, guv'nor, that it's possible Clulow may be under the thumb of the bookie he's in debt to, and that he's going to sell his side in Saturday's match?"

"Yes, it's just possible, my boy. But," added Lee with a laugh, "we mustn't jump at conclusions. I may be altogether on the wrong tack. Clulow, despite his little weaknesses, may be absolutely straight. So until I've seen the chap I'll keep an open mind."

They reached the gates of the United ground in Mill Lane, and there found Mr. Densham awaiting them.

Without saying a word about what he had learned about Clulow, Lee accompanied the director into the deserted stand.

Presently, Trainer Trafford and his men emerged from the dressing-rooms, and a moment later "Mr. Smith" and "Mr. Smith, junior"—for so Mr. Densham described Lee and Nipper—were being introduced to each of the blue-shirted players in turn.

The last man of the group was Jim Clulow. He extended his hand almost reluctantly. Lee took it with a smile, but there was no answering smile on the goalkeeper's sullen visage; nor was there any heartiness in his grip.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said Lee. "Your name has long been familiar to me in the football reports; but, unfortunately, I've never had the pleasure of seeing you play. I hope you——"

Lee broke off. No wonder! For Jim Clulow's demeanour was strange, to say the least. His heavy jaw had suddenly dropped and he was staring at Lee with eyes which had in them the unmistakable expression of fear!

The detective watched him narrowly, and for a moment Clulow absolutely shrank before that steady, searching gaze. Then, pulling himself together with an effort, the bullet-headed goalkeeper turned away abruptly, and hurried after his fellow-players, some of whom were by this time hacking a ball about in the centre of the ground.

Mr. Densham, who had been a witness of the little scene, looked at Lee in astonishment.

"Queer!" he ejaculated in a low voice. "What's it mean?"

"It means," answered Lee, "that he recognised me—that he knows who I really am! Somebody must have pointed me out to him in the town; or he may perhaps have seen me in the box at the Assize Court."

"Well, but even if he did recognise you, why should it have affected him like that? He turned quite pale, and for just a second or two looked thoroughly frightened."

"Yes, I noticed it," said Lee grimly. "The fact is, he's in such a state of funk that he gave himself away completely. Guilt was plainly written on the chap's face."

"Guilt! You really believe, then, that he's mixed up in Rendle's disappearance?"

"I'm almost sure of it! Why else should he have betrayed such fright—terror almost—just now?"

"Good heavens!" gasped the director. "I can hardly believe it of Jim Clulow!"

"Men often do desperate things when hard-pressed for money," returned Lee.

"But surely Clulow hasn't any money troubles? He isn't married, and he draws good wages regularly, even though we haven't played him very often this season."

Lee briefly recounted what he had gathered in the smoking-room of the Golden Fleece. The news fairly astounded Mr. Densham. He had had no idea that Clulow was a gambler.

"Do you happen to know this Mark Lockton?" asked Lee.

"Oh, I know the fellow well enough by sight," was the reply. "He's one of the biggest bookmakers in Warpington, and is reputed to be worth no end of money. But he wasn't always so prosperous. There are queer things told about him. I've heard it stated that at one time he was the leader of a gang of card-tricksters, who used to follow the northern race meetings."

"Indeed! Then, as likely as not, he's still a wrong 'un, ready to add to his profits by crooked methods whenever the opportunity offers. If it's true that Clulow owes him a lot of money, it may be that Lockton has practically forced him to take a hand in some rascally scheme or other."

Mr. Densham nodded his head sadly.

"Yes," he said, "it may well be so. Clulow's demeanour just now was certainly most suspicious. What course do you propose to take, Mr. Lee?"

"I propose," answered the detective, "to at once tax him bluntly with complicity in Rendle's disappearance!"

"Oh, but isn't that rather a risky line to take? After all, you're not absolutely certain of his guilt. He may be innocent—and it's a serious matter to accuse an innocent man of such a thing as that."

"Well, I intend to run the risk, Mr. Densham. No use beating about the bush with a man like Clulow. If he thinks I merely suspect him, he will feign ignorance and tell us nothing; whereas if I bluntly accuse him he may throw up the sponge at once and blurt out everything."

"Providing he is guilty," said the director cautiously.

"Oh yes, of course," agreed Lee. "If he isn't," he added with a laugh, "I suppose I shall have to take the consequences of jumping at a premature conclusion. Perhaps an abject apology would satisfy him; if not he might sue me for slander. However, as I said just now, I intend to risk that."

"Very well, Mr. Lee, you know best. Shall I call Clulow off the field now?"

"If you will, please. No use wasting time. For all we know, young Rendle may be in a mighty unpleasant plight somewhere. If such is the case, it's for us to get him out of it at the earliest possible moment."

Mr. Densham nodded; then, curving his hand round his mouth, he shouted:

"Clulow!"

At sound of his name, the goalkeeper, who was being tested with some hot shots by his colleagues, jumped as though a gun had been let off just behind him. Plainly his nerves were all to pieces.

He glanced across to the stands, and, seeing Mr. Densham beckoning him, left his place between the goalposts and slowly made his way off the field.

And, as he approached them, both Nelson Lee and Mr. Densham saw that the muscles of his heavy face were twitching violently, and that the look of fear was back in his eyes again.

"Clulow," said Mr. Densham, as the goalkeeper halted before him, "this gentleman has something to say to you."

Jim Clulow's face twitched more violently than ever as he turned it towards Lee and waited for him to speak. That the man was enduring the torture of suspense was apparent to the detective. He mercifully decided to put a swift end to that suspense.

So, fixing Clulow with a steady eye, Lee came straight to the point.

"Clulow," he said, in a quiet but none the less severe tone, "I suppose you know that this kidnapping of your colleague is a very serious offence, and that you have laid yourself open to heavy punishment by being mixed up in it?"

Mr. Densham half-expected the burly, thick-set goalkeeper to hurl himself upon his accuser and take him by the throat. What, then, was his amazement to see Jim Clulow shrug his great shoulders, and to hear him reply sullenly:

"Aye, Mr. Nelson Lee, reckon I know what I've let myself in for all reet! I was a silly fool to let Mark Lockton talk me over, for I never liked the idea, and I somehow felt in my very bones that it 'ud come to no good."

"Yes," said Lee, "you certainly were a fool to do it. Not only have you ruined your career as a football professional, but you've rendered yourself liable to criminal proceedings."

"No need to tell me that," was Clulow's dogged rejoinder. "Reckon I know what's comin' to me, and I ain't goin' to whine about it."

Clulow's demeanour had now undergone a remarkable change. His face no longer twitched, while the expression of fear had gone from his eyes. It was the dread of being found out that had made him nervous and furtive. Now that the blow had fallen and he knew that he was found out, a great weight seemed to have been lifted off his mind, and he looked actually relieved.

"This is an exceedingly painful surprise

to me, Clulow," said Mr. Densham. "If Rondle has sustained any physical harm, it—"

"He's come to no harm, sir!" interrupted Clulow. "The two chaps who took him on Tuesday night didn't knock him about at all."

"How do you know?", demanded the director. "Were you there to see?"

"No, sir, but Mark Lockton gave me his solemn word that 'twas all done gentle like."

"And I suppose," put in Lee, "the idea was to hold Rendle a prisoner for a few days so that you would be called upon to take his place in Saturday's match?"

The goalkeeper nodded.

"And how much were you to receive for allowing Pitborough Rovers to win?" asked Mr. Densham sternly.

"Fifty pounds, sir."

"So for a paltry fifty pounds you would have sold your club—eh?"

"I owe Lockton over two hundred pounds, sir. He was goin' to wipe that off the slate into the bargain."

"Was he, indeed! How very generous of him! He could well afford to do so, seeing that he would have been able to lay heavily against United with the certainty that he ran no risk of losing. A nice scoundrel to be associated with!"

"No good callin' him names, sir. The thing is, what are you goin' to do about it?"

"That," answered Mr. Densham, "will depend on how Rondle has been treated. Where has he been taken to?"

"He's in charge of two chaps at a tumbledown old place called Bratchett's Farm, about a couple o' mile t'other side o' Heppleby."

"Very well, Clulow, that will do now. Go to the dressing-room and change your things. It's the last time you will go there, for I need scarcely say that you will play no more for Warpington United!"

Half an hour later a motor-car in which were seated Nelson Lee, Nipper, Mr. Densham, and Sam Trafford, left the town by way of a moorland road, and quickly reached the lonely, half-ruined house known as Bratchett's Farm.

And there, sure enough, they found Dick Rendle. His wrists and ankles were bound; but, except for that, he had not been badly treated by Cowler and Purton.

These two, it transpired, had waylaid Rendle in the dark road a few minutes after he had left his mother's cottage on the Tuesday evening. They had first rendered him insensible by means of a handkerchief soaked with some powerful anaesthetic, and had then conveyed him to the lonely farmhouse.

Happily the young goalkeeper was little the worse for his adventure, and on the Saturday afternoon he duly turned out for the match against Pitborough Rovers. That match proved a repetition of the "away" game, for once more Warpington United were victorious by 2—0.

It only remains to be said that no proceedings were taken against Mark Lockton, Jim Clulow, or the two actual kidnappers of Dick Rendle. This was because Lockton went to Mr. Densham and Rendle, and actually going on his knees, begged them not to prosecute. In consideration of their not doing so, the bookmaker offered to donate the sum of £500 to the Warpington Hospital, and to clear out of the town within a month.

On these terms the affair was hushed up. The hospital duly received its donation, and within the stipulated month Lockton departed. At about the same time Jim Clulow also vanished from Warpington, and professional football knew him no more.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK WILL APPEAR
PART ONE
OF AN AMAZING AND BAFFLING MYSTERY STORY OF NELSON LEE AND NIPPER, ENTITLED,

THE MAYFAIR MYSTERY!

or, ON THE DIAMOND TRAIL.

The Second and Concluding Episode of this Thrilling Detective Story will appear in the week following.

buried inside this hut. Oh, he were a clever one, and no mistake!"

"But not quite clever enough!" remarked Sam sententiously.

Nothing more could be done just then, so Tom proposed that they should return to the school.

"At two o'clock," he said, "I shall tell Mr. Ralston what we have discovered here, and then, Perks, you will be put upon your defence."

"Will—will they put me in prison, Master Tartar?" faltered Perks.

"I really can't say what they'll do with you," was all Tom could reply.

He was far from feeling sure that Ralston would take a sentimental view of the position of Perks, and if he did not, that young gentleman stood a fair chance of being tried as an accomplice.

Tom kept his word, and at two o'clock, just before school was resumed, he made his statement to Mr. Wrasper. He frankly admitted that he had promised to be silent for awhile for Chopps' sake.

"It doesn't matter," said Mr. Wrasper, "an hour isn't much. They are sure to catch him."

Ralston was informed as soon as possible, and his first care was to send in pursuit of Chopps. But the wary bird had got some way upon the wing, and at a late hour of the night nothing had been heard of him.

Meanwhile the last lot of smuggled goods had been dug out of the hut and conveyed to a place of safety. It completed the list of things wanted, and so justice was satisfied.

But Mr. Ralston was still unhappy.

He wanted Chopps.

Everybody else was contented, however, and hoped Chopps would get away.

Something like reaction set in in the usher's favour.

"The less fuss there is now about the matter," said Mr. Wrasper, "the better for us."

"And I shall keep the little presents he gave me," thought Mrs. Wrasper. "I don't see why I should not. That uncle of his—I mean, his brother—lived on the fat of the land, and I don't see why it shouldn't be paid for."

And that was what everybody else said.

As for Chopps' verbal will, it was the general opinion also that it should be acted upon. The law would not take any cognisance of a few knick-knacks in his room, and if anybody had a right to them it was the person appointed by Chopps to receive them.

So they all became Tom's, and a very wonderful collection of odds and ends they proved to be.

There were curious shells, beautiful stones, marvellous butterflies and beetles, pictures, knives, and two richly-inlaid daggers.

Last, but not least, there was the wonderful musical instrument with which Chopps had sought to conceal his absences from his room.

It was a wonderful piece of work, the box inlaid, and the interior machinery very complicated and beautiful. Fully wound up, it would go for hours.

The boys were allowed to have it in the schoolroom that evening, and its music was a fine help to getting up the lessons for the morrow—at least, the boys said so.

But on the morrow their lessons were not remarkably perfect, which was overlooked, owing to the excitement of the last few days.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mr. Wrasper, "I hope all that sort of thing is over now, and that peace has come to Peddleton!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

Tom Goes Out into the World.

DESPITE the fact that his full description was circulated throughout the kingdom, Achilles Chopps was never caught. It can only be surmised that the cherub ex-usher succeeded in making his escape to America or some other country, where, it is to be hoped, his undoubted abilities enabled him to prosper by honest methods.

His brother Joe and the other members of the smuggling gang were tried in due course, and sentenced to short terms of imprisonment.

Wrasper's School now entered upon a period of peaceful calm. The establishment steadily improved and prospered, Mr. Wrasper being fortunate enough to secure as assistant-master, a gentleman who quickly gained the liking and respect of the pupils.

So thoroughly capable in every way was this new master, that before long Mr. Wrasper took him into partnership, and under their joint ownership the school became quite a model one of its kind.

It was within a few weeks of the end of the term that Tom Tartar learnt that his schooldays were to end, and that he was to return home at once and take up a post which awaited him in the office of one of his father's City friends.

A trifle saddened at the thought of leaving his chums, Tom, at the same time, felt the elation of one who is going into the world.

He was about to take his place in the ranks of those who wage war in the battle of life.

Tom asked for permission to give a little feast to his chums before leaving, and it was readily granted.

The last brief holiday of his school-days was selected, and the dining-room given up to him for the occasion.

Sam Smith, Johnny McLara, and Law-

(*Continued on page iii of cover.*)

The NEW USHER

BEING THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF Tom Tartar at School

(Concluding Instalment.)

CHAPTER XLV.

Mr. Achilles Chopps' Confession.

"BOYS," said Chopps, addressing Tom and Sam Smith, "let my career be a warning to you both. I am not a preacher, by any means, but I don't think that a few appropriate words will be thrown away upon you.

"I am the son of a man," continued Chopps, "who prospered fairly in trade and left me a good business to begin the world with. But I was not satisfied with making money with moderate quickness. I took to scheming, and I laid out plans for smuggling excisable goods on a gigantic scale. What these plans were I reckon you know now, and I need not go into particulars.

"I flatter myself that these plans were pretty well laid; but, well laid as they were, it seems they were not quite good enough. It's just the way of most plans laid for doing wrong; you leave out a little bit of the machinery and the whole thing goes to pieces."

He stopped again for a moment.

"Tartar," he said, "you are a smart lad and a good one; you are straight. It is not everyone who would have resisted my brother Joe's offer of ten pounds, but I knew you would do so, and so I never offered to bribe you. I tried to make you a friend."

"You did," replied Tom; "and I am sure I did not want to be your enemy."

"No," said Chopps; "but you could not help being so, for you can't go any way but straight, and I was playing a crooked game. And now I am going to make my will.

"A verbal one," he said, in response to a startled look from Tom. "All the odds and ends in my room I leave to you. You need not be afraid to accept them, for they are not bought with a smuggler's money. Smuggling, in fact, hasn't paid me. I've invested all I had in the game, and lost it. That's all the good it has done me!"

He laughed grimly as he spoke and dug his hands deeply into his pockets, as if he hoped to find his lost fortune there.

"I don't say every penny is gone," he answered, "for I have enough to get abroad, and then I mean to go and see if something can't be done honestly with brains. As for Joe, he will get three months' imprisonment, and that will do him good, for he's much too satisfied with his own cleverness. The others will be let off lightly, and as they are men who have to rough it in their own country, they won't howl about being laid by the heels for a few weeks. That's all. Remember, Tartar—everything to you."

"I don't think I ought to accept it," said Tom.

"Nonsense! Why not? However, you'll please yourself about it, of course.

"And now, good-bye!" concluded Chopps, holding out his hand. "Good luck attend you! I am sorry for Wrasper. He has not recently been in luck's way with his assistants, but I think I stand out an angel of light compared to the last one he had. Good-bye."

Tom grasped the hand proffered him. He could not help feeling sorry for the little, chubby man who had misused his undoubted abilities and come such a cropper.

There was a suspicious moisture in the eyes of Achilles Chopps as he wrung Tom's hand, and then hurried away.

And there was a curious huskiness in Tom's voice as he turned to Sam and Perks, and asked the latter to point out the exact place where the smuggled goods were buried.

Perks walked briskly into the hut, and pointed to the left-hand corner.

There the ground was smoother than in any other part of the hut. Tom remarked on the fact.

"Oh," grinned Perks, "that was his artfulness! He smoothed that place as careful as ever was, and then made the other parts look rough, so as to lead people to dig there if they suspected the stuff was

(*Continued from page 40.*)

rence Turrell were stewards of the feast, and Tom found them busy arranging the places where each guest was to sit.

At six o'clock they all sat down to a good repast, without the restraining influence of master or tutor.

Nobody acted as waiter—they waited on themselves; and soon the room was filled with lively conversation and laughter.

Shortly after Sam Smith got upon his feet to say a few words, and he made a neat little speech, praising Tom, but without any fulsome flattery.

Tom responded, expressing his regret at leaving them, and hoped that in the future they might have the good fortune to meet again.

As he was sitting down Jane entered the room with a small parcel, which she handed to Tom.

"One of Sir Claude Freshly's servants brought it," she said.

Tom opened the packet, and found it contained a handsome gold watch and chain, the gift of his "sincere friend, Cecil Freshly."

There was a note from Sir Claude, expressing his regret at the unavoidable absence of Cecil, who was travelling with his tutor.

Tom was deeply moved by the gift.

But there was yet another present to come—the gift of Mr. Wrasper and the boys a handsome dressing-case.

So close had the secret been kept that Tom had not the faintest suspicion of it until Mr. Wrasper came into the room and presented it to him, with a few kindly remarks.

We need only record the concluding sentences.

"I do not intend to flatter you, Tartar," the schoolmaster said, "when I tell you that you are made of the stuff which makes good and sometimes great men. By what extraordinary mental powers your previous master arrived at the conclusion that you were an 'incorrigible,' I know not. He must, in any case, have mistaken vivacity for vice, and an inborn natural independence for deliberate insubordination. I did so at first; but now I know my error. I am proud of the fact of having had you for a pupil, and among the general regret at your leaving mine is not the least."

Tom was fairly broken now, and could only say a few words in reply. But happily the boys cheered each separate word as it fell from his lips, and so left the sense to the imagination of the hearers.

Anyhow, they were considered satisfactory, and Tom sat down amidst rapturous applause.

This was the final event of the evening, and shortly after this the meeting broke up.

Next morning the morning of Tom's last day at the school Tom went to bid his village friends good-bye—the Misses Smatterly, Lottie Fenn, Widow Blake, and others.

Evening came—it was bound to come—and Tom, accompanied by Mr. Wrasper and half the boys, went to the station.

Tom had not forgotten Noddy Berril, and it was an understood thing that Noddy would be on the platform to bid him good-bye.

Strong as he was, he shed just one tear as he grasped Tom's hand.

"I'm mighty sorry," was all he could say.

The train comes rumbling in.

Tom thinks he would like a compartment to himself, and they find one. He steps in, closes the door, drops the window, and leans out.

His friends cluster around, exchanging a few words of final adieu.

"Right there!"

"Stand back, please!"

A hurried touch of the hand extended by Sam Smith, and Tom feels he is being borne away.

He takes off his hat, and waves it. The hats on the platform are whipped off in response.

"Good-bye, old fellow!"

"Good-bye, all!"

The train increases its pace, and Tom, leaning back in the carriage, reflects on a great fact that presents itself to him.

He has left one school to enter another—the sterner School of Life, in which he may encounter perils to which all that he has gone through while at Wrasper's are as naught.

THE END.

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