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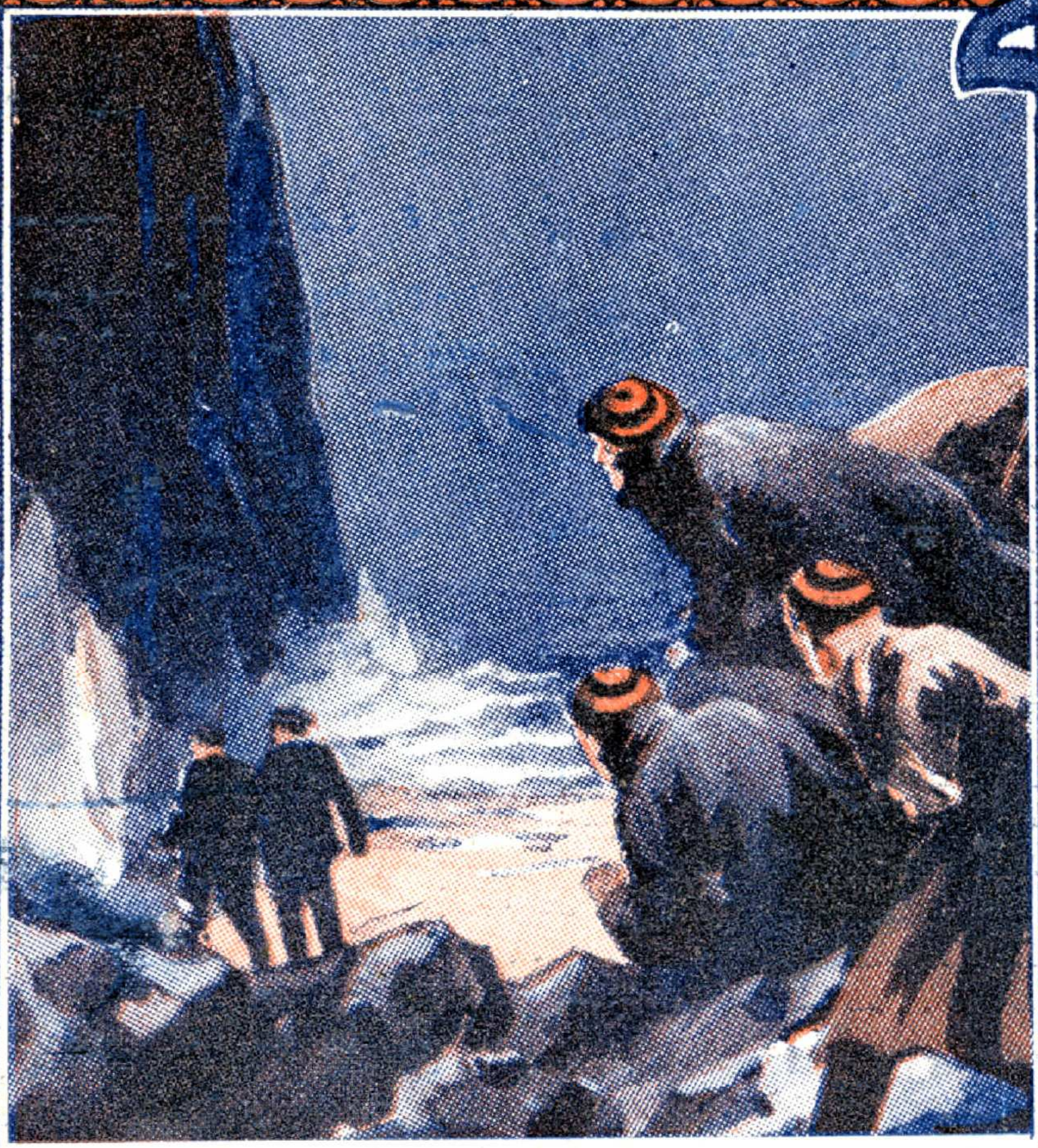
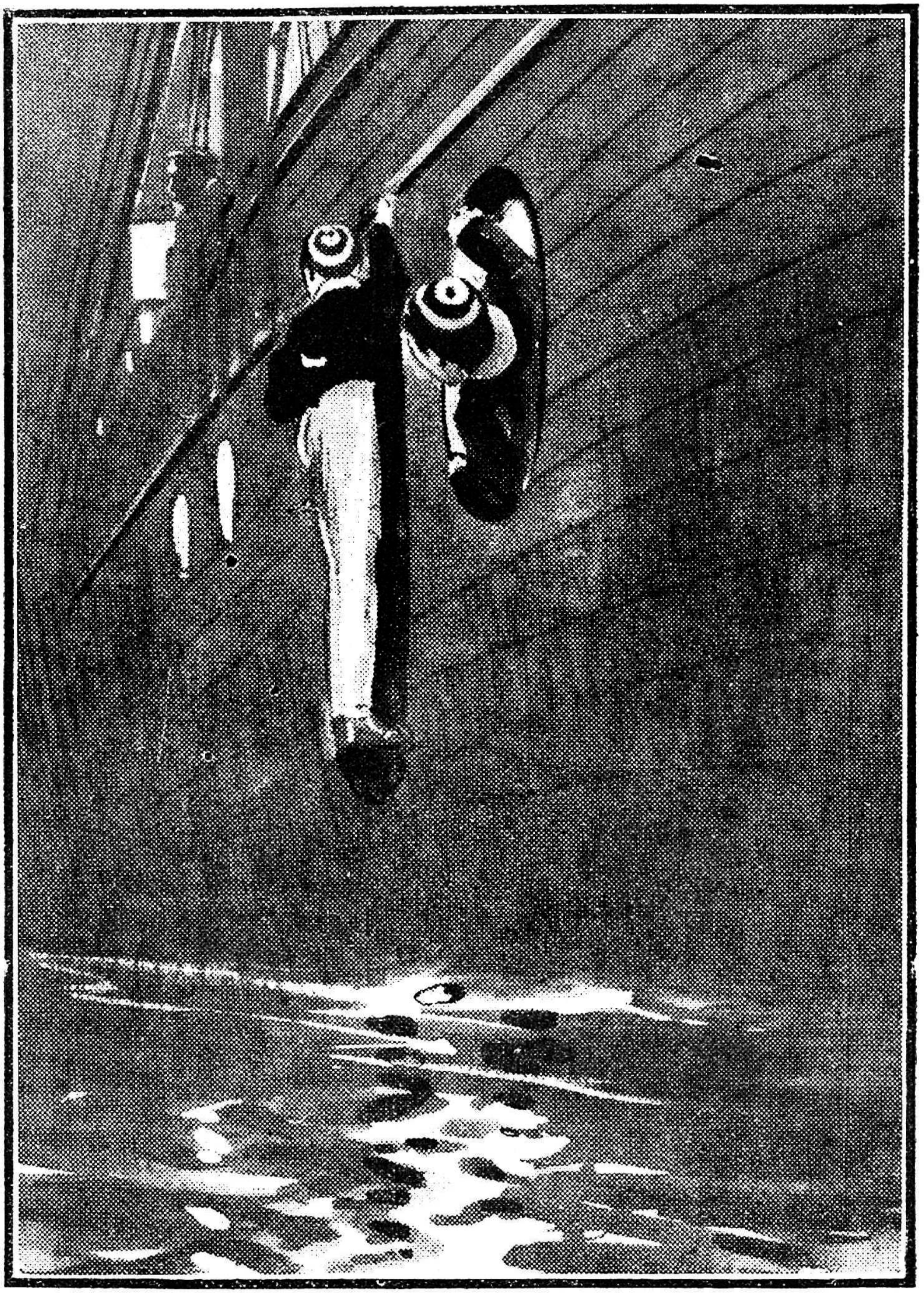


The Riddle of Demon's Gap

Being the Title of This Week's Grand Long Complete Story of School and Detective Adventure at St. FRANK'S College.

No. 388 EVERY WEDNESDAY NOV. 11, 1922



Handforth and McClure squeezed through the porthole, one after the other. They were free, but would they gain their full liberty?

The Riddle of Demon's Gap!

A grand long complete story of School, Mystery and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE as the famous Housemaster-detective, NIPPER, the Captain of the Remove, and the well-known Juniors of St. Frank's College. By the Author of "THE REMOVE TO THE RESCUE," "HANDFORTH MINOR," "THE MYSTERY OF THE EDGEMORE HERMIT," and many other fine stories.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

CAUGHT IN THE FOG!

"COME back, you ass!" said Willy Handforth crisply.

"Eh?"

"Do you think I want you to skid off that slippery seaweed?" demanded Handforth minor. "I'm not keen on diving in after you! You can't swim a giddy stroke, and it's not worth the risk——"

"Who can't swim?" demanded Chubby Heath indignantly.

"Oh, well, we won't argue!" said Willy. "Only don't go along that ridge! Understand? I'm not standing any rot!"

Chubby Heath grunted, and retreated. The three leading lights of the Third Form at St. Frank's were out for an afternoon ramble. And it was quite characteristic of Handforth minor to issue orders as though he were twice the age of his two companions.

And they accepted his leadership without question—for, in the Third, Willy Handforth was a power. Anybody who opposed him had reason to regret it immediately afterwards. For Willy's right possessed a terrific swing very reminiscent of the driving power of his elder brother's. And there wasn't a fag in the Third who was capable of standing up to Handforth minor for more than a couple of minutes.

But Willy wasn't in the habit of misusing his power. He was the most popular junior in the Third, although he had only been at St. Frank's a few weeks. During this brief period he had reorganised things so thoroughly that the fags were enjoying all manner of advantages they had previously lacked.

And it was good policy to remain friendly with Willy. He was generous to a degree—just like the one and only Edward Oswald. And he had enough cheek for a dozen.

This afternoon ramble along the beach from Caistowe to Shingle Head was Willy's idea. Chubby Heath and Owen minor had been compelled to go whether they liked it or not. If Willy gave the command, there was nothing more to be said.

It was cold, and somewhat thick out to sea. Only a faint breeze blew, and there was a dampness in the atmosphere which was not exactly comfortable. However, the fags didn't notice little details of this kind. They were collecting seashells and curiously-shaped pebbles.

And Willy had some vague idea that they might run across a few shrimps or winkles. Funds were rather short, and some kind of delicacy for tea would be acceptable. But Willy and Co. were rather foggy as to how winkles and shrimps could be found. But they kept their eyes open.

Chubby Heath had ventured along a narrow strip of seaweed-covered rocks, treacherous and slippery, which jutted out into the sea. Willy had given one look, and ordered his chum to come back.

For Willy, although reckless himself, could always see the faults of others. He would have strode along that ridge without a qualm—but he couldn't see anybody else do it.

And so the three fags went on their way, still looking for shrimps and winkles, and occasionally picking up pebbles or shells. The afternoon sport was not proving to be very exciting.

"We sha'n't find any shrimps along here!" said Owen minor, with a sniff. "In fact, I don't think it's the time of year for shrimps! It wouldn't be so bad if we could spot a decent-sized crab! Shrimps don't live in these parts——"

"Hold on!" said Chubby, pointing. "What's that patch over there? See? On those rocks! That reddish blob! I'll bet there are enough shrimps there to provide the whole Third——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the matter with you, you cackling ass?" demanded Chubby.

Willy Handforth yelled again.

"You — you ignorant fathead!" he gurgled. "Who told you that shrimps are pink or red?"

"Who told me?" repeated Chubby Heath, staring. "Nobody! I've got eyes, I suppose? I've seen shrimps thousands of times—and eaten them, too! What's the idea of trying to be funny?"

"My poor, pitiful josser!" said Handforth minor. "Shrimps are generally a grey colour—grey or brownish—and they don't turn red until they're boiled!"

"What?" said Chubby Heath blankly

"Fact!" went on Willy. "I've boiled 'em, and so I know! Besides, they don't crawl about the rocks like a swarm of ants! Shrimps live in the sea, and when they're swimming about, they look like spiders!"

"Ugh!" said Chubby, with a shiver. "I think I'll eat winkles in future!"

"And winkles are just like snails!" said Willy cheerfully.

"You—you rotter!" put in Owen minor. "If you go on like that, we sha'n't want any tea at all!"

Handforth minor grinned.

"That's just as well, because we sha'n't get any, by the look of it!" he remarked. "Hallo! What have we here? Gaze upon it, my lads! Fortune smiles upon us, and we can go shrimping in style!"

Chubby Heath and Owen minor stared. They had just turned a bend, after rounding some rocks. And there, tucked away in a little cove, just out of reach of the lapping waves, was a small, but cumbersome, fisherman's boat. The fags hurried up to it with great interest.

The boat was one of those heavy affairs, all smothered with tar, but it seemed to be in excellent condition, and a pair of oars were tucked away inside. At the stern there was an iron ring, with a short length of frayed rope attached.

"The giddy boat must have drifted ashore!" declared Willy. "No fisherman would leave it here, on this deserted bit of coast. I expect it got adrift from Caistowe during that gale last week. Then it drifted about, and got chucked up here—hitting a piece of smooth sand by luck."

This reasoning was probably correct. And the three fags walked round the boat with renewed interest. They were quite alone and unobserved. A stretch of sandy beach lay just in front of them, with frowning rocks in the distance. The sinister mass of

Shingle Head itself loomed up in the mist. At the rear of the beech the cliffs rose in jagged, rocky sections. The place was quite wild, and there was a certain grand beauty about it.

"Well, what shall we do?" asked Chubby Heath.

"We're going out in this boat," replied Willy promptly.

"Out?"

"Rather!"

"But—but it'll be too risky!" said Owen minor. "We might get caught on a rock or something! And if we got wrecked, there's nobody near by to help us——"

"Oh, don't croak!" said Handforth minor. "Trust to me, and you won't go wrong! You can take it for granted, my sons, that everything will be all serene. Lend a hand, and we'll shove her down into the water."

"But we sha'n't be able to manage a clumsy thing like this!" objected Chubby. "Look here, Willy, be reasonable! There's no sense in asking for trouble——"

"We're going out in the boat!" interrupted Willy firmly. "And if you fatheads make any more objections, I'll punch you sideways! I'll swipe you until you can't see straight! Now, what's it going to be?"

The answer, of course, was obvious.

Chubby Heath and Owen minor assisted vigorously, but grudgingly. The boat was heavy, but the three fags succeeded in getting it down to the water's edge at last. Heath and Owen had attempted to spoof—apparently pushing with all their strength, but using no real effort. Their leader, however, had quickly seen through this dodge, and a certain significant motion of his fist caused Heath and Owen to discover large stores of energy.

"Now then—jump in!" shouted Willy. "Look out, you ass! You'll get soaked——"

"Yow!" howled Chubby. "I'm half drowned!"

A wave had come in, soaking his feet, but he managed to scramble on board, and the other two followed. The boat was still on the sand—but with great speed, Willy grabbed one of the oars, and successfully poled the boat into deep water. Then, grabbing the other oar, he was soon rowing noisily.

He splashed the water everywhere, and the little craft made a jagged, zig-zag course out of the cove. Here the water was quite calm, and there was really no danger. Chubby Heath and Owen minor rather liked it now, and they were by no means sorry that they had started on the trip.

"I'll take one of the oars, if you like!" said Heath.

"Fat lot you know about rowing!" exclaimed Willy "If you get messing about with one of these oars, you'll tip us over!"

Handforth minor, like his brother, had supreme confidence in his own ability, but very little confidence in the ability of others. And he stuck to the two oars, and rowed with all his strength.

He didn't seem to realise that he was getting all the hard work, and his chums were having quite a luxurious time. At least, he didn't realise it at first. But when he began to perspire pretty freely, he became indignant.

"You—you lazy slackers!" he panted warmly.

"What?"

"You—you rotters!" said Willy. "Can't you lend a hand?"

"Well, my hat!" said Chubby Heath. "I like that! I offered to take one of the oars five minutes ago, but you scoffed at me——"

"Oh, don't quibble!" said Willy tartly. "Grab hold!"

He gave up the oars to his two chums. They seized one each, and continued the good work. And Willy found that they made quite a good job of it The cumbersome boat went through the water surprisingly well.

And by this time they were quite outside the cove, making for the open sea. The water here was not so smooth, but inclined to be peculiar in action. There were no waves, and it really seemed that the sea was quite smooth. But there were all manner of queer currents, due to the presence of so many rocks and jutting headlands. And, strictly speaking, this little expedition of the fags was quite a foolhardy performance. But they didn't think so.

"This is a jolly fine lark!" grinned Willy. "I've just thought of something else, too. Salvage!"

"Eh?"

"Salvage, my sons!"

"What the dickens do you mean?" asked Heath.

"Of course, being so ignorant, you wouldn't know," exclaimed Willy. "Here's this boat—a pretty mouldy old crock, I'll admit, but I expect it's worth three or four quid, all the same. It has been at the mercy of the wind and sea for days, and the owner has probably given it up as lost. Well, we've got it, and we'll barge into Caistowe——"

"And find the owner?" asked Heath eagerly.

"Exactly," said Handforth minor. "It won't take us long to discover who she belongs to. And if we don't get ten bob, at least, it'll be a pity! And that'll give us tons of money for a ripping feed!"

His chums looked at him admiringly.

"My hat!" said Owen minor. "You do think of things!"

"It's a good thing there's one of us who can think!" retorted Willy. "You chaps wouldn't have got hold of a wheeze like that in a month of Sundays! All we've got to do is to row round to Caistowe, and triumphantly shove the salvage ashore!"

"But we're not going in the direction of Caistowe at all!" declared Heath.

"We ought to be—we're rowing that way."

This was a fact. The juniors were using all their energy at the oars, and the bows of the boat were pointing towards Caistowe. They were now well out, clear of all the rocky projections, and nearly a quarter of a mile from the beach.

But, although they rowed with all their strength, it somehow seemed that they were making little or no progress. They were quite safe at present, for the sea was perfectly calm, and there was very little fear of turning such a cumbersome craft as this over.

"Just have a look at that point!" said Heath, indicating a jutting spur of rock with a nod of his head. "We're exactly opposite now and, according to the way we're rowing, we ought to be past within a minute."

"That's right," said Willy. "Put some beef into it!"

His chums perspired freely. But five minutes later they glanced at the shore again. And they were rather staggered to find that, instead of getting past the rocky projection, they had actually lost ground—or, to be more exact, water!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Owen minor blankly.

"Jolly queer!" said Willy, frowning. "We sha'n't get to Caistowe at this rate! A fat lot of good you chaps rowing! Gimme one of the oars."

He soon got to work and, for three or four minutes, he rowed with terrific vigour. But, in spite of this, it seemed that the boat would not progress. The only result was that she apparently got further from the shore—although they were not rowing outwards at all.

Willy paused at last, breathing hard.

"It's the current," he declared. "That's what it is! The giddy current, my sons! Who ever would think it was so jolly strong. It's no good—we shall never do it. The best thing we can do is to turn round, and buzz with the current, and get back to the shore."

"Good!" said Owen. "Why, hallo! What the dickens—— Look there! Jolly queer, isn't it?"

He pointed out to sea, and for some peculiar reason the horizon had completely vanished. The line which marked off the sky from the sea was no longer visible. But there, the fags could see a blank wall of greyish whiteness which seemed to cling to the surface of the sea like a pall.

"Fog!" said Willy, nodding. "I've seen it before—but you needn't get scared. We shall be ashore long before it comes over this way. Nothing to get windy about."

All the same, Willy looked rather anxious as he gazed at the fog bank. It had come unexpectedly—stealthily and in the fashion of all sea fogs. Only a short time before there had been no hint of its presence, but now it was there, enveloping the sea as far as one could gaze. Even the furthermost rocks of Shingle Head were already becoming hazy and indistinct.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Owen minor.

For, as he looked, these indistinct rocks were blotted out completely. It was like magic. There was no visible indication that the fog was increasing over there. Yet the rocks vanished—they became blurry, and then disappeared into the vague whiteness.

And now the fags were slightly alarmed. They worked like niggers, Willy himself using one of the oars with great energy. The boat had been turned by this time, and she was going with the current—but not exactly in the direction that the fags wished.

For they could not seem to get a great deal nearer to the shore. They were moving, certainly, but they kept an almost average distance from the land

And then, like the fall of a curtain, came the fog.

It was sudden and dramatic.

The juniors were in clear air, with the sea all about them, and with the rocky beach clear and well defined. And then, as though by the wave of a magician's wand, the beach disappeared—the beach, with the rocky projections, the cliffs, and the sands.

And the boat was surrounded by a whitish-grey wall.

Willy, sitting amidships with one of the oars, was looking at Chubby Heath in the stern. Chubby became ghostly, like some wraith of the mist. Then his form became indistinct, and he vanished.

"Great Scott!" came Owen minor's voice. "We're in the thick of it now! We're caught, you chaps—and we shall never find the shore."

And a chill crept into the hearts of all three.

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERY OF THE ROCKS!

HANDFORTH minor laughed reassuringly. "Don't get windy, you fatheads!" he said cheerfully. "There's nothing to worry about. Fancy getting scared by a bit of a fog! It doesn't matter tuppence if we drift for miles. The sea's calm, and we're bound to strike the shore sooner or later."

His words had the desired effect for a moment or two. Chubby Heath and Owen minor bucked up and laughed.

"Yes, we're all right!" said Chubby. "It's a bit of sport, in fact! My hat! Fancy getting caught in a fog, and losing the giddy beach. We shall have something to tell the other chaps when we get back."

They sat in the boat, with the oars idle,

strangely fascinated by the peculiar novelty of the situation. The entire abruptness of the change made it all the more remarkable.

All sound seemed to have left them—with the exception of the gentle lapping of the water against the sides of their boat, or the scrape of a foot on the boards. There was no longer any hiss of the sea against the rocks. For all they knew, they might have been scores of miles out.

They were shut in—enclosed in that wall of fog. Overhead the sky seemed to be fairly clear, which indicated that the fog layer was not deep. But on every side the grey pall hung thickly.

"I've read about a fog at sea, but I'm blessed if I've ever seen anything like this before," remarked Willy, at length. "Well, grab one of those oars. We might as well be moving."

"I say!" exclaimed Owen minor huskily.

"What's wrong?"

"We—we're in a rotten pickle, after all!" declared Owen. "If we row, we may be taking the boat further and further out to sea! There's no telling—we might get right out into the Channel! And—and then we shall be run down by one of the steamers."

Handforth minor sniffed.

"Don't be a fathead!" he said gruffly. "The shore's over in this way," he added, pointing. "Do you think I haven't got any sense of direction? We must row—because the current is inclined to drift us out, and all the time we're idle, we're getting further and further out to sea."

"Great Pip!" said Chubby. "You're right!"

They seized the oars rather eagerly now, and pulled with all their strength. Willy was quite certain as to the direction of the beach, but he was probably wrong. There is nothing easier than to get a totally wrong idea of direction in a fog—as many an expert master mariner has discovered to his dismay. It was hardly to be expected that a mere junior schoolboy could be successful.

And the fog got thicker.

The fags were hoping against hope that it would lift—that it was a mere passing mist that would fade as rapidly as it had gathered. But there was no such luck for them.

The juniors were invisible to one another. Even their voices seemed muffled when they spoke, and they were quite isolated from everything. Willy, although he was within three feet of Chubby Heath, could see nothing of his chum except a hand which appeared, ghost-like, now and again, as Chubby wielded his oar.

They kept it up until they were tired.

"It's no good," said Chubby, at length. "We're nowhere near the shore! I believe we're miles out already! Oh, it was mad to come out in this boat! I knew it from the very start——"

"Didn't I say so?" demanded Owen minor nervously. "Oh, it was madness! Chubby's right——"

"You're jolly lucky that I can't see you!" came Willy's voice aggressively. My only hat! You croakers! When I get you ashore, I'll knock you both flat!"

"You won't get us ashore!" said Chubby hopelessly. "We're going to drift out, and then we shall be drowned! Either that, or some whacking great ship will come and smash us to bits! You're always reading of accidents like that in the Channel now-a-days!"

Willy grunted.

"There's no need to be scared," he growled. "If you'll only have a little patience—— Hark! I—I say, can't you hear something?"

They all held still, and listened intently.

And, to their ears came the joyous sound of waves breaking on rocks. It seemed near, and yet, at the same time, the sound was so muffled and indistinct that it might have been half-a-mile away.

There is nothing so deceptive as fog. There was no real telling where these sounds of breaking waves came from. But the fags were filled with hope and delight.

And, strictly speaking, they were an exceedingly lucky trio.

Many people in their circumstances would have drifted out, further and further into the open sea. An experienced fisherman, who knew every cove and headland of this coast, might easily have met with disaster.

But these three fags, absolutely ignorant of the sea and its ways, found themselves within a foot or two of the rocks.

Without any warning, the welcome sight loomed up.

Gazing intently through the thick mist, Willy suddenly saw a darker patch—a kind of greyish outline. It took shape, and then Handforth minor gave a sudden whoop of joy.

"Rocks!" he yelled.

And here was no doubt about it. There—within a foot—brown, sinister-looking rocks loomed up. And at the same second the bows of the boat grated jarringly, and the stern swung round.

"Jump for it!" shouted Handforth minor.

Chubby Heath and Owen needed no second bidding.

They gave one leap, and succeeded in scrambling out of the boat on to the rocks. Willy followed them. And, so swift was this whole incident, that before they could turn round, the boat itself had vanished.

Lightened, she had slid off the rocky ledge, and had vanished into the fog. In all probability she was quite near by and possibly caught on the rocks. But the fags could see no sign of her.

"My goodness—that was quick!" said Owen minor breathlessly.

"It was a lot better for us to grab the chance while we had it, anyhow!" said Handforth minor. "We're pretty safe now,

I should think. We've only got to climb along these rocks and we shall get to the shore in a minute or two."

"Shall we?"" exclaimed Chubby in a hollow voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I—I've just thought of something!" said Heath, grabbing Willy's arm. "Oh, we were fools to get out of the boat! This—this may be one of those bits of rock far out beyond Shingle Head! It—it'll be covered over at high tide, and we shall be swept off and drowned."

It was a ghastly, disturbing thought.

And the other juniors, for the first time, realised that there was more than a chance that Chubby Heath's fear was correct. This part of the coast was dotted with isolated rocks which jutted out of the sea at low and half-tide. At full-tide they were covered.

Willy thrust the fearsome picture aside.

"We'll soon make certain, anyhow," he said huskily. "Come on!"

They moved along the slippery rocks—and Willy took good care that his chums remained quite close. One false step, and either of the fags would go plunging down to almost certain death. For, once in the icy water, surrounded by fog, there would be little or no chance of being hauled out.

And the rocks were covered with seaweed, slippery, and treacherous. The fags kept within touch of one another. And to their growing relief and joy they found that the rocks became drier and drier as they progressed. This could only mean one thing. They were close to the beach!

And all doubts were set at rest a minute later.

For, in front of them, loomed a solid wall of cliff, rearing its mass upwards into the sky. And here and there were clumps of coarse grass. Willy gasped with relief.

"It's all right, my sons," he said crisply. "This is the cliff—and we've only got to climb over these rocks until we come to an opening. Then we shall be able to get up to the open country."

His chums did not say much. They realised that they had had a very narrow escape, but to their boyish minds it did not seem so acute as it actually was. But they knew they were safe now, and it was only necessary to get to the top of the cliff and they would find their bearings all right.

In fact, the fog was not so dense up here, it seemed more inclined to cling to the sea, and although all objects at five yards were quite invisible, the juniors could see one another as they stood there.

The most remarkable fact about the whole adventure was that they were not even wet. Their boat had struck that narrow ledge, and, owing to prompt action, they had leapt on to the rock and saved themselves. Actually, the spot where they had landed was almost the further extremity of a narrow finger of rock which jutted right out into the sea.

And the fags had crawled up this, with the water on either side of them.

Owen minor looked round him, frowning.

"Why, I know where we are!" he exclaimed. "I remember now. We must have landed on the Demon's Finger."

"The which?" asked Willy.

"Of course, you don't know much about the coast here, do you?" said Owen. "There's a kind of bay just beyond Shingle Head. It's locally known as Demon's Gap. And just at one end of it there's a jutting chunk of rock which sticks right out to sea, and there's been many a fishing boat wrecked on it during storms. It's called the Demon's Finger."

"By jingo, you're right, old son!" said Chubby Heath. "It must have been the Demon's Finger—there's no other ledge of rock like that about it. So we're in Demon's Gap now. Not much chance of meeting anybody here."

"Why not?" asked Willy.

"Because the place is absolutely avoided," said Chubby, pleased that he was possessed of superior knowledge. "These country people are jolly superstitious, you know, and they won't come near the Gap, even in the daytime. They avoid the giddy place like the plague."

"Well, that doesn't make any difference," said Handforth minor. "We can get out of it, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes," said Owen. "We've only got to crawl along these rocks to the middle of the Gap, and there's a kind of gully which leads up. Come on—I'll lead the way. I shall be jolly glad when we get back to St. Frank's. I'm starving, and we shall be hours late for tea!"

Willy grinned, and pulled out his watch.

"You ass!" he said. "It's only just half-past three! We shall get back long before tea-time."

"I thought it was nearly six!" said Chubby. "That watch of yours must be wrong——"

"This watch was a present from the pater, and it's always right to a minute!" said Willy proudly. "It's not a five-bob thing, like most of you chaps have got! It's a watch!"

His chums were silent. At various times they had possessed "tickers," but they generally lasted until the second week of the term. By that time they had either been swopped for somebody's pocket-knife, or some grub, or they had had various pins stuck in the works, and thus rendered useless. The fags seemed to have an idea that watches were especially made to be opened and investigated and probed with pins and spent matches. And no self-respecting watch will stand this kind of treatment.

Handforth minor's pater was wise. He had presented his hopeful son with a keyless watch which had a sealed back. Willy couldn't open it, even if he wanted to—

which was very fortunate for the watch. It was still keeping perfect time.

The three fags, thus reassured as to the time, commenced going over the rocks in the direction of the gully. At least, Owen minor said they were going in the direction of the gully. It was just as likely that they were going the opposite way. But, in the fog, it was impossible to be quite certain.

They were climbing over one rock without speaking, when Owen, who was leading, suddenly came to a halt.

"Hist!" he whispered, looking back. "I can hear voices!"

And, looking round the boulder, they could just see two figures in the mist. They were men—big, burly fellows, in great reefer jackets and peaked caps. They stood there talking for a few moments, just against a yawning cavity in the rocks.

Chubby was quite astonished. He had been on this spot before, and he had never known that there were any caves hereabouts. Yet this black cavity certainly appeared to be a cave entrance of some sort.

Then an amazing thing happened.

One of the men turned, and entered the black hole. It must be understood that

And there, tucked away in a little cove, just out of reach of the lapping waves, was a small but cumbersome fisherman's boat.

"Nothing to be scared about!" said Willy. "We'll ask them——"

"Dry up, you ass," whispered Owen minor. "The people round here never come down into Demon's Gap! They may be some chaps looking for that giddy boat! And we let it drift out to sea again!"

Willy and Chubby Heath thought it just as well to keep quiet. They didn't want to come face to face with the boat's owner, and be compelled to confess that they had taken the craft out for a lark, and that they allowed it to drift away on the current.

And so the juniors crouched low on the rock.

They wanted to be quite sure before showing themselves. There was really no sense in asking for trouble.

Handforth minor and Chubby Heath crept forward, and peered cautiously round a friendly boulder. All was hazy beyond, but the fog was not absolutely dense—for here the juniors were at a higher level.

everything was very dim and vague to the juniors. They could only see just a few hazy outlines, and nothing definite. But they were willing to swear that the very cliff itself closed up.

At all events, there was no longer any cavity.

The figure of the second man vanished like some spectre of the mist. And while the three fags crouched there, wonderingly, they found themselves utterly alone. There was not the slightest indication that any men had been present.

"My goodness!" breathed Chubby Heath. "We—we must be dreaming!"

"But—but the men were there—I saw them!" declared Willy. "And—and did you notice that chunk of rock? It seemed to slide into position as though it were a kind of door!"

"We couldn't see much in the fog——" began Owen.

"Listen!" interrupted Chubby.

Faintly, indistinctly, there came a new sound.

It was like a muffled throbbing. Then, owing to the curious nature of fogs, the sound came to them in quite a loud burst. Throb—throb—throb! And just as suddenly it faded away.

"A motor-car!" whispered Chubby Heath breathlessly.

"Fathead!" sneered Willy.

"Eh?"

"Of course, a motor-car can go over these rocks, can't it?" asked Handforth minor sarcastically. "Talk sense for goodness' sake!"

"But I distinctly heard an engine——"

"Don't they put engines into motor-boats?" demanded Willy. "That's what we heard—a motor-boat, my sons! The chap went to it, and buzzed off! I wish it wasn't foggy—we could see what was going on then."

The fags were quite bewildered.

"Yes, I suppose you're right!" said Chubby, at length. "It must have been a motor-boat. But—but who the dickens was the chap? And where did he come from? That—that hole in the rock, you know——"

"We'll soon find out!" said Willy.

He walked forward, and his chums followed him.

They still had their eyes on that great slab of rock. And as they drew near they fairly gasped with astonishment. Before them, now clearly visible in the thinning fog, lay a great mass of rough, massive boulders. The one which had aparently moved was an enormous thing which must have weighed tons. It was utterly impossible for a dozen men to have shifted it.

And yet it seemed to the fags that it had closed like a door.

They were facing the cliff side—rough, rugged, and barren. The rocks were so hard that no footprints could have been left. And to all appearances no human being had been here for ages. The cliff was solid—with no trace of any cavity or tunnel.

"Well, this just about beats the band!" declared Handforth minor. "My sons, there's something pretty rummy about this! Lend a hand!"

He put his shoulder to the cliff face, and heaved. His chums helped him, but it was just like attempting to shift a sky-scraper.

"What—what can it mean?" asked Owen minor wonderingly.

"I—I think we must have been seeing things!" said Chubby, in rather a scared voice.

"Rats!" declared Willy. "We saw two men—one of them went into this rock, and the other cleared off in a motor-boat. You can't spoof me, and there's something fishy about it, too!"

"But what shall we do?"

"Do?" said Willy practically. "Well, nothing much. But I mean to tell Mr. Nelson Lee about it when we get back to St. Frank's! He's a corker when it comes to a mystery, and it won't take him long to get to the bottom of this."

"But how will he know where to come?" asked Owen.

"I'm going to take my bearings," said Handforth minor. "Now, look here. Let's stand back a bit."

They retreated some little way, but they could still see the cliff fairly clearly in the mist.

"That particular chunk of rock is a rummy shape," said Willy shrewdly. "It's about twenty feet high and fifteen feet broad, and it must weigh hundreds of tons, and——"

"But those men moved it," gasped Heath.

"Never mind that," said Willy. "I could move the earth if I had a lever big enough! There must be some balancing arrangement, I suppose," he added keenly. "Anyhow, it moved! And it's shaped something after the style of a heart, upside down, with the point sticking upwards."

"That's right enough!" said Owen. "I hadn't noticed it before."

"And immediately above it there's a clump of grass, in a dead line," went on Willy. "Just over to the left a piece of rock sticks out like a spike, with a sharp end. Now, we can't mistake the place, can we? We've only got to come and look for these landmarks, and we shall be on the spot."

"My hat, you're jolly cute!" said Chubby Heath admiringly.

"Rot!" declared Willy. "It's no good going away, and then suddenly remembering that we hadn't taken any location. We'll keep our eyes open, too, as we go along."

They left the spot, since it seemed quite fruitless to remain.

And, by luck, they found that they were within a comparatively short distance of the gully. Willy counted three projections that they had to get round. After the third projection, they found the gully looming up before them.

And, with laborious tread, they worked their way upwards, until, at length they found themselves with grass beneath their feet and with a stretch of moorland country in front of them.

The fog was almost the same up here, but nothing like so dense as it had been at sea level. They could see for five or six yards, but no further.

But both Chubby Heath and Owen minor knew their bearings, and they explained that this place was on the outer edge of Bannington Moor. St. Frank's lay about two and a half miles distant.

So the three heroes of the Third broke into a trot, and were soon covering the ground at a good speed.

They lost themselves once, but soon found a moorland road which ultimately led them past the old ramshackle mill, and from here they knew a short cut through Beilton Wood.

And when they reached St. Frank's there was still about twenty minutes to spare before teatime. Considering what they had been through, they had done very well indeed.

And they strode into the Triangle, bursting with their news.

CHAPTER III.

THE INSTINCTS OF THE SLEUTH!

"HARD lines!" said Reginald Pitt regretfully.

"Begad, rather!" agreed Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "It's shockin'ly unlucky, dear old boys—it is, really. I think the fog might have waited until we'd finished the game! Frightfully bad form, you know!"

"Fogs were always disagreeable!" I remarked, with a grin.

After vainly attempting to carry on a game of football for twenty minutes in the growing fog, we had at last abandoned it. It was rather a pity, too, because we had our visitors pretty well whacked.

Now, of course, the match would have to be replayed.

We had been entertaining Helmford College Juniors, and at half-time the score had been two—nil; our visitors being the side that had failed to score. Soon after half-time they had obtained a goal; but we were well in the ascendancy, and had no doubt as to what the results would be.

Then the fog crept up—until it was really impossible to see from one end of the ground to the other.

And at length we had forsaken the match. Fog is about the only atmospheric condition which will put an end to a football match.

Edward Oswald Handforth was rather indignant.

"Jolly rotten—that's what it is!" he said fiercely. "Why the dickens couldn't the fog wait until we'd done?"

"Better ask it," said McClure.

"Oh, don't try to be funny!" snapped Handforth. "If it hadn't been for the fog, the Helmford asses wouldn't have got that goal! I couldn't see the giddy ball! It suddenly came out of nowhere, and whizzed past me before I knew it!"

"Well, never mind," said Church. "The match is going to be played again—on Saturday, I think. Let's get indoors, and change. It's none too warm out here in these togs."

The advice was sound, and Handforth and Co. left Little Side, and made their way into the Triangle. But just before they reached the Ancient House doorway, three smaller figures loomed up out of the thick mist. Handforth paused as he recognised them.

"What have you been up to, my lad?" he asked, in a fatherly tone.

Willy grinned

"I've been making some discoveries!" he replied.

"What?"

"I've located a mystery!" said Willy calmly.

"If you're trying to pull my leg, kid——"

"No, honest Injun, Ted!" said Handforth minor. "We've found out something absolutely queer, and we're just off to tell Mr. Lee about it."

"Can't be did!" said Handforth. "Mr. Lee's not in. I saw him go out some time ago."

"Oh!" said Willy. "That's rotten!"

"If you've really discovered something, you'd better tell me all about it, my lad," said Handforth kindly. "Come along to my study, and cough it up. And if you're trying to kid me, you'll get slaughtered!"

Willy hesitated.

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you!" he said slowly.

"Why, you young ass——"

"You're such a reckless chap!" went on Willy. "There's no telling what you'll get up to, Ted. Still, there's no harm. I'm going to tell all the other chaps, and so you're bound to get to know. All right; I'm game!"

He spoke in a way which indicated that he was doing his major a favour. Handforth glared, but Church and McClure grinned. They always liked to hear Willy talking to his brother. He hadn't the slightest fear of him—indeed, one was led to suppose that Willy rather looked down on Edward Oswald.

They all entered the Ancient House, and proceeded to Study D, in the Remove passage. A fire was burning, and it was soon kicked into a blaze. And then Willy, aided by Chubby Heath and Owen, explained how they spent the afternoon.

"What rot!" said Handforth, at last. "Are you trying to spoof me that two men moved a chunk of the cliff weighing about twenty-five tons? You cheeky young fatheads!"

"It's true!" declared Heath warmly.

"Don't be a young donkey——"

"I tell you——"

"Another word, my child, and I'll biff you!" said Handforth, frowning. "It's humanly impossible for two men to move a giddy cliff!"

Willy grinned.

"I didn't say they moved the cliff—only a bit of it," he explained. "How about a strong-room door?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing—but a strong-room door weighs about a couple of tons," said Willy calmly. "And one man can easily move it. That's because it's on hinges, and properly balanced. This chunk of rock must be hinged somehow."

Handforth looked keen and eager.

"Well, that's feasible," he admitted. "I was just going to suggest the same thing, as a matter of fact. Let's have the facts clear. First of all, you took out a boat,

and lost yourselves in the fog. After that, you were wrecked on the Devil's Toe——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The Demon's Finger, you ass!" chuckled McClure.

"What's the good of quibbling?" roared Handforth. "There's not much difference between a toe and a finger, I suppose?"

"Besides, we **didn't** get wrecked," said Willy. "We jumped ashore, and while we were among the rocks we saw these two men."

"Are you absolutely sure they came out of the cliff face?" asked Handforth eagerly. "And are you sure that they went off in a motor-boat?"

"Pretty sure, anyway," replied Owen minor. "We couldn't see anything in the fog—we only heard the noise of the engine. But there's no question about the chaps coming out of the rock. We saw that all right."

"And you examined the cliff afterwards?"

"Yes," replied Willy. "But I'm blessed if we could find anything. I tell you, it's the most mysterious thing I've ever struck. And I'm pretty sure there's something fishy about it, too. Men don't come out of rocks like that if they're up to legitimate business. I marked the place before coming away—so that we should know it again."

"How do you mean, you marked it?" asked Handforth.

"Well, I took note of the landmarks," replied Handforth minor. "That chunk of rock that moved is about twenty feet high and fifteen feet broad—and jolly thick, too."

"You young ass!" said his elder brother witheringly. "You hopeless duffer. You babbling lunatic! And you're trying to tell me that two men moved a piece of rock twenty feet high!"

"If you don't like to believe it, you can do the other thing!" said Willy coolly. "But it happens to be the truth—that's all. This piece of cliff looks a bit like a heart—reversed. And just over the top of it, in a dead line, there's a clump of grass. And on the left a piece of rock sticks out like a spike. You can't mistake it. You've only got to go along the base of the cliff in the Demon's Gap, and you'll locate the spot in a minute."

"It was jolly cute of you to notice all those details," said Church.

"Cute?" repeated Handforth. "Rats! Anybody would have done it. It seems to me that something ought to be done. The whole thing's queer——"

"Of course something ought to be done," interrupted Willy. "As soon as Mr. Lee comes in I'm going to tell him all about it. At one time I thought about informing the police—but they're not much good about here. Mr. Lee's the man for the job."

Handforth major shook his head.

"Don't you believe it!" he said. "Now look here, my lads—keep this thing mum. Understand? Don't tell Mr. Lee—and don't breathe a word to any of your pals. If you do, I'll knock spots off the three of you!"

"What's the idea?" asked Willy, grinning.

"Never mind what the idea is!" said Handforth. "But you've got to keep quiet—or else answer to me! I don't want to threaten you, or anything like that, but you'd better understand that you'll get it in the neck if you disobey me."

His brother grinned.

"I suppose you're going to do a bit of investigating?" he asked. "Well, if it'll please you, we'll keep mum. But only for a couple of hours, Ted. If you fail to turn up by calling over we'll get up a search party, and come and look for your remnants."

"You young idiot!" said Handforth wrathfully. "If I take up this case, I shall make a thorough success of it! It's the first opportunity I've had this term—and long before calling over I shall have routed out the mystery."

"Well, you'd better go easy—that's all," said Willy. "You're a pretty reckless sort of chap, you know, and you'll find a lot of trouble if you're not careful. We shouldn't like to come and find your remains littered all over the rocks!"

The three fags took their departure soon afterwards, after promising that they would keep the thing quiet. But this promise only held good until calling over, as Willy took pains to explain.

"Now we'll see about tea," said Church briskly, after the fags had gone.

"Tea!" snorted Handforth. "Tea! You've got the nerve to talk about tea when a problem like this is waiting to be investigated? You're coming with me, my son—and you're coming at once!"

"Oh, but look here——"

"I say, Handy——"

"Don't argue—my mind's made up!" interrupted Edward Oswald grimly. "There's not much daylight left, and we want to take advantage of it. I mean to find out what there is in that cliff."

It was useless for Church and McClure to argue. Their Leader had made up his mind, and the only thing was to agree. If they didn't, it would certainly lead to a whole lot of trouble.

Accordingly, the three chums of Study D soon set out. They did so without attracting attention for they were completely concealed in the fog. And, in any case, there were very few fellows about—the majority being at tea in their various studies.

Just as they were passing out of the gateway Church heard a footstep. Glancing round, he dimly caught sight of a ghostly figure in the mist—a figure which was crossing from the College House to the Ancient House. Church came to a halt.

"Why, that's Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed.

"Eh?" said Handforth.

"I thought you said he was out——"

"So he was out——at least, I saw him going through the lobby!"

"You—you duffer!" said Church warmly. "Then Mr. Lee isn't out at all! And he hasn't been out, either! I've never known such a chap for jumping to conclusions! Look here, we'd better go and tell him all about this!"

"Yes, rather!" agreed McClure.

Handforth clenched his fists.

"Look here, Mac, we'll do nothing of the kind!" he said grimly.

"What's the idea of calling me Mac?" asked McClure. "It isn't the first time you've said that——"

"And it won't be the last!" interrupted Handforth aggressively. "McClure's too long! In future I shall call you Mac! We're not going to tell Mr. Lee anything about this—if we do, he'll only take the thing out my hands!"

This, of course, was just what Church and McClure required. They would have given anything if Handforth could be restrained from going on this expedition. Church greatly regretted that he had not called Nelson Lee when he first sighted him. Handforth wouldn't have had a chance then.

As it was, Church and McClure were compelled to go. They were by no means nervous, or afraid—but they were certainly hungry, and, at the same time, they had an instinctive feeling that Handforth was going to make an ass of himself. His chums judged from past experiences.

"Of course, it's a jolly good idea, going on this trip," said Church diplomatically. "But, at the same time, I reckon it would be better if one of us went back and told Mr. Lee the facts. Then he could follow on, and get in at the death, so to speak. He'd just be in time to see you complete the case in a victorious way, Handy."

But Handforth wasn't moved by this kind of subterfuge.

"Not likely!" he said firmly. "I'm not having any butting in from Mr. Lee until the job's absolutely finished. And I don't want to hear any more fatheaded suggestions. If you can't talk sense, don't talk at all."

Church and McClure could talk sense all right, but, unfortunately, Handforth didn't regard their advice in this light. And so they continued their journey to Demon's Gap.

As they progressed towards the coast there were some signs of the fog lifting. But when they finally arrived on the cliff top the fog was as thick as ever, and it was quite impossible to see the beach, nearly a couple of hundred feet below.

The three juniors, in fact, nearly fell headlong down the cliff—for they arrived at the edge almost before they knew it. They only just pulled up in time.

Handforth would probably have gone clean over if Church hadn't let out a warning yell just in time.

"Well, here we are," said Handforth. "This giddy fog is a nuisance, you know. We can't see anything. Now, as far as I can make out, the Demon's Gap is just below us. We've only got to scramble down this cliff——"

"Scramble down the cliff!" echoed McClure. "Why, you chump, we should kill ourselves! It only slopes for a few feet, and then drops sheer! The only thing we can do is to find that gully. It's just along here, to the right."

Even Handforth was compelled to admit the wisdom of this suggestion. But, of course, he insisted that the gully was towards the left, and not to the right. But, after walking three or four hundred yards in that direction, he agreed to try the other way. So they retraced their steps.

And, sure enough, within five or six minutes they arrived at the gully. They had no difficulty in getting down to the beach by this means. But, even so, they had to proceed with caution, for, owing to the thick fog, they were in constant danger of colliding with sharp, ugly rocks, or slipping down into treacherous clefts. At length, however, they found themselves at the base of the cliffs, progressing in the direction of the Demon's Finger.

They knew the coast well, and so the fog was not altogether fatal to their expedition. They seemed to be in a world apart, with crags and boulders rising out of the murk in ghost-like formations.

And there was the continuous rumble and swish of the sea, although this was completely hidden by the dull blanket of fog. The tide was about half out, and the waves were breaking upon the rough, jagged rocks.

"It's all very well to talk about a piece of rock shaped like a heart—but it's not so easy to find!" said Handforth gruffly. "By George! If those young fatheads were spoofing us, I'll jolly well skin 'em alive!"

As a matter of fact, Church and McClure had thought of this possibility already. But Willy had said "honest injun," and they could hardly believe that he would use that expression—which, in schoolboy parlance, was an absolute guarantee of good faith—if he was really playing a practical joke.

It was McClure who made the discovery.

The three juniors were keeping as close to the cliff face as possible, and working their way along, studying the hazy outline of the rocks as they progressed. It was a ticklish business, for they had no sand to walk on—but were compelled to climb over rough masses of rock.

McClure was looking up the cliff when he gave a little exclamation of satisfaction.

"That's it!" he said keenly. "Not a doubt about it! It's a pretty queer kind of a heart, but there's the tuft of grass, and that spike of rock. My hat! A hundred men couldn't shift that piece of rock!"

They went a little nearer, and could see more distinctly. At close quarters the fog thinned out, enabling them to see the clear outlines.

And, according to Willy's description, this was certainly the place.

"Yes, I knew I was right!" said Handforth, nodding. "Of course, I spotted it first, although one of you asses started talking! That's generally the case! By George! Young Willy is dotty! That piece of rock must weigh about five thousand tons! It's solid—it's a part of the cliff!"

They went closer, and they walked all round that massive rock, and pushed at it and heaved with their united strength. But they might just as well have tried to shift the very cliff itself.

"Not a footmark—not a trace of anybody!" grunted Handforth. "I'm a trained detective, and I could easily see footmarks if there were any! Those young rotters must have been pulling my leg——"

"Hist!" whispered Church suddenly. "I—I heard something——"

"Voices!" breathed McClure tensely.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CLIFF OF MYSTERY!

HANDFORTH crouched down among the rocks.

"You're right!" he murmured. "Voices! I can hear 'em! By George! I expect it's those two men coming back. We'll crouch here and spring out on the bounders as soon as they show up."

His chums looked highly alarmed.

"You—you reckless ass!" gasped McClure. "It would be madness to do that! We shouldn't stand an earthly against two determined men—and it's almost a certainty they've got revolvers."

"The best thing we can do is to slip down that hole in the rocks!" said Church quickly. "You know—you nearly fell down it Handy! We can crouch there without being spotted, and see everything that goes on. If these men open the rock, we shall be able to see it."

"Ass!" said Handforth. "Naturally, that's the best thing to do—I knew it all the time! But you'll never let me get a word in edgeways!"

Without waiting another second they slid across the rocks, and then lightly dropped down into a kind of pit—a natural affair formed by two large boulders. It accommodated them neatly, and in such a manner that they could peep over the edge, and see the entire face of the cliff at this point.

And they were only just in the nick of time.

For, hardly had they dropped into cover, when two men loomed up out of the mist. They were only progressing slowly, talking at the same time. In the fog the three juniors could not see much, but the men looked big and powerful. They were well wrapped up, and of a seafaring type.

"This fog comes in kinder handy, Ginger!" said one of the men, as they paused at the cliff face. "This is the first time we've been able to get busy in daylight since we started things."

"It's likely we'll have more chances soon," said the man addressed as Ginger. "They have a good few fogs on this coast during winter, I reckon. Still, we'd better be careful. Fogs have a nasty habit of lifting—although I don't think this one'll shift for a while."

While they were speaking, one of the men seemed to be doing something in a kind of crevice. And then, as Handforth and Co watched, they were astounded to see the the great face of the cliff open outwards!

That entire piece of rock, weighing scores of tons, swung gradually outwards. To one who was not accustomed to such a sight, it was rather staggering. The two men stood waiting, quite unconcerned.

They little knew that three pairs of keen eyes were watching them. They evidently believed that they had the whole scene to themselves. And a moment or two later the heavy rock came to a standstill.

Both the men passed through a kind of gap, and disappeared into what seemed to be the entrance to a cave or tunnel. The watching juniors waited expectantly, fully believing that the rock would close again.

But the seconds passed, and still the opening remained.

"That's queer!" breathed Church. "They haven't shut the entrance!"

"Oh, it's bound to go in a minute!" said McClure.

But it didn't go. Perhaps the men were coming out again, soon—indeed, this seemed to be the only possible explanation. Feeling that the fog made everything quite secure, they had not taken the trouble to close the extraordinary rock door. Probably they had been in the habit of leaving it open at night, and so they adopted the same procedure now.

After three minutes had elapsed, Handforth gradually raised himself.

"What's the idea?" asked McClure quickly.

"I'm going to have a look at that tunnel!" declared Handforth.

"But—but——"

"Rats!" said Handy. "We may not get another chance. Look here, this is something big! Church, you stay here and watch—keep your eyes skinned, and if anybody else comes, buzz up and give us the tip. McClure and I are going into that tunnel."

"I say, it's too risky!" said McClure doubtfully.

"Rot! We're going!" said Handforth curtly.

Church and McClure knew perfectly well that it was a foolhardy proceeding. But to argue with Handforth was every bit as foolhardy, and hopeless into the bargain. McClure promptly accompanied his leader—chiefly because he wanted to be with Handforth when the latter encountered trouble. This, in McClure's opinion, was a certainty. McClure wasn't looking for trouble, but he

didn't like to think of Handforth being left to himself. Handy was capable of any recklessness.

They slid silently along, and at last came to the great rock, which now stood like a huge door ajar.

But even at close quarters, the juniors could not see what mechanism worked the door. Something was obviously hidden at the rear of the movable boulder, and so cunningly fixed that it was quite invisible from outside. It must have taken weeks, and much hard labour, to effect that contraption.

The two juniors peered cautiously into the dark cavity. And at the same second they drew their breath in with surprise.

"Great Scott!" muttered McClure, in amazement.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly.

They stared down the tunnel—for this, indeed, was what the opening actually was. They had fully expected to see a cave or cavern, black and grim. The reality was very different.

The tunnel stretched away for perhaps thirty feet without a turn. At this point there was a bend, and there, suspended from the roof, was a glowing electric light! The tunnel itself was wide, dry, and perfectly clean, and a current of pure air passed through. The light seemed rather hazy, owing to the intruding fog.

"But—but what can it mean?" asked McClure huskily. "Here, right in the middle of these barren cliffs—electric light! It—it can't really be true!"

"Ass!" said Handforth keenly. "We can believe our own eyes, I suppose? Of course it's true! I was right all along! I jolly well knew there was something squiffy about this business! By George! There'll be a sensation when I expose the whole show! All the big London papers will be full of it, with my name in big type!"

But McClure looked rather uncertain.

"I say, old man, it's too much! We can't manage it on our own!" he said tensely. "If we go in here we shall only get ourselves in a fix. It's too much! We can't tackle it!"

Handforth looked at him with supreme scorn.

"You weak-kneed funk!" he said bitingly. "My only aunt! Afraid to tackle a little thing like this!"

McClure clenched his fists.

"I'm not afraid!" he muttered fiercely. "You know it, you rotter! But I'm cautious. We ought to buzz away before we're seen, and tell Mr. Nelson Lee. He'll fetch the police, and then the thing will be done in style."

Without question, this was the best plan of all.

But Handforth scorned it.

"Oh, yes!" he said witheringly. "A fine idea—I don't think! We make all the discoveries, and Mr. Lee and the police get all the credit. Not likely! We're going to do this thing on our own. Come on! We'll slip to that corner and see what lies beyond."

They succeeded in scrambling out of the boat on to the rocks. And so swift was this whole incident that, before they could turn round, the boat itself had vanished.

Before McClure could make any comment, Handforth walked forward. His chum was just as curious as Handy, but he saw no reason why he should take unnecessary risks. Only for a second did he hesitate, and then he followed.

They arrived at the corner of the tunnel, and from here they could see further along—but only for a very short distance. About ten yards away there was another bend, bearing away towards the right, and rising slightly. And a glow from beyond the turning clearly told that another electric light hung from the roof just out of the line of vision.

"Come on!" whispered Handforth eagerly.

He tiptoed on, and McClure followed him. They reached the corner in safety, but even as they did so disaster occurred. McClure had been anticipating it all the time, and he was not exactly surprised, although he was greatly startled.

Handforth was fairly staggered.

For they had only just turned the corner, and had come within sight of another stretch of the tunnel, when the two men appeared. They appeared as though by magic, seemingly emerging from the very wall itself.

As a matter of fact, they had come out of

a side tunnel, the entrance to which was concealed to the juniors. Their appearance was so sudden, and so unexpected, that Handforth and McClure stood stock still.

And the two men, catching sight of the two juniors at the same time, halted in their tracks. A pipe dropped to the floor with a crash, spilling hot embers in all directions. And the man uttered a fierce curse.

"What in thunder does this mean?" shouted the other hoarsely. "Boys—schoolboys! What fools we were to leave that door open! I never thought that—— Quick, Ginger! We've got to get these young whelps!"

"Sure!" snapped the other,

And they simply hurled themselves forward towards Handforth and McClure.

"Scoot!" yelled McClure urgently.

But, to his dismay and consternation, Handforth remained quite still. And he clenched his fists and squared his jaw. He was ready to fight! He was quite prepared to fight! He was quite prepared to put up a scrap, and this, as McClure well knew, was the very height of folly.

McClure had already taken a step or two, but he now halted.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Run, Handy——"

"Piffle!" shouted Handforth. "We're going to fight these rotters, and then we'll get on with the investigation."

McClure groaned, and prepared himself for the worst.

And by this time the two men were upon them. They evidently believed that they had a very swift task in front of them. They were burly fellows, and two mere junior schoolboys seemed quite a tame proposition.

But they didn't know Edward Oswald.

"Come on—I'm waiting!" roared Handforth aggressively. "I know your game, you rotters! Boring holes in the giddy cliff, and fixing up electric light! It's a coiners' den! You can't spoof me!"

"You young fool!" snarled one of the men. "Quit that noise!"

He reached forward, intending to grasp Handforth by the shoulder. But the leader of Study D. suddenly let himself go. His famous right came round, and it went towards its mark with glorious accuracy.

Crash!

Handforth's fist thudded into the man's face with the force of a battering-ram. It was a well aimed, beautifully timed blow. The fellow staggered, shook in every joint, and crashed headlong to the floor, grunting with agony and rage and surprise.

"That's just to start with!" bellowed Handforth. "Want some more?"

McClure was struggling desperately with Ginger, who had grasped him so firmly that the junior had no chance of getting away—although he was putting up a very good fight for it.

Biff!

Handforth's right came round again, in spite of his bruised and tingling knuckles. Ginger caught the blow on the mouth, and he gave a perfect bellow of rage as he staggered.

By this time the other man was on his feet, purple with fury. He hurled himself at Handforth like some animal. And Edward Oswald, in spite of his pluck and dogged determination, was overwhelmed.

He hit out right and left, and some of his blows took effect; but the fellow was powerful, and, once at close quarters, Handy had little or no chance. He was swept off his feet.

Then a hammer seemed to thud upon the top of his head. It seemed to him that the whole tunnel was collapsing. He was picked up, and hurled against the wall with such a thud that he sank down, dazed and dizzy.

"You infernal young brat!" panted the man fiercely. "By gosh! I'll make you pay for that, you little spitfire! Loosed all my front teeth—that's what you've durned well done, hang you!"

McClure had attempted to dash away, feeling that flight was the best course under the circumstances. For, at least, he would be able to give warning that Handforth had met with disaster, and could bring help.

But he was not allowed to get away.

Ginger was after him in a moment, overtook him at the first bend, and hauled him back, struggling and panting. And by this time Handforth was lying on his back, with the other man astride him.

And three minutes later the two juniors were side by side, their hands bound behind them. And the men were standing over them, breathing hard, and in a state of considerable alarm.

"It's a durned mess-up—that's what it is, Cap'n!" said Ginger hoarsely. "The boss'll be fair mad when he hears about it, and we sha'n't hear the last of it for many a day! The boss was always careful about that door being closed. Schoolboys, mind you!"

"Yes, it's infernally serious," said the Captain slowly. "We can't let the brats go—they'll spread the whole yarn everywhere, and that'll mean the finish. We've got to keep 'em here."

"Oh, yes—you try!" said Handforth aggressively. "You needn't think you'll have everything your own way. There'll be a search-party come after us——"

"That won't be any good!" muttered McClure, with a quick flash of shrewdness. "At the school they only knew we'd come out for a walk—we didn't even say we were coming to the beach. They'll never be able to find us."

Handforth, fortunately, understood.

"Oh, my hat!" he said blankly. "You're right!"

"You'd best understand that you've let yourself into a tidy hole!" said the Captain grimly. "This is what comes of interfering in things that don't concern you. Take one of 'em, Ginger. We'll shove 'em along

the new tunnel, and put 'em about in that storo cavern. They'll be safe enough there, I guess."

Handforth and McClure were roughly hauled to their feet, and then forced along the tunnel until they arrived at the partially concealed side-turning. Another electric-light gleamed further along. But before they reached it, the juniors saw a big wooden door.

It was built into the very rock, and Ginger pulled the bolts back and swung the door open.

"In with 'em!" said the other man.

The two prisoners were pushed into a black opening, and then the door swung to with a thudding sound. Handforth and McClure found themselves in pitchy darkness. And they could hear the bolts being pushed home on the other side of the door.

They had made a few discoveries, but it could hardly be truthfully said that Handforth had covered himself with glory.

CHAPTER V.

STARTLING NEWS!

"SILLY ass!" muttered Church, with a worried frown. He's—bound to get into trouble! But at the same time Church hoped against hope that his chums would suddenly appear out of the foggy opening. Over five minutes had elapsed, and he was still quite alone. He had heard no sound—no hint whatever of the fight which had been proceeding in the tunnel.

"The rocks effectively muffled all sounds, and Church had an idea that his chums were only just in the entrance. He could hear the waves breaking upon the rocks with continuous insistency, although he could see nothing of the ocean.

Then, at last, he heard a movement.

Two figures came out of the rock doorway, and Church caught his breath in with a quick, silent gasp. For the figures were those of the two men. Handforth and Co. were not to be seen.

"Oh, my goodness!" muttered Church. "Something's happened!"

For a second he thought about dashing out, and asking what had occurred to his chums. But he instinctively drew back, and waited. After all, he could do practically nothing on his own.

It was just as well that he remained in concealment.

Ginger and the captain came out upon the flat rocks and peered searchingly through the fog. They saw no sign of Church, for he had drawn his head down quickly. And the voices of the two men came to him as he crouched there.

"A waste of time—that's what it is!" said Ginger. "There ain't any more—one o' the brats let it out. Didn't you hear him say that nobody wouldn't know what had 'appened to 'em? It's no good lookin' about 'ere."

"Still we'll make sure," said the other.

They came nearer, and Church pressed himself down into the crevice until he was tucked away beneath a little overhanging part. Even if the men looked straight down it was doubtful if they would spot him.

And Church was filled with wild alarm.

Handforth and McClure were prisoners! They had been captured by these mysterious men from the tunnel!

It was absolutely up to him to remain at liberty, so that he would be able to rush back to St. Frank's and obtain help. For if he was captured, too, then the matter would be grave, indeed.

Certainly, Willy knew where they had gone to, and he would undoubtedly tell Nelson Lee soon after calling-over. But Willy knew nothing of this adventure, and he would only be able to say that the three Removites had vanished.

It was also up to Church to let the men think that Handforth and McClure were the only schoolboys on the scene. He felt sure that he would be able to escape even if he made a sudden dash for it. In the fog he would easily be able to outwit the two strangers. But that would be a foolish move, for they would know that he had escaped and would be prepared for any possible rescue party.

By remaining quiet, however, he would be able to slip away unseen and unheard, and the strangers would know nothing.

So Church crouched low, and almost held his breath.

The captain and Ginger searched among the rocks, coming nearer and nearer, and at last, they were practically over the spot where Church lay concealed. At any moment he expected to be seen and hauled out.

He even began to accuse himself of being foolish for not making a dash at the first moment. And then, while he was thinking of this, the men moved away. And, finally, they returned to the tunnel entrance, and passed inside. And Church, watching in the dim gloom, saw that great piece of rock slide back into position—until it seemed to become a part of the very cliff itself.

"Thank goodness!" he murmured fervently.

He didn't wait any longer now, but squeezed himself out of his tight crevice; and a moment or two later he was climbing over the rocks and towards the gully. He didn't pause until he reached the top—until the open country stretched before him. And now he was breathless and alarmed and excited.

"Oh, I thought something like this would happen!" he muttered feverishly. "It was all Handforth's fault! The reckless chump! Whenever he starts any of his fatheaded investigations, he always lets himself into the cart!"

Church could easily picture what had happened.

His two chums had entered the tunnel, and had then been surprised by the strangers. And before they could escape, they had been seized and held. There was no doubt about it, the position was serious.

Church didn't even think of going to the police.

The one plan, according to his idea, was to tell Nelson Lee all about it with as little delay as possible. There was something serious here—something grave and sinister.

And it needed the wit and skill of a man like Nelson Lee to deal with it. Perhaps it would not be too late for Nelson Lee to effect the rescue of Handforth and McClure. And the sooner he got to St. Frank's, the better.

It was very gloomy now, for evening was drawing on, and the dusk was further thickened by the swirling fog. But as Church progressed, it seemed to him that the fog was not quite so dense now.

And, at last, he arrived at St. Frank's. There was still well over half an hour to calling over, and the Triangle was deserted. On such a cold, chilly evening, all the fellows were in their various studies, or the common rooms, gathered round the fires.

Church entered the Ancient House at the double, and dashed along the passages, making straight for Nelson Lee's study. But just as he was turning a corner he nearly charged full-tilt into a small junior who was coming round.

"Hallo!" said the latter. "What the—— My hat! Anything happened?"

The small junior was Willy Handforth, and he looked at Church rather curiously, and with a certain amount of alarm.

"Yes!" panted Church. "Handy and McClure are collared!"

"Collared!"

"Yes, we spotted a couple of men, and they went into that opening in the cliff!" said Church tensely. "Handforth followed like an ass! And McClure went with him. They didn't come out."

"Phew!" whistled Handforth minor. "That's just like my major! He always thinks he can do something clever, and then he gets himself tied up in about a dozen giddy knots!"

"Don't I know it!" said Church bitterly. "He's done it scores of times, and he never learns by experience! And this time it seems pretty bad. He and McClure are properly captured by those men."

As quickly as possible, Church explained exactly what had occurred, and Willy Handforth listened with growing alarm. By the time Church had finished Willy's usually sunny countenance was clouded, and his jaw set.

"It's my fault!" he said fiercely. "I was an ass to tell Ted anything about it—I ought to have gone straight to Mr. Lee ——"

"I'm going to him now," said Church.

"Good wheeze! I'll come with you."

They moved off together, and I ran full tilt into them just as they were approaching Nelson Lee's study. I had been to see the guv'nor, and I regarded Church and Handforth minor keenly.

"What's the trouble?" I inquired. "You both look pretty well worried. What's Handforth been getting up to now? I'll bet he's in some trouble or other?"

"That wasn't a difficult guess!" said Church. "When isn't Handy in trouble? But this seems to be a bit more serious than usual. We're going to tell Mr. Lee all about it."

"I'll come with you!" I said promptly.

They made no objection, and together we went to Nelson Lee's study. I knocked and entered. The guv'nor was sitting in front of the fire, reading the evening newspaper. He looked round inquiringly.

"I met these chaps out in the passage, sir," I said. "They've got something special to tell you, I think."

"It's about Handforth, sir," said Church quickly. "He and McClure have been captured by some rough men in Demon's Gap, just along the coast. They went into a tunnel, and they've been made prisoners, and they're in a fearful hole. We want you to do something, sir."

"We thought it better to come straight to you, sir," put in Willy. "I found the cave place first. It's hidden behind a great piece of rock which moves out on a hinge, and I believe the men are criminals of some sort. It's pretty bad for my brother, sir. There's no telling what might happen to him."

Nelson Lee laid his paper aside.

"What on earth is this rigmarole?" he inquired curiously. "A tunnel at Demon's Gap! Mysterious criminals who appear out of the very rocks! What put such ridiculous ideas into your head?"

"But it's true, sir!" said Church tensely.

"I say!" I protested. "Draw it mild, you know!"

"I tell you it's true!" insisted Church. "I told Handforth not to go in, but he wouldn't take any notice——"

"Come, come!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "Let us hear this story somewhat more lucidly, my boys. You say that you were the first to discover this remarkable place, Handforth minor?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then tell me all about it."

Quickly, but in clear, concise sentences, the Third Former explained exactly what had taken place during the afternoon, although he didn't go into many details concerning the incident of the fisherman's boat. He saw no necessity to bring that little affair in.

"Rather an extraordinary story," commented Nelson Lee, at length. "I cannot help thinking, my boy, that you are

attempting to play a little joke at my expense, or, possibly, that you have allowed your imagination to run somewhat wild."

Willy leaned over the desk, his face earnest and anxious.

"I'm not trying to spoof you, sir!" he said grimly. "And I haven't let my imagination run loose. It's true, sir—every bit of it! Ask Church—he knows a lot more!"

"What have you to say, Church?" asked Nelson Lee crisply.

Church had a whole lot to say. He went into all details regarding the capture of Handforth and McClure. And Nelson Lee's early scepticism completely vanished. He could tell by Church's very anxiety and the ring of his voice that he was relating an actual occurrence.

And I could see that Nelson Lee's eyes had suddenly taken on a keen light. He repeated some parts of the story, in order to get the details more clearly defined. And, at length, he rose to his feet.

"It appears, boys, that this business is somewhat serious," he said. "But you need not worry. I will look into it at once, and make every attempt to gain the freedom of Handforth and McClure."

"Are you going to tell the police, sir?" asked Church eagerly.

"I don't quite know," replied the guv'nor. "But you may rest assured, boys, that I shall leave no stone unturned. It will be advisable for you to remain quiet about the whole affair, for no good purpose would be served if the whole school discussed it. These men might easily get to know that the truth is out—and that would be bad for the two boys. Secrecy is essential."

"You can trust us, sir; we won't say a word," declared Willy.

"Good," commented the guv'nor. "Now, my lads, you had better go quietly to your own quarters, and try to behave normally. I can give you my word that everything possible will be done for Handforth and McClure. And you must not imagine that the boys are in danger. This affair is probably more simple than it appears on the surface."

Before the juniors left, Nelson Lee had calmed them to a very great extent, and they felt that Handforth and McClure would soon be back. But less than five minutes after we had departed, I sneaked back unobserved. Nelson Lee was just about to start off.

"There's no sense in beating about the bush, sir," I said boldly. "I'd like to come along, too."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"You are just forty seconds late, Nipper," he said calmly. "I was expecting you nearly a minute ago. It would have been very remarkable if you had not put in an appearance. Yes, you can come—to be quite truthful, I was going to fetch you, in any case."

"Oh, good!" I said eagerly. "We're going straight to Demon's Gap?"

"Yes."

"Got everything, sir?"

"I think so," said the guv'nor, smiling.

"Electric torch, revolver, a length of cord——"

"Yes, everything—including binoculars," said Nelson Lee. "There is a great advantage in having deep pockets, Nipper. One can carry things without appearing too bulky."

Nelson Lee moved across to the window, and laid his hand on the blind.

"Switch the light off, and follow me."

"Through the window?" I asked, staring.

"A somewhat undignified exit, but it has two advantages," replied Lee smoothly. "Firstly, it is a short cut, and secondly, we attract no attention, for the Triangle, I judge, is quite deserted. Out with the light!"

A moment or two later we were outside, slipping silently across the foggy Triangle towards the gateway. We passed out, and were soon on our way towards Demon's Gap, walking briskly and with a sensation of coming adventure. Quite unexpectedly, we had been plunged into a case which seemed to be remarkable for its novelty.

"Have you got any idea what these men might be doing in the cliff, sir?" I asked as we walked.

"Yes, I think I know their game."

"You know it, sir?" I repeated, staring. "But those chaps didn't give any details, and they didn't even know——"

"I am not judging by what the boys told me," said the guv'nor smoothly. "But I have recently heard certain rumours concerning a series of mysterious happenings on the coast. The police have been quite baffled. It strikes me that this remarkable cavern in the cliff may be directly connected with the matter. I am quite keen upon looking into the affair—quite apart from rescuing McClure and Handforth from the result of their own folly."

But, although I pressed him, Nelson Lee would give me no idea of his suspicions. And I had to accompany him still in the fog—in more senses than one.

We arrived at the cliff top at Demon's Gap after darkness had completely fallen. And we had to be very cautious, for the fog had lifted considerably, and was now hardly any thicker than a mere haze.

We could even see the sea below and the rocks. A few watery looking stars were shining, and a pale, weak moon was appearing somewhat coyly from behind a little bank of clouds.

"Not very favourable for us, sir," I remarked softly. "It would have been better if the fog had kept thick."

"On the contrary, Nipper, I have an idea that the conditions are far more favourable in their present state. See! There appears to be a schooner lying out yonder at the mouth of the bay. Surely it is unusual

for such vessels to anchor at such a treacherous part of the coast?"

I looked, and whistled softly.

"By jingo, you're right, sir!" I said.

And we looked out over the sea curiously and intently. And just then Nelson Lee suddenly seized my arm and bent low. At the same time he pointed.

"Look!" he murmured intently. "What do you think of that?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCHOOLBOY PRISONERS!

"WELL, this seems to be about the finish!" said McClure despondently.

Handforth grunted.

"That's right—grumble!" he said. "There's no need to worry; we'll soon be out of this hole. You needn't think I'm going to stay here!"

"That's jolly interesting!" said McClure, out of the darkness. "I'd like to know how we're going to get away? We've got our hands bound, and we're in a black cavern behind a bolted door!"

The position certainly did seem to be rather serious, but Handforth made light of such matters. He merely scoffed. The optimism of Edward Oswald was phenomenal.

"Bolted doors don't concern me!" he declared. "There are plenty of ways of escaping. Just you wait until I've got my hands free! I'll show you! By George! I'm not going to let those rotters have the best of it."

The two unfortunate juniors had been imprisoned for about five minutes, although it seemed to them a much longer period. They were in total darkness, and the silence was absolutely so complete that it seemed to be like something solid. Escape appeared to be well night hopeless.

But Handforth was always a trier.

He had been struggling with his bonds for some little time—ever since the enemy had thrust them into the cavern. And, at last, he was beginning to feel a slight loosening.

"It's all right—I sha'n't be long!" he panted.

"Eh?"

"About two minutes!"

"What are you jawing about, you ass?" growled McClure. "You'll be two minutes in doing what?"

"Getting free from this rotten rope, or whatever it is," said Handy. "The idiots didn't tie it very tightly, and a few more wriggles will just about do it. A detective is always liable to be collared by the enemy. That's part of the game! He's simply got to get free, and then he can round up the whole gang!"

McClure grunted again.

"That's what they do in stories!" he said miserably. "But this isn't a story—and there's all the difference between a giddy detective tale and real life! Besides, we're not detectives!"

"We're not!" agreed Handforth. "I am! You're merely my assistant. I'm the investigator."

McClure made no reply—but he gave a sniff which was ten times more expressive than any words. Handforth gritted his teeth and panted.

"You—you rotter!" he said fiercely. "You think you're safe because my hands are bound! But as soon as I get free, I'll punch your nose until it's pointing round the corner!"

"Oh, don't rot!" said McClure tartly. "It was a mad idea to go into that tunnel at all—no sensible detective would have done it, anyhow! It was simply asking for trouble through a megaphone! And just because we found it, you seem surprised!"

"Wait!" said Handforth grimly. "Wait! I'm not going to swipe you, after all! You're not worth it! I'll just put it down to your ignorance! But when I've got us out of this hole, and after I've brought the case to a successful conclusion, I'll expect you to apologise!"

"I'll apologise all right—if you do it!" said McClure.

"Great pip!" said Handforth breathlessly. "Good! Hurrah! That's it—just one more tug! I'm free—— Oh, rats! It's all gone wrong! I thought I'd worked the rotten thing loose, but it's still tight!"

McClure sniffed again and Handforth worked like mad.

After all, it wasn't such a difficult task. If I had been in a similar predicament, I should have probably worked myself free from those bonds long before this. For Nelson Lee had trained me in the art of wriggling free from ropes. Handforth, however, knew nothing of such tricks, and was by no means a second Houdini.

But, after another five minutes, his efforts met with success.

It rather disgusted him, however, to make the awful discovery that McClure had been free for about two minutes, although he hadn't said anything about it.

"Good!" gasped Handforth, at last. "I've done it, my lad! And that's more than you could do! I've a jolly good mind not to set you free!"

"Don't worry!" growled McClure. "I'm all right."

Handforth fumbled in his pocket and found a box of matches.

He struck one, and the light flared up—quite a glare after the intense darkness. And Handforth stared blankly at McClure who was standing there with his hands by his sides.

"What the—— Why, you rotter, you're free!" gasped Handforth.

"Of course I am!"

"Then why didn't you tell me?" demanded Handy fiercely.

"You were so clever, I thought I'd give you another minute or two," said McClure rather bitterly. "But what difference does it make about having free hands? How do you suppose we're going to get through a solid door?"

Handforth struck another match and looked round.

The cavern was only a small one, with a roof about eight feet high, sloping down towards the rear. There were a few empty boxes lying about, but nothing else. And the door was a great solid affair of teak, and it didn't shift a fraction of an inch when Handforth pushed his weight against it.

The match went out, and they were again in darkness.

"Well, Sexton Blake, we're not out yet!" said McClure sarcastically.

Handforth breathed hard.

"Can't you give me a chance?" he demanded fiercely. "Do you think I can look at the door and open it like that? I've got to think of something. This is where brains are required!"

"Then what's the good of hoping?" asked McClure.

Fortunately, Handforth was deep in thought, and didn't observe the implied insult. He remained quiet for several minutes. But at length, even he was forced to admit that nothing could be done.

"Well, of course, I didn t know the place was like this!" he growled. "Even a first-class detective can't do impossibilities! If there was a grating here, or a drain, I might manage to wriggle out!"

"Thank goodness you've admitted that you're whacked!" said McClure. "Now perhaps we can talk a bit. What do you think of it? I wonder why those men collared us? And what are they going to do?"

"Goodness knows," said Handforth. "But there's no need to worry. Church hasn't been collared—or he'd have been shoved in here before now. Anyhow, Willy knows where we've come to, and we can be pretty sure that we shall be rescued in a few hours. You can take it from me, Mac, that everything will be all serene."

"Yes, I reckon that Churchy is buzzing back to St. Frank's by now," said McClure hopefully. "He's bound to go straight to Mr. Lee, and we shall soon be saved. It was a pretty decent idea of mine to spoof the men that we'd come alone."

"Your idea?" repeated Handforth tartly. "Why, that was my wheeze!"

"Oh, just as you like!" said Mac wearily. "If it pleases you, you can think it. We were silly asses not to go straight to Mr. Lee in the first place. There's no telling what might happen now. Anyhow, if those men come back soon, I vote we dodge out like lighting, and make a dash for liberty."

Although Handforth and McClure objected strongly, and struggled with all their strength, they were forced into the sacks and the tops were tied.

"Of course," said Handforth. "That's what I was about to suggest."

"Naturally," agreed McClure. "But you were a bit late——"

"Shush!" breathed Handforth suddenly. "I can hear something."

They held still, tense and alert. Sure enough, there were sounds just outside the door. And then a sudden flood of light came into the little cavern. The door opened wide.

"Now's our chance!" roared Handforth.

With one accord, the two juniors swept out. Ginger was just about to enter. He was sent staggering backwards by the force of Handforth's rush. And before the second man could stop him, Handforth had got by with McClure just in his wake. The two juniors tore like mad along the tunnel.

A number of curses came floating after them, and the two men pelted away in pursuit. But Handforth and McClure were swift of foot, and there was no fear of going wrong, for the tunnel was well lighted.

At last, breathless, they arrived at the last turning. They sped round—and Handforth uttered a gasp of dismay. The tunnel ended abruptly in a cul-de-sac! There was no way of progressing further.

"Oh, my goodness!" he gasped. "We've come the wrong way!"

"No we haven't!" panted McClure. "That's the door—but it's closed, and we're trapped!"

This, indeed, was the literal truth. And a second or two later Ginger, the Captain, and a third man came hurrying up. They were all grimly amused. They came along the tunnel abreast.

"Not so easy, eh?" said the Captain gruffly. "So you thought you'd nip off, my fine young sparks! Sorry, but not this trip. We need you mighty badly, and you'd best understand that jibbing won't help you."

"You—you rotters!" gasped Handforth. "What's the idea of keeping us here like this? It's no good trying to spoof me—I know what your game is! You've got a coiner's den here!"

"You're a mighty fine guesser!" said the Captain curtly.

"Look here, my boys, you've let yourselves into this trouble, and you've got to take the consequences," said the third man—who was dressed in an ordinary lounge suit, and spoke in a more refined manner. "I might as well tell you that you're putting us to a great amount of trouble. But we're certainly not going to let you go."

The men said no more, but took hold of the two juniors and held them firmly. Ginger went off, and returned within a minute or two with two large sacks. And, although Handforth and McClure objected strongly and although they struggled with all their strength, they were forced into the sacks, and the tops were tied.

There was no fear of the juniors suffering any harm. The sacks were not extra thick, but they served their purpose well. For the prisoners could not escape by any means.

And, one by one, they were carried out of the tunnel into the open air. They knew this, for they could feel the chill in the atmosphere, and presently they heard the rush of the sea along the shingle and along the rocks.

As a matter of fact, the two boys were carried swiftly down to a waiting motor-boat—which was sitting there with its nose tucked into the shingle of a little inlet. The high rocks on either side made it quite impossible for any eyes to see what was taking place.

There was only one possibility—and that was from the cliff top. But in this haze and darkness, it was very doubtful if anybody would be able to see. And, in any case, the vicinity of Demon's Gap was shunned by all the local inhabitants after dark.

Handforth and McClure were placed in the bows of the motor-boat, and immediately afterwards the little craft commenced speeding away across the water. In the haze, it made its way in the direction of a low sailing vessel which was riding at anchor at the very mouth of the bay.

The vessel was a schooner—and not a particularly big one at that. And at length the motor-boat nosed alongside, and she was made fast. One by one, Handforth and McClure were hoisted up, and then they were taken below.

During the course of this journey they had been tossed about roughly, and they were feeling rather bruised and exhausted by the time they found themselves in a small, stuffy cabin.

And they were half-choking, too, for the confinement in the sacks was not calculated to improve their lungs. But now the ropes were cut at the top, and the two boys were allowed to struggle out.

They looked round, blinking and panting.

They saw that they were in a grimy, smelly cabin. A lantern hung from a hook in a rafter, and cast a dim, uncertain light. The two men were there, and they were both looking grim.

"It's all right, Cap'n Huggins; leave the kids to me!" said Ginger. "I'll look arter 'em until we get well out to sea. Arter that it won't matter. They can have the whole run of the ship, and if they like to dive overboard, all the better! I'll keep me eye on 'em until we're clear of the coast."

Captain Huggins turned to the two juniors.

"See here, my lads," he said. "There's no call for you to get excited. You won't come to no harm, and you'll be fed well, and looked after. But you ain't going back to your school."

"Are—are you taking us away?" asked McClure huskily.

"You've guessed it, kid!"

"By George!" said Handforth. "I suppose you're taking us to London?"

Captain Huggins smiled.

"Not exactly," he replied. "The fact is, you'll soon be on your way to New Orleans; and if you know your geography, that's situated in the United States of America. We're setting sail at once, and by the time you come on deck, you won't see no more of the cliffs of old England!"

Handforth and McClure stared rather dazedly.

"You—you're taking us to America?" gasped Handforth wildly.

"Sure!"

"But—but we can't go!" roared Handforth. "Besides, what about our people? You you awful scoundrel! We'll have the police on you——"

"Cut that stuff out!" interrupted the captain curtly. "You'd best understand straight away, young man, that you ain't got any choice. You butted in where you wasn't wanted, and you've got to suffer. Get me? Now, Ginger, see that the brats don't get up to mischief. I reckon I'm needed on deck."

And Captain Huggins passed out. He locked the cabin door after him. Ginger stood at the table, and he regarded the juniors from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. He looked determined.

"Now, none o' your tricks!" he said.

"It won't do you no good to start any scraps. I'm ready for you, and there's a dozen more outside who'll come if I let out a hail. Take my advice, kids, and get into them bunks!" he added, indicating two unsavoury-looking bunks with a wave of his hand.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We're not going to stand this! We'll tell the police, and have you all arrested——"

"Get into them bunks!" roared Ginger fiercely.

His voice was so loud, and his manner so aggressive, that the two juniors were startled. Moreover, Ginger had picked up a heavy belaying pin. Any attempt to rush him would be futile.

The juniors climbed into the bunks, and lay there, Handforth in the upper one. He was looking desperate, but it really seemed that there was no hope. They were off for America!

Prisoners on this schooner, they had no chance of getting away! And they would be taken right out to sea, and across the wide Atlantic. They could picture the consternation which would break loose at St. Frank's when they could not be found. And their parents, too, would be anxious and alarmed. All the newspapers, in fact, would be full of the mystery of the missing schoolboys.

Handforth suddenly began sobbing and snivelling.

"You—you rotters!" he muttered brokenly. "It's all up, Mac—we're finished! We—we'd better go to sleep! Oh, it's awful! What—what will dad say?"

McClure nearly fell out of his bunk in surprise. Then, suddenly, he realised that Handforth was spoofing. He hadn't suspected his leader of such a dodge. He immediately took his cue, and started snivelling, too.

"That's right—snivel!" grinned Ginger, and he filled his pipe. "It's the best thing you can do, my lads! You'll soon blub yourselves to sleep, and then I shall get a bit of peace!"

The juniors sobbed in a most heart-breaking manner. In fact, Handforth nearly overdid it. He was always inclined to go a little bit too far. But, fortunately, Ginger did not suspect.

And then, suddenly, something shot across the cabin with a terrific swish.

Biff!

The object struck Ginger fairly and squarely in the face, he toppled over, and crashed backwards to the floor. Handforth gave one leap from the other bunk, and landed on the man's chest.

Crash! Biff! Crash!

His fist thudded repeatedly into Ginger's face—Handforth had no scruples in such an emergency as this. McClure was on the spot, too, and the two of them were sprawling on the man and holding him down. Ginger was still a bit dazed, or the juniors might not have succeeded in their desperate object.

But it must be admitted that Handforth had acted smartly.

While sobbing, he had cautiously unlaced one of his boots. And at the very second that Ginger was glancing at his pipe, Handforth hurled the boot. Now the man was bound, and Handy's first object was to tear the muffler from about his throat. With a few swift turns, it was soon bound tightly round Ginger's mouth, so that he could only utter a few muffled grunts.

The next thing was to make him secure. He was half on his face, fortunately, and between the two of them, the boys pushed him over, and forced his hands behind him. There was a coil of rope within reach, and Handforth held Ginger's wrists, while McClure tightly bound them.

Then the juniors were allowed to have a bit of a breathing space.

"Good old Handy!" gasped McClure. "My hat! That was smart!"

Handforth grinned.

"Didn't I tell you to wait?" he said triumphantly. "Hah! It's likely I'm going to allow these blessed rotters to have all their own way! We're going to New Orleans, are we? I don't think!"

After their short breathing space, the two juniors felt better, and now they proceeded to tie Ginger up in a manner which would utterly defy all attempts to get free. They had plenty of rope, and they trussed the unfortunate man up until he looked something like a mummy. He couldn't move a limb. And the muffler round his face made it impossible for him to give any outcry. They left him lying on the floor.

"Now, what's the next move?" asked McClure breathlessly.

"We're going out," said Handforth, creeping to the door. "We're—— Great pip! The door's locked!"

"Then—then all this has been for nothing?" asked Mac, in dismay.

Handforth glanced round keenly.

"Has it?" he asked. "What about that porthole?"

"But—but we can't swim ashore!" said McClure. "The sea's like ice, and we should only be drowned——"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Handforth. "Once we get out of that porthole, we can creep along the side of the ship—there's bound to be something to hold on to—and get to the stern. There'll probably be a boat there, and we can jump into it. Anyhow, we're going through the porthole!"

They opened it cautiously, and peered out. There was plenty of room for them to pass through, and just outside there were a number of ridges to which they could cling. Away in the distance a few lights twinkled. They were the lights of Caistowe. The distance was altogether too far to swim, even if the sea had been at summer heat.

Handforth and McClure squeezed through the porthole, one after the other.

They were free, but would they gain their full liberty?

CHAPTER VII.

NELSON LEE TAKES ACTION.

NELSON LEE gripped my arm tightly as he pointed.

"By jingo!" I murmured. "You—you mean those figures, sir?"

"Yes!" he breathed. "Don't speak too loud, Nipper; the night is fairly still, and our voices might carry. Crouch low, for we don't want to give ourselves away against the skyline. Now do you see how fortunate it is that the fog lifted?"

"Rather, sir!" I replied tensely.

We were, as I have already explained, on the top of the cliff immediately above Demon's Gap. Directly below us lay the cruel rocks, rocks which had given this particular bay such a grim name. In rough weather the place was a death trap to any vessel that happened to be driven inshore. But now the sea was quite calm, otherwise the schooner would never have dared to drop anchor at such a spot. She had probably done so just before the fog became thick, and had been unable to move until the mist cleared.

It was very difficult to see anything clear with the naked eye. The guv'nor had seen the figures through his binoculars in the first place. But after he had pointed them out to me, I had no difficulty in keeping my eye on them. Three men were moving down the rocks towards a little inlet. They were carrying something bulky.

"What's that they've got, sir?" I asked softly.

"A sack!" replied Lee, with the glasses to his eyes.

"A sack!" I repeated. "I wonder what ——"

"The sack is of a most peculiar shape, and I have suspicions!" breathed the guv'nor. "By James! Yes! I saw a movement just now! Either Handforth or McClure is inside that sack!"

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

All doubts were set at rest a few moments later. For the sack was taken into a waiting boat, and the three men retreated. Then they came from among the rocks again, and they were carrying a second sack. And after this had been deposited in the boat, the latter set off in the direction of the waiting schooner.

"She's a motor-boat, sir!" I murmured, as I heard the beat of the engine. "My goodness! What the dickens shall we do? Perhaps that schooner will set sail——"

"I think, Nipper, that this is a time where determined action is necessary," interrupted Nelson Lee crisply. "You need not imagine that that schooner will get away. There's only one thing to do—and we must do it."

"You—you mean, give chase, sir?"

"Exactly—but not alone."

And Nelson Lee, without another word, started off at the run along the cliff path. I went by his side. When the guv'nor chose, he could go like a hare—and he did so now.

Together, we went at a smart double straight in the direction of Caistowe. The distance was not so very far along the cliff top, certainly no more than a couple of miles.

As we arrived, at last, thoroughly warmed up, and rather out of breath. Nelson Lee's first move was to go straight to the police-station. The officials here knew him well, of course.

Without wasting any time on unnecessary words, the guv'nor explained to the inspector in charge what had happened to Handforth and McClure, and he added that he had definite suspicions that the two boys had been carried on to the schooner.

Inspector Mackley was a man of action.

He sent out a call at once, and obtained every available man. He gave instructions that three motor-boats were to be commandeered and prepared for sea. He also communicated with the coastguards by telephone, and arranged to have a dozen bluejackets ready, with a couple of officers.

And in less than half an hour the party was ready for departure—twenty strong. The coastguards were a keen lot, and they were ready enough to go on this adventure. One of the officers heard Nelson Lee's story, and he was greatly impressed. He was particularly interested in the yarn about the cliff tunnel.

I went on the boat which contained Nelson Lee and Inspector Mackley, and one of the officers—to say nothing of several coastguards. The schooner was in for some excitement, by the look of things. Personally, I was agog with excitement. I knew that big things were about to happen.

Our motor-boat was leading, and we were making straight out from Caistowe Bay in the direction of Demon's Gap. A sharp look-out had been kept from the front of the little town, but there had been no sign whatever of the schooner. From Caistowe, and from the coastguard station, Demon's Gap was invisible.

It became more and more evident that the sailing ship had crept into the gap in the first gathering of the haze. And there she had remained during the fog—unsuspected, and comparatively safe in the calm sea. But now the fog was lifting, she would certainly make a move.

We need not be afraid that we should miss the schooner. For with such a faint breeze, it would be impossible for her to move with any speed. She would only crawl away, probably without lights, until she was some long distance from the shore. And we kept a sharp look-out.

We were wrong about the lights.

For only ten minutes later, after passing across the mouth of the Gap, we faintly saw the portlight of a vessel some distance out to sea. She was nearly hidden in the

thick haze which still covered the ocean. But as we drew nearer the light became brighter. And then the shape of the ship herself took solid form. She was certainly a schooner.

Both Nelson Lee and I recognised her at once as the vessel we had seen from the cliff top. It was quite impossible that there could be any other schooner of similar size on this particular section of the coast. And our three boats made straight for the ship.

As we drew up near, the coastguard officer let out a hail.

"Schooner ahoy!" he bawled. "Get ready; we're coming aboard!"

"Motor-boat away!" came the reply. "What's the trouble there?"

The officer replied that he would soon state the nature of the trouble, and intimated that the schooner was, practically speaking, under arrest. And before the captain could give any orders, or make any move at all, the motor-boats were alongside and most of their occupants had swarmed on board the schooner's deck.

There had been no mistake. Captain Huggins was waiting on the little poop, and he was by no means comfortable. This invasion had taken him quite by surprise.

The motor-boats had swooped up out of the night unexpectedly, and it was a tremendous shock for the captain. Knowing that Handforth and McClure were on board he had every reason to have inward misgivings. Moreover, he had other matters to worry him, quite apart from the juniors.

But Captain Huggins affected indignation.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded hotly. "What's the idea of coming on board my vessel as though you owned her? Police, too. Darn my mainmast! Things are getting to a pretty fine pass——"

"Hold on, captain!" interrupted Inspector Mackley. "We have every reason to believe that two schoolboys of St. Frank's have been brought on this vessel, and we intend to search it."

"Oh, do you?" roared Captain Huggins. "We'll see about that! I'm master of this ship, and I'll see that no infernal landlubbers——"

"That sort of thing won't do, captain!" put in the leading coastguard officer. "Even if you can defy the police, you cannot defy me! It is my duty to warn you that I have full authority to search this ship. In fact, for the time being, you must relinquish the command into my hands. Let's have no nonsense. If these boys are not on board and if you have nothing to fear, there's no sense in getting excited. Is that plain?"

The captain gave a harsh laugh.

"Maybe I got a bit angry," he said. "A skipper doesn't like to stand things of this kind on his own vessel! All right—go ahead. You'll find nothing wrong aboard my old hooker!"

"Where are you bound for?"

"New Orleans."

"What is your cargo?"

"General," said the captain. "I'll show you my papers if you want to see them. We came out of Tilbury yesterday. Let go the hook off the coast here on account of the fog; only got way again half an hour ago. These durned fogs are enough to make a saint swear!"

"The fog is certainly annoying," put in Inspector Mackley. "But we must insist upon searching your vessel——"

"I'm not objectin', but it's an infernal liberty!" snapped the captain. "We've seen nothing of any blamed schoolboys——"

"Liar!" said Handforth abruptly.

He appeared as though by magic, and shoved his clenched fist under Captain Huggins' nose.

"Liar!" he repeated. "How do you like that?"

Captain Huggins started back, cursing.

"Handy!" I yelled. "Oh good man!"

And then I saw that McClure was there. They had both appeared from behind a collection of lumber on one side of the deck. Further for'rard members of the crew were standing about, looking on, attentive and ugly. I half expected them to start a fight.

The coastguard officer seized Handforth's arm at once.

"Did this man bring you on board by force?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, sir!" said Handforth. "McClure and I were forced into sacks, and taken down into one of the cabins. But we jumped on the chap who kept guard, tied him up, gagged him and left him on the floor."

"You confounded young dogs!" snarled Huggins furiously.

"Not quite so smart are you?" jeered Handforth. "Hallo, Mr. Lee! Jolly glad to see you, sir! You've just come in time for the finish! I've handled the case pretty well, I think!"

"You certainly seem to have got yourself into some trouble, Handforth!" replied Nelson Lee grimly.

"All part of the day's work, sir," said Edward Oswald. "After Mac and I collared Ginger, we crawled through the porthole, and got on deck. Then we hid ourselves among all that rubbish, but didn't have a chance of doing anything. And then you came on board."

"You will please consider yourself under arrest," said the police inspector, turning to the captain. "This matter is now one within my province, and it is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. I shall also arrest all your officers."

Captain Huggins suddenly whipped out a revolver.

"Curse you!" he snarled. "Stand back! Up with your durned hands! Every man of you! I'm standing no blamed nonsense! Briggs! Hitchcock! See that the men are brought——"

He ended up in a snarling cry. For at that second Nelson Lee hooked his foot forward.

He just tapped Huggins' ankle—but it was enough. The man momentarily staggered. The next second Lee was upon him. There was a quick, brief struggle, and the revolver clattered to the deck.

Less than two minutes later, Captain Huggins was handcuffed. And every other officer on board was similarly treated. The coastguards took over the entire control, and all the members of the yacht's crew were herded into the forecastle, and a couple of bluejackets were placed in charge.

The whole thing was done quickly and smartly.

In fact, Handforth was rather disappointed because there was no real scrap. The coastguard officer stated his intention of taking the schooner straight into Caistowe. There, her hatches would be unbattened, and her cargo examined.

Nelson Lee questioned Huggins on this matter, but the skipper would give no reply. Nelson Lee also asked the man for information concerning the strange tunnel in the cliff.

But Huggins professed ignorance.

He said that he knew nothing about any tunnel, and stated that he had not even been ashore. He had no intention of giving any game away. Not that this made very much difference.

Nelson Lee drew me aside after a short while.

"There is no need for us to remain on board, Nipper," he said confidentially. "Our work here is done. We can trust the others to take the vessel into Caistowe. Our main object in coming on board was to rescue Handforth and McClure. They are with us, so I think we might as well leave at once in one of the motor-boats."

"Good idea, sir," I said. "But we're not going to St. Frank's, are we?"

"Not direct."

"You mean, that tunnel place?"

"Precisely," said Nelson Lee calmly. "We can leave the vessel in the hands of the Naval gentlemen. The police are no longer required on board. I suggest, therefore, that we all go together to this remarkable stronghold among the rocks, and learn the exact nature of the plot."

"Good!" I said enthusiastically.

Just then Handforth and McClure came in.

"What about that place in Demon's Gap, sir?" asked Handforth. "I've found out a good bit, but I don't quite know how many men there are there. Of course, it's a coiners' den.'

"Indeed!" said Lee."

"Rather, sir."

"How do you know this, Handforth?"

"How—how do I know, sir?" repeated Handforth. "Why, you see—— I mean, what else can it be, sir?"

The guv'nor chuckled.

"Apparently, my boy, it is your method to jump to a certain conclusion and to regard it as an absolute fact," he smiled. "There are many things that could be done in this secret retreat under the cliffs. But we shall soon know for certain, for we are going there at once—with the police!"

"Oh!" said Handy. "Can we come, sir?"

"H'm! Well, under ordinary circumstances, I should say no," replied Nelson Lee. "But seeing that you have been so mixed up in this affair, it would perhaps be as well if you boys accompanied us."

"That's great, sir!" said Handforth eagerly. "I'll show you how to open that rock door!"

"If you can do that, Handforth, I shall certainly be justified in allowing you to come," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "But I have an idea that your usual optimism will not pan out exactly as you expected."

"All right, sir—you wait!" said Handforth confidently. "I've carried the case on triumphantly so far, and I'll bring it to a victorious conclusion!"

The guv'nor nudged me, and I heard him chuckle softly to himself. Handforth was apparently quite determined to make himself believe he was the only person of importance in the whole affair!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECRET REVEALED!

THE motor-boat ground her nose somewhat noisily into the shingle. We were in the centre of Demon's Gap, just in that little inlet where the sea was calm and undisturbed.

In the motor-boat with us were ten police officers, including Inspector Mackley. The latter was keen and alert, and he was grimly determined to see this thing through to the bitter end.

For one thing, he was a smart, business-like officer—very different to the officious Inspector Jameson of Bannington—and for another thing he saw indications and hopes of promotion.

This was evidently going to be a big affair, and the bigger the case the more credit Inspector Mackley would get!

Once the motor-boat was firmly beached, we all got out, and then the craft was drawn up high and dry. Nelson Lee had brought Handforth and McClure because these two juniors could point out at once —and without delay—the exact locality of the rock door.

Their presence was really necessary. And they led the way over the boulders, and along the base of the cliff until they came to a halt. Handforth pointed to a spot against the solid cliff itself.

"That's the door, sir," he said briskly.

"There?" I said, staring. "But, my dear chap, you must have made a bloomer. It's all solid rock!"

"Is it?" said Handforth. "We'll soon

see about that. Just you wait until I open the door! It's quite simple. Those chaps did it without any trouble. They just came along, messed about a bit, and the door opened!"

Handforth went up against the great rock, and he, too, attempted to "mess about a bit." He certainly did. He fumbled here and there, and pushed and pulled at various boulders. But there was no result.

"Hardly what you expected—eh?" smiled Nelson Lee.

"But I can't make it out, sir," said Handforth. "It ought to have opened!"

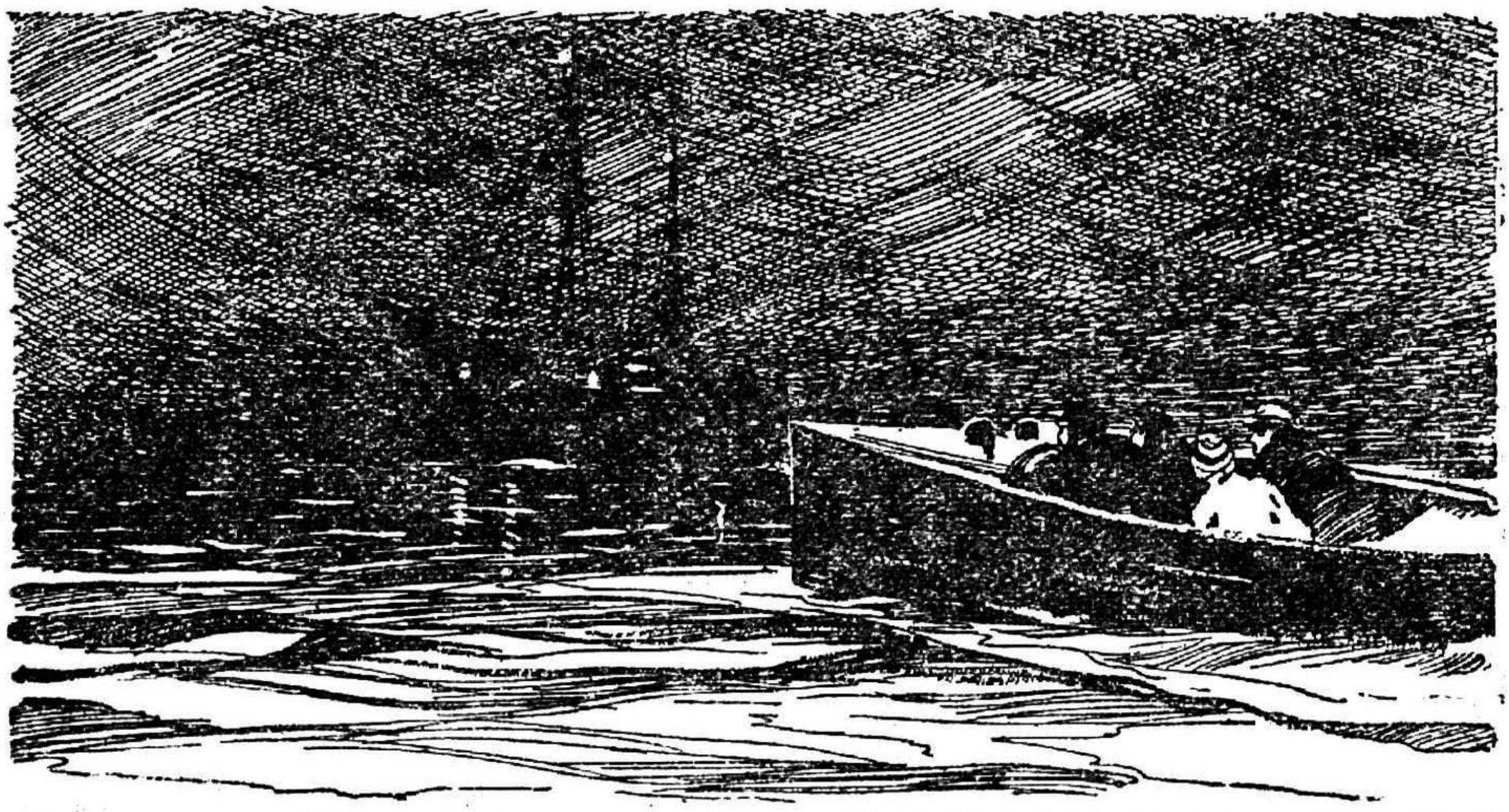
began to look as though we should have to give it up as a bad job.

But Nelson Lee was not pessimistic.

"It will only a mean a little delay," he said. "I think we can take it for granted that there are some men in here now. If a close watch is kept, they are bound to betray themselves sooner or later. But I have not given up hope yet."

The minutes passed, and still Nelson Lee continued his examination.

And then, at last, I heard him give a little, soft exclamation. He had pressed himself between two walls of rock. At the end there were several jagged pieces



And then the shape of the ship itself took solid form. She was certainly a schooner.

"You are quite sure that this is the right place?"

"Positive, sir!"

"Oh, yes, sir, it's the right place," put in McClure. "That great piece of the cliff moves out somehow. It's pretty marvellous, because it looks as solid as a house."

We gazed up at the cliff in wonder, and with a certain amount of incredulity. For it seemed absolutely impossible that the chums of Study D could be correct. Nothing short of an earthquake was capable of moving such a vast rock—which, indeed, was part of the very cliff.

Nelson Lee had his electric torch out now, and, carefully and closely, he was examining every inch of rock. Now and again he would put his shoulder to the cliff, and press. But there was no sign of any result. Indeed, it seemed quite a fool's game to stay here at all.

But both Handforth and McClure insisted that they had made no mistake, and they ought to have known, anyway. It

of boulder—very much alike to look at, and apparently in no way significant. But as the guv'nor grasped one of them he distinctly felt a tremor.

It had certainly moved a fraction of an inch.

Nelson Lee pushed at it, he tugged, but it seemed to make no difference. Then, quite suddenly, probably by reason of some twisted movement, the projection of rock moved sideways.

And, at the same moment, we saw that huge piece of cliff move slowly and deliberately outwards, to the accompaniment of a very low, grinding noise. Then it stopped.

To all appearances it seemed very little out of position. At a hundred yards distance, even in full daylight, nobody would be able to see any difference.

But, as a matter of fact, it had come away from the cliff face for a distance of about five feet. Accordingly, there was now a wide gap, forming an opening

through which an army of men could have passed.

"My only hat!" I muttered. "What a marvellous thing, guv'nor! I say, it must have taken a good long while to fix that up in that way!"

"Possibly, Nipper, although the rock itself may have been naturally balanced," said Nelson Lee. "In that case, it would merely need some comparatively simple mechanism. But we need not concern ourselves about it. Our chief aim is to get inside, and see what secrets are to be discovered."

There was a short consultation with the police, and then Nelson Lee and Inspector Mackley entered first. Other police officers followed. Two men were left on guard outside.

And I brought up the rear with Handforth and McClure. We were not allowed to be anywhere near the front, for there might be a fight—and it was just possible that some shooting would take place.

We entered the tunnel, and Handforth's extraordinary story turned out to be true. For there were electric lights in the roof. And the very fact that these were glowing proved that the place was occupied. For if it had been deserted, the mysterious men would certainly have extinguished all lights.

Not a sound was made.

Nelson Lee had particularly warned everybody—and Handforth more especially than the others—that there was to be no talking. And Lee and the police crept up the tunnel like so many shadows.

There was an air of intense expectancy in the atmosphere. We instinctively knew that some big discovery was to be made. And we were all eager and keen to get to the root of this mystery.

We turned bends in the tunnel, and it seemed that we were penetrating right into the very heart of the cliff. There was no question that this tunnel was partly natural. At different points it had been widened, for we could see the marks of the pick.

But, for the most part, it was the work of Nature. There was nothing very surprising in this, for along these cliffs there were many caves and caverns and winding tunnels.

At last we turned out of the tunnel, and came suddenly upon a scene which filled us with surprise. Handforth and McClure and I had crept up, in spite of the guv'nor's warning, and we saw almost everything.

We found ourselves looking into a big cavern. It had a fairly low roof. In no place was it higher than ten feet. But it was wide and long, and stretched away into many dark corners. There were

(*Continued on next page.*)

numbers of electric lights gleaming, and the whole place was quite brilliant in the centre.

And here there were three men at work.

At the moment of our entry they had their backs towards us, and were not even aware of our presence. They were busily engaged upon some peculiar looking copper mechanism. The air seemed to be heavy with the pungent odour of salt, or spirits, or something of that kind.

And, completely lining the walls, there were large numbers of bottles and wooden cases.

And then, before we could see much more, Nelson Lee and the police sprang forward.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but it would be advisable if you surrender at once!" said Lee briskly.

The three men spun round, staggered.

One of them was the man who had already spoken to Handforth and McClure, and, apparently, he was the leader. In a flash, his hand went to his hip. But Nelson Lee was first.

"No, please don't draw that revolver," he said curtly. "I have you covered, my friend, and it would be a pity to have any shooting."

The man dropped his hands, and laughed.

"Very smart!" he said calmly. "All right; I give in. I think I know when I'm beaten!"

But his companions were not quite so ready. They did not possess their leader's coolness. He knew that the game was up, and saw no sense in engaging in a fight which could only end in one way.

The others, cornered, attacked the police officers with fury and desperation. And in less than a moment a fierce fight was raging. Of course, it was short and swift. The police had a bit of trouble, but their truncheons were ready, and they used them.

Handforth dashed forward, to join in the scrap. He was like an Irishman when it came to a battle. He always wanted to be in it. But by the time he arrived in the midst of the combatants, it was over.

The three men were made helpless, and handcuffed.

"This is all because of these fine young gentlemen!" said the leader, as he gazed grimly at Handforth and McClure. "And I thought I had dealt with them rather effectively. Well, it's no good grumbling. I'll take my medicine like a man!"

"I want to know your name," said the inspector curtly.

"Certainly," replied the leader. "My name is Grogan—William Grogan!"

"It is my duty to warn you——"

"That's quite all right," interrupted Grogan. "I know the usual thing. But it doesn't matter. There's quite enough evidence here to convict me, in any case. Well, I've had a good run, so I mustn't grumble."

"You evidently thought yourself to be secure," said Nelson Lee.

"I did," agreed the other. "No doubt you have got Huggins?"

"We have!"

"Confound the fellow!" snapped Grogan. "He deserves it! All this disaster is entirely his fault! He was insane enough to leave the rock door open, and these boys entered. My downfall is due entirely to Huggins' carelessness. It only proves that in this life you can trust nobody but yourself!"

Nelson Lee looked round.

"Whisky!" he said. "Quite an elaborate still, by all appearances."

"I'll guarantee that this is the most complete plant of the kind in the whole of England," said Grogan. "We have a special process of our own for 'ageing' the spirit before shipment. I would not like to drink the stuff; but we get a very high price for our produce, all the same."

Nelson Lee walked over to the bottles, and picked one up.

"Dear me!" he said. "Do you use these labels?"

"Every time!" smiled Grogan coolly. "Rather neat eh? They are forged, of course, and the makers have been worried tremendously during the past twelve months. We have copied their label and bottle in every detail."

"But not their whisky?"

"The spirit we manufacture is, I will admit, of a very inferior quality," said Grogan. "But what does that matter, when the stuff is shipped to a 'dry' country? They'll buy anything!"

"I gather that you have been manufacturing this stuff for the United States?"

"The procedure is quite a simple one," said the "moonshiner" calmly. "We make the whisky, bottle it, and send it secretly over to the other side. We pay no duty, of course, and our profit is enormous. The whisky itself is wretched stuff, but in the States they are ready to buy anything with a bite in it. Captain Huggins and his schooner were our means of transport, and we fondly imagined that we should be able to keep the game going. It is rather hard that a couple of schoolboys should upset everything!"

Handforth nodded.

"Yes, you've got me to thank for this!" he said. "Once I get on the track you haven't got a giddy earthly!"

We examined the place with great interest. Not that we needed any further evidence. The cavern contained a complete plant for the manufacture of illicit whisky.

As Grogan had said, the men had been in the habit of bottling the stuff under the label of a famous firm. Thus, sending it over to America duty free, they had been able to sell it at a fabulous price, and Grogan and his accomplices had probably made a small fortune, even in one year.

The whole scheme was elaborate in the extreme—and this was necessary, too, for the Revenue officers were on the alert, and

it required clever men to outwit them. But Grogan and his gang had succeeded.

Later on, at the trial, all the facts came out, and very interesting they were. But it wouldn't interest anybody if I set them down here. It's enough to say that Grogan, Huggins, and the others all received long terms of imprisonment.

As far as we were concerned the matter was over.

And Nelson Lee, Handforth, and McClure and I, having seen the men carted off in the hands of the police, started on the return journey to St. Frank's. It was rather late in the evening now, but we reckoned to be in by about supper-time.

As we had half expected, Willy Handforth was hovering about in the Triangle. He was wrapped up, and Chubby Heath was keeping him company. Church was there, too. And they came rushing towards us as we appeared.

"Handy!" panted Church, with joy.

He and Willy rushed at Handforth and grabbed him

"All right—don't get excited!" said Edward Oswald. "Nothing to make a fuss about. I told you I'd bring the thing off. Once I start I finish! I've had all the rotters arrested!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"A remarkable performance, Handforth!" he said drily.

"Rather, sir," agreed Handy. "Of course, I'll admit that you did something, but it was my case, sir!"

"You—you bragging ass!" I said indignantly. "The guv'nor did everything! If you had been left on your own you would have been out in the Channel by now—bound for New Orleans! You couldn't have escaped from the schooner if we hadn't come on board! The guv'nor planned everything, and carried out the coup."

Handforth turned red.

"Oh, well, Mr. Lee did a good bit," he said reluctantly. "But you can't deny that I started the whole thing!"

"All right, my boy!" laughed Nelson Lee. "If you care to take the credit I don't mind in the least. And I certainly admit that you started the whole thing—and that, at least, is a great deal. All's well that ends well. We are safe and sound, and some very good work has been accomplished."

"And it's a jolly good thing we didn't tell the others," remarked Willy. "It would only have caused a scare. Talking about credit, where do I come in?"

Handforth stared.

"Why, you didn't do a giddy thing!" he said warmly.

"Oh, didn't I?" demanded Willy. "How about discovering the cavern entrance? Where would you have been if I hadn't told you? Nowhere! It's my show as much as yours! But, as a matter of fact, we've neither of us done much. Mr. Lee is the one who did the deed."

The guv'nor chuckled again, and went indoors.

And within five minutes the whole school was ringing with the story. There was no longer any need to keep it quiet. And Edward Oswald Handforth went about explaining how he had unmasked the moonshiners, and how Nelson Lee had "helped" a bit towards the end.

And Willy went about explaining that his major was an ass, and that he hadn't done anything worth a dump. Anyhow, the school had plenty to talk about—and most of the fellows felt rather swindled because they knew nothing until it was all over.

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

Readers are invited to write to the Editor on any matter of interest concerning this journal or themselves, and should address their communications to The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

My dear Readers,—I do not think that any of you will complain of a lack of variety in our stories yet at the same time the leading characters are like old friends with whom we have spent many a pleasant hour together. You look forward to next week's story knowing that you will get something quite different to the previous story while you will be sure to meet old friends again. That is the great charm of the Old Paper, and that is why I know you will not miss our next splendid story of St. Frank's, "The Wandering Jew!"

Another Problem Story Competition!

I am going to ask you Next Week to try your skill in solving another mystery detective story featuring Nelson Lee, when Part One of "The Flaming God!" will appear. Money prizes will be offered to readers as in the last Problem Story Competition. Full particulars will be given in our next number.

Your sincere friend,—THE EDITOR.

Nipper's Magazine

No. 51, EDITED BY NIPPER, November 11, 1922.

BELLTON VILLAGE

A small country village about a mile from St. Frank's College. On half holidays it is much frequented by the boys of St. Frank's, and it is then that Mr. Binks, who runs the local tuckshop, does a roaring trade. The accompanying picture is a general view of the main street.

EXCHANGE & MART.

Conducted by Solomon Levi.

WANTED Large PADDED CELL. Suitable for DANGEROUS LUNATIC. Apply C. and M., Study D.

A MEMBER OF THE NOBILITY has a large stock of OLD CLOTHES. MUST Get Rid of them. Baggy Breeches, Torn Coats, and Inky Collars a speciality. Apply Somerton, Study M.

Lessons in STUFFING will be given DAILY in exchange for JAM PUFFS, PASTRIES, TARTS, MINCE PIES, DOUGHNUTS, SARDINES and any other Comestibles. Write or Call, Fatty Little, Study L.

A BEAUTIFUL PAIR OF BLACK EYES will be presented by ADVERTISER in exchange for SAUCE. Also an exceptionally large stock of THICK EARS and BRUISES. Call in person any time after school hours at Study D (Dept. E. O. H.).

WONDERFUL WAISTCOATS and TERRIFIC TIES in all the Latest Colourings. Only worn once. Send to Study C for Sizes and—Cut!

LINES OF ALL DESCRIPTIONS (Latin, English or Greek) can be exchanged for IDLENESS, INATTENTION and RAGGING. In Batches of 50 and upwards. Apply Housemaster, Ancient House.

BLOTTING PAPER and OLD EXERCISE BOOKS. Anyone having any quantity of these commodities will find ready Market for them. Must be suitable as a shock absorber. Send samples to Owen minor of the Third.

WANTED a PERISCOPE. Advertiser would exchange for same VALUABLE and PRIVATE INFORMATION concerning any Junior at St. Frank's. Apply Teddy Long.

PODGE & MIDGE

THE DEADLY DUD DETECTIVES

BY **BOB CHRISTINE**

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

SECOND PART.

Synopsis of First Part.

While tracking a burglar on Clapham Common in the dead of night, Messrs Podge and Midge, the invincible sleuths, are attracted by a woman's screams to a lonely house on the common. They trace the screams to the dining-room. Here they find on the floor, amid the scattered remains of a meal, the senseless body of a woman with a broomstick clutched in her right hand.

CHAPTER I.

ARRESTED!

BEFORE either Mr. Podge or Mr. Midge had time to regain their composure, footsteps sounded from without.

"The murderers are returning!" said Mr. Midge.

"We must hide!" said Mr. Podge resolutely.

Thereupon they slipped behind the heavy window curtains just as several figures rushed into the room. The detectives heard one or two muffled exclamations, and then an order from the chief of the gang to search the room. Unfortunately, the massive figure of Mr. Podge stood out in bold relief from behind the curtain and attracted the attention of somebody's boot.

Mr. Podge gave a loud bellow and a desperate fight ensued, during which the curtain came down and enveloped the combatants in a mass of drapery. When Mr. Podge emerged he found that he had been handcuffed and that he was under arrest for *murder!* Mr. Midge was nearly overlooked, but was pounced upon by an alert constable while in the act of crawling away.

CHAPTER II.

A STARTLING DEVELOPMENT.

Things looked very black against the Firm. But Mr. Podge was not the man to flinch. He and Mr. Midge had been in tight corners before now.

"I know nothing of this crime!" declared Mr. Podge emphatically.

"We are quite innocent!" piped Mr. Midge.

"Then what were you doing here?" roared the police inspector.

"That is our business," replied Mr. Podge drily.

While the inspector was writing this statement down in a note-book an amazing thing happened. The corpse sat up and, in a terrified voice, screamed:

"Take it away—take it away! Take away that awful apparition!"

"We are just about to, mum," said a constable softly as he helped the lady to rise. Gazing round the room her eyes fell on the two prisoners.

"Idiots! Blunderers! Nincompoops!" she cried indignantly. "It wasn't a man at all. It was a ferocious monster with glittering green eyes!"

CHAPTER III.

THE CLUE OF THE MELTED BUTTER.

"Gentleman," said Mr. Podge dramatically, "we are the great Firm of Podge and Midge, the never-been-known-to-fail detectives and specialists in crime on the cash and delivery principle. Remove these manacles and we will track the monster to its doom."

The inspector complied with humble apologies.

"May I ask, madam, if you had lobster for supper?" Mr. Podge put to the lady.

"No; I had boiled cod," she replied.

"Ah, very significant!" said Mr. Podge, examining the carpet with his powerful lens.

For on the floor was a trail of white, creamy substance which continued towards the door.

"Melted butter!" exclaimed the great detective.

"You have found a clue, Mr. Podge?"

"There is not the slightest doubt, Mr. Midge, that this discovery has a most important bearing on the case," declared Mr. Podge with evident pride.

"We will follow this trail of melted butter, Mr. Midge," he continued. It led to the black depths of the coal-cellar. Here Mr. Podge paused. "We must be courageous, Mr. Midge, for there is an unknown peril before us."

"There—there it is!" quaked Mr. Midge with chattering teeth.

Two awful green eyes loomed out of the darkness. With trembling fingers Mr. Podge produced a torch and pressed the knob. Click! The light revealed the dreadful monster crouched ready to spring from behind a collection of fish bones. *It was a black cat!*

CHAPTER IV.

CONCLUSION.

The next morning the Firm received a big cheque from the Clapham lady with a letter of thanks, which they are going to frame and hang in the consulting-room. The black cat, which was a stray, has definitely decided to take up its abode at the address where Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge found it, and its new mistress seems to have taken quite a fancy to it in spite of its green eyes.

THE END.

The Case of THE CARDIFF CONTRACTOR

A Brilliant, Complete Detective Story of NELSON LEE and NIPPER.

CHAPTER I.

THE GRAIN OF THE GLOVE, OR CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

NELSON LEE, the well-known private detective, and his equally famous assistant, Nipper, had dined upon the train. Now that their meal was at an end, Nelson Lee pushed his empty coffee-cup aside and began to detail the more prominent facts of the case upon which they were engaged.

"As the case stands," he said thoughtfully, "it does not promise to be particularly interesting; and, but for the fact that we are at a loose end for a day or so, I would have been tempted to decline its investigation.

"Our client is one, Daniel Thomas—a builder of Cardiff; or, more correctly speaking, of Penarth.

"He is in a big way of business, from what I can make out; and, until recently, was in partnership with a second contractor named Ellis Jones, of Cardiff City.

"Messrs. Jones and Thomas (Jones and Thomas was the style of the firm) did well enough as regards business for some years, and there is no doubt that the two principals were on a very friendly footing during the whole of that time.

"Then, suddenly, the partnership was dissolved, and the two men acquired such a violent distaste for each other's society, that they would not meet even in the winding-up of the business.

"During the ten weeks which followed this event, these two men, Jones and Thomas, did not meet; until, late one night—about a week ago, it was—Jones, in a state of extreme agitation, called to see Thomas at the latter's private house, spent an hour in close consultation; and then, despite the fact that it was nearly midnight, returned to his own offices at Cardiff.

"He was seen to enter his offices by a policeman on patrol duty.

"At seven the next morning, the charwoman found him sitting at his desk.

"A pistol-bullet had passed through his head; and, according to the medical evidence, he had been dead for six hours."

Here Nipper interjected a question:

"Were his affairs in order?"

"Ah, there," replied Nelson Lee, "you repeat the first question which was raised at the inquest. The answer appears to be in the negative. Mr. Jones' private office was also used as his counting-house; and one of the ledgers, lying open beside him, had unquestionably been falsified.

"The final report of the chartered accountants who are examining the books is not yet to hand; but even at the inquest they were able to state that the deceased man's affairs were in an unsatisfactory condition."

"What," asked Nipper, "was the purpose of Mr. Jones' call upon his late partner?"

"That, also, arose at the inquest, and, judging by newspaper reports, Thomas did not give a very satisfactory reply.

"In his reply he stated that he dissolved partnership with Jones because he did not like the financial methods of the latter. Asked whether he meant that Jones was not strictly honest, he sheltered himself behind a Latin quotation: 'De mortuis nil nisi bonum'—of the dead let nothing but good be spoken—thus, by implication, he did assert that Jones was not strictly honest.

"Yet, all reports agree that Jones was both honest and able.

"He stated, further, that Jones asked him, during that last interview, to put back into the business some part of the five thousand pounds which he received for his share upon dissolution of partnership.

"That this last statement was true, was confirmed by an independent witness who met Jones on his way to the house of his old partner, Thomas.

"According to this witness, Jones said:

"'I am going to ask that scoundrel Thomas for some of the five thousand out of which I was swindled by him!'

"You will bear in mind, Nipper, my lad, that Welshmen are more excitable than their English friends, and more given to extremes of language. We may therefore, to some extent, discount the strong expressions used by Jones."

"And," resumed Nipper, "as to the falsification of the books. Did they call the book-keeper?"

"They did. The book-keeper was a young man named"—here the private detective referred to his note-book—"named Goss, Adrian Goss.

"His evidence, also, was unsatisfactory.

"He first denied, and then admitted, that he knew the books to be incorrect.

"Who was responsible for the books? He was.

"Had he pointed out to his employer, Mr. Jones, that the books were incorrect? He had.

"When? On the night of the tragedy.

"What action had Mr. Jones taken? Mr. Jones had flown into a rage, said that he would see Thomas, and left hurriedly.

"Did he—Goss—have any idea why his employer connected the falsification of the books with Thomas? Only that, since the dissolution of partnership, his employer had been extraordinarily bitter against Thomas.

"Had witness any reason to suspect Thomas of the obvious falsifications which the accountants had picked upon? —None whatever—the illicit alterations concerned a period when Thomas had ceased to have any interest in the affairs of the firm or access to its books."

Lee pocketed his note-book.

"Judging by the newspaper reports," he went on, "this young man's evidence was altogether wanting in conviction. He showed sincerity and certitude only when they asked him a question implying doubt as to the dead man's probity.

"Then he asserted, with convincing emotion, that Mr. Jones was honoured and respected by all who knew him. That much rang true, anyhow."

The train slowed to enter Cardiff station, and Nelson Lee swung his suit-case down from the rack.

A moment later he was shaking hands with a pale, dark-haired man, who introduced himself as Daniel Thomas.

The contractor was accompanied by a big, quiet man, who carried himself like a soldier and dressed like a gentleman's gentleman.

"This," he explained, "is Inspector Davies, of the Monmouthshire police, who has the case in hand. As I am particularly anxious that no time should be lost, I have brought Inspector Davies to meet you."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lee," said the inspector rather drily. "Where are you staying?"

"The Park," replied Lee, "better get a taxi, I think. We can talk at the hotel, if you are agreeable."

"Rather a private matter," objected Lee's client, "to be discussed in an hotel."

Lee had a good memory.

"There is a private sitting-room," he said, "on the ground floor of the hotel in question. We shall be able to use that, I expect."

Once within the room in question, with drinks before them and smokes going, the four settled down to a long discussion of the case.

"Inspector Davies," explained Thomas, "had a certain objection to my consulting a private detective, however eminent. He thought that the police were quite able to handle this case themselves; and, with that view, I agree—I fully agree; but, look you, I am a public man and I have to defend myself, I——"

Here the inspector interrupted.

"Have I not told you," he said, evidently resuming a wrangle which had been started earlier in the day, "that no one suspects you of murdering poor Jones. Good heavens, I would as soon suspect myself!"

"But they do suspect me, I tell you. I have called in Mr. Lee because they suspect me. I will prove to you that they suspect me.

"Here, now:"

And the contractor drew from his pocket a sheet of common note-paper covered with printed characters.

"Read that," he said triumphantly.

Lee read the brief epistle aloud.

"Don't forget," it went, "there is someone who knows all about Mr. Jones' death, as well as yourself, Daniel Thomas; someone who will see you swing!"

"Writer evidently an educated man," commented Lee. "He has not put his name to this accusation; but I suspect that he has signed it nevertheless."

"What does that anonymous letter mean," queried Thomas, "if it doesn't mean that I had to do with the murder?"

"But," objected Nelson Lee, "I have yet to learn that it was a murder. The coroner's jury returned an open verdict. Have fresh facts come to light?"

Inspector Davies looked important.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "they have. The public doesn't know it yet; but I have already told Mr. Thomas, here—who is working with us—and, in confidence, I am now telling you, that we have certain evidence of foul play.

"Firstly, two days before poor Jones was found dead, some person forged and uttered a cheque on his account for two hundred pounds; and, secondly—probably you know our methods, Mr. Lee—secondly, we have established the fact that the weapon bore no finger-prints, blurred or otherwise.

"Further," and Inspector Davies looked impressively at the private detective, "it did bear distinct traces of the grain of a

glove, both upon the trigger and upon the butt.

"We are inclined to assume that the man who forged the cheque fired the pistol; and that, for the purpose of concealing his crime, he wore a glove upon his pistol-hand."

"But," objected the private detective, "I gathered, from the evidence, that Mr. Jones was found locked in. His private office, if I remember rightly, had a snap-lock, and the outer door a night-latch very difficult to pick. If that was so, how did the murderer obtain access to the premises?"

"The only possible method," said the inspector, "was by means of those said doors."

"Then," continued Lee, "since the murderer would not have sought Jones at his office at that hour, and must have followed him in, it follows, I suggest, that the murderer has keys of the premises."

The inspector nodded.

"Exactly."

"And who had keys of the premises?" pursued Lee.

He turned to his client, Thomas.

"Did you?"

"At one time," said Thomas, "I did, of course, but not recently. At the time when I was a partner in the firm, there were four sets of keys. I had one, which I gave up when the partnership dissolved. Poor Jones had another, the third was held by the charwoman, and the fourth——"

Here, with the Celt's instinct for drama, he paused.

"The fourth——"

"Ah!" said the inspector. "There you have it, Mr. Lee! The fourth set was held by —"

And now, as if by prearrangement, to complete the little denouement which Thomas and his friend were approaching with such enjoyment, the hall-porter opened the door of their sitting-room.

"Mr. Adrian Goss," he said, "would like to see Mr. Nelson Lee."

"Goss!"

Lee saw by the expressions of the two men that that was the name they had been leading up to.

Mr. Goss had obviously been seeking Dutch courage in the lounge. His tie and hair were disarranged, and his eyes were tinged with blood. "Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Nelson Lee?" he asked.

"Let Mr. Goss come in," he said, before they had recovered from their astonishment.

It must be admitted that the young man did not create a favourable impression upon the mind of Nelson Lee.

Rather obviously, he had been seeking Dutch courage in the lounge. His tie and hair were disarranged, and his eyes were tinged with blood.

"Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Nelson Lee?" he asked. "Mr. Nelson Lee, of Gray's Inn Road?"

And then, without waiting an answer, he went on:

"It's no use your trying to stop me, Thomas. I am going to lay my case before the London detective We'll have fair play here. I dare say you are paying a thumping big fee—well, I can pay a thumping big fee, also. Which is Mr. Lee?"

Lee turned to his assistant.

"Just ring that bell, will you, Nipper?"

"You are going to have Goss thrown out?" suggested Thomas.

"No; I am going to order him a strong coffee—he needs it!"

Then, to their uninvited visitor, he said:

"I am Mr. Nelson Lee. Sit down, young man, and pull yourself together. I am as anxious to see you as you are to see me."

The coffee was brought; and, while young Adrian Goss regained composure, Nelson Lee talked of indifferent things. He was a great believer in fair play.

"Now," he resumed, when he saw that Goss was calmer, "we will continue our conversation."

He turned to Inspector Davies.

"I suggest, inspector, that we have nothing to gain by secrecy. Let us take this young man into our confidence."

The police officer gave a somewhat grudging assent, and, addressing the young bookkeeper, he continued:

"We have reason to believe that your late employer was the victim of foul play, and we have reason to suspect that his death was in some way connected with the abnormal circumstances beginning a short time before he left his office to call upon Mr. Thomas. Perhaps you would be good enough to refresh my memory on one or two points?"

"Yes, sir. I will tell you the truth."

"To begin with. Why did Mr. Jones arrive at his decision to see Mr. Thomas?"

"I don't know. I think it was because of something he discovered in looking through the books."

"You said at the inquest, I think, that your employer discovered that the books were falsified, and connected the falsification with Mr. Thomas here. Do you now repeat that statement?"

The young fellow looked wretched.

"Yes," he replied; and then, after a moment: "No."

Lee waited patiently.

"Mr. Jones discovered that the books were falsified," explained the young man, as if every word was painful to utter, "but he did not suspect Mr. Thomas."

"Did he suspect anybody, then?"

"Yes."

"Whom did he suspect?"

Young Goss looked longingly at the door.

"Myself, sir."

"And he was right? You were guilty?"

"Yes."

"Then," the inspector broke in, "on that evening—the evening of his murder—your employer had discovered that you had robbed him?"

"I had been in difficulties," said Goss, not without a shamefaced dignity, "and I had taken money by altering the wages sheets. It was not for myself; but that doesn't matter. Before Mr. Jones discovered the fact, I had returned every penny."

The inspector was pitiless.

"I repeat my question," he said. "On that evening your employer had discovered that you had robbed him?"

"Yes."

The word was almost inaudible.

"And he then went over to Penarth to see Mr. Thomas?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I—I was very upset, sir."

"Answer my question. What did you do?"

Young Goss looked around him, as if seeking help; but Lee and his assistant knew that the cross-examination must go on.

"As a matter of fact," admitted Goss, "I came round here."

"You got some drink?"

"Yes."

"And what time did you leave?"

"I—don't—know."

"You left at ten o'clock," the inspector told him.

"I don't know what I did."

"I do. You left at ten. What did you do after that?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do. I was—I didn't like to go home—like that. I went for a long walk."

"You went for a long walk?"

There was a world of meaning in the inspector's repetition.

"You live," he went on, "at Landaff, with your mother. What time did you arrive home?"

"It must have been nearly two in the morning," replied Goss, in a half whisper.

"Ha!"

The net was closing round.

"And how were you dressed, Mr. Goss? As you are now?"

"Yes, I think so. Yes."

"With your overcoat?"

"Yes."

"And these gloves?"

With a rapid movement, the inspector filched a pair of reindeer gloves from the young man's overcoat pocket, and tossed them on to the table.

"Yes," admitted Goss, with an accent of surprise. "I was wearing those gloves; but I can't see——"

"No? Perhaps not. But you will!"

The inspector turned to Nelson Lee with a self-satisfaction which was largely justified.

"I'll ask you, Mr. Lee, to compare the

grain of these gloves with a photographic enlargement of the traces found upon the weapon with which the crime was committed."

He handed the private detective a couple of mounted photographs, which looked like the first blurred efforts of a clumsy amateur, but were really masterpieces by one of the best photographers in the Principality.

Lee screwed a watchmaker's monocle into his eye, and inspected first the gloves and then the photograph.

"Yes," he agreed, "it is the same skin."

"Good enough!"

The inspector moved towards the door.

"You have admitted," he said to Goss, "that, on the eve of the murder, Mr. Jones had discovered serious faults in your work, from which, whatever you say to the contrary, we may deduce a more or less violent altercation. You have admitted that, between your leaving Mr. Jones and the hour of his death, you had been drinking heavily. You have failed to produce an alibi. You have admitted that your evidence at the inquest was false; and lastly, you have admitted that, on the night of the crime, you were wearing these reindeer-skin gloves.

"We know that your relations with your employer were strained; and that he was murdered by one who wore reindeer gloves and had the key of his office.

"On those facts I feel justified in arresting you on a charge of wilful murder, and I warn you that anything you say may be taken down in writing and used as evidence against you."

Too late, the unhappy young man saw the net which the inspector had so adroitly woven.

With an incoherent cry, he made for the door.

But the three detectives were all used to handling such situations, and he did not stand a chance.

"All right," he said. "I'll go quietly. "Perhaps I shall wake up in a minute and find that this is all a rotten dream. It must be. Why, the idea of my murdering Mr. Jones, it's—well, I don't know. You seem to be able to prove I did it, and I can't prove I didn't. Let's get away to the station, or wherever it is. I'm ready."

While a taxi-cab was called, he stood like one in a catalepsy; but as, in company with Inspector Davies, he turned to leave the sitting-room, he roused himself for a strange appeal to Nelson Lee.

"Mr. Lee," he said, "I know I'm innocent. Don't believe anything else. The police—they won't work to clear me; but you will, won't you, sir? I'll see that your fees are paid."

"Fees," said Nelson Lee, "don't interest me very much."

Young Goss saw his mistake instantly.

"But justice does," he exclaimed; "and I want justice. Only justice, Mr. Lee. I implore you to see that I get it!"

"That's quite enough of that!" said the inspector sharply. "Are you coming quietly? Or shall I——"

The young man turned, with a gesture of utter despair, and accompanied the inspector out of the door.

"I don't believe he did it," said Nipper impulsively.

Nelson Lee smiled ruefully.

"The Welsh are born actors," he said, "every one of them."

Daniel Thomas laughed harshly.

"Did it?" he said. "Of course he did it! Mr. Lee's right. That talk of innocence was just a bit of play-acting!"

II.

THE case which the newspapers termed "The South Wales Murder" caused a great amount of interest, principally on account of the unusual ability shown by Inspector Davies.

The fact that Adrian Goss turned out to be affianced to the dead man's daughter lent its details an extra piquancy, and the eminence of the parties added thereto.

Counsel for the prosecution built up his case very largely upon conjecture; but his conjecture was so unassailably logical, and so supported by circumstantial evidence, that it is no wonder if the defence was weak.

What defence was there? Even Goss admitted—under cross-examination—that he remembered nothing of his movements after eleven on the fatal night. The verdict of "the man in the train" was, in the words of Thomas: "Of course he did it!"

And the verdict of the public counts for a lot.

It had already transpired that a forged cheque for two hundred pounds had been uttered a day or so previous to the murder; and now the assistant cashier at Jones' bank—who was a new hand, and not acquainted with Goss—described the man who had cashed the said cheque. And his description fitted Goss as a glove fits the hand.

When Adrian Goss was condemned to be hanged, the public agreed that the verdict was justified, and even the usual petition for a reprieve was not forthcoming.

As the reader is aware, Nelson Lee had taken up the case with indifferent interest; but now he followed every move with the deepest attention.

"In nine cases out of ten," Goss's counsel had said, making the best of his weak defence, "circumstantial evidence is trustworthy. This is the tenth case."

Was it? Was there any possibility that Goss was innocent? These were the questions which perplexed Nelson Lee. He was present during the whole of the trial; but, even with the complete case before him, he could adduce only two arguments in favour of Goss being innocent.

And even those arguments were very weak. Indeed, it is probable that the legal mind would have dismissed them as not worthy of consideration.

Nelson Lee, however, was not afflicted by the legal mind. He was, on the contrary, a very human individual. He gave some weight to the facts, firstly, that Goss—a decent enough young fellow—was in love with Jones' daughter; and, secondly, that the young man undoubtedly had had a great regard for his murdered employer. These were the two arguments which kept Nelson Lee in Cardiff when many pressing affairs called for his attention at Gray's Inn Road, London.

A further reason did not transpire until after the judgment against Goss had been given.

Then a young lady, heavily veiled, and dressed in deep mourning, called at the Park Hotel and insisted upon seeing the detective.

It was Barbara Jones, daughter of the murdered man, and betrothed of the man condemned.

Nelson Lee had already seen the girl once, early in the case, when she was called to give evidence, and he was shocked at the change in her appearance.

From being full-faced, bright-eyed and high-coloured, she had become pallid and worn. Only her native courage and her unwavering faith in her lover had kept her from breaking down altogether.

Needless to say, Nelson Lee was kind and sympathetic to the poor girl. Who could have been otherwise? But he could not hold out any hope. He felt that it would be cruel to do so.

The interview hurt him deeply; and, when the girl had left him, he sat for a long time smoked his favourite briar, turning over the events of that fatal night—as he knew them—like the pages of a book, vainly seeking to strike out a line of thought which might lead him on another trail.

He had decided to leave for London on the morrow; but now, because he felt it due to the poor child who had implored his aid, he determined upon a last investigation.

In company wth a member of the firm of chartered accountants who had investigated the firm's books, Nelson Lee paid a visit to the office wherein Mr. Jones had been discovered dead.

In reply to the accountant's question as to what he expected to find, Lee was compelled to admit that he did not know.

"I have brought you here," he added, "because I wanted you to point out the places where the books have been falsified. I don't anticipate that that, or anything else, will be important; but I make a point of covering all the ground. As your time is doubtless valuable, we had better begin with the books."

(Continued on next page.)

With an incoherent cry he made for the door.

The accountant complied, with all the aplomb of a specialist, and a moment later, all the books which had been produced in court were opened for Lee's inspection.

The errors by which young Goss had covered up his defalcations had been neatly ringed in green pencil; and Lee was bookkeeper enough to appreciate that the errors on the wrong side were balanced by errors on the right side.

When Goss had stated that he had made voluntary restitution, he had been stating nothing less than the truth. This did not excuse the minor crime to which he pleaded guilty, it is true; but it showed that his repentance had been sincere.

Lee went through book after book, with the minute care at which his official friends would sometimes smile. Occasionally, not satisfied with the evidence of his naked eye, he would bring out the watchmakers' monocle which he used, and scrutinise a figure by means of that.

And, from beginning to end, he had no idea what he was looking for. He was merely doing the job properly.

Yet as often before, this meticulous attention to detail brought the reward which it deserved.

When he came to the last alteration of all, the false entry which had been discovered immediately after the crime, he stopped, scrutinised it for a long time, and with great care, and finally turned back to the earlier entries.

"Something strange here," he muttered. "The previous entries were made with considerable skill, and with a deliberate intention; this one is made clumsily—a child could detect it—and its intention is difficult to perceive."

"I don't see that that fact bears upon the case," said the accountant.

"Possibly it does not," Lee admitted. "But consider this: the previous alterations had a purpose—a purpose which is apparent to you and me. Beyond question, this alteration had a purpose also; but in this case the purpose was obscure.

"Do you see what I mean?" he went on. "My methods of investigation demand a reason for everything. Here we have something without a reason. I naturally fasten upon that. I shall not be happy until that is explained."

The accountant frowned. He did not perceive the importance of Lee's discovery; but he was quite unable to provide a theory for the alteration.

"The man who could inform you about that," he suggested, "is Goss himself."

The detective nodded.

"Precisely. I will give you a receipt for that book, and take it down to Goss."

The accountant allowed the book to leave the office; but he did not appear to believe that Lee would obtain an interview with the condemned man. He knew that such an interview was difficult to bring about.

And he was not misinformed.

But Nelson Lee had performed many such miracles in his time, and knew exactly how to set about this one. An order signed by the counsel for the prosecution, who happened to be a Cardiff man, together with the detective's own influence, obtained his admission to the condemned cell within the hour.

Once there in the large room where Adrian Goss was living out his last few days in company with two officials whose mission it was to see that he did not do anything to cheat the law of its just revenge, Nelson Lee came straight to the point.

"Goss," he said, "I want you to understand that my coming does not mean anything from which you might hope. I have no desire to be brutal; but the truth is necessary. I am here merely to ask you one question about this cash-book which I hold in my hand."

He opened the book and pointed to the last entry.

"You see there a falsification which appears meaningless. Now, I have very closely inspected the handwriting in which that false entry is made, and it seems to be un-

like your own. I want you to assure me that it was made by you."

He fixed his grey eyes upon the face of the unhappy young man, and, during the minutes which followed, he read every thought which passed across the young man's brain.

If Goss had lied then, Nelson Lee would have known it beyond a shadow of doubt.

Goss looked at the figures with only a casual interest. It did not matter to him whose figures they were—surely nothing mattered any more. He was as one already dead.

"I can't assure you of that," he murmured, "because I did not make those figures, and I don't know who did."

"H'm! Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Can you say when they were made?"

"Easily. The cash-book had not been made up for a long time, and on the evening before Mr. Jones was murdered"—Lee noted that he did not shrink from the word —"I brought the casts up to date. If you know anything about book-keeping, you will see that the alterations could not have been made before the totals had been arrived at."

"Therefore, the alteration in question must have been made within twenty-four hours of Mr. Jones' death?"

"That is so."

Lee turned, and walked thoughtfully from the cell and the prison which contained it.

"That alteration had a purpose," he was thinking. "What was its purpose? It was not used to cover up a defalcation—there was none to cover at that date. It was a clumsy alteration, and made at a page where the book lay open. What does that indicate?"

He stopped. His train of deductions was leading him to a rather curious conclusion.

"Heavens!" he gasped. "That clumsy fake was put there to draw attention to Goss's dishonesty!"

He turned round and went back to the prison.

"Goss," he asked, as soon as he gained readmittance to the condemned cell, "was there anyone who might have known that you had embezzled money, previous to your late employer's death?"

The reply was a disappointment.

"No," said the young man, I don't think so."

"You don't think so? H'm! Let us put it another way. If someone had known, who would that someone have been?"

"I don't know. If anyone had known, Mr. Thomas—yes, Mr. Thomas certainly knew that I had urgent need of money at one time, and that I did not know where to get it. He might have known; but, if he did know, why didn't he give me away? There was no love lost between us. Well, you're acting for him, and I don't suppose you've got any sympathy for me, even if I wanted your sympathy."

"There you are wrong," said Lee. "But I see that you are not interested. Tell me one thing, and I will go."

"I'll do that if I can," said the young man wearily. "What is it?"

"Just this," said Nelson Lee. "I'm afraid you'll think it a somewhat flippant question, but where did you get those reindeer gloves which figured in the case?"

The young man's lips curled. It was indeed a flippant question to ask a dying man.

"If you want to know," he said, "I bought them at——"

And he named a deservedly well-known hosier of Cardiff city.

Before going there, the detective looked in at his hotel, and found Nipper, who had just returned from an emergency visit to London.

"Nipper," he said, "this case has taken a most interesting turn—most interesting indeed."

He unwrapped the cash-book from its cover of brown paper and opened it at the entry which had aroused his suspicion.

"I want you to blow a little graphite over this page to bring out any finger-prints, then photograph it, and let me have the proofs by dinner-time. Can you do it?"

Nipper's "ay, ay!" was given without hesitation, and his employer left him with complete confidence that the job would be done to time.

He found the glove-shop easily enough, and tackled the chief salesman forthwith.

Needless to say—since the traces of a reindeer glove had played such an important part in the evidence against Goss—the matter of the gloves had been already investigated by the police, and the salesman had the whole matter cut and dried.

Nevertheless, being either more thorough or more lucky than the police, Nelson Lee managed to go a step further than they—a step which was to have important consequences.

As it happened there had been a shortage of genuine reindeer gloves at the time of Goss's purchase, and this particular firm of retailers had only been successful in securing three dozen pairs.

Of these, two dozens had been ordered by customers in advance, and the names and addresses of these customers were duly placed before Nelson Lee. The remaining dozen had been sold one pair at a time; and, as regards these, the salesman had to trust to his memory.

Fortunately, his memory was unusually good; and, knowing most of his customers by sight, he was able to say exactly where nine of the remaining dozen pairs had gone to.

Lee listened attentively to the string of names.

"And then," the salesman continued, "there was Mr. Bagshaw, of the Portland cement people, he bought a couple of pairs. I remember that, because he made arrangements to change one of the pairs if it was not the right size——"

"So," commented Lee, "he was giving a pair away, was he?"

"It looks like it, Mr. Lee."

"You don't happen to know to whom he gave them? No! Well, then, I had better see Mr. Bagshaw. Do you mind giving me his address?"

Mr. Bagshaw turned out to be a fussy old gentleman with a short memory.

"Dear me," he said, "did I have some of those gloves? Ah, yes, I remember now, I left them in the train. No, I didn't. I left one pair in the train and gave the other to a customer. Who was it? Ah, there you have me. Wait a minute. Where's my diary? Yes, here we are. Always keep a record of this sort of thing, you know. December twenty-third. 'Gave pair gloves to——' What's the name? Thompson? Thompkins? Can you read it? My eyes are not what they were."

The eyes of Nelson Lee were exceptionally good, and a single glance told him that he had made an important discovery. The name was Thomas—the name of Jones's old partner.

He hastened to confirm that the recipient of the gloves was Daniel Thomas and no other, then he hurried away, with the diary in his possession.

By dinner time of that day, he had collected evidence which gave him reason to believe that Daniel Thomas was the guilty man.

But belief and proof are very different things.

"Here," he said to his assistant, "we have a photograph of finger-prints which may, and probably will, turn out to be those of Thomas. We have proof that Thomas also was possessed of a pair of reindeer-skin gloves. I have compared the finger-prints which you have photographed with those of Goss, and I know that Goss did not fake the cash-book in that particular place. Yet the evidence proved that the cash-book must have been tampered with on the night of the crime.

"I reason this way. That clumsy alteration of the books was made to incriminate Goss and thus divert suspicion from someone else. It was made by someone who was well acquainted with the books of the firm, and had at least a suspicion that Goss had been guilty of dishonesty.

"Now the person who made that alteration, was possessed of a pair of reindeer-skin gloves, knew that Jones would be at the offices, and was in a position, by means of a key, or otherwise, to effect an entry thereto. I submit that it points to Thomas."

"But how," asked Nipper, "are you going to prove it?"

"That's the question which is worrying me, my lad. I don't believe they would even reopen the case on the evidence which we have collected so far. I must think."

The detective went into the writing-room, threw himself into an armchair, and smoked reflectively for over an hour.

The several people in that place who knew Nelson Lee by sight, possibly commented on the easy time enjoyed by highly-paid specialists in crime-detection; but, for all his comfortable attitude, Nelson Lee was working as hard as ever he had worked in his life.

The result of his deliberations was curious.

"I have decided," he told his assistant, "to leave for London first thing to-morrow morning."

"Right-ho!" said Nipper; but his heart was heavy. He concluded that Nelson Lee had come to the conclusion that, after all, Goss was the guilty man.

"In that case," he went on, "what about a stroll before turning in?"

"Can't be done, my lad. I think that Thomas will have heard of my visit to Jones' office, and will call to see whether I have made any further discoveries. I hope he will."

His conclusion was justified by events; for, half an hour after, the contractor called in.

"I heard that you were up at the offices to-day," he said frankly. "Did you manage to discover anything else?"

Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"I did," he said, "but I am afraid that it is not worth much."

He invited the contractor to join him in a drink.

Then, in response to the man's impatience, he continued.

"Oh, my discovery was just this. Possibly it isn't a discovery at all. Possibly you know it already. There is a secret drawer in Jones' writing-table. You pull out the filing box, and this exposes the handle of the secret drawer."

"No," said Thomas. "I didn't know of that. What a very interesting thing! Was—was there anything in the drawer?"

"As a matter of fact," said Lee, "there was. I don't suppose it has much bearing on the case; but I'm going to tell Inspector Davies about it—or, perhaps, as I'm leaving Cardiff to-morrow, you will tell him yourself. Mr. Jones appears to have kept a diary right up to the day of his death, and the diary is in that drawer."

Did Nelson Lee imagine it, or did the contractor lose a little of his robust colouring.

"Did you read the diary?" he questioned.

"Unfortunately," said the detective, "I could not. It was written from beginning to end in the Welsh language.

"But," he continued, "I don't suppose it is any use."

"Probably not," the contractor agreed, "but your discovery is very interesting. Will you have another drink? No? Then I must be going. Good-bye, Mr. Lee. Let me have your bill in due course."

The detective watched his departure with a reflective smile.

"The fish rises to the bait," he told himself.

. . . . . .

The light of a full moon, streaming into the room where Mr. Jones had been found dead, threw into strong relief the features of one who sat at his table. And the face of the man who sat there was the face of the dead man himself, and his bearing was the bearing of the dead man.

It was a triumph of make-up on the part of Nelson Lee. By a careful study of photographs, and a loan of cast-off clothing he had been able to effect an impersonation which caused even Inspector Davies to feel a thrill of superstition, even though he was in the secret.

The inspector and Nipper were concealed by a screen, and all three of them maintained a complete silence.

They argued that if Thomas were guilty he would try to get the diary—which it must be admitted was nothing more than an invention of Nelson Lee's.

In making the attempt, the contractor would have to betray the fact that he possessed keys of the premises; and, as they hoped, might be driven by fear to utter something approaching a confession.

An hour went by, then another. It was half-past one in the morning.

"I have told you," grumbled the Inspector, "this is futile. We have got the right man. I——"

"Be quiet," said Lee, "there is someone at the outer door."

He was right. A moment afterwards, listening intently, the others detected the careful closing of a door, and then the creaking of the wooden stairs, as someone stealthily ascended.

The fish was rising to the bait.

The door of the room in which they sat was locked with a night-latch; but the newcomer had a key for this, and a moment later, the door opened.

The feelings of the murderer must have been terrible enough in thus entering the room where he had committed the terrible crime to which he had been driven.

Already he must have been on the verge of hysteria.

But when he stood before that ominous silent figure, and recognised the features and habiliments of the man he had slain, his punishment must have been dreadful indeed.

The guilt of a murderer and the superstition of an imaginative race must have culminated to drive him insane.

"Jones," he said, "don't look at me like that! If I hadn't killed you, you would have ruined me. You know, you said you would. I had to have that money.

"I know I put it on to Goss. But what was Goss? He was a thief—a common thief! You didn't know it, Jones, but I did."

The wretched man sank to his knees, and hid his face upon his arms.

"For pity's sake," he groaned, "don't look at me like that!"

Nelson Lee had hooked his fish, and now he struck pitilessly.

"Turn on the light," he said.

The light went up, and Thomas staggered to his feet.

He gave one look at the three detectives around him, and then he sprang at the window.

It was a suicidal impulse, and carried out with the desperation of madness.

The age-worn beads and glass were carried away, and the unhappy criminal dropped sixty feet on the flags below.

He was quite dead when they found him.

The case against Goss was re-opened amid a furore of popular sentiment, and the triumph of his "pardon" was not forgotten for many a long day.

The public were agreed upon two things. First, circumstantial evidence should be ruled out in future murder cases; second, Inspector Davies was a genious at his profession.

Nelson Lee was charitably mentioned here and there as one who had been of service in enabling the cleverness of the Inspector to bear fruit.

For this neglect of his deserts, Nelson Lee did not care a snap of the fingers. He was used to it.

He felt that he was rewarded to the full when Mr. and Mrs. Goss, on their honeymoon, called at Gray's Inn Road to thank him.

He found occasion to give young Goss a severe dressing-down on the subject of commercial honesty; and it is whispered that, when Goss took over the business which had once been carried on by Jones and Thomas, it was Nelson Lee who financed him.

The one thing which Inspector Davies performed to deserve the promotion with which he was presently rewarded, was to discover the youth who had impersonated Goss in cashing the cheque for two hundred pounds.

It was the forging of this cheque by Thomas which Mr. Jones had discovered on the fatal night, and it was to prevent the exposure with which he was threatened, that Thomas had followed and slain his old partner.

When asked whether the case had been remunerative in point of fees, Nelson Lee replied:

"Well, I received a piece of excellent wedding-cake from some young friends in Cardiff; and I don't think that any fee that I have ever received has given me greater pleasure. What do you say, Nipper?"

Nipper grinned.

"What you say, guv'nor, is good enough for yours truly; but, if you don't mind my saying so, you earned it!"

And there is little doubt that the lad was speaking the truth.

THE END

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