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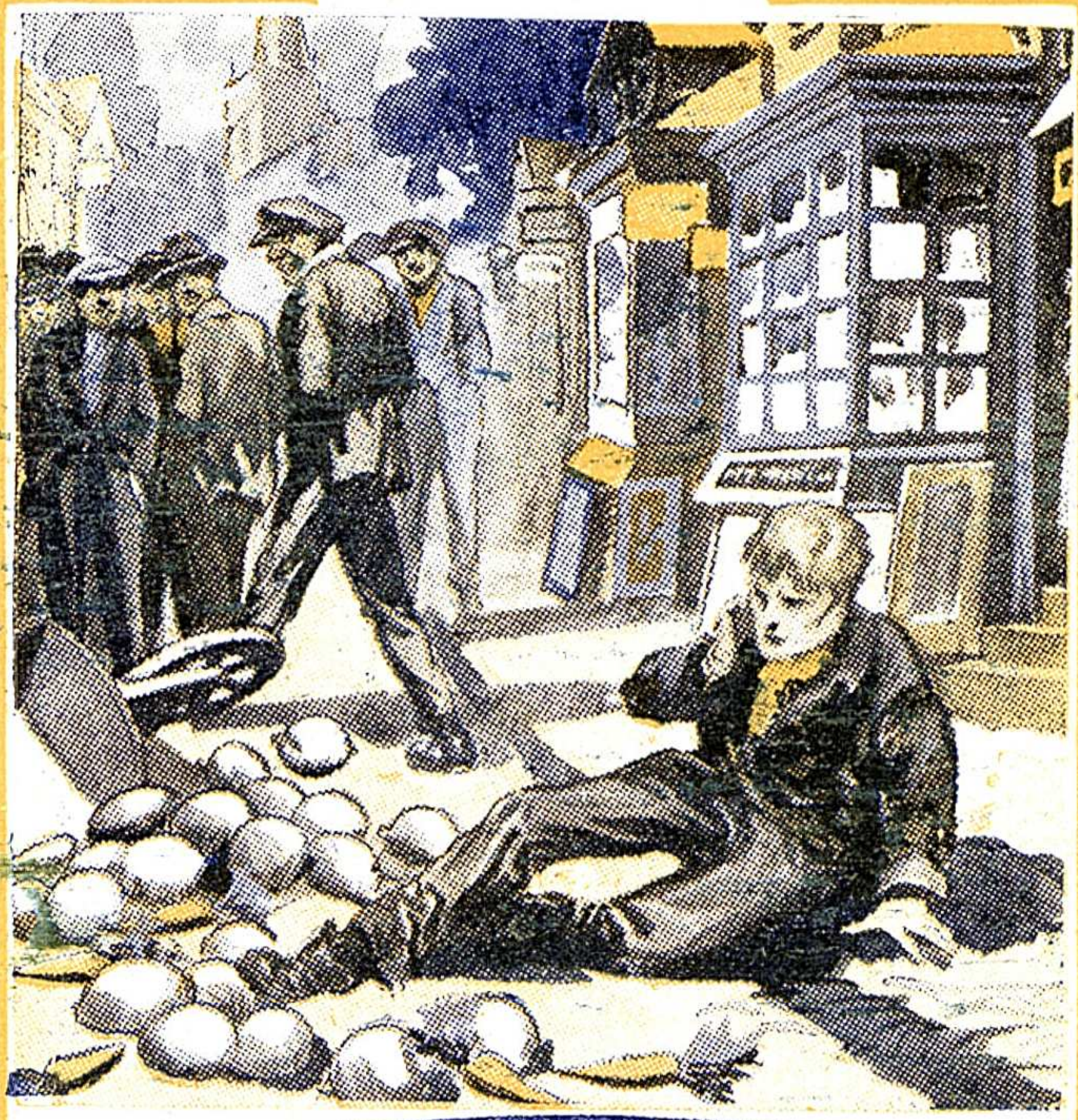
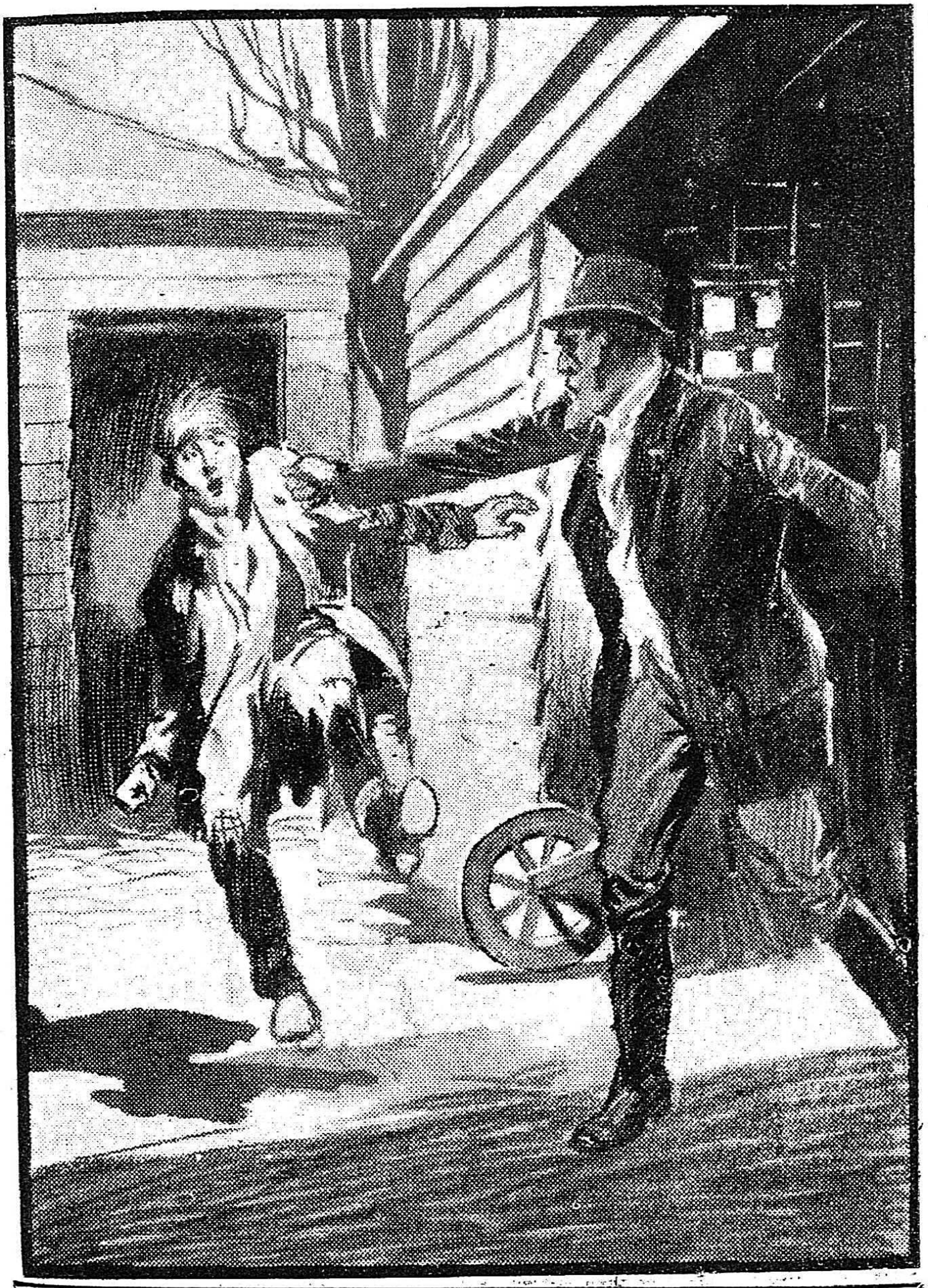


WHEN A BOY'S DOWN.

A Grand Long Complete Story of School Life and adventure at St. Frank's College appearing in this number

No. 390 EVERY WEDNESDAY NOV. 25, 1922



"Take that!" roared Farmer Holt brutally. His heavy hand swung round, and Softy caught the full force of it on the shoulder.

When a Boy's Down!

Or, THE SENSATION OF THE VILLAGE.

A Splendid Long Complete Story of School Life and Detective Adventure, with a Strong Human Interest. Introduces Softy Wade, a New Character; NELSON LEE as the Famous Schoolmaster Detective; NIPPER, the Leader of the Remove; and the well-known Juniors of St. Frank's College.

(The Narrative Related Throughout by Nipper.)

CHAPTER I.

THE FARMER'S BOY!

"SHAME!"

Mrs. Jones made that remark in an indignant voice. She was standing at the doorway of her cottage in Bellton High Street. Mrs, Jones was the wife of the village boot repairer, and she always took a great interest in the doings of the High Street. She spent a large amount of time daily on the doorstep.

"Shame! That's what it is!" she said warmly. "Going for the poor boy like that, when he ain't done nothin'! If I was nearer, I'd clip that there Lumpy over the side of the head! A rare bully—that's what he is!"

Having expressed herself by means of these terse remarks, Mrs. Jones continued to survey the scene. It was not particularly exciting. About a hundred yards further up the street there was a youth with a barrow. He was not more than sixteen, and he was attired in the oddest assortment of clothing one could imagine, and hardly one garment fitted him.

He was endeavouring to guide an ordinary garden barrow, which was filled to overflowing with a supply of very healthy turnips. Standing in front of the youth was Lumpy Bill, and all round were numbers of other village boys.

Lumpy Bill was renowned far and wide as the "kid's terror." He had the distinction of being the village bully, and he was a big, burly youth with any amount of muscle, and a limited quantity of brain.

"That's right, soppy, try an' push 'er now!" he grinned. "I'll give you a tanner if you git that barrow on the go! An' you'd best be quick, too, because I'm fed up with waitin'!"

The other youth shook his head in a dull kind of way.

"I can't shift the barrow while that stone's in front of it!" he said, in a spiritless voice. "Let me get on up the road, Lumpy. Mr. Holt will be rare wild if I ain't back soon!"

"Who cares about Mr. Holt?" jeered the village bully. "I'm goin' to teach you not to be saucy. Take that!"

Biff!

Lumpy Bill's fist swung round, and the other boy received the force of it on the side of his head. He staggered over, and sat down in the road amid a yell of keen enjoyment from the youthful throng.

"See?" said Lumpy. "That's what you git for bein' a fool! Yah! Call yourself a human bein'? Lumme! You ain't no better than a rabbit! Chaps like you oughter be chucked in the river!"

The other boy slowly picked himself up.

"'Tain't fair!" he complained. "I ain't hurt you!"

It did not seem to occur to him to retaliate, although he might easily have sent Lumpy Bill off, yelping with fear. For Lumpy was a bigger coward than a bully, and if only his victims would turn on him, he would have done.

But Softy Wade was well known in the district. Even the smallest urchins could cheek him without fear of suffering. He had been called Softy because it was generally admitted in the village that he was not quite all there. He was perhaps the most harmless specimen of humanity one could meet.

As a boy, Softy was by no means unhandsome. He was well set up, straight, with good muscles, and he had a head of fair, curly hair. His features were well formed. But of spirit he seemed to possess no trace.

He was attired in rough corduroy breeches, heavy boots, and an ancient kind of coat which was much too large for him. A dilapidated hat adorned his head. Altogether, he was something of a scarecrow.

"Now shift that barrow!" said Lumpy Bill. "If you don't move it quick, my lad, I'll tip all them turnips in the road! See?"

"Oh, don't do that!" said Softy, in alarm. "Mr. Holt would half kill me if any o' them turnips was lost!"

"Turn the barrow over, Lumpy!" advised one of the small urchins.

"Good old Lumpy! Nobody can't beat 'im!"

Thus encouraged, Lumpy grasped the barrow, and lifted it slightly. Softy Wade stood looking on, dull misery in his eyes. It seemed very extraordinary that he did not make any attempt to stop the disaster.

At one time, possibly, he had the normal amount of spirit which is due to every healthy boy. But this had been knocked out of him during the course of three or four years employment at Holt's farm—which lay only about half a mile out of the village.

Mr. Holt did not possess a very enviable character in the neighbourhood. The St. Frank's juniors hated him, for if ever they crossed over any of his land—during a paper-chase, for example—he would chase them, report to the headmaster, and generally make himself exceedingly unpleasant.

And Softy Wade, the simple farm boy, had been in Mr. Holt's employment ever since he left school. But this is scarcely putting it correctly. Softy was little better than a slave.

He never received any money, he was kicked and cuffed from morning till night, and he was made to work like a nigger. He got nothing in return except his food and a pile of straw in one of the stables.

The general public did not know of the conditions in which Softy lived. He never thought of complaining to anybody. It was his life, and he said nothing. Either he was afraid of Farmer Holt, or his spirit was so quelled that he never thought of it. At all events, he was the butt of every village lout.

For it was generally known that Softy was an orphan. He had been born in the Bannington workhouse—he had been brought up in the workhouse—and Farmer Holt had taken him out as an act of charity when he was about ten. Ever since then he had existed at the farm.

Softy didn't live. He was like a machine, doing everything that he was ordered to do, and never complaining. Even when he had gone to school, he had been jeered at as the biggest dunce of all.

Given a fair chance, he might have shown up well. But it was not generally known that, winter and summer, he had been hauled out at five o'clock in the morning. And Farmer Holt had made him work until within ten minutes of school time.

When he came home at the dinner-hour, he had worked again, and at night he had been kept busy on all sorts of farm jobs until late in the evening.

The boy had never had a chance.

He had been crushed as a child. He had, practically speaking, never joined in any boyish game—not because he was a fool, but because he had never had the chance. Farmer Holt had kept him ground down, and the result, at sixteen, was rather pitiful to anybody who had a spark of understanding.

For Softy was almost like a child of seven or eight. His manhood had never had the slightest chance to develop. Even now, with a change of scene and work, it would be possible for him to find himself. But there was a very slim chance of this, for he was Farmer Holt's slave, and had to do the tyrant's bidding.

He was down—crushed—trodden on.

Nearly everybody in the village accepted him as the local idiot, and treated him with disdain and jeers. The fact that he worked as hard as a Trojan from morning till night was accepted as a matter of course.

And nobody ever thought of protesting because Softy never protested on his own account. And he had been the butt of the village bullies for so long that he never had the slightest idea of defending himself.

While the little scene was going on, three cyclists appeared down the street. They were Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. The nuts of Study A saw what was going on, and Ralph Leslie Fullwood grinned.

"There's that fool of a Softy down the road!" he said. "Remember how we chucked him in the pond last week?"

"Rather!" said Gulliver, with a chuckle. "Big enough to swipe any of us, and yet he's as meek as an infant."

"Can't expect a born fool to be anything else!" remarked Bell. "Lumpy Bill seems to be enjoyin' himself. Suppose we pause for a minute or two an' chuck Softy in the pond again?"

His companions grinned at the thought. It was a half-holiday at St. Frank's, and the afternoon was comparatively fine. The air was cold and keen, with a touch of frost in it.

Fullwood and Co. slowed down as they approached.

And it so happened that at that very moment Lumpy heaved the barrow over, and the turnips went flying over the road in every direction. Fullwood, who was just getting ready to dismount, found turnips rolling on every side.

He hit one of them with his front wheel, wobbled, struck another, and then capsized. The elegant leader of Study A went over with a fearful crash, and it was rather unfortunate that he should sit practically in the middle of a muddy puddle.

"Haw, haw, haw," roared Lumpy Bill.

Fullwood picked himself up, purple with rage.

"By gad!" he shouted. "I'll make you pay for that!"

He didn't think of turning on Lumpy, who was the real culprit. Instead, he went for Softy, and, before that unfortunate youth could back away, Fullwood's clenched fist struck him in the mouth.

Crash!

The blow was immediately followed by another drive from Fullwood's left. Softy reeled, and then went over, gasping and sobbing. He lay on the ground for a moment or two, crouching there.

"Get up, you infernal worm!" snapped Fullwood. "What do you mean by chucking these rotten turnips all over the road? My suit's ruined!"

"I couldn't help it!" panted Softy sullenly. "It wasn't me what pushed the barrow over. I—— Oh! Oh!"

Before he could finish speaking, Fullwood slapped him on the face, a heavy, resounding cuff. And Fullwood, feeling that he had done all that was necessary, picked up his bicycle and remounted.

To tell the truth, he didn't want to remain long, or Lumpy Bill might start something. And Fullwood was not very fond of Lumpy. The latter was capable of delivering a very business-like punch.

Lumpy himself grinned at the misfortunes of the unhappy farmer's boy. And he considered that nothing more remained to be done. So, with a number of urchins surrounding him, he walked off.

And Softy Wade was left alone, sitting there, with his overturned barrow near by, and with the turnips lying in all directions. Softy was filled with misery as he saw the village bully was deliberately crunching on every available turnip as he walked away. Lumpy's hobnail boots caused enormous damage to the vegetables.

Another figure appeared along the road. It was an elegant figure, dressed in the latest of fashion, and surmounted by a top hat which fairly glittered and sparkled. From head to foot the newcomer was radiant.

He paused as he drew opposite the scene of destruction.

"What-ho! What-ho! What-ho!" he observed. "I mean to say, what?"

He gazed round, assisted by a monocle. Softy made no comment, but sat there in the road, breathing so heavily that he was practically on the point of sobbing. Softy, in fact, was wondering what would happen when Farmer Holt got to know about it.

"It appears, laddie, that trouble is lying about in considerable chunks!" said Archie Glenthorne, of the Remove. "That is to say, trouble and a choice assortment of carrots and what-nots! Or are they turnips? These bally things are so deucedly hard to distinguish. But what, may I ask, is the scheme? Kindly allow the old tongue to wag slightly."

Softy got to his feet, and rubbed a sleeve across his eyes.

"Them boys did this," he said dully. "Nigh on half the load gone, and me got to take 'em up to the farm straight off. Mr. Holt'll be as riled as anything with me. I sha'n't get no tea, nor yet no supper!"

"Dash it all!" said Archie. "That seems to be frightfully ridic., old scream! No tea or supper, what? But, I mean to say, accidents are bound to occur. A chappie can't always steer a straight course!"

"It were that there Lumpy Bill!" muttered Softy. "Turned my barrow over, he did. I'll be half killed when I get to the farm. I daresn't go! Mr. Holt'll hit me with a gret stick!"

Archie looked surprised.

"Absolutely not!" he declared. "I mean to say, what priceless piffle, old lad! I've got an idea that Mr. Holt is several kinds of a putiferous bounder! Certain rumours have reached the old bean at various times. But, all the same, old fruit—all the same, as it were, the blighter can't touch you. It was this Lumpy chappie who performed the bally deed!"

"Mr. Holt never do believe a word I say!" exclaimed Softy pitifully.

Archie regarded him with a certain amount of curiosity. It seemed to him that Softy was decidedly in the wars, and Archie always had a soft spot for anybody in trouble.

As a general rule, he would not dream of soiling his hands, or damaging his perfectly fitting gloves. If he had been

offered a fiver to pick those turnips up, he would have refused on the spot.

But it seemed to Archie's simple heart that this youngster required a little cheering up. And it struck him that a helping hand would not come amiss. So he bent down, and commenced piling the turnips back into the barrow.

"I mean to say, the glad hand, and all that kind of rot!" he remarked. "When a cove is in trouble, you know, it's rather a decent scheme to assist with something practical, what?"

"You don't need to do that, master!" said Softy, with a faint show of interest. "I can pick these 'ere turnips up, thanks all the same. 'Tain't right that you should make your 'ands dirty!"

"Absolutely not," agreed Archie. "As a matter of fact, my good chappie, the old paws are positively protected. But I shall certainly require a new pair of digit covers!"

He continued with his task, and Softy hastened to help. After three or four minutes, all the turnips were on the barrow, including the crushed ones. They looked very damaged, and quite a few were missing altogether.

"Well, that, so to speak, is that," said Archie, at length.

"Don't mensh., old boy! Always glad to shove forward the assisting fist. Absolutely! And now, laddie, I should advise you to trickle along the good old pathway."

Without a word, Softy lifted the handles of the barrow, and walked off. He was so afraid of Farmer Holt that he did not even think of thanking Archie. He was like a hunted animal, and his dulled wits scarcely seemed to function properly.

Archie shook his head rather sadly as Softy walked away.

"Most remarkable!" murmured the elegant junior. "The chappie looks as right as anything, and yet he seems so dashed spineless. I mean to say, it's not natural. A fellow like that ought to be bursting with energy and health and this and that!"

And, shaking his head rather sadly, Archie passed on.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER FROM LONDON.

MR. JEREMIAH HOLT paused as he came out of the big barn. He was in the act of lighting his pipe, and he became aware of the fact that a youthful figure was trundling a wheelbarrow up the muddy farm road. There were a good many outbuildings near by—cowsheds, pigsties, and similar structures. The farmhouse itself was a comparatively small building with a thatched roof. But it was quite big enough for Mr. Holt, who was a bachelor.

"Oh!" said the farmer gruffly. "An' high time, too!"

He pulled out a vast watch from his waistcoat pocket, and consulted it. Then he glowered upon Softy Wade as the latter came nearer. The boy was already shrinking with terror at what the farmer would do.

"A nice time you've been, you young rapscallion!" exclaimed Mr. Holt severely. "You oughter have been back with them turnips over an hour ago! What d'you think I keep you for, eh? You ain't never out o' my sight, but what you get up to mischief. Ye worthless young dog——"

The farmer paused, as he gazed at the turnips.

"What's this 'ere?" he demanded fiercely.

He strode forward, one hand tugging at his grizzled beard. And he frowned heavily down upon the barrow.

"There ain't a full load here!" he exclaimed sharply. "An' what's this? What's this? Why, half o' these turnips are broke and bruised! What darn game have you been up to, my lad?"

"Please, sir, I had an accident!" said Softy. "The barrow fell over, and them turnips got throwed out. It waren't my fault, sir, an'——"

"Take that!" roared Farmer Holt brutally.

Crash!

His heavy hand swung round, and Softy caught the full force of it on his shoulder. He went spinning over, and sprawled full length in the mud. And as he lay there, Holt brought his foot down, and kicked the boy viciously.

Softy just gasped with pain, but said nothing.

He was accustomed to this kind of thing—it was part of his daily life. It happened with such frequency that Softy was never free from bruises of some kind or other.

"You infernal little pig!" snarled the farmer. "I feed you, an' I give you a bed, and all you can do is to waste good turnips! I'll make ye suffer for this—not another morsel of food shall ye touch to-day!"

Softy had picked himself up by this time, and he stood there with hanging head. He knew that he wouldn't get any more food—it as one of Holt's favourite punishments. Considering how ill-fed the boy was, it was rather surprising that he looked so healthy and sturdy.

"You'd best get into them sties, and clean them out!" ordered the farmer curtly. "An' don't half do it, or I'll come along with a broomstick! Any slacking, my lad, an' ye'll know it!"

He turned on his heel and walked away, muttering into his beard.

It was well known that Mr. Jeremiah Holt was an ill-tempered man. He was hated by all the St. Frank's boys. But nobody in the district knew how harshly and inhumanly he treated this slave of his.

Softy himself never complained—for the simple reason that he was afraid to. He

regarded the farmer as some kind of ogre. Ever since he could remember he had been held down—crushed and beaten. And the thought of sticking up for himself never occurred to him. Since early childhood he had never had a chance.

And so, without complaint, he set about cleaning out the pigsties.

He worked mechanically—with scarcely any thoughts in his undeveloped mind. One day was just the same as another to Softy. The same old round of work—the same knocks, and the same harshness from Farmer Holt.

Softy didn't know what it was like to have a kindly word spoken to him. Even in the village he was treated with scorn and contempt. Most of the rougher children were in the habit of trailing behind him, jeering and calling him names.

There were some, it is true, who treated him in a different spirit. Occasionally they would give him a sweet, or a piece of cake. And Softy remembered these. They were little friends who counted for much in his drab existence.

And as he worked in the first sty his mind went back to Archie. And now that he had time to think—now that the fear of Farmer Holt's wrath had left him—he began to realise the wonder of it.

He had frequently seen the St. Frank's fellows—but only on rare occasions had one spoken to him. And then it had been to jeer. Even Teddy Long of the Remove—the biggest little sneak in the school—had once punched Softy without retaliation. So completely was the boy's spirit quelled, that the idea of hitting back was unknown to him.

But Archie was different.

Archie was a kind of tin god in Softy's opinion. He was dressed better than any of the others, and he spoke in a superior kind of way. And yet he had helped Softy to pick the turnips up from the muddy road. This was something to wonder at—something that was beyond Softy's understanding.

His mind worked very slowly—not because he was dull or brainless—but because he had never had any occasion to use his wits. It had always been work for him—hard grinding manual work from morning till night. And he was so tired out at the end of the day that he was good for nothing but sleep.

And while he cleaned out the sty, he noticed a stranger approaching. It was most unusual for strangers to appear at Holt's Farm. Occasionally, there would be somebody from the village come up—and this would be something of an event. But now the man who approached was quite unknown in the district. He was a gentleman, too—attired in sombre black, and a silk hat, and an umbrella. He picked his way gingerly along the muddy track.

"Disgusting, quite disgusting!" Softy heard him mutter. "Positively unfit for any human being to walk upon. Huh! Thank Heaven I am nearly there!"

He saw the farmhouse immediately in front of him, and he was very glad to step upon the cobbled yard immediately in front of the building. He crossed this, and was just in time to meet Mr. Jeremiah Holt as the latter came round a corner of the house. The two men gazed curiously at one another.

"Am I addressing Mr. Holt?" said the stranger.

"You are!" said the farmer. "What may your business be, sir?"

"My name is Mr. Brigstock, and my business is of a private nature," replied the other. "Will you permit me to step inside, Mr. Holt, so that we may have a short conversation?"

The farmer looked surprised, and then nodded.

He said nothing, but walked into the house and wiped his feet upon a big wire mat just inside. Mr. Brigstock followed, and a few minutes later the two men were sitting down in the curious, low-ceilinged sitting-room which Mr. Holt kept exclusively for visitors.

"Now, sir, what's the business?" said the farmer.

"I must say at once that I am a solicitor," replied the other. "My name, as I have already told you, is Mr. Brigstock—of Brigstock, Brigstock and Brigstock, Lincoln's Inn, London."

Mr. Holt was becoming very interested.

"A solicitor!" he said eagerly. "That's very interesting! Do you mean that you've come here about some money, sir?"

Mr. Brigstock coughed.

"Well, in a way, yes," he agreed. "But I must point out that my mission in no way concerns yourself, Mr. Holt. I am here, strictly speaking, to inquire after a youth named Charles Wade."

The farmer frowned, and removed the pipe from between his teeth.

"Charles Wade?" he repeated. "I don't know—— Why, good gracious! You don't mean Softy?"

"I am afraid I have not yet heard of Softy," said the solicitor.

"Why, it's impossible!" declared Mr. Holt. "Softy! He couldn't have a solicitor comin' to inquire about him—a worthless little scamp of a ragamuffin like that! He's a workhouse boy——"

"Ah!" interrupted Mr. Brigstock sharply. "His name is Charles Wade?"

"Yes—but I'd near forgotten it!" replied the farmer. "He's always been known as Softy—for the last seven or eight years. The poor youngster is not much better than half-witted, but he just about earns his food and keep at the farm."

"I should like to see this young man," said Mr. Brigstock.

"If so be it's important, I'll bring him in afore long," said Farmer Holt. "But mebbe you can tell me what this 'ere business is?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Holt, but it is quite private," interrupted the solicitor.

"Private!" echoed Mr. Holt. "Rubbish, sir! The boy's my employee, and I've got

a right to know what this matter is. He ain't nothin' but a young idjit, an' can't talk sensible, even if he tries."

"Nevertheless, it is my desire to see Charles Wade in private," said Mr. Brigstock firmly. "I must insist, Mr. Holt."

The farmer looked red with sudden wrath for a moment. But he realised that it would never do to show his temper to this London solicitor. He argued and argued, but Mr. Brigstock would not change.

And so, at last, the farmer, grumbling under his breath, passed outside. He intended hearing the conversation, if it could possibly be done. He looked upon it as an outrage that he should be excluded.

He found Softy in the barn, cleaning himself up a bit after finishing the pigsties.

"Here, Softy—I want you inside!" said the farmer curtly.

"I'm just a-cleanin' of myself, sir——"

"That's all right—you needn't waste no more time on that!" interrupted Holt. "There's a gent from Lunnon, an' he wants to see you. I reckon he must be fair mad, but there it is."

"A gent from Lunnon to see me?" muttered Softy, in a dazed kind of way.

"Yes—an' you've got to tell me everything he says to you," declared the farmer. "I won't have no secrets——"

"I am sorry to interrupt, but I thought it as well to come outside," exclaimed Mr. Brigstock, suddenly peering in the doorway of the barn. It would be better, perhaps, for me to interview the lad in his own quarters. Please do not let me detain you any longer, Mr. Holt."

The farmer gnashed his teeth with helpless fury. But there was no getting out of it—he had to go.

And he could not very well "listen in" at the conversation between Softy and the solicitor. There was no convenient hiding-place. Holt had already decided that he would be outside the door of the sitting-room while the pair were talking. Possibly, Mr. Brigstock had anticipated something of this kind. And so he had taken pains to prevent any such eavesdropping.

Mr. Holt went, and the solicitor stood looking at Softy in a curious, abstracted kind of way. He had expected to find a poor, ill-clad farmworker. The reality was not quite in accordance with his mental picture.

To begin with, Softy was curiously dull in expression—but not dull from lack of intelligence. There was misery in his face—misery and hopelessness in his eyes. And there were a few stains on his cheeks, too—left by the tears which had come from pain.

Softy was rather a pitiful sight. A well set up youngster, clad in the direst of rags, unkempt, and obviously ill cared-for. Upon the whole, Mr. Brigstock was more favourably impressed than he thought he would.

The boy was all right—but he had been treated shamefully.

"Well, well, there is nothing to be afraid of, young man," said the solicitor kindly. "So you are Charles Wade?"

"Yes, sir, I—I think that's my name, sir," said Softy.

"Are you not sure?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure," said the boy. "I got some papers an' things in my little box—stifticates, I believe, sir, an' things like that."

"Splendid!" said Mr Brigstock. "Certificates, eh? Good! You had better lead the way to your own quarters, Wade."

The boy walked out of the barn without a word, and it was obvious to Mr. Brigstock that Softy was accustomed to obeying orders in a machine-like way. The solicitor noticed that Softy limped rather badly.

"Have you hurt your leg, my lad?" he asked.

"Master kicked me, sir," replied Softy simply.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the visitor startled. "Your master kicked you? Where did he kick you?"

"On the shin, sir."

"Show me."

Softy bent down, and raised a portion of his rough trousers. He revealed an ugly hack, which had been bleeding slightly. The bruise was a severe one. Mr. Brigstock looked at it in horror—and further noticed that there were small scars on other parts of the shin.

"Has your master ever kicked you before?" he asked sharply.

"He be allus a-doin' it, sir."

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed the lawyer. "This—this is quite appalling! I am afraid that your master has not been treating you well, my boy."

Softy made no reply. He was still living under a kind of spell. Over every action of his life hung the grim figure of Farmer Holt. And even now the lad's heart was beating rapidly with sudden alarm, for he felt that he had said too much. The farmer would get to know it, and this would mean more hard knocks.

Mr. Brigstock was looking very grim as they passed through one of the stables, and then into a kind of disused harness-room. It was not much better than a cupboard, with a tiny window high up in one wall. On the floor lay a pile of dirty-looking straw, and some canvas and sacks. Softy halted there, and said nothing.

"Why have you brought me here?" asked the solicitor.

"You told me to, sir."

Mr. Brigstock started.

"What!" he exclaimed sharply. "This—this is where you sleep?"

"Yes sir."

Mr. Brigstock recoiled in horror, and examined the little place with renewed interest. He touched the straw with his umbrella.

"I am surprised at you, Wade!" he said angrily. "This straw is quite filthy! Surely,

if you have no better bed, you could at least have kept clean straw in the place."

"Master won't give me no more, sir," said Softy quietly.

"You are telling me that Mr. Holt refuses to supply you with clean straw to sleep upon?"

"Master say that cost too much, sir."

"Good heavens!" muttered Mr. Brigstock. "If the sanitary authorities knew of this, Holt would be prosecuted. The man is a heartless ruffian. I am exceedingly glad that I came here—for there is nothing like seeing with your own eyes. Now, Wade, show me those papers you referred to."

The boy went to a corner, and picked up a little wooden box. Evidently he treasured the contents, for the box was tightly bound round by a piece of rope. Softy unfastened it, and Mr. Brigstock stood looking on. The lawyer had come to the conclusion that Charles Wade was by no means a fool. He was not the village idiot, as some people had led him to suppose. His meekness—his dull obedience—was simply the result of being continually crushed and held down.

The owner of the village tuck-shop started back in some alarm. Just as he was closing up for the evening, half the children of the village were swarming round the shop like wasps round a jam pot.

Given a fair opportunity, the boy would probably find his feet, and make good. Mr. Brigstock felt that his duty here was one of the most pleasant he had ever undertaken—for he was in a position to bring sunshine into the drab existence of this unfortunate youngster.

He examined the papers, and was fully satisfied. One was the boy's birth certificate, and another the death certificate of his father. There were a few letters, too, apparently from a grandfather, and these had come from foreign parts. Mr. Brigstock was particularly keen upon these.

He looked round, and found a box.

"Sit down, Wade," he said kindly. "I want to have a little quiet talk with you. You needn't be afraid, and you can put all thoughts out of your head that Mr. Holt will hurt you. It is my intention to take you away with me. You will leave the farm for ever."

The words had a curious effect upon Softy.

He clutched at Mr. Brigstock's sleeve, and his face flushed deeply. And this proved to the lawyer that, in spite of appearances, Softy was fairly quick-witted. So far he had had no occasion to use his wits. Mr. Brigstock had taken quite a liking to the lad, for all his rags and tatters.

Softy went pale as suddenly as he had flushed. Then he bent his head, choking back a kind of sob.

"Oh, it isn't true, sir!" he muttered. "I shall allus be here! I can't remember no other place, 'cept the workhouse."

"There—there, keep calm!" said Mr. Brigstock. "What I shall tell you will seem quite impossible, but you may be sure that I should not misinform you upon such a matter. Tell me, Wade, what is the largest

amount of money you have ever possessed?"

Softy shook his head.

"I don't never 'ave no money, sir," he replied.

"But, surely on some occasion——"

"Once, about three year ago, sir, a gent give me a shillun!" interrupted the boy quickly. "I picked up his hat after it 'ad blowed off in a high wind. That's the most money I ever had, sir. But Mr. Holt took it as soon as he saw it. Said I hadn't no sense to keep money."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Brigstock. "Have you any idea, my boy, what a thousand pounds amounts to?"

"A thousand pounds, sir!" said Softy. "Why, that be a reg'lar pile o' money, sir. A thousand pounds be a fortune."

"What will you say when I tell you that you are the owner of twelve thousand pounds?" asked the solicitor quietly.

Softy was not impressed.

"I reckon you're kiddin', sir," he replied, smiling.

It was the first time that he had smiled, and Mr. Brigstock was very pleased. As a matter of fact, Softy hardly knew how to smile. It was only the genial solicitor's kindly, fatherly way which had brought about the change. Kindness was something foreign to the lad.

"No, Wade, I am not kidding you," said Mr. Brigstock. "Your grandfather died in a place called Bolivia two or three months ago. He died suddenly, without making any will. You are his only known relative, and his direct heir. Your grandfather's business interests in Bolivia have been sold, and there is a clear residue of twelve thousand four hundred pounds. This money, Wade, is entirely yours. The sum has been transferred to England, and it is in the keeping of my firm. We have been searching for you for the past fortnight, and at last had information to the effect that you were working on this farm."

Softy dimly began to realise that this was true—although it seemed to be an impossible, ridiculous dream. He—the village idiot—the fellow who was kicked and cuffed worse than a dog! He was rich! He had money—perhaps six or seven times as much as Farmer Holt himself!

"I knowed about my grandfather, sir," said Softy. "I ain't never seen him, but I knowed he was in foreign parts. But it seems too wunnerful, sir—me—with lots of money!"

He stood there, his eyes gleaming with hope and wonderful joy. Mr. Brigstock could see that the boy's simple mind did not even suspect any joke now. He knew that the statement was true, but he was rather stunned by it.

"Yes, Wade, you have lots of money," said Mr. Brigstock. "But you must realise that you are quite young, and it is impossible for you to have charge of all this money. A trustee will be needed—somebody who will be willing to become your guardian. Do you quite understand?"

"I understand, sir," said Softy. "'Tain't right that I should have all that money. I shouldn't know what to do with it. You mean that some gent will look arter it for me, so's I don't lose it?"

Mr. Brigstock smiled.

"In effect, yes," he agreed.

"And is it really true that I'm going away from the farm, sir?" asked the boy. "I ain't never been happy here—an' never should be, neither. Oh, just think of it, sir! I sha'n't need to be afeared o' the master no more."

There was a distinct change in Softy already. The very knowledge that he was independent—that his bonds had been cut—made a great difference. He was still down, but he was about to struggle free from his bonds.

"Have you anybody you would care to suggest as a guardian?" asked Mr. Brigstock.

"I don't know nobody but the master, sir——"

"Good gracious, no!" said the solicitor. "Under the circumstances, I do not think it would be advisable to appoint Mr. Holt as your trustee and guardian. The man, as far as I can see, is a heartless——"

He paused, as heavy footsteps were heard in the stable. A moment later the farmer appeared, glaring angrily.

"Ain't you done with that brat yet?" he asked sharply. "I can't afford to let him waste his time chatting with you! I need him now. He's got to go into the village with some hay——"

"I am very sorry, Mr. Holt, but Wade will perform no further duties for you," interrupted Mr. Brigstock curtly. "And I may mention, sir, that I am quite disgusted with the manner in which you have looked after the lad. You deserve to be prosecuted, sir."

Farmer Holt went purple.

"Why, you—you interfering——"

"Please keep yourself calm, Mr. Holt, and do not attempt to bully me as you have been bullying this boy," interrupted the lawyer. "It may interest you to know that he has come into a fortune of twelve thousand pounds, and is now entirely his own master, and free to go where he wills."

The farmer choked back the words he was about to utter, and stood there, limp and flabby. The news took all the go out of him. "What's that?" he said thickly. "Softy! Come into twelve thousand pounds? What darn nonsense is this——"

"It happens to be the truth, Mr. Holt," said the other. "I have satisfied myself as to the boy's birth and identity. I dare say you are rather sorry, now, that you have treated him so harshly in the past."

Holt gathered his wits together rapidly.

"That boy is in my care," he said roughly. "I'm his guardian, an' the legal trustee of any money that may be his!

I've been a father to him since he was a kid, 'an this money——"

"Your idea of what a father should be to a son is apparently a curiously warped one," interrupted Mr. Brigstock sharply. "Under no circumstances shall I allow the boy to remain here."

"I'm his legal guardian——"

"Nonsense, sir!" snapped Mr. Brigstock. "I am a solicitor, and you will kindly refrain from attempting to teach me my own business! You have absolutely no legal authority over this lad. You employed him, and if I chose to be unpleasant, I could make things extremely hot for you. As it is, I shall think about the matter and do as my better judgment dictates. Come, Wade, we will go. Good-afternoon to you, sir!"

Mr. Brigstock, bristling with anger, gave the farmer one final glare and passed out of the harness room, grasping Softy firmly by one hand. The latter was clutching at his precious box. The documents it had contained were now in Mr. Brigstock's wallet.

Farmer Holt was so furious that he had absolutely nothing to say. By the time he had partially recovered, Softy and the solicitor were half-way across the barnyard, and making for the muddy road which led towards the village. Exactly what Holt's feelings were it would be impossible to describe.

He stood there, staring after the departed pair.

Twelve thousand pounds! And this money belonged to Softy! Farmer Holt had been amazed several times in his life, but this was the biggest staggerer of all. A few other people were destined to be staggered, too!

CHAPTER III.

THE SENSATION OF THE VILLAGE!

MR. BRIGSTOCK paused when he and Softy Wade emerged upon the lane close to the village. It suddenly dawned upon the solicitor that it would create a large amount of public attention if he walked into Bellton hand in hand with Softy.

"We must pause, my boy," he said. "We must think what is the best thing to be done. Of course, I shall take you into Bannington at the earliest possible moment, and you will visit the public baths as a commencement. After that, you will have a hair cut, and then a visit to the outfitter's will be somewhat essential. Upon my soul! By the time we have done, you will hardly know yourself, young man."

Softy stood listening, and in a kind of dream.

"You mean I'll have a real suit of clothes, sir?" he asked wonderingly.

"My dear lad, you will be able to have a dozen suits, if you wish," replied Mr. Brigstock. "But there is this point about your guardian. H'm! I think, on second thoughts, that we had better leave that until later. After all, the most important thing is to improve your appearance. Therefore, we will make for Bannington."

The solicitor received many curious stares as he passed through Bellton with Softy Wade trotting by his side—for Mr. Brigstock walked very rapidly. Shopkeepers came to their doors, and wondered.

Quite a number of people declared that Softy had evidently been up to mischief, and there could be no doubt that Mr. Brigstock was a detective. It was such an unusual thing to see Softy going along unburdened, that this fact alone caused comment.

For the farmer's boy was a drudge, or had been. He only occasionally appeared in the village, and then he was the butt of every jeer and gibe from the Bellton children.

Now, for some unexplained reason, Softy looked different.

Those who saw the pair going towards the station could not understand. Somehow or other, Softy looked a bit tailer. He held himself more straight, and there was a flush in his cheeks.

People had never seen him like this before, and most of them took it for granted that he was in trouble. But Softy knew why he was flushed—he was beginning to emerge from his shell.

Mr. Brigstock smiled once or twice as he looked down upon his young charge. He tried to imagine what the boy was thinking of. He supposed that Softy was attempting to realise the extent of his good fortune.

But, as a matter of fact, in Softy's mind's eye there was a tailor's window in Bannington. And a wonderful suit of brown with a pronounced stripe repeatedly arose before Softy's mental vision. He had seen it once, when he had been sent to Bannington by Farmer Holt, about four months earlier.

And the memory of that suit had remained with Softy very vividly. To him it seemed like some unattainable glory, and he had often wondered if he would ever have enough money to buy such a suit. To him, Bannington seemed to be a vast city. He had never been beyond the town, and from early childhood he had been compelled to work for his bread-and-butter.

Arriving at the station, Mr. Bigstock found that there was no train for another twenty minutes. So they sat on a seat on the platform, and the solicitor questioned Softy closely about his earlier years. He heard all about the boy's life in the workhouse—or as much of it as Softy could remember.

And then, when the train came in, the lad was freshly delighted—for this was his first journey in a railway train. It seemed to him that all this was too good to be true, and that he would soon wake up to find

himself in his little harness room, on the pile of unclean straw.

But, instead of waking up, he went from wonder to wonder. He thoroughly enjoyed his bath in Bannington. And, in the meantime, Mr. Brigstock was busy at the outfitters. A glorious striped shirt, a pair of thick woollen socks, boots, and woollen underclothing were sent to Softy to don after his bath.

Then he was dazzled by a suit which completely knocked spots off the one he had so longed for. It was blue, with the loveliest stripes Softy had ever seen. And, being a well-built youth, the "ready made" fitted him to perfection, as though he had been measured for it.

By the time he emerged, the transformation was complete.

Barely an hour earlier, he had been a farmer's boy—attired in soiled, ragged, corduroy trousers, tattered coat, with a torn scarf round his neck. His hair had been tousled, his boots cracked and gaping.

But now he was hardly recognisable.

He stood there, smart from top to toe. A tweed cap was upon his well brushed hair. His face glowed with cleanliness. Over his blue suit he wore a thick winter overcoat, and his feet were encased in good, sensible boots which fairly gleamed. The patent toe-caps of those boots nearly took Softy's breath away.

He was wearing a collar and tie—a totally new experience for him. They were a trifle uncomfortable, but what did he care? He would have suffered tortures just now—to look smart was more wonderful than he could describe.

As a matter of fact, he was not suffering at all—he only felt rather strange in his new get-up, but the feeling of joy within him compensated for any discomfort. And he emerged upon Bannington High Street, with the curious feeling that everybody in the whole town was staring at him.

Mr. Brigstock was more than delighted.

He had feared that Softy would look clumsy and awkward in his new clothing. But this was not the case. The lad looked quite ordinary in every way—just as though he had been accustomed to wearing such clothing all his life. And his new get-up completely robbed him of that soft look which had earned him his nickname.

His frowsiness was gone, and—and this was far more important—that half sullen, hunted expression was beginning to vanish, too. For he no longer had the fear of Jeremiah Holt upon him.

Although Softy repeatedly told himself that he must be mad, he was thrilled through and through by this wonderful happening. And he hadn't got over Mr. Brigstock's latest action, for the solicitor had handed him a big pile of loose silver—to be exact, thirty shillings. Softy thought it was a tremendous amount.

"Can—can I spend this money, sir?" he asked breathlessly.

"I have given that sum to you just as a commencement, Charles," said Mr. Brigstock genially. "It is for your use as pocket-money. I think we had better go into this excellent restaurant now, and partake of refreshment. After that, we will return to Bellton."

Mr. Brigstock was very pleased with himself, for it was only just about tea-time now, and the whole evening lay ahead. The solicitor wanted to find a reliable, responsible man, who would consent to act as Softy's guardian.

They went into the Japanese cafe—a favourite Bannington resort—and were soon enjoying poached eggs on toast, bread and butter, and tea. To Softy, this was a sumptuous meal, and he felt that he was doing something which almost amounted to a crime.

Just before they came out the waitress brought the bill, which amounted to three and fourpence.

"Oh, sir!" said Softy eagerly. "May I pay for this, sir?"

"Certainly not, my boy——"

"But I'd just love to, sir!" said Softy. "I ain't never paid anybody so much money as this. Besides, you've been so kind to me, I reckon I'd like to pay for your tea. Please let me, sir!"

Mr. Brigstock, with a chuckle, gave in. And Softy very proudly went to the paybox, and parted with some of his silver. And after that they went to the station, and were in nice time to catch the evening train back to Bellton.

In the train, Mr. Brigstock put more questions.

"Now, Charles, we must think seriously about this question of your guardian," he said. "Mr. Holt is, of course, quite out of the question. Is there anybody—any-friend—whom you would like to suggest?"

Softy slowly shook his head.

"I ain't got no friends," he replied quietly.

"H'm! That's rather awkward," said Mr. Brigstock. "I would prefer you to remain in this district for the time being, if possible. But if there is nobody you can call a friend, I must seriously consider the question of taking you to London. The point is rather a difficult one, and——"

"Oh, sir!" said Softy suddenly. "There's the gent. from the school!"

"Indeed! From what school?"

"The big one up the road, sir. St. Frank's they call it. There's nothing but swell young gents. there, sir. Some of 'em ain't gents. neither!" he added rather bitterly. "But there's one what treated me real kind."

"Oh!" said Mr. Brigstock. "Do you know this gentleman's name?"

"No, sir, but I'd know him in a minute," said Softy. "A real kind gent., sir—an' I'm sure he'd be willin' to look after my money."

"This is good news!" said the solicitor. "I do not think we can do better than visit St. Frank's at once. We will find this gentle-

man, and put the matter to him without delay."

Mr. Brigstock felt delighted. Obviously, Softy was referring to a master at the school, and Mr. Brigstock could think of no better responsible party. But Softy, of course, really had Archie Glenthorne in his mind.

They arrived at Bellton Station, and then caused a tremendous sensation in the village.

It was not dark yet, and Mr. Brigstock smiled quietly to himself as he and Softy walked through the High Street. People were still staring, but now their former wonder was turned to amazement.

Strangers were not general in Bellton, and so the return of Mr. Brigstock was noted at once. At first the villagers thought that the solicitor had come back with another youth altogether. Then somebody recognised him as Softy, and the news flashed round like lightning.

Softly—all dressed up like a lord, in the finest of clothing!

It was a real staggerer for the village gossips, and after Mr. Brigstock had passed through, the sensation reached a fever pitch. Everybody was asking questions, and yet no satisfactory explanation could be thought of.

And at last St. Frank's was reached, and the pair turned into the Triangle and paused for a moment. It was growing rather dusky, and the warm lights gleaming out from the various windows made a very cheerful picture.

The Triangle was deserted, for everybody was at tea, or just preparing for the evening's work. The last of the stragglers had come in from the playing fields, and so Mr. Brigstock and Softy had the triangle to themselves.

"Now, my boy, about this gentleman," said Mr. Brigstock. "I think it would be as well if we made inquiries, and asked to see one of the masters. You will then be able to describe the gentleman you mean."

"Yes, sir," said Softy, although he was very hazy.

They walked towards the Ancient House instinctively, for this was a larger building, and more imposing, than the College House. They mounted the steps, entered the lobby, and then came face to face with three juniors—who had appeared at lightning speed from the passage.

It seemed that one junior was chasing two others, for he grabbed them with extraordinary violence as they came to a halt upon seeing Mr. Brigstock. And the pursuing junior proceeded to hit out right and left.

"Hi, steady!" roared one of them. "Chuck it, Handy! Can't you see this gentleman? Yarooh!"

Church broke off with a tremendous yell.

"I don't care about the gentleman!" roared Handforth. "If you think I'm going to stand your blessed cheek, you've made a bloomer! It's likely I'm going to be told that I don't know more than an earwig!"

"I didn't say that!" snapped Church. "You told me——"

"Dear me—dear me!" interrupted Mr. Brigstock. "What is all this? Please control yourselves, boys. I shall be greatly obliged if you will direct me to a gentleman——"

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth abruptly.

He was staring fixedly at the farmer's boy.

"Look!" he went on faintly. "Feast your eyes on him, my sons! It's Softy—Softy from Holt's Farm! My only topper! Did you ever see such a nerve in all your life? Coming here dressed up like a Piccadilly Johnnie!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" said McClure. "It's Softy right enough! He must have come into a fortune."

"You will hear all about it later on, my lads," said Mr. Brigstock. "For the moment, I should like you to tell me——"

"Oh!" said Softy suddenly. "There he is sir—that's the gentleman I meant."

"What ho!" observed Archie Glenthorne, as he strolled in. "I mean to say, what? The bally old pointing finger, and all that sort of thing. What have I done, laddies? Why should I be singled out in this frightful way?"

Mr. Brigstock adjusted his glasses, and regarded Archie critically.

"Good gracious!" he said. "But—but this is not a gentleman——"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie, gazing down at himself. "I mean to say, do I look like a bally steam-engine, or what? You'll pardon me, old fruit, but I must really insist upon a few lumps of first-class explanation."

"Kindly allow me to conclude my observation, young man," said Mr. Brigstock. "I was about to remark that you are not a gentleman of age and maturity."

"Absolutely not!" agreed Archie. "Maturity, what? Well, the fact is, I must confess to being somewhat lacking in that kind of stuff. Gadzooks! Is it poss.? Do the optics deceive me? But surely this chappie is no less a person than the dear old cove I hobnobbed with in the village this afternoon."

"That's right, sir," put in Softy eagerly. "You helped me with them turnips!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "But you must let me point out, old scream, that the grammar is somewhat frightful. I mean to say—them turnips! Not quite the thing, what? To be absolutely correct, a cove ought to say——"

"It is really a matter of small importance, my boy," put in Mr. Brigstock. "I have been brought to this school under a misapprehension. From Wade's remarks, I gathered that his friend here was a master. And I discover that you are nothing but a junior schoolboy. That is rather unfortunate, as my calculations are greatly upset."

"Oh, but—but I want this gentleman to take care of my money, sir," put in Softy.

"He's the only one who ever spoke nicely to me. I am sure he'd agree to help me."

"Any old thing!" said Archie. "Just say the word, laddie, and I'm at your service. Absolutely. Kindly state the nature of the service that is required."

Mr. Brigstock was becoming impatient.

"Really, boys, we are wasting time," he said. "I dare say you all know this young man. It will surprise you to learn that he has inherited a very considerable sum of money, and my object in coming to St. Frank's was to find a gentleman who would act as trustee—since Wade appears to have no friends in the village itself."

"Great Scott!" said Handforth, staring at the farm boy. "Softy with money! Well I'm blessed! A giddy farm labourer kid, you know! Still, all the same, I'm jolly glad to hear it—the poor kid's always been sat on! Here's my fist, Softy!"

Handforth grabbed Softy's hand warmly, and gave it a tremendous shake. Softy was more astonished than anything else, but, at the same time, his face flushed with pleasure. He had not expected to be treated so generously.

Mr. Brigstock looked rather suspicious. But if he had known Handforth better, he would not have entertained any fears that the junior was trying to be friendly because Softy had money. Handforth was one of those impulsive fellows, who always acted on the spur of the moment. He was genuinely pleased that Softy had had some luck.

And just at that moment I arrived on the scene, and stood looking on and listening for a few minutes. It did not take me long to gather the trend of the discussion. After I got over my first surprise, I thought that I could be useful.

"Well, Charles, we must be going!" said Mr. Brigstock. "It is quite impossible for you to appoint a schoolboy as your guardian. Such a thing is by no means legal, and——"

"Pardon me for interrupting, sir, but perhaps I could suggest some way out," I put in. "Do I understand that you would like to find somebody who will act as a responsible guardian for Softy?"

"That is so—precisely."

"Then what about Mr. Nelson Lee, sir?" I asked. "I'm sure he'd agree. The guv'nor's always been a bit interested in Softy. In fact, only a week ago he was telling me that Farmer Holt was a brute, and if he didn't improve there would be trouble."

Mr. Brigstock was interested.

"Mr. Nelson Lee?" he repeated. "But surely that is the name of the famous detective of Gray's Inn Road?"

"Mr. Lee lives at St. Frank's most of his time, sir," I explained. "He's one of the housemasters here. I'm Nipper."

"Indeed—indeed!" said the solicitor, pursing his lips. "Mr. Nelson Lee, eh? A man of world-wide reputation—a man of unimpeachable character! If he would consent, I cannot think of a better trustee—more particularly as he lives in the neighbourhood, and knows the main facts concerning the boy."

"Come along to Mr. Lee's study, sir," I said.

And so, five minutes later, Nelson Lee and Mr. Brigstock were talking together seriously and intently. I stood close by with Archie Glenthorne and Softy. Softy had insisted upon Archie coming in.

"Under the circumstances, I shall have great pleasure in looking after the lad," said Nelson Lee, after he had heard everything. "It delights me to learn of his good fortune. The boy has been crushed since childhood, and it is indeed gratifying to know that he has been removed from Holt's Farm."

"If you will look after him, Mr. Lee, my mind will be greatly relieved," said the solicitor. "No doubt you will be able to place him in a good home somewhere in the district. I shall return within two or three days with various documents that will need signing, and I shall transfer the entire amount of Wade's inheritance to your keeping. Oh, and by the way—I will leave ten pounds here for the boy's use."

It did not take so very long to complete the arrangements, and very soon afterwards Mr. Brigstock left the school, highly delighted with his day's work He had been rather worried about Softy, for he did not want to be bothered with the lad in London. He felt that he could not have left his charge in safer keeping.

And Nelson Lee, for his part, was agreeable to the arrangement, because he was quite interested in the lad. After Mr. Brigstock had gone, Archie and I had to part, too. And the guv'nor talked with Softy alone.

"I have no doubt, Wade, that you are somewhat bewildered by all these new arrangements," he said kindly. "A few hours ago you were working as usual on the farm. But now your entire outlook has altered. Mr. Holt has no further authority over you, and I advise you to have nothing whatever to do with him."

"I hate him, sir!" said Softy, with a touch of spirit. "I didn't realise it before, sir. But now that folks have been so kind to me, I'm beginning to know things. It ain't right that you should take so much trouble, sir ——"

"I can assure you, Wade, that I am taking no trouble whatever," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I have merely agreed to act as your guardian, and that does not add to my labours in any way. You must realise that you are quite independent now. What is your most cherished wish?"

"I don't understand, sir," said Softy.

"What would you like to do?"

"I reckon I want to go to school, sir!" said Softy promptly. "I aint never had no proper schooling. I've allus longed to know things, sir. A feller ain't much use unless he has some larnin'."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is the right spirit, Wade," he said approvingly. "I am beginning to see that you have been grossly misjudged, for you appear to possess a great deal of common sense. We will see about your schooling. I will make arrangements, and before long you will be installed in a preparatory school. But for the next two or three days you must remain in the neighbourhood, and I have no doubt that you will enjoy yourself. The experience will be a novel one for you."

"Seems like I was dreamin', sir," said Softy.

"Exactly," smiled Lee. "Well, it is quite early yet, and you may go out for an hour or so, if you wish. You have been a prisoner so long that it is only right that you should enjoy your freedom. You will sleep here for to-night."

"Here, sir?" repeated Softy breathlessly.

"There are one or two spare bedrooms on the upper floor, and I will have one prepared for you," said Lee. "Take my advice, and keep well clear of Mr. Holt. With regard to this money, I will give it into your keeping."

"But I got money, sir," said Softy. "I got lots!"

In spite of his protests, Nelson Lee insisted that he should take the ten pounds which Mr. Brigstock had left. And Nelson Lee had a definite object in this. He wanted to see what the boy would do with so much money. It was by way of an experiment.

Perhaps it was a very severe test upon the boy—but Nelson Lee thought that it was advisable. All his life he had never possessed more than a few pence. Would this large sum of money turn his head? Nelson Lee wanted to see. And he would be greatly interested in the result of his little test.

Softy left Nelson Lee's study in a kind of maze. Although he knew that everything was true, he was still dazed. At dinner-time he had been penniless—the slave of Farmer Holt. Now he was independent—with pounds and pounds in his pocket. It was like a fairy tale.

The very instant he got outside in the passage, he was surrounded by a crowd of waiting juniors. They carried him along into lobby, and the excitement was rather tremendous.

Softy was quite bewildered.

After being ignored all his life, it was a curious experience to find himself the centre of attention. He dimly expected that everybody would try to take his money away. And it was a surprise to him to find that nobody asked for even a penny. The juniors were not after his money—they were simply interested in him.

And, at last, he fought his way out into the Triangle, and succeeded in getting to the gateway. He wanted to get to the village. There was an irresistible desire with him to show himself in Bellton—where he had always been scorned and trodden upon.

For the first time in his life, he would be able to hold his head up. And a great idea had come to him—an idea that filled him with intense delight. Already he was beginning to break free from his fetters.

Armed with a neat leather handbag, he looked very like a typical solicitor's clerk, and was certainly very difficult to recognise as Fullwood of the Remove.

CHAPTER IV.

SOFTY FINDS HIMSELF.

MR. BINKS was considerably startled.

"Sakes alive!" he declared wonderingly. "What next? Well, I never did!"

The owner of the village tuck-shop started back in something like alarm. He was in the act of placing the old-fashioned shutter in front of his door. He was just closing up for the evening—not without regret, for he still had a large supply of pastries and cakes left over.

And now, without any warning, his establishment was invaded.

It seemed to the startled Mr. Binks that

half the children of the village were swarming round his shop like wasps round a jam pot. He had certainly heard childish glee in the distance. He had even seen the crowds of youngsters tearing along the High Street.

But when the crowd swerved and pelted into his shop, he was practically swept off his feet in the rush. After a moment, however, he recovered himself, and made great haste in getting behind the counter. To his alarm, some of the youngsters were already partaking of doughnuts, rock-cakes, jam-tarts, and other dainties of a similar nature.

"You young varmints!" he shouted angrily. "Put them cakes down! I never did! I'll fetch the policeman after ye—that's what I'll do!"

"It's all right, Mr. Binks—I'll pay!" said Softy Wade. "I brought the kids along so's they can have a treat. See? It don't matter how much the bill comes to—I'll pay it!"

Mr. Binks stared.

"You!" he exclaimed, looking at Softy rather dazedly. "Well, sakes alive! If things ain't comin' to a pretty pass these days! I've heard tell that you've come into some money, Softy. Like as not it's got into your head already. Still, that ain't my business. I suppose you've got money?"

Softy produced a number of pound notes, and Mr. Binks was satisfied.

He brightened up considerably. He had a keen eye to business, and the prospect of selling off his entire stock was enticing. He hadn't had such a stroke of business for months. And by the way things were going, he could see that cakes and pastries would not be sufficient.

But he had plenty of biscuits and sweets. He wouldn't care if he sold the lot—he could easily get a new stock in the morning. And so, for the next half-hour, he was so busy that he hardly had time to breathe.

The shop was simply packed out. And in the street a number of elderly villagers had gathered, and they were looking on, shaking their heads and making grave comments. But Softy was enjoying himself—and so were the children.

This was Softy's big idea. He was revelling in it. All his life he had longed to take his little friends into the tuck-shop and to treat them. But he had never had a chance—he had never had any money to spend.

He wanted to be a child himself—and was one. And those who looked on were amazed at the change which had come about in Softy's character. It was so swift—so totally unexpected. A great many of the children were those who had always jeered at him—but Softy didn't care.

He freely forgave them, knowing that they had only jeered him because others set them the example. They were kiddies—and they loved cakes and pastries. And it delighted Softy to a very great extent to see them enjoying themselves. To give things away had always been Softy's ambition. But until now he had never realised the pleasure of giving—which is a far greater pleasure than that of receiving. He ate very little himself. He just stood there and grinned with sheer delight.

And, at last, Mr. Bink's stock was exhausted. There wasn't a crumb left—not a biscuit, not a sweet.

The bill came to over three pounds, but Softy didn't care a bit. He knew that he had spent the money well. And just outside he ran into a big, burly youth who grinned amiably at him, and clapped him on the back.

"What cheer, Softy!" said the burly youth. "Jolly glad to know that you've come into a bloomin' fortune! I allus was one o' your pals, and you ain't the kind to go back on a chum!"

Softy suddenly became very serious. The youth was Lumpy Bill, the village bully, and Softy regarded him coldly and in a curiously dignified way. There was something about his bearing which stamped him as being Bill's superior in every possible way.

"You never was my pal!" he said shortly. "You've always jeered at me, an' done things that no decent chap would do. I don't want to speak to you, or have anything to do with you."

Lumpy Bill had evidently thought that he could easily win Softy over. He apparently forgot that he had always treated Softy in an atrocious way. He had kicked him, cuffed him, and bullied him at every meeting. And Softy, crushed and held down, had never thought of retaliating.

But this was a different Softy now.

"Ho! So that's it, hey?" exclaimed Lumpy Bill coarsely. "You don't want nothink to do with yer old pals, hey? I'll soon show you, you young brat! If you don't lend me a quid, I'll knock your 'ead off!"

"Let Softy alone!" shouted a number of the village boys.

"It's all right, thanks—I'm not afraid of Lumpy now!" said Softy. "At one time I hated him—but that ain't any good. Hating a chap don't make him any better. I reckon I pity him now. He ain't got enough sense to know what's right and what ain't!"

Softy pushed past, and Lumpy Bill stood there, rather dazed. To hear such words from the supposed village idiot was a bit of a shock. And before Lumpy Bill could take any action, Softy had gone, surrounded by the crowds of children.

The farm boy came in for a lot of adverse criticism from the older folks in the village. They shook their heads, and said that he would make a fool of himself—that he would run through his money, and squander it recklessly. But nothing could alter the facts that Softy's first act with his money had been to give pleasure to others. And there was nothing very wrong in that.

And Nelson Lee was quite satisfied. He was, in fact, pleased when Softy, later on, told him exactly how much money had gone,

and how it had been expended. For Lee could see that the boy's heart was in the right place.

Considering that this change in his life had only come about since the middle of the day, the alteration in Softy was not only remarkable, but well nigh unbelievable. It was almost impossible to recognise him as the same human being.

That night he slept in a cosy, warm bed, between snowy white sheets. The experience brought back dim recollections of the workhouse—where, at least, he had had a bed. But that place had seemed like a prison compared to this new life of his. And his memories of it were very vague.

When he woke up in the morning, it was some little time before he could recall what had happened. He only knew that he was wonderfully comfortable, and he felt that he must be still asleep.

It was quite dark, for the hour was between four and five—Softy's usual time for turning out. As he lay in bed, half asleep and half awake, he wondered why Farmer Holt didn't come and kick him out. There were the cows to see to—the pigs to feed. There were sheds to be cleaned out, the yard to be scrubbed down, and a dozen other arduous duties that he usually performed. It was like Heaven when he awoke to full realisation of the fact that such tasks were no longer necessary. For the first time in his life he was like other boys. His period of slavery was at an end, and he could live a normal life.

He was dressed and down hours before any of the juniors. In fact, as soon as he heard the servants stirring themselves he got up. And then he went for a long walk into the country—a luxury which he could never previously indulge in.

It was a cold, crisp morning, and perhaps it was Softy's chief object to show off his new clothes. For, after all, he was only human, and it afforded him intense pleasure to show people his new suit and overcoat. He walked through the village with a bright, upright step, and the Bellton folk looked at him with wonder.

When he returned to the school all the fellows were out in the Triangle, or lounging in the lobby or passages. And Softy again became the centre of interest.

All the decent juniors had generally treated him well. If they had happened to meet him in the village, they had spoken a cheery word to him, and sometimes he had been given a hand in some task or other.

But Fullwood and Co., and Merrell, and all the other rotters had generally jeered at him, and had not been above cuffing him about. It will give some indication of Softy's former character when it is realised that even Teddy Long could knock him about with impunity.

Teddy was the biggest little coward in the Remove. Yet on several occasions he had cuffed Softy in the lane, or in the village street. And the farm boy, terrorised and cowed by Jeremiah Holt, had never even thought of retaliating. Or, if he had thought of it, the prospect of Farmer Holt learning of it, would stop any action. He had been a drudge—a human machine, with no character of his own.

The difference which had taken place was so pronounced that many fellows could hardly credit it. Teddy Long himself was one of those who declared that there was no real difference. Softy was still a fool—still as meek and harmless as a worm.

"Blessed if I can understand what the fellows are making such a fuss about!" said Marriott, with a sniff. "He's nobody—only a silly farm labourer. I wouldn't touch him with a barge pole!"

"Makes me sick!" said Merrill. "There's Nipper and Handforth, and a lot of the others shaking hands with the young cad! I suppose they're crawling round him for what they can get!"

"You'd better not make a remark like that in Handforth's hearing!" said Hubbard. "Nipper and Handy are not the kind of chaps to sponge on a fellow. They're pally with Softy because they're decent chaps, that's all. I'm blessed if I don't shake hands with him, too! I hate a chap to be a stuck-up prig!"

Hubbard walked off, rather disgusted with the views of the other juniors. And there were still more who were busily discussing Softy and his new wealth.

Fullwood and Co. were very intrigued about the matter.

"What fatheads we were!" said Gulliver. "Look what happened yesterday—just before the chap came into all his money, too!"

"It was Fully's fault!" said Bell. "Think of it—he's got pots of money—bags and bags of it! And we ain't even friendly with him!"

Fullwood grunted.

"It's no good moaning," he said gruffly. "We may not have been friendly in the past, but we can soon get round the little fool. His money won't last him long—and I'll jolly well see that we get a good share of it."

"But he's got thousands, you ass," said Gulliver.

"Well, that's what they say—but I don't believe it," remarked Fullwood. "I expect he's come into five or six hundred quid. That's a tidy little amount, anyhow. We'll soon touch some of that cash."

"How?"

"Leave it to me," said Fullwood. "It's no good going about a thing like this in a hurry. He'd smell a rat if we did, and then we shouldn't click anything. I've already got a wheeze, and I'm going to work it out."

"But what shall we do to start with?"

"Well, the first thing is to get pally," said Fullwood.

"He'll never be pally, after what you did."

Fullwood grinned.

"Just wait and see!" he said calmly.

"It only needs a little tact, an' you can trust me to supply any amount of that. It wouldn't be a bit of good to go up to him and slobber over him. It's got to be done by degrees."

And while the Nuts continued their discussion as to how they could relieve Softy of some of his wealth, Teddy Long was actually on the job. Teddy thought that the matter would be simple.

He strolled up to Softy, with his hands in his pockets, and nodded casually.

"Hallo!" said Long. "Lucky beast! Getting all that money for nothing! Some fellows have all the jam!"

Softy looked at him coldly.

"I'm sorry if you don't like it," he said quietly.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Teddy. "The fact is, it'll come in jolly handy. I was going to let you lend me a quid."

"You mean that you want me to lend you a pound?"

Teddy Long shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't exactly want you to," he replied casually. "But I'm not a snob, goodness knows. I thought it would be doing you a bit of a good turn if I borrowed a bit from you. On second thoughts, I think it'd better be a couple of quid. It'll make it all the better for you—and you'll find it handy to have a friend at St. Frank's."

"But I've got many friends here already," said Softy.

"Oh, they're only after your money!"

"But aren't you after it, too?" asked the farm boy. "And don't you think you've got a lot of cheek, asking me this? You've always been down on me—you've jeered at me up till now."

"That's because I didn't properly understand you," said Long easily. "But we won't argue. Hand over that two quid, and I'll say no more about it."

"No!" said Softy. "I sha'n't give you nothing!"

"What!" roared Long. "Why, you—you ——"

"I think you are a cad, and I despise you!" said the farmer's boy, with delightful frankness. "I don't want you to speak to me at all!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good for you, Softy!"

"Teddy asked for it, and he got it!"

Several juniors had collected round, listening to the conversation. Handforth was among them, and he pushed forward, and was about to seize Teddy Long when Reginald Pitt held him back.

"Hold on!" said Reggie easily.

"Why, what——"

"Don't butt in—let's see what happens."

Teddy Long was bubbling with rage.

"You—you don't want to speak to me!" he roared. "You call me a cad! Why, you—you blessed pauper—you gutter brat——"

"Do you really think I'm a gutter brat?" asked Softy quietly.

"Yes, I do!"

"And yet you wanted to borrow two pounds from me——"

"Did he?" bellowed Handforth, struggling. "The—the rotter! I'll jolly well—— Leggo, you ass!"

"Don't be in such a hurry!" gasped Pitt. "You'll spoil everything if you butt in!"

Teddy Long was already pushing up his sleeves.

He had an audience, and he knew from past experience that he could knock Softy about with impunity. He thrilled at the thought of bringing his fist round and crashing it into Softy's face.

He would show these chaps what he was made of. They had often called him a funk and a coward, but now he would prove to them that he was as good as they were. When Teddy had a soft job on hand, he could be very valiant.

"You insultin' worm!" he roared. "You've got to apologise!"

"I won't!"

"If you don't, I'll knock you down!" yelled Teddy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you can laugh, but I'll show you!" shouted Long. "Take that, you rotten farm lout!"

Thud!

Teddy Long's fist missed its mark somehow, for instead of striking Softy in the face, he only succeeded in delivering a weak punch upon the farm boy's chest. Teddy's aim was not particularly good.

If an incident of this sort had occurred the previous day, Softy would have meekly accepted the punch. But he was not the same boy now. And he saw no reason why he should put up with bullying any longer—especially bullying from such a young cad as this.

Crash!

Without warning, Softy's right came round and hit Teddy Long on the jaw. The sneak of the Remove went over with a terrific howl. He bumped on the ground, and sat there, yelling as though he had been half murdered.

"Yow—yaroooh!" hooted Teddy. "Ow! I—I'm half killed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

All the other juniors roared with merriment.

"There you are!" grinned Pitt. "What did I tell you?"

"I like the chap!" said Handforth approvingly. "With a little more practice, that drive of his will be a terror. And it always gives me pleasure to see Long sloshed

on the giddy jaw! He asked for it, and he got it!"

Long scrambled to his feet, half blubbing with pain and rage.

"Did—did you see that?" he screamed. "This—this pauper chap hit me! I'll jolly well complain to the Head——"

"Will you?" roared Handforth, seizing Long by the collar. "You miserable little sneak! If you breathe a word, you'll jolly well be flogged for insultin' the chap. Come on, you chaps—kick him round the Triangle!"

"It's all right," I grinned. "I think he's had enough. Softy's improving. In six months time, he'll be a new chap altogether. I'm jolly glad the guv'nor's taking care of him."

There was certainly no doubt that Softy Wade was kicking his bonds free, and I could see that he would soon blossom forth into a full state of independence. But, in the immediate future, he was to learn the first serious lesson of his young life.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRICKSTER AND THE TOOL!

WEDNESDAY morning—two or three days later—brought more news concerning Softy. He was still one of the chief items of conversation at St. Frank's. For he had won the full approval of practically all the juniors.

On the Monday evening Softy had surprised everybody by appearing at the school with a huge hand truck filled to overflowing with every kind of luxury one could imagine. Pork pies, beef patties, sausage rolls, sandwiches, cakes, pastries, and almost every other variety of delicacy.

And, then and there, he had asked the juniors to join him in a big spread—a whacking great feed for all. Well, boys will always be boys, and the majority of the fellows entered into the thing with wholehearted enthusiasm.

There were a few of the rotters who refused—saying, with a sniff, that they wouldn't lower themselves by accepting grub from such a low class bounder. But the festive party was all the better for the absence of these snobs.

Softy enjoyed himself more that evening than he had ever enjoyed himself before. For he was a boy among boys, and was the host of the party. He won many friends over that feed.

And he was also proving himself to be of sound common-sense. There was nothing of the fool about him. And we could all see how unjust it had been to regard him as the village simpleton.

And now on the Wednesday morning some more news came out.

His money had been transferred to a Bannington bank by Messrs. Brigstock, Brigstock and Brigstock, of Lincoln's Inn, London. It was even rumoured that he had a cheque book, and was in a position to draw out as much cash as he desired.

And he was no longer at the school, for a very excellent room had been placed at his disposal at the George Tavern, in the village a small place, but quite select.

His presence at St. Frank's had been rather too disturbing to the juniors, for they were always buzzing round him—particularly the unscrupulous fellows who were only after what they could get.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood had not given up hope of gaining his end.

"This is the best bit of news we've heard yet!" he declared. "So Softy's got a banking account, has he? And a cheque book of his own—eh? That makes it all the easier. We'll soon think of some way to wangle the game!"

"It's all very well to keep talking," said Gulliver. "But we're pretty well on the rocks, and there's no prospect of any cash coming in. It's a queer thing you can't think of something easy."

"If it was a matter of two or three quid, I'd have had it long ago," said Fullwood. "But two or three quid won't suit us. I want to get hold of somethin' that I can see. Anyhow, I've got an idea, an' I'll slip to the village immediately after lessons."

"What for?"

"Never mind what for!" replied Fullwood. "I've got a bit of a scheme, but it's hardly developed yet. I want to be on my own, so that I can think it out. Then I'll go and see Softy."

"Look here, Fullwood, don't be an ass!" put in Bell seriously. "You may think you're clever, an' you may have a rippin' stunt on hand. But do you think that Softy will even look at you? After what happened that day in the village, you can bet your boots that Softy will cut you dead."

Fullwood scowled, and looked thoughtful.

"All right; leave it to me!" he said gruffly. "I know what I'm doing."

At the same time, Bell's words made him think rather deeply. As soon as lessons were over, Ralph Leslie donned his overcoat, and set out smartly for the village. But he had only gone a hundred yards before he met Gulliver and Bell—who, apparently, had been waiting for him.

"What's the idea of this?" demanded Fullwood sourly. "Spyin' on me?"

"Don't be mad!" said Gulliver. "But we don't see any reason why we shouldn't be in this thing as well as you. If there's any cash to be got out of Softy, we want our share. We're not goin' to be left out in the cold."

Fullwood hesitated a moment.

"Oh, all right!" he grunted. "I suppose you'd better come."

So they went to Bellton together.

And, in the meantime, other events were happening. Mr. Jeremiah Holt, looking

strangely good-tempered, was just entering the doorway of the George Tavern. Mr. Holt was attired in his best, and he had certainly done his utmost to look less like a brute than usual.

The landlord met him in the lobby.

"Just tell Master Wade that I'd like to have a few words with him!" said Farmer Holt casually. "I'm interested in the boy—which ain't to be wondered at, seein' as I kept him since he was a kid."

"I don't reckon that you've got much to boast about, Mr. Holt," said the landlord curtly. "By what I gather, the lad doesn't like you much. Still, I'll take him your message."

He disappeared, went upstairs, and entered a very comfortable little sitting-room on the first floor. Softy Wade was seated within, deeply emersed in a little volume which explained a number of knotty points concerning etiquette. Softy was keen on improving his table manners.

"There's Mr. Holt downstairs, Softy," said the landlord. "Says he'd like to see you for a few minutes. What shall I tell him?"

Softy put his book down, and his eyes looked grim.

"I thought something like this would happen, Mr. Tapley," he said. "Please tell Mr. Holt that I don't want nothing to do with him, and I won't see him, not if he stays here all day long."

"Good lad!" said Mr. Tapley, with a nod. "You ain't near such a fool as people made out, Softy. Farmer Holt ain't no good to anybody!"

He went downstairs again, pleasantly smiling.

"Sorry, Mr. Holt, but Master Wade is too busy!" he said blandly. "In other words, he don't want to see you."

The farmer scowled furiously.

"The impudent young whelp!" he snapped. "So that's what he says, is it? Look here, Tapley, you go and tell Softy that I've got to see him——"

"I'm not accepting orders from you, Mr. Holt!" said the landlord flatly. "I've told you what the lad wants you to know, and the sooner you leave my premises, the better. I'm rather particular about people who come here."

Farmer Holt nearly choked with rage.

"You won't tell the boy what I says?" he snarled.

"No!"

For a moment it seemed as though Holt would do something violent. He lifted his stick threateningly, and his hand quivered with the rage which surged through him. Then he swore violently under his breath.

"I don't allow bad language in my hotel!" said Mr. Tapley curtly. "Outside, please!"

To Farmer Holt, this was gall and wormwood—it was the bitterest pill he had ever been asked to swallow. His own farm boy—his slave for years—had refused to see him! The lad he had kicked and cuffed about to his heart's content had sent down a message that he was too busy! This, as a matter of fact, was Mr. Tapley's idea, but Farmer Holt didn't know it.

It was only by an effort that Holt held himself in check. But, at last, he turned on his heel and strode out. He knew well enough that popular opinion was already against him in the village. A scene in the George Tavern would not tend to improve matters: So he took his departure.

And just outside he ran into three juniors who were about to make for the porch of the little inn. Fullwood and Co. had arrived, but as soon as the leader of Study A saw Farmer Holt, he paused. The expression on the man's face was eloquent.

"Has that brat been cheeking you, Mr. Holt?" asked Fullwood sympathetically.

It was a diplomatic question. Mr. Holt was at once alive to the fact that these boys were on his side.

"The infernal young cub!" he growled. "Refused to see me! Wouldn't even let me go to his room! Not because he was afraid, neither. He's stuck up—that money's got into his head!"

"Well, that's only to be expected, considerin' that his head is a bit weak," said Fullwood. "Perhaps we can do somethin', Mr. Holt? I don't mind tellin' you that we're fed up with Softy, an' if we can help you, we'll be only too jolly glad. Anythin' to get square with that workhouse brat!"

For a second Mr. Holt made as though to push past. Then he paused and started. He looked at Fullwood intently.

"Yes, mebbe there's something you could do!" he replied slowly. "Seein' as you're a young gent, you might be able to help in a thing like this. And I don't suppose you'll be above earning a bit of cash for yourself—hey?"

"It all depends upon what you want me to do," said Fullwood cautiously.

Farmer Holt looked round.

"Well, we can't talk here," he said. "Come up to the farm."

Fullwood, who scented that something good was on, at once agreed. And a minute later the three juniors were accompanying the farmer along the muddy lane which led to the old farmhouse.

Having arrived, they went straight into Mr. Holt's sitting-room. He closed the door, and then crossed over to an old-fashioned writing-table. He unlocked one of the the drawers, and took some papers out.

"Now, my lads, we'd best talk quiet," he said softly. "There's that housekeeper o' mine dodging about somewhere, and it wouldn't do for her to know anything, the inquisitive old hag! But the fact is, you might be able to do a stroke of business for me."

"Business?" said Fullwood. "What sort of business?"

The farmer smiled.

"You needn't think it's anything shady," he replied. "But see here. I don't mind

telling you young gents that I'm feeling a bit bad about Softy. Mebbe I didn't treat him right. It's only after you lose a feller that you realise you ain't treated him as you might ha' done. I went to the George Tavern because I wanted to help him, and the young brat wouldn't see me!"

"You wanted to help him?" repeated Fullwood incredulously.

"Yes—help him!" repeated the farmer gruffly. "I dessay it sounds a bit queer, but folks ain't always judged me right. I've got nothing agin Softy because he wouldn't see me. Likely he'll see you if you go about it in the right way."

"But what's the business about, Mr. Holt?"

"Well, these bonds!" said the farmer, lifting up the papers. "I bought 'em six months back from a lawyer chap in Bannington. They're bonds of the Sunset Oil Co. in Mexico and these 'ere papers represent five thousand at a pound each."

Fullwood nodded, as serious as a judge.

"Pretty big figures, Mr. Holt," he said calmly. "Do you mean to say that those papers in your hand are worth five thousand quid?"

"They're worth every penny of it!" replied Farmer Holt, with a cunning look in his eye. "I paid five thousand, anyhow. But, as I was saying, I feel that I ought to make up a bit to Softy, so as to square things. So I was going to offer him these bonds for three thousand."

"And drop two thousand quid on the deal?" grinned Fullwood.

"Yes, my lad!" said Holt. "There ain't nothing to laugh at——"

"Laugh at!" repeated Fullwood innocently. "Not at all! I think it's very generous of you, Mr. Holt, an' Softy ought to be kicked for treatin' you like that—when you were plannin' to do him a jolly good turn."

Fullwood spoke so frankly that the farmer's first suspicions were allayed. He had feared that the boys would suspect him of some trick or other. But it seemed that they had swallowed the thing whole. Unfortunately, Mr. Holt had failed to observe a flicker of Fullwood's left eyelid as he glanced at his chums.

"These bonds are a good investment for the boy!" went on Holt. "They're worth five thousand to-day, and they're likely to go up in price. So I'm losing a good bit by offering them to Softy for three thousand. How would you like the job of selling them to him?"

"Seein' that it's such a snip, I wouldn't mind takin' it on," replied Fullwood. "You're not the kind of man to try any swindlin' business, Mr. Holt. So I shall be safe enough in acceptin' the commission But where do I come in ?"

"If you put this through, I'll give you ten pounds!" said the farmer eagerly.

Fullwood laughed.

Fullwood was just a little perturbed when he saw the cashier give a decided start as he glanced at the amount of the cheque.

"I think we'd better be goin'!" he said, turning to his chums.

"Right-ho!" said Gulliver and Bell, taking their cue.

"What the—— Wait a minute, young man!" exclaimed Holt. "What's the idea? Ain't ten pound enough?"

"Ten pound is an insult!" replied Fullwood calmly. "Look here, Mr. Holt—we'll be straight about it. Agree to give me fifty quid, an' I'll shove the deal through. Is it a go?"

The farmer rose to his feet, purple with rage.

"You infernal young robbers!" he said thickly. "Fifty pounds! Never! I'll give you twenty pounds, and not a farthing more."

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"It didn't take you long to double the first offer, anyway," he remarked. "You'd better think again, Mr. Holt. We don't mind waiting a few minutes. Anythin' to oblige."

And the rascal of the Remove lay back in his chair, and whistled softly as he gazed at the ceiling. Gulliver and Bell silently admired their leader for the cool manner in which he was handling the farmer.

As a matter of fact, Fullwood knew well enough that he was on safe ground. Never for a moment did he believe Holt's absurd bluff that the bonds were worth five thou-

sand pounds, and that he was prepared to sell them for three thousand. Fullwood was quite certain that the bonds were duds, and worth practically nothing. It was nothing more or less than a swindling attempt to sell Softy a pup.

But Fullwood felt that he was safe in accepting the job, because he could always protest—in the event of exposure—that he had acted under the best possible motives. He would be able to swear, truthfully, that Farmer Holt had declared the bonds to be worth five thousand.

"No!" he said, at length. "Twenty pound is my limit!"

"In that case, Mr. Holt, you'll have to sell the bonds to Softy yourself!" replied Fullwood. "You'll have to do this generous act on your own account. Unless I can make fifty quid out of it, I'm not going to touch the thing. So it's up to you."

Mr. Holt breathed hard.

"Thirty!" he snapped.

"Fifty!" replied Fullwood steadily.

"You—you——"

"Fifty—or nothing!" said Fullwood.

Again the farmer paced up and down, muttering fiercely to himself. But by now he was beginning to realise that Fullwood held the upper hand. And he came to a halt, at last, and sat down.

"You grasping young demon!" he snapped. "All right—I'll make it fifty. I'm not going to let this chance go by, and so I've got to agree. I'll make it fifty—but you've got to sell the bonds and bring me the money in cash."

"Good enough!" said Fullwood briskly. "How much do I get on account?"

"Not a farthing—nothing until you put the deal through!" said Farmer Holt.

"Well, perhaps that's business," said Fullwood smoothly. "There's just one other little point, Mr. Holt. I'd like you to write out a paper saying' that you've commissioned me to sell five thousand pound worth of bonds to Softy Wade for three thousand pounds, and that you accept all responsibility."

Holt looked up sharply.

"Nonsense!" he said. "That's not necessary."

"I think it is," said Fullwood.

"Well, I won't sign any paper."

"All right—the deal's off," said Fullwood calmly.

"By thunder! Didn't you just agree?" rapped out the farmer harshly. "What's the idea of chopping and changing about like this?"

"I'm not chopping and changing about," said Fullwood. "You told me that this deal is square, Mr. Holt, and I accept your word. If you sign that paper, I'll get on with the job. If you don't sign it, I shall begin to suspect that the thing's not so square as it looks."

Jeremiah Holt was cornered, and he knew it.

"Oh, well, it's all ridiculous nonsense!" he growled. "The deal's all square enough, of course. I'll give you that paper, if you particularly want it. I ain't the kind of man to haggle over a trifle."

Two minutes later Fullwood glanced through the paper and nodded, and placed it in his pocket. Then he accepted the bonds, carefully checked them, and stowed them away with the other document.

"Leave it to me, Mr. Holt," he said calmly. "The job's as good as done."

He and his chums walked out, and Ralph Leslie's eyes were gleaming.

CHAPTER VI.

FULLWOOD'S LITTLE SCHEME.

"SMART work, eh?" said Fullwood, as they walked down the lane.

"By gad! I'm blessed if I know how you do it!" exclaimed Gulliver admiringly. "You talked to that old bounder like a Dutch uncle! Fifty quid, eh? Do you think you'll get it?"

"I'll get it if I sell these bonds!" replied Fullwood.

"But he mightn't dub up——"

"What about that signed paper? He won't get that back unless he pays me my fifty. And he knows it, too."

"Perhaps he won't care about that paper ——"

"Won't care about it?" repeated Fullwood. "You ass! It's worth hundreds to him! An' you needn't think I'll let him have it back easily! If I can't squeeze more than fifty out of him, it'll be a queer thing. These giddy bonds ain't worth five thousand, you fatheads! I'll bet they're not worth two thousand!"

Gulliver and Bell looked rather startled.

"Then—then it's a swindle!" said Bell uneasily. "I—I say! It's a bit risky, you know, especially over such a large amount ——"

"Rot!" said Fullwood. "Where's the risk? With this paper, we're as safe as houses. We can always make out we were actin' with the best intentions. I wouldn't go into a thing like this unless I was on solid ground to start with. As for swindlin', that's Holt's affair, not mine. He knows, an' I don't. They're his bonds, and I'm simply an agent workin' on commission. If there's any trouble Holt'll get it in the neck, not us."

"My hat, you're deep!" said Bell. "Blessed if I thought you were so deep, Fully."

Fullwood chuckled.

"It's not a question of being deep," he said. "I'm simply wide awake—that's all. Now, look here, I've got to sell these bonds to Softy, an' if possible, I'll do it this afternoon, as soon as I can."

"We've got to get back to dinner——"

"Blow dinner!" interrupted Fullwood.

"We can't waste time like that. It's a half-holiday, anyhow. So there are no lessons to bother about. We've got to think of this bond business."

"Well, it seems easy enough," remarked Gulliver. "You've only got to see Softy, an' spin the yarn, and you'll be all right. He's got a bankin' account, an' his own cheque-book, so there's nothin' in it."

Fullwood looked at his chums almost pityingly.

"I always knew you were a bit soft, but I didn't think you were so dotty as all that!" he said sourly. "What's the good of me goin' to Softy? In the first place, he wouldn't see me—one of you chaps said the same thing. Not only that, but even if he did see me, do you think he'd buy three thousand quid's worth of bonds?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Bell. "Why did you take the job on, if you don't think you can manage it? You know jolly well you can't bring anybody else into the thing."

"That's just the point," said Fullwood. "You remember that old solicitor chap? What was his name? Brigstock, wasn't it? Well, the fellow who sells these bonds to Softy has got to be an agent of Mr. Brigstock. He has come straight down from London with these bonds on purpose to offer Softy a gilt-edged, brass-bound opportunity."

"But—but how the dickens can you get hold of one of Mr. Brigstock's agents?" demanded Gulliver impatiently.

"How can I—— Ye gods and tadpoles!" said Fullwood, taking a deep breath. "O, you poor mutt! Can't you see through the little scheme? Are you absolutely as blind as a bat? I'm going to be Mr. Brigstock's agent!"

"You!" gasped Gulliver, forgetting to be insulted.

"Yes, me!"

"But—but——"

"But nothin'!" said Fullwood. "It'll be as easy as fallin' off a log. We'll slip back to St. Frank's like lightnin' an' borrow a few effects from the property room of the Dramatic Club. A high collar, an' a wide soft hat, an' a neat false moustache will make me look ten years older. Softy's a simple kid— he'll never suspect anythin'. I can wear glasses, too. Just leave it to me."

Gulliver and Bell were becoming more and more astonished. There was no doubt that Fullwood was determined to handle the thing thoroughly. His scheme was not only possible, but feasible. And the more he thought of it, the simpler it became. The main thing was to put some speed on.

So they hurried back to St. Frank's as quickly as they could go. They arrived at a very convenient time, for everybody was at dinner, and they were able to get in unobserved.

And then, in the property-room, Fullwood prepared.

He didn't trouble to don a different suit, because that wasn't necessary. He already wore striped trousers with his Eton jacket, and a big overcoat was sufficient. He would take care not to open it. He completely bronzed his face by means of some simple colouring, and the addition of a tiny moustache—quite secure and life-like—added ten years to his age.

Finally, he put on some spats, a pair of pince-nez, and a bowler hat. He decided that a bowler would look more business-like. Armed with a neat, leather handbag, he looked very much like a typical solictor's clerk, and was certainly very difficult to recognise as Fullwood of the Remove.

"All right?" he asked, as he turned himself round.

"Great!" said Gulliver enthusiastically. "By gad! It's absolutely marvellous! Nobody will know you."

"Simplicity, my sons," said Fullwood. "The great danger in a thing of this sort is to overdo it. I know just where to draw the line. Now, look here—you chaps had better remain in the school."

"Why?"

"Because it might muck up everythin' if you're seen with me in this get-up," said Fullwood. "If anybody happens to see me walkin' out of the school, they won't think anythin'. I shall be taken for a tradesman's canvasser, or somethin' like that."

And Fullwood set off almost at once, his chums rather disappointed because they couldn't accompany him. And it must be admitted that the rascal of the Remove had planned out this scheme amazingly well.

He strode down towards the village at a smart walk, and passed Hodder major and Frinton, of the Sixth, just near the Stowe bridge. They looked at him, but with no sign of recognition. And Fullwood took good care to face them boldly. He was satisfied that his make-up was good enough to fool Softy.

So he was feeling in excellent spirits when he entered the George Tavern, and inquired for Master Charles Wade. Mr. Tapley, the landlord, was rather surprised to see this smart-looking visitor, but he certainly showed no sign of suspicion.

"You might tell Master Wade that I've just come down from London," said Fullwood crisply—in accents very different to his usual drawl. "Just a little matter of business. Tell him that I'm from Messrs. Brigstock, Brigstock, and Brigstock, of Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"Ah, yes, to be sure!" said Mr. Tapley. "Just a minute, sir."

It was as easy as shelling peas. In a few moments Fullwood was ushered upstairs into Softy's room, and the door closed behind him. He had been accepted without question by the landlord. And now the farm boy came forward rather eagerly. He had been feeling a bit lonely, and a messenger from Mr. Brigstock was very welcome.

"My name is Jarrow, and I represent Messrs. Brigstock, Brigstock and Brigstock," said Fullwood, in clear, business-like tones. "The senior partner of our firm has sent me down especially to see you, Master Wade."

"About my money, sir?" asked Softy.

"Well, in a way, yes," said Fullwood. "The fact is, Mr. Brigstock is very keen upon helping you in every way he can. Let me see, what is the approximate amount of your inheritance."

"They do say that it be about twelve thousand pounds!" said Softy, as though the amount awed him—which, indeed, it did.

"Ah, yes—twelve thousand!" said Fullwood, inwardly pleased. "Well, Mr. Brigstock has been very much concerned about this money of yours, and he wants you to invest it safely and in the best possible manner. That's mainly the reason he sent me down."

"Invest it?" repeated Softly, rather out of his depth.

"Exactly!" said Fullwood, as he opened his bag, and produced an official looking bundle of papers, tied round with coloured tape. "Probably you don't know much about investments, Master Wade?"

"I dunno what they are, sir," confessed Softy.

"Ah, but you'll soon learn—you'll soon learn!" said the rascally Removite cheerfully. "Now that you have come into this money, my boy, you'll find it necessary to learn all sorts of things concerning investments and other legal points. But to get to business. I understand that Mr. Brigstock has transferred your money to Bannington——"

"Mebbe you're right, sir, but I thought it was Mr Lee what did that," said Softy.

"Mr. Lee?" repeated Fullwood, rather startled.

"Yes—Mr. Lee from the school," said the farm boy. "He's my trusty guardian, or whatever they calls it, sir. All this money has been put in the bank for me, ay, and I've got a book, too."

"Book?"

"I've just got to write on one of the pages, and sign my name, and I can get any money I like from the bank!" said Softy with pride. "Ten pound—twenty pound—a hundred pound, sir! It's rare wunnerful!"

"Ah, you mean a cheque book!" said Fullwood.

"Yes, that's the word, sir."

Fullwood was pleased to learn that the rumour was correct—that Softy actually had a banking account, and was able to draw his own cheques. This simplified matters greatly. He had half-feared that Softy was going to say that he would have to approach Nelson Lee before signing one of those "pages."

So far as Fullwood could see, the thing was now plain sailing.

"Now, about this little investment," went on Fullwood. "I don't want to alarm you, Master Wade by talking about large sums, but this matter involves an amount which may surprise you. But remember that Mr. Brigstock is advising you solely for your own good."

"I'll do anything what Mr. Brigstock says, sir," declared Softy.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Fullwood glibly. "Well, this investment will be a very profitable one for you. Now, you see these papers? They are what we call bonds in the legal parlance. Each one of these bonds is worth a pound each at the present moment, and there are five thousand of them here."

"Five thousand pounds!" ejaculated Softy, in wonder.

"It seems quite a large amount, eh?" smiled the plotter. "But, actually, Mr. Brigstock has obtained them for three thousand pounds. That is why I am here—to offer them to you. It is really a chance in a million—a chance that may never occur again. You understand? Remember, these bonds are far better than having money in the bank—for the interest which accrues is altogether more advantageous to an investor than the usual interest on a deposit account at the bank. Do you quite follow me, Master Wade?"

Master Wade didn't follow him. Fullwood was using all the biggest words he could muster, and he was talking as though conversation of this kind was an everyday habit of his. It was hardly to be wondered at that poor Softy, utterly inexperienced, should be deluded.

"I don't reckon I understand, sir," he confessed.

"Well, never mind!" said Fullwood, secretly delighted. "Never mind, my lad. You can be quite certain that Mr. Brigstock knows what he is about. I have been instructed to leave these bonds with you, and to obtain a cheque for three thousand pounds. I should like you to write it out at once."

Fullwood was feeling absolutely confident. The thing had gone so well, and Softy seemed so awed, that it was really child's play. Softy never suspected that there was anything fishy about the business.

There was no question that Fullwood was acting in a very rascally manner. It may be some excuse for him to say that he did not fully realise the enormity of his conduct. At all events, this is the charitable view. But, rascal though he was, he drew the line at a certain point.

A tempting idea had come to him to sell the bonds for three thousand five hundred. It would be just as easy—and Farmer Holt would never know. But a moment's reflection told Fullwood that such a course would be, indeed, absolutely criminal. And if the truth came out, he would have no leg to stand on. Besides, the sum of five hundred pounds was an awe-inspiring one. Greedy though Fullwood was, he didn't want so much as this.

No, it would be far better to fulfil Mr. Holt's commission, and nothing further. In

this way, Fullwood would remain the tool all the time, and could not be prosecuted if any trouble arose. Holt would be the sole sufferer.

Softy Wade, accepting Fullwood's statements without question, produced a cheque book and wrote out the desired amount. He did so without a thought of any swindle. This gentleman was from Mr. Brigstock—and that was quite good enough for Softy.

Fullwood had been expecting this result, and hoping for it all the time. Yet, now that the cheque was actually in his possession, he could hardly believe his luck.

Fullwood took care that the cheque was an open one, and made payable to bearer. He would be able to get the money from the bank without difficulty. This was necessary, because Farmer Holt would never accept a cheque.

Fullwood had it all planned out. He would go to Bannington at once—arriving well before closing time. Once he had got the cash, he would take the money to Farmer Holt, collect his commission, and the whole thing would be over.

But there's many a slip——!

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE NECK!

BANNINGTON was rather quiet as Fullwood strode smartly up the High Street. It was Wednesday afternoon, and very little business was doing. He turned into the bank, and handed his cheque across the counter with all the assurance in the world.

He was still wearing his disguise—and for a very obvious reason. The bank would never pay a sum like three thousand pounds to a schoolboy. And if Fullwood had had much experience of banks—which he had not—he would have known that they would hesitate before paying three thousand pounds on a bearer cheque to anybody.

But the leader of Study A fondly believed that the thing would be simple. The bank officials would take him for a man, and they would hand over the money without a word.

Consequently, he was just a little perturbed when he saw the cashier give a decided start as he glanced at the amount on the cheque. Then, to increase Fullwood's uneasiness, the cashier walked briskly away, and disappeared behind a glass-topped door. Fullwood tried to appear at his ease while he waited for a minute or two. But it was very difficult. He was, as a matter of fact, on tenterhooks, and more than once he felt an almost uncontrollable desire to take to sudden flight.

He was, in fact, contemplating a strategic move out of the bank, when the door of the manager's office opened. Fullwood's heart leapt into his mouth. But he cooled down as he observed that the cashier was coming back, and that he was smiling.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, sir, but we very seldom have such large cheques handed across the counter for cash payment," said the cashier smoothly. "Indeed, we find it difficult to place our hands on such a sum at a moment's notice."

"Do you mean that you can't cash it?" asked Fullwood, assuming indignation, although he felt sick with alarm.

"Oh, no, sir—not at all," replied the cashier. "The manager begs me to tender his sincere apologies. Would it be convenient for you to call round just before closing time—say, in about twenty minutes from now? Or, if you prefer it, you may spend the time in the waiting-room."

Fullwood recovered his equanimity.

"Oh, that's all right," he said carelessly. "As a matter of fact, I've got one or two business calls to make, and it makes practically no difference to me. You'll have the money in about twenty minutes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right you are—I'll be back at about ten to three."

Fullwood walked out, and he heaved a sigh of intense relief as he reached the pavement. After his opening fears, he was now feeling as though he trod on air. He had begun to imagine all sorts of awful things while the clerk was in with the manager.

"That's the worst of these bally tin-pot banks!" he grunted, as he walked up the street. "Haven't got tuppence to bless themselves with! A bank, and can't raise three thousand quid! I expect they've got to go chasin' about gettin' the cash from the strong rooms, or somewhere."

However, Fullwood didn't mind much, although he hated the thought of going back to the bank again. He had been hoping that it would be over in one spasm. And now he had to go through it again.

At the same time, he feared nothing. The cashier had been very pleasant, and Fullwood's inexperience on all matters concerning banks lulled him into a sense of false security.

It seemed to him that the town hall clock must have stopped, and that his own watch had stopped, too. That period of twenty minutes was like an age. The minutes dragged by as though they were hours.

But, at last, the time was ten minutes to three. Fullwood gathered all his assurance, and marched back into the bank. The cashier smiled genially as he caught sight of him.

"All right now, sir," he said briskly. "Here it is—ready for you. I gathered that you required the sum in Bank of England notes."

"That's the idea," said Fullwood.

The cashier handed them over, checking them as he did so. It seemed quite a small bundle for such a large amount, but it was quite correct, and Fullwood could hardly contain his inward excitement as he stuffed the notes into his pocket.

He nodded casually, and walked out—wondering if his stride was as unsteady as it felt. But within him there was a surging wave of victory. He had pulled the thing off!

And then, in a flash, the heavens fell. It seemed to Fullwood that a kind of explosion occurred in his mind, and for a second he stood absolutely still, open-mouthed, with his wits scattered.

For there, just outside on the pavement, stood Nelson Lee!

Considering the shock of it, Fullwood pulled himself together with really remarkable rapidity. A thousand and one thoughts crowded through his startled mind. But the most coherent of all was that he had to get away. He was disguised, and it was surely a mere coincidence that Nelson Lee was here. Lee would never recognise him if he brushed past quickly.

But it was not such an easy matter to brush past.

For Nelson Lee came straight up to Fullwood with a smile of recognition. And before Ralph Leslie could dodge, Lee had grasped his hand.

"Well, upon my soul!" exclaimed the detective delightedly. "This is a most unexpected pleasure, Mr. Bradley. I never dreamed of seeing you down in Bannington, How are you?"

Fullwood gurgled. This was ghastly. Nelson Lee had mistaken him for somebody else! Quite accidentally, he had disguised himself in such a way that he resembled a real personality.

"I—I——" Fullwood paused. "You—you—must have made a mistake, sir!" he went on hurriedly. "My name is Jarrow——"

"What nonsense!" said Nelson Lee, seizing Fullwood's arm affectionately. "That won't do, Bradley! You can't tell how pleased I am to see you. Come along!"

The grip on Fullwood's arm was like iron, and he had no chance of getting away. And, in spite of himself, he was half pulled, half pushed, across the pavement, and into Nelson Lee's waiting car.

In a moment Lee slipped the clutch in, and they were soon speeding along at a pace which was contrary to all regulations of the road. In vain Fullwood protested. Lee merely laughed, and drove all the faster.

To leap out was impossible—at least, unless he wanted a broken neck. The position was quite horrible. The plotter of the Remove was absolutely at his wits' end. He felt that the meshes of the net were closing about him—and he didn't feel far wrong.

In next to no time the car was at St. Frank's. It turned into the Triangle, and then Fullwood was again seized by the arm. Once he attempted to get away. But that once was enough. The pain that shot through his arm was excruciating. Dismayed and scared, he found himself in Nelson Lee's study

"There—there's been some mistake——" he began weakly.

"No, Fullwood, there's been no mistake!" interrupted Nelson Lee briskly, as he turned the key in the lock. "You unmitigated young rascal! Hand over that money you obtained from the bank."

Fullwood stared, dumbfounded.

"My—my name is Jarrow——"

"You will cease that nonsense at once, Fullwood!" cut in Nelson Lee, tearing open the junior's overcoat, and revealing his Etons. "Take my advice, and drop this foolery without any further delay. You had better explain fully to me why you are masquerading in this get-up, and how you obtained a cheque for three thousand from young Wade."

Fullwood felt as though his legs would not bear the weight of his body.

But, even in this extremity, he fought to regain his composure, and partially succeeded. And then he had the audacity to tell Nelson Lee that the whole thing was merely a business transaction.

"You will probably realise, Fullwood, that this 'business transaction' will result in your being expelled from the school in disgrace!" said Nelson Lee coldly. "If you can satisfy me that you have been used as a tool by somebody else, there may be a chance for you. But, remember, I demand the whole truth—every single fact from the very beginning."

That mention of expulsion scared Fullwood more than anything else could possibly have done. And, then and there, in scared tones, he told how he had met Jeremiah Holt, how he had gone to the farm, and all the rest of it. Nelson Lee succeeded in worming the whole story out.

"A very pretty story!" exclaimed the detective, at length. "So this criminal scheme emanated from Mr. Holt's brain! No doubt he is the prime mover, Fullwood, but your share in the affair is despicable and utterly dishonourable."

"But—but that paper——"

"This paper may save you from expulsion, Fullwood," said Nelson Lee, as he glanced at Farmer Holt's signed statement. "Do you happen to know what those bonds are actually worth?"

"Mr. Holt said they're worth five thousand pounds."

Nelson Lee smiled very grimly.

"It may interest you to know, Fullwood, that the bonds of the Sunset Oil Co., of Mexico, were quoted yesterday at a figure which renders Mr. Holt's bundle of bonds worth one thousand pounds at the utmost."

"Good heavens!" said Fullwood, in well assumed amazement.

"So, according to that, Mr. Holt was deliberately attempting to swindle Wade out of two thousand pounds!" said Nelson Lee. "That is a very serious matter indeed—all the more so when it is remembered that Holt has always treated the boy with the umost brutality."

"I thought the bonds were worth five thousand, sir," muttered Fullwood.

"I will not openly dispute what you say, Fullwood, although I have very decided suspicions," said the detective curtly. "However, under the circumstances, I suppose I must give you the benefit of the doubt—and therein you are very fortunate. But you must not imagine that you are to escape punishment."

"Shall I be sacked, sir?" asked Fullwood nervously.

"That remains to be seen—it will, in fact, depend on the headmaster's decision," replied Nelson Lee. "You will remove those absurd things at once, Fullwood, and return to me here. If you attempt to disobey me, there will be no question whatever about your expulsion."

Fullwood crawled out of the study, miserable, shivering, but lucky enough to escape at all.

In the passage he met Gulliver and Bell.

"What's happened?" breathed Gulliver fearfully.

"That infernal beast of a Lee has twigged the whole game!" snarled Fullwood. "We're done—we don't draw a red cent! But, by gad, old Holt's going to get it in the neck as well as me—but he'll probably go to chokey!"

Fullwood didn't wait to talk longer, but quicky removed the remains of his disguise. Then, feeling somewhat better, but still very nervous, he once more presented himself in Nelson Lee's study.

"Come with me, Fullwood!" said the detective briskly.

Fullwood went—to the punishment room.

"And now," murmured Lee, as he strode out, "for Farmer Holt!"

"There is only one swindler in this room, Mr. Holt!" interrupted Nelson Lee coldly. "You desired to sell those bonds for three thousand pounds. You shall have your desire."

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE FOR HIS NOB!

SOFTY WADE was nearly on the point of sobbing after he had told Nelson Lee all about it. But the latter soon calmed him, and assured him him that everything was all right.

"As a matter of fact, my boy, I was prepared for something of this nature," said Softy's new guardian. "I really allowed you to have the cheque book in order that you may be taught a lesson. I hope you have learned that you must never trust any stranger, no matter how smooth-tongued he may be."

"I—I'm all dazed, sir," said Softy helplessly.

"Well, never mind," went on Lee. "No harm has been done—in fact, I am highly pleased with the result. I imagine that Mr. Holt will be feeling very sorry for himself before long. I may as well tell you, Wade, that I laid the bait deliberately—just in order to see if the wolves would be after you."

But Softy hardly knew what to say. He had already told Nelson Lee about the man who had come from Mr. Brigstock, and about the cheque and the bonds. Lee examined the bonds with grim interest.

Then, telling Softy to say nothing, he took his departure, and walked straight to Holt's farm. As it happened, Holt him-

self was just crossing the barnyard when Lee appeared, and he halted, eyeing the newcomer inquisitively.

"Anything I can do, sir?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes, Mr. Holt; I should like a short private conversation with you," said Nelson Lee smoothly.

Holt did not seem at all pleased, but there was something about Nelson Lee's manner which was not to be denied. And, after a moment's hesitation, the farmer led the way into a little sitting-room.

"Now, Mr. Holt, it is not my intention to beat about the bush!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "You will probably be rather startled to learn that I am fully acquainted with your arrangement with Fullwood to sell Charles Wade five thousand bonds of the Sunset Oil Co., of Mexico."

Holt started.

"You—you know all about it?" he asked blankly. "Good gosh! I—I—— Well, what's it got to do wi' you?" he went on, with a sudden burst of fury. "It ain't your business to come here interfering! I don't want no truck wi' busybodies what don't know how to mind their own affairs ——"

"This happens to be my affair, Mr. Holt, because Fullwood is one of my boys," interrupted Lee. "You deliberately used him as a tool in your unscrupulous swindle ——"

"Swindle!" shouted Farmer Holt, jumping up.

"Yes, sir, swindle!" thundered Nelson Lee.

Holt nearly choked.

"What—what right have you got to interfere?" he snarled at last.

"I have already told you that I am responsible for Fullwood," replied Nelson Lee. "It may also interest you to know that I am Charles Wade's legal trustee. I have not yet informed the police——"

"Do you think I care if you inform the police or not?" broke in Holt harshly. "The transaction was perfectly honest."

"Honest!" repeated Nelson Lee sharply. "Honest! You have the audacity to tell me that, after signing a document for Fullwood, and giving him a promise of fifty pounds if he transacted this swindle!"

Holt flopped back into his chair and gulped.

Actually, he collapsed. If Nelson Lee knew all this, it was quite impossible to keep up the bluff. The very fact that Holt had promised to pay Fullwood fifty pounds was sufficient to condemn him.

"Don't—don't tell the police, sir!" he pleaded wildly. "It'll ruin me, sir—absolutely ruin me! I didn't mean to take no advantage of the boy."

"That, of course, is a lie!" said Nelson Lee, as he placed the bundle of bonds on

(*Continued on next page.*)

the table, with the three thousand pounds in bank-notes beside it. "There, Mr. Holt, are the bonds, and the money you attempted to obtain. I should like to know your estimation of the value of these bonds."

"They're worth three thousand pounds!" replied Holt quickly.

"Their value was quoted in the newspapers yesterday at one thousand pounds!" snapped Nelson Lee.

Holt said nothing—he knew what the bonds had been quoted at. His very silence was sufficient indication of this.

"Now, look here, Mr. Holt, I have already decided what shall be done," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "Nothing can mitigate the nature of your offence. You have deliberately attempted to defraud Wade out of the sum of two thousand pounds—and for this swindle you were prepared to pay Fullwood fifty pounds."

"Don't tell the police, sir," muttered Holt pleadingly.

"It is not my intention to tell the police," said Nelson Lee. "I have a far better scheme, Mr. Holt. It is my intention to punish you in another way."

The farmer gasped with relief.

"Anything but a prosecution, sir!" he exclaimed.

"As you say—anything but a prosecution," agreed Nelson Lee. "Let me tell you, Mr. Holt, you thoroughly deserve a term of imprisonment for your dastardly behaviour. But under all the circumstances I shall take another course. You have a pen there? And paper?"

"Why, yes, sir!"

"Then you will at once write out a receipt for the sum of three thousand pounds—being full payment for five thousand bonds of Sunset Oil Co. stock," said Nelson Lee smoothly.

Holt had already lifted his pen. But it dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"But—but——" he began, in amazement.

"Write the receipt!"

"Is this some trick?" demanded Holt thickily. "Are you trying to get the bonds out of me for nothing? By thunder——"

"There is only one swindler in this room, Mr. Holt!" interrupted Nelson Lee coldly. "You desired to sell those bonds for three thousand pounds, and you were willing to pay fifty pounds commission on the transaction. You shall have your desire, and it will not even cost you a penny."

Holt, utterly bewildered, wrote out the receipt.

"Thank you!" said Nelson Lee, placing the bonds in his pocket. "There, Mr. Holt, is your money. Kindly check it."

Holt lifted the bundle of notes feebly.

"But—but why have you done this?" he asked, breathing hard. "You know as well as I do that the bonds are only worth a thousand pounds."

"I am glad that you have admitted your despicable guilt!" said Nelson Lee.

"There's some trick about it!" muttered Holt. "This—this money isn't real—I reckon as how they must be forged notes! That's it! You're trying to get them bonds for nothing, because you know I can't say a word, or else you'll tell the police!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

Holt was passing through agony, but Nelson Lee was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"During the whole of yesterday," said the detective, "Sunset Oil bonds rose hourly and with meteoric rapidity. By the end of the day they were quoted at a figure which will really astonish you. Their present value, Mr. Holt, is three pounds each."

Farmer Holt nearly fainted on the spot.

"Good gosh!" he said feebly.

Nelson Lee had fairly revelled in the little chat, for it was extremely gratifying to see this rascal so thoroughly confounded.

Exactly what Farmer Holt said afterwards, Nelson Lee never knew—and he certainly didn't care. The man would never dare to breathe a word, for exposure of the plot would undoubtedly mean a criminal trial for Mr. Holt. Lee considered it far better for him to suffer in the other way. It was only fair and just that Softy Wade should benefit by the sale of those bonds—for Softy had bought them in all innocence, in a thoroughly legal manner.

Softy was so overjoyed that he hardly knew what to say.

He had been down—crushed and fettered. But now he was beginning to feel his freedom. His boyhood was only just beginning, and the future was rosy. The farm boy who had received nothing but kicks and cuffs was just about to enter upon his first real taste of life.

Incidentally, it might be mentioned that Ralph Leslie Fullwood had a most painful interview with the Head that same evening—and for at least four days Fullwood revealed quite a remarkable aversion to sitting down!

THE END.

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A Hundred Years Ago.

By the Oldest Inhabitant of Bannington, in an Interview with Cecil de Valerie.

"TIMES ain't what they used to be," muttered the old man who was sitting outside the White Hart as I arrived.

He was a very old man, with a very long white beard. And his face was seamed and wrinkled like parchment. I saw at once that he was the oldest inhabitant.

"Nor ain't boys," he went on, fixing me with his old eyes. "I don't call 'em boys now, I don't. They're namby-pamby milksops now. That's what I calls them. Not an ounce o' pluck among the lot of them."

"That's rot," I said. "Why some of the St. Frank's fellows ride motor-bikes and——"

"Bikes!" the old fellow snorted. "Who's talking o' bikes. I mind the day when all the boys came back to the college on a coach. In winter it were as I remember. There used to be snow in those days. And on many occasions their coach used to be held up by highwaymen."

"Highw aymen!" I gasped.

"Aye!" continued the old gaffer. "I've seen that old coach held up by as many as fifty fierce highwaymen. The leader of the gang was a huge great fellow standing over seven feet. And they was all armed with swords and pistols and muskets and daggers. They set on the coach like mad."

"Great Pip!" I said. "And what happened."

"Why the boys in the coach drove 'em off," the old fellow went on. "They drove 'em off with their fists like good 'uns. Oh they was real boys in those days. They was stirring times then. And I mind one o' the chaps from the College was put in the stocks. There was stocks in Bannington in those days. They left him there three days without neither bite nor sup. Then they flogged the poor fellow. Then they put him back for nearly a week——"

"But—but didn't it kill him?"

"Nary a bit," said the old gaffer. "I tell 'ee they was real boys in those days. You couldn't frighten 'em then. I've seen a party come down here from the school and capture some of the young townsfolk. They've marched 'em back to the College and flung 'em into the dungeon."

"The dungeon!"

"Aye! There was a dungeon in those days. I mind it well. And I mind that St. Frank's was surrounded by a moat. And it had two towers with little windows like slits. And behind these windows all the term through were posted archers."

"My—my hat!" I shouted. "I don't believe it——"

But the old gaffer suddenly rose with a grunt, and went into the inn. If he wasn't the oldest inhabitant he certainly must have been the oldest liar!

THE GEORGE TAVERN (BELLTON)

It is interesting to note that this picturesque old tavern is where Softy Wade stayed as mentioned in this week's narrative.

The Red-Headed League

PART I.

CHAPTER ONE.—On the Prowl.

WHEN late one evening the well-known criminologists, Messrs. Podge and Midge, emerged from their rooms in Quaker Street, disguised to play a dangerous *role* at the headquarters of the Red-Headed League, no one could have mistaken the identity of the huge, ponderous physique of Mr. Podge, nor the dwarf-like figure of his partner, Mr. Midge, notwithstanding that they both wore red wigs and red beards.

Their journey, made on foot, lay in the direction of Soho, and although their appearance excited some curiosity from passers-by and cries of "Beaver!" from high-spirited youths, they did not fail to reach their objective at the appointed hour.

CHAPTER TWO.—In Soho.

Arrived at a dismal doorway in a dark and squalid street in Soho, Mr. Podge rapped thrice with his stick on the woodwork. The door was opened a few inches, and a gruff voice demanded:

"Who are you?"

"Mr. Pod—Powder and—er—Mr. Chowder!" answered Mr. Podge.

"What do you want here?" growled the other.

"We have an appointment with Mr. McTavish of the Red-Headed League," ventured Mr. Midge, while Mr. Podge was clearing his throat.

"Enter!" commanded the voice.

Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge obeyed and found themselves in an evil-looking corridor.

"Follow me!" said the stranger as he led them along the passage and then down some steep wooden stairs. When they reached the bottom the ground suddenly gave way, and they plunged downwards through a trap-door until they alighted in a huge underground vault.

CHAPTER THREE.—Headquarters of the R.H.L.

Seated around a table in the vault were twenty scowling red-headed men listening to an address from one who was apparently their leader, and whom the detectives recognised as Mr. McTavish.

As Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge appeared, the speaker paused and motioned the two new arrivals to two vacant chairs. The detectives sat down amid the ferocious glares of the red heads.

"Brothers of the Red Hair," said the speaker, "these two gentlemen, Messrs. Powder and Chowder, have come here to-night to fill the vacancies made by our late lamented brothers, Bryan and Taggart, who perished, as you know, in the attempt to demolish the new palace of the L.C.C. at Westminster.

"If the candidates do not meet with your approval, they will be removed at once to the death chamber and there summarily disposed of.

"Signify in the usual way!"

Several hands went up.

"Brothers Powder and Chowder," continued the chairman, "you are elected as members of the Red-Headed League, and your first duty will be to carry out the work begun by your predecessors, Brothers Bryan and Taggart."

CHAPTER FOUR.—Mr. Podge decides to act.

Two murderous engines of destruction the size of cricket balls were pushed towards the astonished Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge. Beads of cold sweat began to form on their foreheads. They felt that now had come the moment for them to act. Each grabbed his bomb, and then Mr. Podge rose to speak.

"Brother Red-Heads, you can depend that I and my friend will not hesitate to do our duty when the time comes. We shall not bungle—we have never been known to bungle—and if we have to die, we shall all die together here and now!"

As he uttered these words Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge tore off their disguise.

"Scoundrels, murderers!" hissed Mr. Podge, "if any man moves a finger, I will hurl this bomb into your midst."

CHAPTER FIVE.—The Bombshell.

"You traitors!" shouted McTavish. "You shall die for this! Seize them!"

Following several fearsome oaths, a rush was made for the two detectives, who immediately let fly their bombs with a loud crash on the table. Raucous laughs filled the vault, and Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge blanched with horror—for the bombs had failed to explode.

CHAPTER SIX.

The detectives were quickly overpowered and manacled with their own handcuffs.

"Silence!" roared McTavish above the uproar.

"Prisoners," he said, "you are caught like rats in a trap. You have sought to come where wise men fear to tread. Those bombs were dummies and a test of your trustworthiness to our cause. You have proved yourselves unworthy of our confidence, and now you must die.

"Remove these traitors to the death-chamber!" he commanded.

Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge had been in many tight corners before, but now their doom was sealed. (*To be continued.*)

THE FLAMING GOD

A Baffling Detective Mystery Story from the latest Adventures of NELSON LEE and NIPPER

Synopsis of Part I.

Mr. Charles Stannard's country residence is burgled, and a Brahmin idol is stolen; the thief, who was seen by the butler, apparently being a Hindoo. The idol had been purchased from a curio dealer by Mr. Stannard for a few pounds. A Hindoo, corresponding to the thief, is arrested in London. As the suspect had made no attempt to conceal himself, Nelson Lee, who is called in to investigate, is doubtful of the prisoner's guilt. Yet there is evidence that the suspected man has been intent on getting possession of the idol, and is willing to pay a large sum of money for it.

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PART II.

I.

NELSON LEE IDENTIFIES THE HINDOOS.

THE eloquent appeal made by the youth Naryan, his urgent request that the elder Hindoo should confide in the detective, his disclosure of the relationship that existed between the two—all this brought not even a flicker of surprise to Nelson Lee's countenance.

There was no reason why it should, since it only corroborated a theory which he had previously formed by shrewd deductions. As for the relationship, he had also been aware of that since he had been in the apartment.

"We can trust this Englishman, father," the youth repeated, after waiting briefly for an answer. "Tell him everything."

"Heed your son's advice, Meerza," urged Nelson Lee. "It will be for the best if you do so."

There was still no answer. The man sat gazing into vacancy, an inscrutable expression in his eyes. He was deep in thought. Once or twice he opened his lips, and was on the point of speaking, but as quickly he checked himself. For nearly a minute he was silent, and at length, looking up at the detective, he shook his head firmly.

"It is for me to judge, sahib, not for you," he declared. "I have carefully considered this matter in my mind, and not now will I give you my confidence, for I hope that in a short time all will be well, and my friend Gondal will be set free. Should it not be so, however, then I will tell everything to you, and will be glad to have your assistance."

"Do not delay, father," the youth implored. "Confide in the Englishman now, else you may be sorry. We are strangers in a strange city, where you have not the power which you have at home, and without the help of this sahib, who has talked to you as a friend, we may never recover the ——"

"Hush, my son!" Meerza interrupted. "Say no more. I know what is best."

Nelson Lee whispered a few words at Nipper's ear, and at once the lad stepped to the door, and slipped from the room. Turning to the elder Hindoo, Lee moved closer to him, and looked him straight in the face.

"You are behaving very foolishly, your Highness," he said quietly.

Meerza was struck dumb. He drew a quick deep breath, and the youth gave a violent start. Nelson Lee repeated the words, his gaze still bent on the man, who was trying to hide his emotion.

"Why have you thus addressed me, sahib?" he asked.

"It is your proper title," Lee replied.

"My title? Meerza is my name, and——"

"Not so. You are Thakur Sind, the Raja of Purana. And this youth, as he appears to be, is neither of that sex, nor is he your son. It is your daughter, the Princess Lativa, who has assumed the name of Naryan. Furthermore, the man Gondal is the captain of the guard of soldiers which you keep at your palace in India."

"How does it happen that you have knowledge of these things, sahib?"

"I paid a visit to India a year ago, your Highness. I was in the city of Lalapur when

you came there in state to attend a public ceremony, I saw you pass by in your carriage, with the princess seated by your side, and I also saw the man Gondal riding at the head of your escort of troopers. I have a good memory, and I recognised the three of you on seeing you again."

The Princess Lativa was overcome with shame and confusion. She hung her head, her cheeks hotly flushed, and shrank farther back on the couch as if she would conceal her boyish figure.

The elder Hindoo had recovered from the surprise. His expression was proud and haughty, and there was a cold glitter in his dark eyes.

"You are right, sahib," he calmly admitted. "I am Thakur Sind, the Raja of Purana, and this is my daughter the princess. For certain reasons she accompanied me to England disguised as a youth, and we took the names of Meerza and Naryan. Yet we have done no wrong."

"That is true," Nelson Lee replied. "At least so far as concerns your using false names. As for other matters, I repeat that you have behaved foolishly."

"How so?" asked the Raja.

"I will briefly explain," said Lee. "The idol which has caused this trouble belonged to you, and it was presumably stolen from your palace. You prized it highly, though it was of little intrinsic value.

"Having by some means learned that it had found its way to a bazaar in Bombay or some other Indian city, and that it had been bought by an Englishman of the name of Judah, you came with your retainer and your daughter to London to search for the man.

"You were successful. You ascertained that he kept a shop in Wigmore Street, and when you called on him he informed you that the idol was no longer in his possession. To that point I find no fault.

"But to-day, after the arrest of Gondal, you would not speak freely to the Scotland Yard inspector, and you have also refused to give me any information that might throw light on what occurred at the residence of Mr. Charles Stannard. Will you now confide in me fully, and let me deal with the affair on your behalf and in your interests?"

"No, sahib, not yet. You must wait. I myself desire information of a kind, and if I fail to get it I will be glad to have your assistance, as I have told you before. Not until then will I speak."

"Why do you set so high a value on the idol?"

"I have nothing more to say, sahib."

"How much were you willing to pay for its recovery, your highness? What sum of money did you offer to Mark Judah?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Did you and Gondal know that the idol had been sold to Mr. Charles Stannard? Was it Gondal who stole it?"

"I have nothing to say, sahib."

With that Thakur Sind rose to indicate that the interview was at an end. He frowned at his daughter, who would have made another appeal to him. Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders, and, realising that it would be useless to press the matter any farther, he merely bowed, and left the room.

"I can read the raja's mind like an open book," he said to himself. "It is just as I supposed. That it is a case of double cunning I haven't a doubt. I can see my way clear now. I will recover the idol, and if meanwhile Thakur Sind gets into trouble it will be his own fault, and will serve him right."

He descended the stairs to the lounge, where Nipper was waiting for him, and a few moments later the two were gliding along Piccadilly in a cab.

Lee disclosed the identity of the three Hindoos to the lad, and told him of his conversation with the raja; and then he sank into one of his silent and thoughtful moods, from which he did not rouse until he was nearly home.

"There is work for both of us to do, my boy," he said. "I want you to keep an eye on the movements of Mr. Mark Judah. When he leaves his shop this evening you will follow him in disguise, on the chance of learning something of importance. That will be your task, and mine will probably be to——"

Nelson Lee paused as the cab stopped.

"Here we are," he added, "we will have our tea, and before you start for Wgmore Street, Nipper, I will tell you what my deductions are in regard to this interesting and mysterious case."

II.

MARK JUDAH'S MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

THE curio shop of Mr. Mark Judah was at the corner of Wigmore Street and a narrow, flagged passage that was called Christopher Place, and struck south to Oxford Street. The private office at the rear of the shop projected from the rest of the building, and had a flat roof with a skylight set in it, and at the back of the office was a small yard with blank walls on three sides of it.

There was no moon on the night after the arrest of the man Gondal at the Kenilworth Hotel, and as the sky was heavily clouded, and a grey mist hung in the air, it was a fitting night, and a fairly safe one, for deeds of evil.

At eleven o'clock the slim figure of a youth, who wore a cap and a suit of shabby tweeds, came slowly along Wigmore Street from the direction of Cavendish Square, stopped for a few seconds at the corner of Christopher Place, and slipped into it.

At this hour all was quiet in the vicinity. No cabs, or cars, or buses were passing.

Not a footstep could be heard, nor was any prowling policeman to be seen in the shroud of mist.

The youth paused again to listen, and to peer into the gloom; and then, almost as nimbly as a cat, he climbed to the top of an eight-foot wall on his left, by the crevices of the bricks, and dropped down on the other side at the rear of the curio-dealer's premises.

That accomplished, he uncoiled from around his waist a ladder of woven silk with a couple of hooks attached to one end of it, and tossed it into the air. At the second attempt it caught on the low, flat roof above him, and when he had mounted the slender, swaying ladder, and drawn it after him, he crawled over the roof to the skylight.

Having softly raised it, as far as it would go, he made fast the silken ladder to the edge of the opening, and descended into Mark Judah's private office, where a light was burning dimly.

The youth had no intention of entering the shop at the front, nor could he have done so had he wished, as the communicating door was fastened.

Swiftly and thoroughly he searched the office, moving here and there with stealthy steps. He scanned a row of shelves, opened and shut the drawers of a flat-topped desk, and looked into a closet that contained only some old rubbish. He twisted the knob of a small safe at one side of the room, and shook his head.

And at length, keenly disappointed, he departed as he had come, leaving no traces of his visit behind him.

Back he went across the roof, after lowering the skylight; down to the yard, where he wrapped the silk ladder around his waist again. and over the wall into Christopher Place.

As he was creeping warily towards the mouth of the passage, he heard a faint sound at the rear, and the next instant, before he could take to flight, a hand gripped him by the arm, and he uttered a startled gasp. For a few seconds he struggled desperately, in a frenzy of fear; and then finding it impossible to escape, he hung limp and trembling in the grasp of his captor. He looked up, and dimly observed a face that was familiar to him.

"The English sahib!" he panted.

"Yes, that's who it is," Nelson Lee sternly replied. "I have caught you, princess!"

"Let me go, I beg of you!" implored the terrified girl. "Oh, please do! Have mercy on me, and don't——"

"Hush, not so loud! Calm yourself, and be quiet, or you will have the police here. There are constables in the neighbourhood."

"You—you are not going to have me arrested, sahib?"

"No, princess, I am not. Don't worry about that. But what a mad thing you have done! You may be thankful that you have not fallen into the hands of the police, who would have taken you into custody, and charged you with attempted burglary!"

"It was indeed madness. Yet I had a good reason, sahib!"

"According to your way of thinking, I dare say. You were wrong. England is not as India, where the native rulers have much power. It was at your father's bidding, of course, that you have done this mad thing.

"If he had confided in me to-day, as both you and I urged him to do, I should have promised to help him, and he would not have dreamed of sending you on such a foolish errand, at the risk of capture and imprisonment."

As Nelson Lee spoke he drew the girl out of the passage to Wigmore Street, and led her along the pavement for a few yards. He could not but admire her courage and audacity. Moreover, he knew what had prompted her to such a desperate deed, and he felt that there was some excuse for her.

"I had my suspicions," he said. "I was inclined to think that the raja, not you, would come here to-night. I expected him at a later hour, and when I arrived I had a glimpse of you disappearing through the skylight over Mr. Judah's office. At the time I had just concealed myself in a doorway yonder in the passage, and I waited there until you returned."

"I will tell you everything," the Princess Lativa answered, "even if my father be angry with me."

"You need not," said Lee. "I know enough as it is. Your object was to search for the stolen idol, I am sure. But you did not find it."

"No, sahib, I could not find it. Yet it may be locked in a safe that is in the office."

"Possibly it is, though I have my doubts as to that. If the man Judah had the idol would he not have called on your father, or sent word to him?"

"Perhaps not. My father and I do not trust him, for we believe him to be a wicked and cunning man. It was through him that poor Gondal has been arrested. He is innosent. It was not he who stole the——"

"Never mind about that. Your faithful servant will not be long in prison."

"And you will not have me arrested, too, sahib? Do you mean it?"

"I have said so, princess. Fortunately, no harm has been done, and therefore you can go back to the hotel. Tell the raja what has happened, and tell him also that I will recover the stolen idol, and that he must wait in patience until he hears from me."

"He will wait, sahib, knowing it will be for the best. Oh, how good you are! I will never forget your kindness!"

There were tears of joy in the Princess Lativa's eyes, and as she was thanking the detective, expressing her gratitude in fervent words, a cab that was for hire approached.

Nelson Lee stopped it, and helped the girl

in, and told the chauffeur to drive her to the Kenilworth Hotel. And when the cab had rolled away he walked slowly in the opposite direction, his brows knit in conjecture.

It was of Mark Judah he was thinking. He had partly solved the mystery of the stolen idol, he was satisfied, but in whose possession was it now? That was the problem he had to deal with.

"I dare say Nipper is at home waiting for me," he reflected. "I wonder if he has learned anything of importance? If not, I shall have to try again, or I will keep the curio dealer under surveillance myself, for I am confident that my theory is right."

They were struck with consternation as they saw Jim Kerrigan mount a bicycle which he must have concealed in the woods.

III.

WHAT NIPPER OVERHEARD.

TO go back a little in the thread of the story, it was seven o'clock that evening when Mr. Mark Judah left the shop in Wigmore Street. He had spent a restless day, waiting impatiently for night to come, and there was a look of anxiety on his face. Apart from being in a fiery temper, he was worried and apprehensive as well, for he was afraid he had roused Nelson Lee's suspicions.

He threw a furtive glance around him after he had locked the door, but in the darkness and mist he failed to observe a youth who was loitering near by.

He did not take any further precautions, did not once glance over his shoulder.

Satisfied that he was not under surveillance, unaware that the detective's young assistant was following him, he went through Christopher Place to Oxford Street, where he hailed a cab, and was driven to Shepherd's Bush. He left the cab here, and a moment later Nipper got out of another one that had stopped a few yards in the rear.

Warily shadowed by the lad, Mr. Judah walked along the main road for a short distance, and turned into a street that ran to the north; and presently, when he had gone for less than a quarter of a mile, he turned again into a roomy and squalid thoroughfare, and entered a tall tenement house.

Having mounted two flights of stairs that were dimly lit, he paused by a door, opened it without rapping, and stepped into a bedchamber that was comfortably furnished. And he had hardly more than shut the door behind him when Nipper appeared at the top of the staircase, and glided noiselessly across the landing.

Within the room, sitting by a table, with

a cigar in his mouth, was a tall, dark man of about thirty, with sinister features that were clean-shaven. He was well dressed, in a flashy style, and he wore a diamond pin in his cravat.

Jim Kerrigan was his name, and he was a person of some notoriety, though it was not of an enviable nature.

"Hallo, Judah!" he said coolly.

With that he sprang to his feet, and stood in a defiant attitude, a sneer on his lips, as the curio dealer advanced towards him. Mark Judah's cheeks were flushed, and his fists were clenched.

"You scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "You dirty dog! You—you sneaking, treacherous cur!"

"Hold on there!" bade Jim Kerrigan, in a savage tone. "Don't call me names!"

"It's what you are!" declared Mark Judah. "A scoundrel and a cur! A cunning trickster!"

"Say it again, and I'll smash your face in! What's wrong with you? Have you gone mad? What the devil are you talking about?"

"You know! My idol! Where is it? I've been waiting for you to——"

"Don't be in a hurry," answered the other. "We'll have a talk first. I'm curious about this business. You didn't make it clear to me, and I'd like you to throw some light on it now. You picked up the idol at a native bazaar out in India, you told me."

"Yes, that's right," Mark Judah assented.

"And you sold it to Mr. Charles Stannard, of White Lodge, for three hundred pounds," Jim Kerrigan went on. "It seems to me to be an ordinary sort of thing. I wouldn't have given five bob for it. Why did it fetch so much money?"

"Because it is something like a thousand years old, and there isn't a duplicate of it in the world. I let it go for too little, fool that I was! I didn't know the value of it at the time."

"I remember what else you told me, Judah. You said that some weeks after you had sold the idol a gentleman who had previously seen it in your window came into the shop and inquired about it, and offered you five hundred pounds for it if you would get it back. Who was the party?"

"A Mr. Cameron, who lives in Scotland. He is a wealthy gentleman, and a collector of antiques."

"You knew Mr. Stannard wouldn't part with the idol at any price, so you promised me two hundred pounds if I would steal it from him?"

"Yes, Jim, exactly."

"Why did you insist on my going to White Lodge looking like a Hindoo? Why did you rig me out like that, in native dress, and a false beard and moustache, and with my face and hands stained brown?"

"To lend an atmosphere of Oriental mystery to the affair, so as to divert suspicion from you and from me. That was the reason."

"There was no other reason?"

"No, Jim, there wasn't."

"There's one thing I don't understand," Jim Kerrigan continued. "There hasn't been any mention in the papers of the affair at White Lodge, so how did you know that the idol was stolen on Thursday night?"

"Mr. Nelson Lee, the detective, told me," Mark Judah answered. "I had a visit from him."

Jim Kerrigan stared.

"From Nelson Lee?" he said sharply. "Is he on the case?"

"Yes; he has been employed by Mr. Stannard."

"Why did he call on you?"

"To find out where I had bought the idol. That was all."

"I'm not so sure, Judah. I shouldn't wonder if Nelson Lee had his suspicions of you."

"I thought so myself at first, but I don't now. If the detective had suspected me he would have had me watched, but I am certain that I haven't been shadowed at any time. You needn't worry about Nelson Lee."

"I hope not. He's the one man I'm afraid of, and I don't mind admitting it."

There was a brief silence again. The curio dealer shuffled uneasily in his chair, and glanced around the bedchamber.

"And now for the idol," he said.

"You shall have it," Jim Kerrigan replied. "Not for two hundred pounds, though."

"How much more do you want? What is your price?"

"Two thousand pounds, Judah, instead of two hundred."

"Two—thousand—pounds! You're mad, Jim!"

Mark Judah was struck dumb. He drew a deep breath, and his eyes rolled wildly. He showed intense agitation, and Jim Kerrigan gazing at him closely, shrewdly observed that he had not named too high a figure.

"Where is it, then?" he asked.

"It is in a safe place. I hid it somewhere the night I stole it."

"On your way back from Bromley?"

"Yes, for fear I should be caught with it."

"Curse you for a cunning rogue!" he cried. "You've got the better of me!"

"I know I have," Jim Kerrigan cheerfully assented.

"But you'll get no two thousand pounds from me."

"I think I shall. You will pay rather then lose the idol. Consider the matter, and let me have your answer to-morrow. I will be at your place at two o'clock in the afternoon."

"I had better come here, hadn't I?"

"No I prefer to call at your office."

"It will be risky. Somebody might recognise you."

"There won't be any risk of that, Judah, for I shall be disguised."

Jim Kerrigan rose as he spoke, and Nipper, who had overheard all of the conversation, concluded that it was time for him to depar. He crept downstairs and out of the house, and walked rapidly towards Shepherd's Bush, thinking of the amazing things he had learned.

"Jim Kerrigan, the crook, known to the police as the Toff!" he said to himself. "He stole the idol and hid it somewhere, and Mark Judah is going to give him two thousand pounds for it. My word, won't the guv'nor be pleased!"

IV.

NELSON LEE LAYS A TRAP.

AT half-past one o'clock the next day Nelson Lee entered the curio dealer's shop in Wigmore Street, and, with a nod to the assistant behind the counter, he went straight through to the private office at the rear.

His appearance was an unpleasant surprise for Mark Judah. He did not betray any uneasiness at first, however. He rose from his desk, a word of greeting on his lips; and then, as he observed the detective's stern and cold countenance, he quailed, and sank heavily down again.

"How are you, Mr. Lee?" he said, in a husky voice. "Take a chair. You have some news for me, perhaps, about the queer business at White Lodge."

"Quite so," Nelson Lee replied. "Some interesting news. As a matter of fact, I have cleared up the mystery so far as relates to the theft of the idol."

"You have cleared it up?" asked Mark Judah. "You haven't made an arrest?"

"I have not, but Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, has. He took into custody yesterday, at the Kenilworth Hotel, in Ryder Street, a Hindoo of the name of Goudal. You were not aware of that, as there was no mention of it in the papers. The inspector blundered, however. The Hindoo is innocent."

"Then you know who the thief is, Mr. Lee?"

"I know who both of them are. There were two. One actually committed the robbery, and the other was, in legal language, an accessory after the fact. The two persons I refer to, Judah, are yourself and Jim Kerrigan, a crook commonly called the Toff."

Every trace of colour ebbed from Mark Judah's cheeks. He stiffened as if he had received an electric shock, and convulsively clutched the arms of his chair.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, don't say that!" he cried. "it isn't true! It is absurd! Something must have led you to suspect me, and—and you thought you could frighten me into making a confession! But you are wrong! I don't know the man you call Jim Kerrigan! I have never seen him! I have no knowledge of——"

"Don't lie, you rascal," Nelson Lee interrupted. "It is not a question of suspicion or deductions. I accuse you of complicity in the crime on the strength of positive information. When you left your shop last evening you were shadowed by my boy Nipper, who had been watching you."

"He followed you to Shepherd's Bush, and from there to the house where you had a stormy interview with your friend the crook. He listened outside of the door, and overheard all of the conversation that passed between you and Jim Kerrigan, not missing a word of it."

Mark Judah was a picture of guilt and terror now, ashen grey to the lips. He gasped for breath, and pressed his hand to his heart.

"So—so you know all!" he faltered.

"Yes, everything," Nelson Lee declared.

"Be merciful, sir! It was a strong temptation, and I couldn't help yielding to it. Don't arrest me! Don't send me to prison! Let me off, I beg of you!"

"I can't promise that, Judah. It may be to your advantage, though, if you make a clean breast of the affair."

"I will, Mr. Lee. I am willing to confess. I lied to you when you were here before. It was in the city of Lalapur, not in Bombay, that I bought the idol at a bazaar.

"And I did recently have a visit from two Hindoos. That was some few days ago. One gave the name Meerza, and the other was called Gondal. It was Meerza who did the speaking.

"It appeared, from his story, that he had come to this country to search for the idol, on which he set a high value. It belonged to him. It had been stolen from his palace in India, and he had traced it to the bazaar at Lalapur, and learned that an Englishman of my name had bought it.

"He related how he had found me in London, and, on hearing that I had sold the idol to a gentleman—I did not say who the person was—he offered to pay me five thousand pounds if I would recover it for him. I promised to do so, and told him I would communicate with him at the Kenilworth Hotel, in Ryder Street, where he was staying, in the course of a week.

"Knowing that Mr. Charles Stannard would not part with the idol at any price, I went to Jim Kerrigan the crook, with whom I had dealings in the past, and arranged with him to steal the thing for two hundred pounds.

"I sent him to White Lodge that night disguised as Gondal, the Hindoo who had been here with the man Meerza. My idea was to divert suspicion from both of us.

"But that scoundrel Kerrigan played me false. He did not bring the idol to me the day after the robbery, and when I called at his place last night he demanded two thousand pounds of me, instead of the two hundred we had agreed on."

Nelson Lee nodded. It was just as he had

suspected. The shrewd deductions he had made had been corroborated by the curio dealer's statements.

"I have told you the truth, sir," Mark Judah continued, in a whining tone. "Will you be merciful, and let me off?"

"I can't promise, as I said before," Lee replied. "We won't talk of that now. Jim Kerrigan is coming here at two o'clock this afternoon for your answer, I believe."

"Yes, sir, that's right. He won't have the idol with him, though."

"I know that. But I must overhear the interview. Where can I hide, Judah?"

"In that closet, Mr. Lee. It contains a lot of old rubbish, but there is space enough for you."

"Very well. Listen carefully to my instructions. You will consent to give Jim Kerrigan what he has demanded of you, and you will make an appointment with him, either here or elsewhere, for the delivery of the idol to you, and the payment of the money to him."

"I will do it, sir. You can rely on me."

Mark Judah rose.

"It is getting near to two o'clock," he added, as he glanced at his watch. "Kerrigan may be a bit early."

With that he opened the closet. Nelson Lee stepped inside, and when the curio dealer had shut the door he sat down again at his desk, his feelings now under control. And shortly afterwards there was a rap, and Jim Kerrigan walked into the office, disguised by a false moustache. Mark Judah nodded to him curtly, and pointed to a chair.

"So the thief has come for his ill-gotten gains," he remarked, with a scowl.

"None of that kind of talk," growled the crook, as he sat down. "I'm not in a mood for it."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you cur!" said Mark Judah, who was exulting in the thought that he was going to set a trap for his faithless accomplice.

"Why should I be? You tried to do me by lying about the value of the idol, and I was too sharp for you. But what of our business deal? Will you pay me the two thousand pounds?"

"Yes, you bloodsucker. I suppose I'll have to. Not until you hand over the idol, though."

"That will be all right. I'll get it to-morrow, and bring it here."

"At what time?"

"The same time as to-day. Two o'clock."

"Very well, Jim, that is understood. You give me the idol, and I'll pay you the money. I'll have it ready in bank-notes."

There was a pause. Jim Kerrigan was lighting a cigar. And now, as Nelson Lee was shifting his position, he unfortunately brushed his leg against a broken statuette, and it toppled over with a dull thud. At once Mark Judah and the crook leaped to their feet.

"It's a trap, you dirty hound!" Jim Kerrigan cried with an oath. "There is somebody hidden in the room!"

With that, letting fly with his fists, he dealt the curio dealer a smashing blow that sent him reeling to the wall. As quickly he wheeled round, and darted from the office, and the next instant Nelson Lee burst from the closet.

The crook had slammed shut the communicating door between the two rooms, and he had dashed through the shop and out to Wigmore Street, to the stupefaction of the assistant, by the time the detective had got the door open.

Having reached the street, and glanced to right and left, Lee turned into Christopher Place, and saw Jim Kerrigan running a dozen yards and more ahead of him.

"Stop thief!" he shouted loudly. "Stop thief!"

There were only two or three people in the narrow thoroughfare, and they did not interfere with the fugitive. Kerrigan tore on as fast as he could, gaining on his pursuer, and he had disappeared in the crowd that thronged the pavement when the detective emerged from the passage into Oxford Street.

Nothing could be seen of him. Nelson Lee looked in all directions, keenly disappointed by his failure to catch the man; and as he was standing at the edge of the pavement, depressed by the thought that he had lost the opportunity of recovering the stolen idol, a shrewd and cheering inspiration flashed to his mind.

He pondered it for a moment, and walked rapidly towards Oxford Circus, seeking for a cab.

"By Jove, I am strongly inclined to think I am right!" he said to himself. "It is what I should have done with the idol if I had been in Jim Kerrigan's place that night. I'll go home and get Nipper, and then we'll drive down to Scotland Yard in my car, and pick up Inspector Lennard."

V.

THE PURSUIT THROUGH THE WOODS.

NELSON LEE and Nipper arrived at Scotland Yard in their car at a little past three o'clock that afternoon, and were delayed there by the absence of Inspector Lennard.

They waited for more than an hour before he returned, and it was between four and five o'clock when they set off on their errand, accompanied by the inspector, to whom Lee had meanwhile briefly related the true story of the theft of the idol, and had spoken of the suspicion that had occurred to him.

They crossed Westminster Bridge, and ran quickly to the Elephant and Castle; and from there, in threading the main highways of South London, they were compelled to go slowly at intervals, and were frequently

held up by the traffic, until they had got to Lewisham.

At rapid and steady speed they drove on to Catford, and from Catford to Bromley, and thence for several miles along a country road.

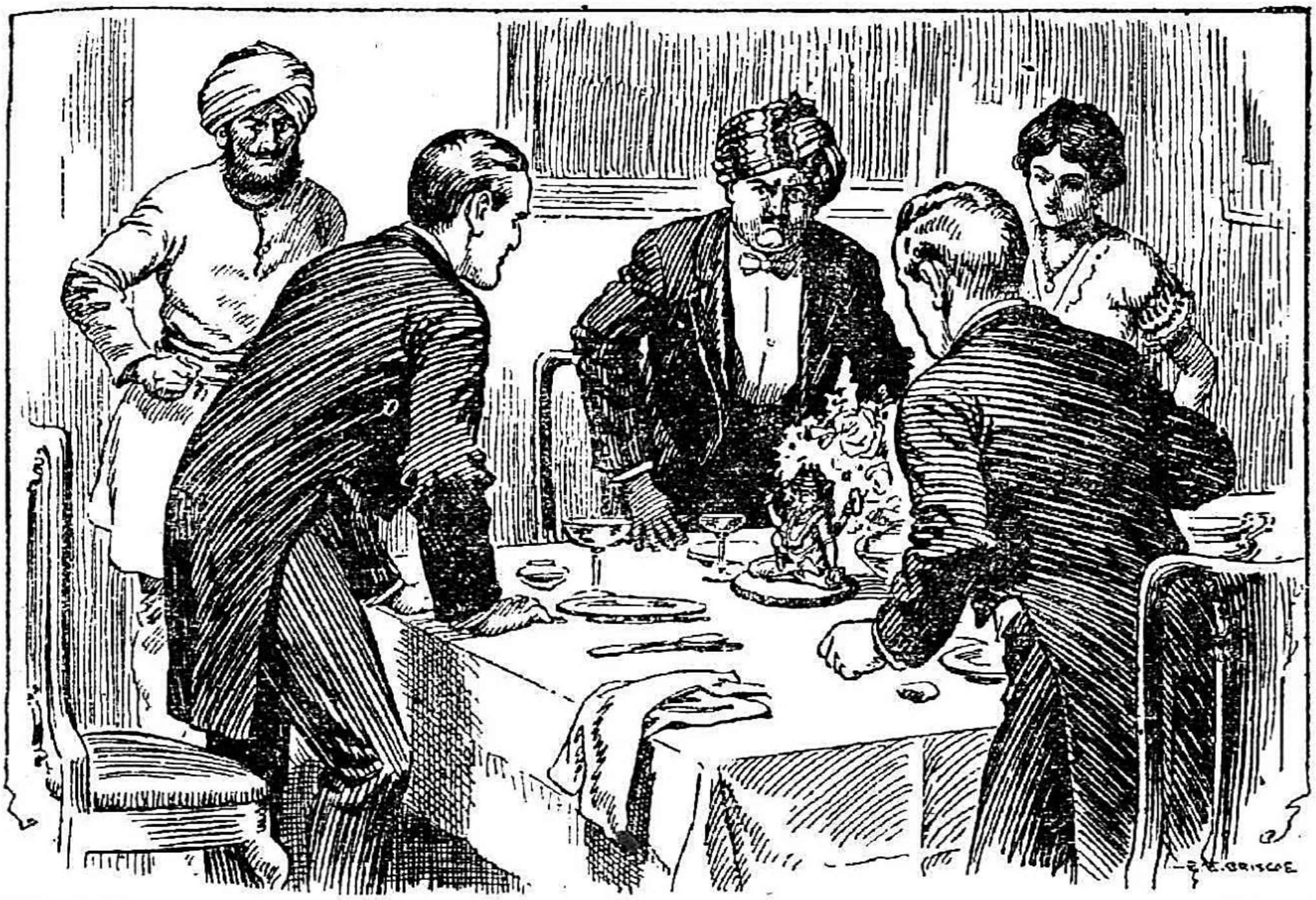
And when at length they stopped they were within less than a mile of White Lodge, the residence of Mr. Charles Stannard; and, as nearly as the detective could judge, close to the spot where he and Nipper had emerged from the wood on the morning after

on this particular spot you have described?"

"Because I should have thought of it on reaching the bridge, I imagine," Nelson Lee replied, "if I had been the thief, and wanted to get rid of what I had stolen."

"So should I, guv'nor," said the lad.

"Well, Lee, you may be right," Inspector Lennard continued. "There is a chance of it. But if you are right perhaps Jim Kerrigan came down here at once after he escaped from Judah's shop in Wigmore



The outer case was removed and disclosed to view a slightly smaller image of Brahma made of ebony with a large rare jewel on the forehead.

the robbery, when they had followed the trail of the man who had stolen the idol.

"Here we are," he said. "I would like to have a talk with Mr. Stannard, but I will postpone that until another day."

The weather was cloudy, with a touch of frost in the air. It was drawing towards evening, and the sun was partly below the horizon. Leaving the car by the side of the road, Lee and his companions entered a plantation on the left, and made their way through it, groping in purple shadows amongst the trees and shrubbery.

"It is a pretty far fetched theory of yours, Lee; it strikes me," the inspector remarked. "The idol may be concealed in London, or somewhere in the woods between here and Bromley. Why did you hit

Street. He may have got ahead of us. He would have had time for that."

"I doubt it," Nelson Lee answered. "At all events, Kerrigan would have waited until night before attempting to——"

"Hark!" Nipper interrupted, as a faint splashing noise was heard. "What's that?"

They were almost at the end of the plantation now. They hurried on, treading softly, and a few seconds later they broke from the trees on to the open meadow through which the stream flowed.

There it was close in front of them, sparkling in the sunset glow; and a short distance to the left was the footbridge that spanned it, just above the deep pool.

"By Jove, look!" the inspector whispered eagerly.

"I was right!" Nelson Lee declared. "I told you I was!"

On the near side of the bridge and below it, still disguised by a false moustache, was Jim Kerrigan. He was standing at the brink of the stream, by the pool, hauling on a stout cord, to which a hook was doubtless attached.

He had no more than been observed when he drew from the water a small sack that contained some bulky object, and the next instant, as he turned to look behind him, he saw the three figures that had emerged from the woods.

A startled oath burst from his lips. Tearing the cord from the sack, he threw the latter over his shoulder, and took to his heels. And after him went Nelson Lee and his companions, the detective in the lead.

"I'm afraid we'll lose him, guv'nor," said Nipper.

"Don't worry," Lee replied. "He can't get away from us, hard as he may try."

The crook, who had a start of about thirty yards, held straight down the open meadow at first. He glanced back now and again, perceiving that Lee and the others were rapidly gaining on him; and presently, in desperation, he paused and swung round, nipped a revolver out, and fired several shots, all of which missed.

Then, swerving aside, he dashed to the plantation, and plunged into it. His pursuers were not far in the rear of him. They had glimpses of him running, and heard his floundering tread amongst the fern and bracken, and the tangled thickset.

He was still well ahead of them, though they had increased their speed. They ran faster, but when at length they burst from the cover, at the edge of the road, they were struck with consternation by what they saw. Jim Kerrigan mounted a bicycle which he must have concealed in the woods, and was already in flight on it, within a dozen yards or so to the left.

"There he goes!" exclaimed the inspector. "Confound the luck!"

"We've lost him!" cried Nipper. "He'll have disappeared in some side road before we can overtake him in the car! If we only had it here, guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee had pulled a revolver from his pocket. He levelled it and fired, aiming low. Crack! The first shot missed the mark. Crack! The second report of the weapon was followed by a dull explosion.

The back tyre of the bicycle had been punctured. The crook skidded, wobbled, and fell with a crash.

And by the time the crook had scrambled to his feet, shaken and bruised by the fall, the three pursuers were upon him.

His frenzied efforts to escape were of no avail. A brief struggle and he was helpless, his wrists locked in fetters. He swore savagely, and his eyes flamed with rage.

"I'll be even with you one of these days, Mr. Nelson Lee!" he snarled.

Lee smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

Taking up the sack from the ground, he took from it first a large stone with which it had been weighted, and then the grotesque little idol. He scrutinised it with keen curiosity, and replaced it in the sack.

"Come along," he said, "You and Nipper fetch the prisoner, Lennard. Our car is within two or three hundred yards, round that bend yonder," he added.

VI.

THE FLAMING GOD.

THE police went that night to the private residence of Mr. Mark Judah, with the intention of arresting him; but they found that he had fled, leaving a note in which he stated that he had gone abroad, and that it would be useless to have him sought for.

The next morning the innocent man Gondal was set free, with apologies from Inspector Lennard; and in the course of the day Nelson Lee motored down to White Lodge to see Mr. Charles Stannard, who, on being informed of the circumstances, readily consented to part with the idol for the sum he had paid for it.

Lee kept it in his possession, and on the evening of the following day, he entertained at dinner, at his chambers in the Gray's Inn Road, the Rajah Thakur Sind, his faithful retainer Gondal, and his daughter, the Princess Lativa.

Nelson Lee related the whole story to his guests, telling why Mark Judah had employed Jim Kerrigan the crook to commit the robbery, and how the guilt of the two rogues had been discovered; and at the conclusion of his narrative, the party having finished dinner, he brought the small image of Brahma from a cabinet, and put it on the table before the raja, who rose to his feet.

Amid hushed silence he picked up the idol, and, having pressed a secret spring at the bottom of it, he lifted out the outer case of painted wood, and disclosed to view what it had concealed—a slightly smaller image of Brahma, made of ebony, with a large and rare jewel set in its forehead; a beautiful stone that was of flame-colour, and glowed and flittered and sparkled in various shades of orange. Nelson Lee and the lad stared at it in admiration and bewilderment.

"My word, how wonderful!" exclaimed Nipper.

"It is magnificent," he declared. "I have never seen such a jewel before. What is it called?"

"It has no name," Thakur Sind replied. "There is not another one like it in the world, to the best of my knowledge."

He held the idol up, so that it would catch the light; and then, replacing the outer shell on it, he sat down again.

"And now I will tell you, as far as I can," he continued, addressing Lee, "the history of this treasure, which I value so highly.

(*Continued on page* 40.)

(*Continued from page* 38.)

"It is called the flaming god, and it has been in the possession of my family for centuries.

"According to an old legend a holy fakir, who had hospitality for the night at the palace of one of my ancestors, left the idol there as a gift on departing in the morning, and with it some writing to the effect that it had the power of bestowing happiness and long life and prosperity. And so indeed it proved.

"Through many generations of my race the flaming god has been present on the occasion of a birth or a wedding, and always that which the fakir depicted was verified. The idol came into my possession when I succeeded to my father, who has been dead for a number of years; and in the spring of this year I set forth with my daughter Lativa to travel in the North of India, where we visited friends of our own rank.

"We stayed for a time at the palace of Nanghar, the young Nawab of Kutch, and while we were there my daughter was engaged to him. We were absent for three months, and when we returned home I was told by my faithful Gondal that one of my servants, Durga Nath by name, had mysteriously disappeared weeks before, and that he had been killed by robbers on the outskirts of the city of Lalapur.

"It was a strange tale, and it roused my suspicions. I went to the locked chest in which I had kept the precious idol, and to my dismay it was gone. I was in great distress, and so was my daughter, who was looking forward to her marriage. Thinking that the murderers might have disposed of the flaming god in Lalapur, I sent Gondal there with a party of troopers to make inquiries, and several days later he brought back news which was better than I had expected to hear.

"He had learned, with the help of the English police at Lalapur, that the idol had been sold to Romesh Ali, a merchant with a shop in one of the bazaars of the city; and that shortly afterwards Romesh Ali had sold it to an Englishman of the name of Judah who had stayed for a time at a hotel in Lalapur, and was a resident of London.

"It was a long journey to this country, but I did not hesitate, so anxious was I to recover the lost treasure.

"Accompanied by Gondal and my daughter, I crossed the ocean, and came to London, where I had been before. We sought for the man Judah, and we found him. Meanwhile, however, he had sold the flaming god to a customer.

"I offered him five thousand pounds if he would recover it for me, and he promised that he would do so, and would send word to me. Such is the story, sahib, apart from that which you learned yourself, and what you have related to me this evening concerning the wickedness of the man Judah and the arrest of the thief.

"That I did not accept your offer of assistance on the day when Gondal was arrested, was because I suspected that it was the wicked dealer in curios, disguised as my faithful retainer, who had stolen the idol from the house in the country.

"I wished to first get proof of his guilt, and therefore, believing that the idol was in his possession, I had my daughter break into his shop to search for it. This was a foolish and evil thing, I will admit. It would have been better if I had confided in you, and told you everything, as I now realise."

The raja paused, and impulsively clasped Nelson Lee's hand.

"You are the wisest and the most clever of men," he said, his voice tremulous with emotion. "I do not know how to thank you. It is a great service you have done for us. Through you the shadow of misfortune, the dread we have felt in looking forward to the future, have passed away.

"As is the ancient custom, the flaming god will shed its golden rays at the wedding feast of my daughter and her lover Nanghar, and will bring happiness and prosperity and long life to the young couple. Never while we live, sahib, will either of us forget the debt of gratitude we owe to you."

THE END.

EDITORIAL ANNOUNCEMENT.

MY DEAR READERS,

"THE DEMON WITHIN HIM," announced on another page as next week's coming attraction, is, in my opinion, the best story I have read for a long time. You may be sure that you can expect something particularly good when next Wednesday comes round.

OUR FIRST PROBLEM STORY COMPETITION.

In this next number I hope to publish the names of the prize-winners in our first Problem Story Competition. I have still quite a number of theories to read, everyone of which is receiving my closest attention. I am gratified to find so much interest taken in this competition by my readers, and heartily wish I could award everyone who entered a prize.

A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

Now for the pleasant surprise I promised to tell you about last week. Beginning with the December 9th issue, I am GIVING AWAY the first of a MAGNIFICENT SERIES OF REAL PHOTO PLATES of Modern British Locomotives. These photos are the best I have ever seen of railway locomotives, and if any of my chums fails to obtain the whole of this splendid series, he must not blame me for not warning him in time.

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

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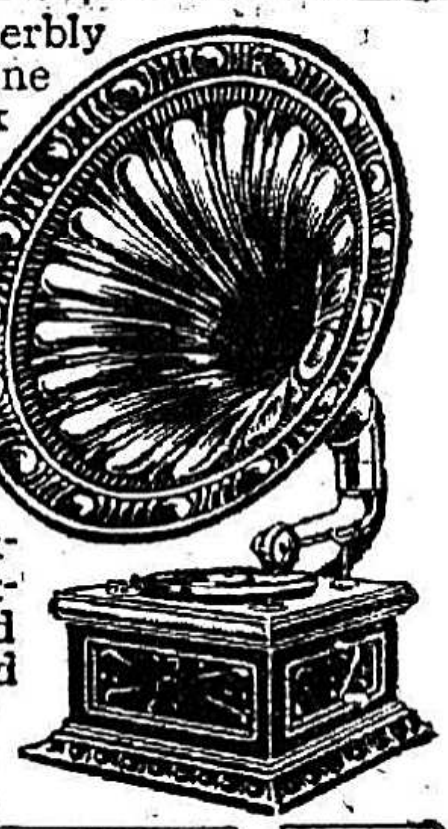

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