THE LADS IN LANCASHIRE! This Week's Great Story of ST. FRANK'S on Tour!

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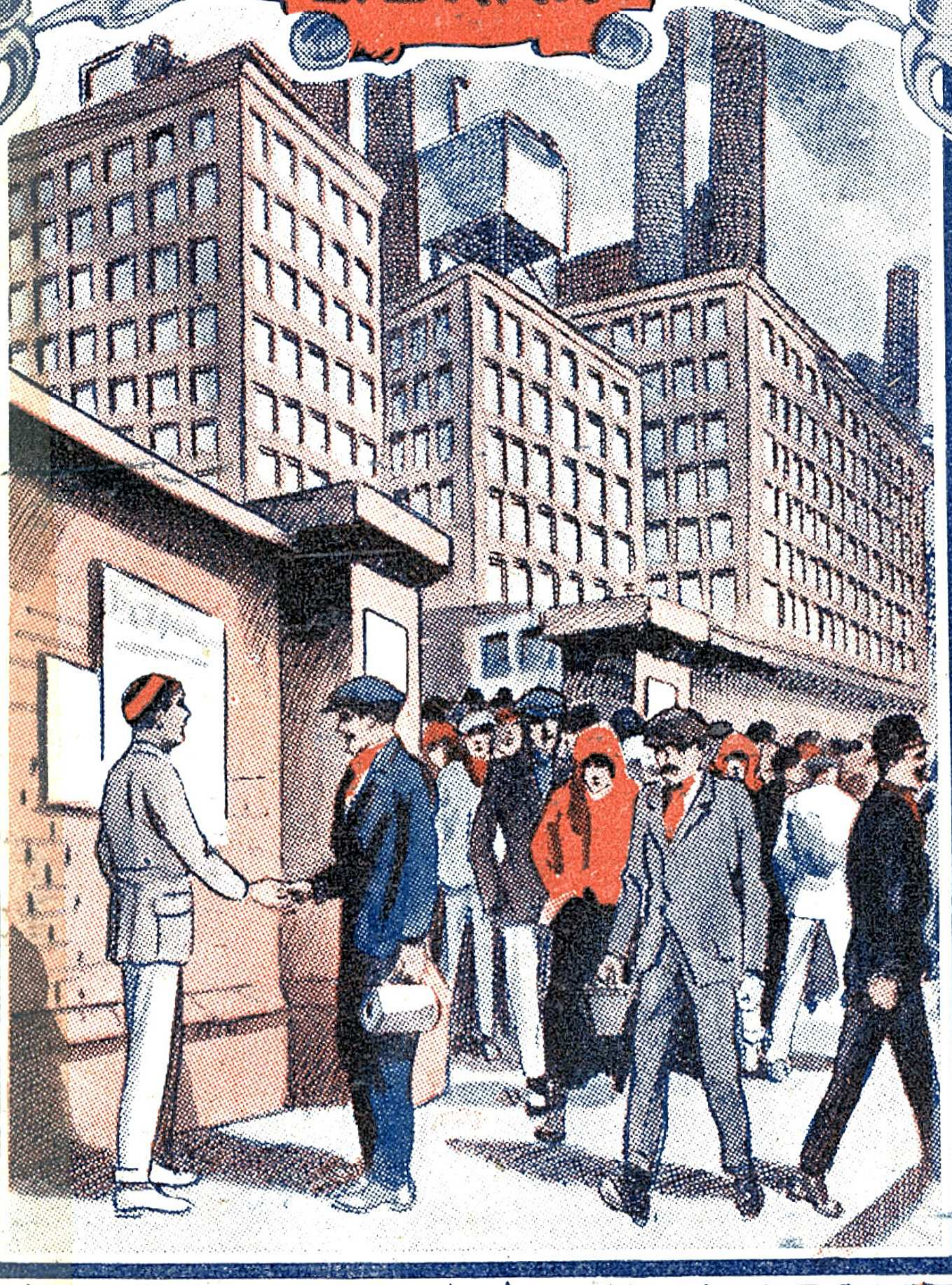


No. 422. EVERY WEDNESDAY JULY 7, 1923.

Whack! Whack! Whack!
"Yoo-hoo-yah!" shrieked Fullwood, as the broomstick descended again and again over his shoulders.

The Lads In Lancashire!

The Narrative Related Throughout by Nipper.

The Travelling School, consisting of the well-known Remove Juniors of St. Frank's, is Nelson Lee's innovation, arising out of the hospitality of the famous school in giving shelter to the boys of a neighbouring school whose buildings had been destroyed by fire.

It was to give more room for the schoolboy refugees that the Remove, under the direction of Nelson Lee, started out in motor caravans to tour England and Wales. The experiment has proved a huge success. The juniors are learning more than they ever knew before about their own country by seeing for themselves what would otherwise be dry facts contained in text books. Besides, they are enjoying themselves immensely, and are in splendid health and vigour.

Last week they were in Wales, and in this story they arrive in the North of England. The author here gives us a delightful impression of the busy manufacturing centres of Lancashire. The story is never dry, it never flags, but rolls on, an intensely human interest underlying the succession of breezy incidents.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER 1

IN COTTON LAND!

ARCHIE GLENTHORPE adjusted his monocle, and gazed round wonderingly.

"Well, dear old chappies, between you and me and these dashed thingummy-jigs, it's all bally marvellous! I mean to say, cotton whizzing here and whizzing there, and all sorts of frightful machinery humming like anything!"

Reggie Pitt grinned.

"Yes, it is a bit terrific, when you see it for the first time," he replied. "I expect these people who work here—the mill-hands themselves—think nothing of it at all. Familiarity breeds contempt, you know. After seeing this kind of thing every day of one's life, it becomes just ordinary."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "At the same time, old fruit, you must admit that it's all dashed amazing. I mean, all this whizzing stuff! I'm not absolutely sure whether I'm on my head or my heels!"

Archie Glenthorne and Reginald Pitt were

not the only St. Frank's juniors who were being shown over the cotton mill. There were quite a number of us there—a big party of Remove fellows from the Travelling School.

It was a half-holiday, and Nelson Lee had arranged with the manager of this particular mill for us to be shown over the entire plant, so that we could gain an inside knowledge of the whole bag of tricks, as Handforth put it.

We were being escorted by the elderly foreman, a genial soul with a broad Lancashire accent, who took a keen pleasure in explaining everything in detail. And we were thoroughly enjoying ourselves.

We had been in Lancashire two or three days.

Our camp, consisting of several huge motor-caravans, was pitched just outside the industrial town of Oldham, in the very heart of the cotton-mill country. We had been all over Manchester and the surrounding districts already.

And those fellows who had not visited these parts before were greatly struck by the wonderful towns—the industry that was ceaselessly going on—the thousand-and-one factories that were working at full steam. It was all fascinating.

Not until one has visited the great industrial centres of England does one realise the might and wealth of our tight little island. Such a visit is, indeed, an eye-opener for the average stay-at-home individual.

And now, as we were being shown through this vast cotton mill, we were enthralled by all we saw. It was wonderful to watch the great looms at work—to see the cotton in its various processes.

And we were interested in the workpeople, too. Ever since we had been in Lancashire we had met with nothing but kindliness and good cheer. We were beginning to like the North Country more and more.

It cannot be truthfully said that Oldham and Manchester and district is famous for its picturesque beauty. They are not the places where one can admire the scenery. It is a vast country of work—constant, never-ending labour, with enormous factory chimneys raising their smoky summits up to the heavens.

How extremely different from Wales!

We had just come from the Welsh hills and glorious scenery, and the contrast was all the more striking to us. But, at the same time, we were more thrilled by this busy life than by the loveliness of the Welsh landscapes. There is something about Lancashire that grips hold of one.

"Of course, it's not so bad, taking it altogether," admitted Handforth, as he looked round one of the biggest workshops. "These chaps seem to have an easy time, you know—especially the shop workers. All they've got to do all day is to look at these giddy machines and see that they don't go wrong!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's more in it than that, Handy," I chuckled. "All these men are skilled at their work—even the boys are wonderfully trained. We couldn't work in this mill until we'd had months and months of practice."

"Fathead!" said Handforth. "There's nothing in it."

He looked round, and saw that our guide had left us for a few moments, to talk with somebody at the end of the shop. We were all interested in the whirling machinery around us.

"What about the shop stewards?" went on Handforth, frowning. "I can't see any! We're always reading in the paper about shop stewards, but I believe it's just bluff! There isn't one in sight!"

"How do you know?" asked Pitt. "Shop stewards aren't labelled, you ass!"

Handforth regarded him pityingly.

"Do you think I don't know a steward when I see one?" he asked. "Everybody knows that stewards wear uniform! Besides, they go about carrying trays, and probably have a serviette——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared, and Handforth glared.

"What's the cackle for?" he demanded sourly. "I suppose you think I'm wrong? Well, I'm not! And, talking about shop stewards, I think it's a bit of a nerve that these factory hands should have stewards at all! The place isn't a ship! And why can't they get their refreshments outside?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!" I chuckled. "He always takes everything literally! He even thinks that a shop's steward is the same as a ship's' steward!"

"Well, what's the difference?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Oh, nothing much—except that a shop steward is merely one of the ordinary workpeople," I replied. "He's the men's representative in any dispute; he looks after the interests of the others."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "But we won't go into any argument—we'll drop the subject altogether."

"It's far safer!" grinned Pitt.

"As for all this cotton—I can't see what all the fuss is about," continued Handforth. "After all, what is cotton? Cotton is stuff they shove on reels, and they pull it to pieces, and make cotton-wool out of it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cotton is made from flax!" continued Handforth, with the air of an expert. "Everybody knows that! The flax grows over in Africa, and it's brought over here in ships, and they unload the reels——"

"Steady on, old man!" whispered Church, tugging at Handforth's sleeve.

"Eh?"

"Ease up, you ass—you're all wrong!" murmured Church.

This was a very risky proceeding on his part, and he knew it. But it was most embarrassing to hear Handforth airing his ignorance so openly. What Handforth knew

about cotton could have been written on a postage-stamp with a blue pencil.

"I'm wrong, am I?" snorted Handforth. "All right—take that!"

Biff!

"Yaroooh!"howled Church wildly.

"I'll show you whether I'm wrong!" snapped Handforth. "If cotton isn't made from flax, what is it made from?"

"Cotton!" grinned Bob Christine.

"Eh?"

"Cotton is just cotton," proceeded Bob. "Flax is the stuff they make linen from. And they grow the flax in Ireland——"

"You—you ignorant ass!" sneered Handforth. "Ireland! Everybody knows that they only grow potatoes in Ireland! And just at present they're growing nothing but revolutionaries! If we had to rely on Ireland for our bed-sheets we should be in a poor way! We should have to sleep in blankets!"

"We could get plenty of cotton sheets, you fathead!" said Pitt.

"What's the difference between cotton sheets and linen sheets?" demanded Handforth. "Nothing—at least, nothing except the price! I'm blessed if I can see any real difference!"

"I don't think it'll be advisable to discuss bed linen at the moment—or bed cotton either!" grinned Bob Christine. "Let's continue our inspection. I'm more interested in the machines than I am in Handforth."

Dick Goodwin, who was with the party, was flushed with pleasure.

"Come on, lads!" he said briskly. "We've got to see a lot more yet. And how do you like the cotton mills? Ay, but they're champion!"

"You bet they are!" said Pitt. "Not that I expected you to say anything else, old son. You were born in this part of the country."

"And proud of it, too," said Dick Goodwin promptly.

He was the Lancashire lad at St. Frank's, and he took a tremendous pride in describing everything to us. The interior of a cotton mill was nothing new to Dick. As a kid he had frequently been in and out of them.

We were just moving on into the next workshop when one of the mill-boys came bustling briskly past, regarding us with amused curiosity as he did so. He was rather smaller than the average size—they seem to run fairly short in Lancashire—but he was well built and sturdy.

And he was just about to pass by when Dick Goodwin clutched at his sleeve.

"Why, it's Mark!" he exclaimed.

The mill-boy opened his eyes wider.

"Ay, Mark's my name all reet," he said. "Sithee, lad, I seem to know your face, somehow—— Ay, if it isn't Dick Goodwin! I haven't seen thee for years, Dick. Ay, but it's champion to meet thee again, lad!"

Dick Goodwin himself was wringing the other boy's hand.

"Mark Finch!" he ejaculated. "The last time I saw you was over in Hollinwood, and we were both about ten years old, then. It's fine to see you like this, Mark! We shall have to have a long talk——"

"I'd like it, Dick, but I can't stay," interrupted the other. "I'll have the foreman after me if I don't hustle. But I'd like a talk reet enough. Maybe we can meet somewhere——"

"When do you knock off work?" interrupted Dick.

"In about another hour."

"Good! I'll wait for you outside," said Goodwin. "By the way, I expect you're wondering what we're doing in the mill?"

"I'm real puzzled," replied Mark.

"You see, we're on tour—just at present—all the Remove," explained Dick Goodwin. "We've got our camp just outside Oldham. Ay, I'll tell you what, lad! After you've changed your clothes I'll take you out to the camp, and you can have a look round. You'll be interested."

"That'll be champion!" said the mill-boy, his eyes gleaming.

A few moments later he was compelled to hurry off, and Dick Goodwin joined the rest of the St. Frank's group. Dick was feeling all the better for this unexpected meeting.

He and Mark had been playmates between the ages of eight and ten. Since then they had scarcely seen anything of one another. And now that they were fifteen they seemed quite grown up by comparison.

Little did Dick Goodwin realise what that meeting was to lead to!

CHAPTER II.

THE MILL-BOY'S HOME.

DICK GOODWIN touched me on the arm.

"Just a minute, Nipper!" he said. "I'm not coming back with you fellows."

We were outside the mill, and were preparing to leave for camp. An electric tramcar would take us to the outskirts of Oldham, and then a short walk would lead us to the little square of grassland where our camp was pitched.

"Not coming back?" I repeated. "Oh, I expect you're going to wait for that chap you spoke to in the mill?"

"Yes," said Dick awkwardly.

"Friend of yours?"

"Ay, in a way," replied Dick, flushing. "Maybe you fellows don't quite like it. I mean, he's only a mill-boy——"

"My dear ass, don't talk rot!" I interrupted. "The fact that he is a mill-boy is nothing against him; this is a democratic country nowadays, and class prejudices are dying down. Thank goodness we're not a lot of snobs! That friend of yours is probably just as good as any of the rest of us."

"That's fine!" said Dick. "I wish they were all like you, Nipper."

"Plenty of them are."

"I was wondering if the chaps would object if I brought Mark along to the camp during the evening," continued Dick. "Of course, Fullwood and his crowd won't like it; but they're of no account, anyhow."

"Bring your friend, and we'll welcome him," I said cordially. "Don't worry about that, old son."

"Ay, that'll be gradely," said Dick. "You're a brick, lad!"

I grinned, and joined the others, leaving Dick Goodwin to walk up and down the pavement outside the blackened walls of the great mill. The street was not a particularly glorious one—in fact, it was grubby and grimy.

But to Dick Goodwin it seemed almost beautiful.

This was where he had been born—at least, in this district. And as a kiddie he had often played about these very streets. He waited impatiently until the time should come when the great gates would open and the workers would come flocking out in their thousands, until the narrow streets were black with them.

Dick was particularly pleased because he had met an old chum. He had found many new friends at St. Frank's, but there was something fine about seeing Mark Finch again.

Mark would be able to tell him all the news—he would learn about many people he had lost sight of. And Dick Goodwin pictured Mark's cosy little home, probably situated somewhere on the outskirts. There was Mark's mother, a kindly, but ailing woman, who spent most of her time looking after her husband.

Mark had no sisters, but a brother several years older than himself. Dick was curious to know how all the family was getting on. He himself was high above them in station, but this made no difference.

At last the noisy hooters sounded on all sides.

And soon afterwards the workers commenced to pour out. Dick Goodwin stood there, just in a little backwater, keeping his eyes keenly on the moving, jostling throng.

And when he had almost begun to give up hope, he caught sight of the sturdy figure he was awaiting. Mark Finch had just come out, carrying a little handbag—in which, presumably, he conveyed his dinner to the mill.

"I thought you'd gone, Dick," he exclaimed, as he came up. "It was fine of you to wait for me like this. Sithee, lad, we'll get reet across t' street, and take one of the cars."

"All right—you know the way best," said Dick.

There was very little opportunity for talking while they were in the tramcar, for it was filled to suffocation. And after a fairly longish ride the pair got out, and proceeded to walk done one of the quieter streets.

There were shops on either side, and this district was of a much better class than the one they had left. And, Dick noted, it was much nearer to the St. Frank's camp than the mill itself. All the better.

"I didn't think your people lived in this direction," remarked Dick, as they walked along the quiet street. I seem to recollect that your home used to be on the other side——"

"There's been some big changes since thou were here, Dick, lad," interrupted the mill-boy quietly. "But wait until we get indoors. I'll tell thee all about it then. My place is only just up t' road."

They presently came to a small row of cottages, set back slightly from the pavement, with tiny gardens in front. Dick turned into one of these, in the wake of Mark Finch.

The mill-boy did not knock, but walked straight in, and made his way upstairs to a small room at the back, on the first floor. He closed the door behind him. Dick was rather surprised.

He had hardly expected to be taken straight upstairs in this way.

"Make thyself at home, Dick," said Mark. "'Tisn't much of a place, but everything's fairly comfortable. And Mrs. Blaker, who looks after me, is a rare champion."

Dick stared.

"Mrs. Blaker, who looks after you?" he repeated. "Then you're not living at home any more?"

"This is the only home I've got, lad."

"But what about your father——"

"Ay, but the old dad died a year ago!" replied Mark. "He was taken bad with influenza, when we had the wave here. 'Twas a big shock for me, Dick. We never expected that dad would go like that."

"I'm sorry," said Dick quietly. "I—I didn't know that things were as bad as that. I don't quite like to question you, old man. Your mother——"

Mark smiled, rather sadly.

"Ay, but it may seem strange to you, but five years is a long time!" he said. "Mother was never very strong. Dick, she died when I was only twelve. That was three years ago, and the hurt isn't quite so bad as it was."

Dick Goodwin was all concern.

"I say, you have been having a rough time!" he exclaimed. "Then—then you've got nobody at all, except your brother? What about Harry? He was quite a big chap—— Why, what's the matter, Mark? Ay, lad, don't look like that!"

Mark Finch had turned rather pale, and his face was set.

"I don't suppose it matters," he said bitterly. "If I don't tell thee, I suppose you'll find out in some other way—and that'll be worse. But Harry—well, Harry got into trouble."

"Trouble?" repeated Dick. "Not—not with the police?"

"Ay!"

"Great Scott!" said Dick, aghast.

"'Twas when I was over in Blackpool, three weeks ago," went on Mark. "Something to do with one of these post-office hold-ups. There's been many of the like this year. Seems that England isn't what it used to be, Dick."

"But—but your brother!" ejaculated Dick. "You can't mean to tell me that Harry took part in a post-office hold-up? Why, he was always one of the best, and everybody liked him."

Mark nodded.

"When you were here, Harry was only sixteen," he replied. "During the last two or three years he got into a lot of rotten company. Fellows who don't do no work, and spend their time betting. Ay, but it makes my blood boil when I think of it! A reet good chap like Harry, too!"

"He was arrested?" inquired Dick slowly.

"Ay!"

"And convicted?"

"Trial's coming on this week," said Mark. "But there's no question about it. Dick—Harry was caught red-handed with two others. Ay, I wish I'd been here—in Owdham! But I was in Blackpool."

"Yes, that's what you told me just now," said Dick. "It must have been a fearful shock for you to come home from a holiday and find your brother in the hands of the police. I'm sorry, Mark—I wish I could do something to help."

"Ay, but you needn't take it to heart," said the mill-boy, with a smile. "I'm getting used to it by now. I'm doing well—before long I shall get a rise, I think. It's hard work that tells, Dick, lad. Loafing about don't get a chap anywhere. Well, I'll change, and make myself look spry."

"That's the idea," said Dick Goodwin.

He sat there, very thoughtful, as Mark set about washing, and preparing to change his clothes. It occurred to Dick that there might be a bit of a fuss amongst the Remove fellows if they got to know that this boy was the brother of the man who was even now awaiting trial for violent robbery.

It seemed that Mark was capable of reading Dick's thoughts, for he suddenly paused.

"Maybe I'd better not come," he said slowly.

"Eh?" said Dick. "Why, what's the matter?"

"Those boys at the camp are all rich—all the sons of gentry folk," replied Mark. "Maybe they'll get to know about Harry. It wouldn't be nice for thee, lad. I don't think I'd better——"

"Oh, rot!" interrupted Dick, flushing. "Don't be an ass! If any of the fellows say a word against you, I'll knock them down! You can't be responsible for what your brother does. And you're my chum—and that's enough. Why, Nipper told me that all the chaps would give you a great welcome."

"Ay, but those chaps seem to be real champions!" exclaimed Mark, with pleasure.

And he continued with his washing.

In less than fifteen minutes he was ready, and the pair sallied out into the street once more. The evening was dull, but no rain was falling. Some of the St. Frank's fellows facetiously declared that this was miraculous—since they had heard that it was always raining in Manchester and district.

But that tale about Manchester rain is something like the tale of the London fog. There's more fiction than truth in it. They do have plenty of rain up there, but there are many spells of fine weather, too.

Dick Goodwin uttered an exclamation as he turned out of the little quiet street into the main thoroughfare. Mark was by his side, and Mark was looking very smart and neat in a well-cut tweed suit.

"My hat!" muttered Dick, biting his lip.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing—only those chaps across the road," said Goodwin. "They're three of our crowd—but I'm not going to introduce you. They're snobs to the backbone—cads and rotters."

Dick was by no means pleased to see Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell on the other side of the street. The three Nuts of the Ancient House had come out for a walk in the town, never expecting to see Dick Goodwin in the company of a native.

Dick turned his back on Fullwood & Co., and led Mark in the opposite direction. And presently they came to a stop, and waited for a car. Glancing down the road, Dick could see Fullwood and his chums still there.

And Fullwood was now talking with a shabby man on the street corner.

"Oh, the cad—the beast!" muttered Dick, to himself.

For, instinctively, he guessed what Fullwood was doing. He was making inquiries about Mark—and, in all probability, he would learn something of the truth. It was extremely unfortunate.

CHAPTER III.

FULLWOOD GETS HIS DESERTS.

DICK GOODWIN was right.

His guess was absolutely accurate. For Ralph Leslie Fullwood was questioning the shabby man on the street corner regarding Dick's companion.

"Oh, him?" said the shabby man. "That'll be young Mark Finch. Lives down this road—a quiet, respectable lad."

"Oh!" said Fullwood, disappointed. "Quiet and respectable, eh? He doesn't look

very respectable to me. A low, common bounder, I should say. One of these beastly mill-workers!"

The shabby man frowned.

"And what's wrong with the mill-workers?" he asked. "Sithee here, my lad, thou'rt a bit too free with those remarks!"

"Oh, rats!" said Fullwood. "We're not Lancashire chaps, thank goodness! As for that Mark Finch, he seems to be a rotter to me. Anyhow, there's no question about him being common. I'll bet he's got some relatives in chokey!"

The shabby man nodded.

"Thou'rt reet there, lad," he said. "Ay, but it's hard for young Mark!"

"I'm right!" said Fullwood eagerly. "Do you mean to say that he really has got some relatives in prison?"

"Ay, Mark's brother is in the hands of the police now!"

And the man proceeded to give Fullwood a long account of the post-office raid, and the result. Fullwood & Co. listened with tremendous interest. This was sweet news to them.

And when they left the man at the street corner, their eyes were gleaming.

"By gad!" exclaimed Fullwood. "There's goin' to be a fuss about this, I can tell you. I wonder what the chaps will say when we tell them that Dick Goodwin has been pallin' up with the brother of a rotten gaol-bird?"

"He'll be barred, I should think," said Bell.

"Sent to Coventry!" declared Gulliver. "My hat! We'll show him up! And as for that Finch chap, we'd better warn him that if he——"

"We won't do anythin' of the kind," interrupted Fullwood. "If Dick Goodwin likes to hobnob with him, it only shows what a low-bred cad he is! And we'll show him up in his true colours."

"Rather!"

Fullwood & Co. were not aware of the fact that Dick Goodwin and Mark Finch were still within sight. The tram-car had been so long in coming that they had decided to enter a near-by confectioner's, and there they had regaled themselves upon ice-cream.

They were just emerging now, feeling cool and cheerful.

Fullwood & Co. were some little way down the road, and it was at this moment that a youngster of about nine—a shabbily-dressed little fellow—came shooting out of an alley at lightning speed.

He was one of those enthusiasts who have a particular liking for careering about the streets upon one roller-skate. And he came tearing out of the alley, quite careless as to what lay in his path beyond, although the corner was a blind one.

The skating enthusiast was quite small, but he came with such force that when he struck Fullwood, the impact was terrific. It so happened that Fullwood was directly in his path.

Crash!

The elegant Ralph Leslie simply went flying. He lost his balance, staggered, caught his foot against a projecting flagstone, and sat down in the gutter with fearful force.

And once there, he proceeded to roll over, smothering himself with dust and dirt.

"My goodness!" gasped Gulliver and Bell.

"Yow-ow! Guggh! Yaroooh!" hooted Fullwood wildly.

He sat up, and stared round in a bewildered way. The skating enthusiast, who had cannoned off at a tangent without falling, swung round. He looked at Fullwood in a scared manner.

"By gum!" he panted. "I didn't see thee——"

"You—you little rat!" snarled Fullwood harshly.

He was on his feet in a moment, his face fairly livid with rage. He was grazed and sore, and he flung himself at the small boy with the ferocity of a tiger.

The skating youngster was unprepared for the attack. After all, the collision had been a pure accident, and the boy was prepared to apologise. But he was not allowed the opportunity.

"I'll make you pay for that!" shouted Fullwood savagely.

He grabbed at the boy, and with one swing he hurled him over on to the pavement. The youngster was down before he could know what was coming to him. And Fullwood drew back his foot.

"That'll teach you not to fly round corners like that!" he panted.

Thud!

Fullwood's boot crashed against the boy's side, and a gasping howl of agony arose. It was a vicious, villainous kick. Even Fullwood would not have delivered it if he had not been in such a fierce temper. But for the moment he had lost his head.

"Steady!" gasped Bell. "I say, Fully——"

"I'm goin' to teach this kid some manners!" snarled Fullwood. "Do you think I'm goin' to let him knock me down like that? A beastly little street urchin? By gad! I'll show him somethin'!"

Thud!

Again he kicked, and this time the boy lay still, sobbing with agony, and with tears streaming down his face. Fullwood could not proceed further with his brutality, for at that moment a figure came dashing up.

It was Mark Finch.

He and Dick Goodwin had seen what was taking place, and that first kick had been enough to send Mark flying up the road. Dick was just as enraged, but he was not quite as quick as his companion.

"You brute!" shouted Mark hotly.

"Eh?" gasped Fullwood, twirling round.

He stared at Mark dazedly for a moment, and then his eyes narrowed.

"Oh," he snapped. "What do you want?

Who the deuce told you to interfere? Clear off, you confounded——"

Crash!

Mark's right fist struck Fullwood's face with all the strength that the mill-boy was capable of. It was a stunning blow, and it was well-merited. Fullwood only received a quarter of what he deserved.

"Yaroooh!" he roared.

He went over backwards, and nearly turned a complete somersault. Gulliver and Bell, instead of supporting their leader, edged hastily away. They didn't want to be mixed up in this affair.

As a matter of fact, they were scared. And after they had proceeded a short distance, they came to a halt, and looked on from afar. Fullwood was just picking himself up, all the fight knocked out of him.

"By gum! You're lucky to escape so lightly!" exclaimed Mark angrily. "You cur! Kicking a kid like that when he's lying on the ground!"

"I—I'll give you in charge for this!" muttered Fullwood hoarsely.

"Oh, will you?" snapped Mark. "All right, we'll see——"

"Come out of it, Mark!" muttered Dick Goodwin, dragging at his companion's sleeve. "You've given him a good slam, and that'll do. We don't want to be surrounded by a crowd!"

Mark Finch was very reluctant to get away, but he realised that Dick's advice was good. The small boy had gone by that time--he had picked himself up and had painfully skated away.

And the crowd which was collecting received a disappointment.

Instead of a fight, as they had anticipated, Dick Goodwin and Mark Finch got on to a passing tram-car, and left the scene. Mark was feeling hot and angry. Anything of that sort always enraged him.

As for Ralph Leslie Fullwood, he stood there, like a fish out of water.

Crash! The elegant Ralph Leslie simply went flying. He lost his balance, staggered, caught his foot against a projecting flagstone, and sat down in the gutter with a fearful force.

He was alone.

His own chums had gone, and a miscellaneous crowd had commenced to collect round him. And this crowd was looking hostile, too. Fullwood was not feeling very well.

"Get out of my way!" he muttered harshly.

He tried to push through the throng, but found it rather difficult. His fury was still as great as ever, but he tried to curb it. For Mark Finch he now felt a burning, undying hatred.

That mill-boy—that common bounder—had knocked him down in the open street! Fullwood's face was still burning from the effects of the blow; his teeth felt loose, his nose was bleeding slightly. And he was smothered with dirt from head to foot. He looked very much of a wreck.

"Let me get past, confound you!" he exclaimed.

"You ought to be locked up—that's what you ought!" said one of the crowd. "Kicking a young boy like that! In spite o' your swell clothes, you're nothing but a common bully!"

"Somebody ought to fetch a policeman!"

"This young swell ought to be locked up!"

"Get hold of him, and give him summat!"

Fullwood looked round wildly. Until this moment he hadn't realised that things might be hot for him. But he was not left long in doubt as to his ultimate fate. And what actually did happen was startling.

There was a big commotion on the outskirts of the crowd.

And the next moment a large lady, attired in clogs and shawl—and, of course, other articles of apparel—burst through the throng and came face to face with Fullwood. She was brandishing a formidable-broomstick, and there was an expression on her face that boded ill for the cad of the Remove.

CHAPTER IV.

CATCHING IT HOT.

FULLWOOD looked at the large lady in great alarm.

"Where is he?" she exclaimed in a voice that carried far. "Where's the young lout that kicked my Billy? I'll gi' him summat! The great, hulking bully! Ah! So thou'rt the one!"

She seized Fullwood by the scruff of the neck before he could dodge.

"Hold on!" gasped Ralph Leslie. "Wait a minute!"

"Sithee here, I want none o' thy back talk!" exclaimed the lady fiercely. "I'm going to give thee a hiding, tha' knows!"

"That's right, Ma!"

"Let him have it!"

"Hit him over the head!"

Fullwood wriggled convulsively.

"Lemme go!" he howled. "By gad! I'll—I'll——"

The words choked in his throat. The terrible indignity of the whole thing was almost more than he could bear. The very thought of it was stupefying. He—Ralph Leslie Fullwood, of the St. Frank's Remove—was being held by the scruff of the neck by a mill hand's wife in an Oldham street!

It was too appalling for words.

As for Gulliver and Bell, who were looking on, they were silent with horror. The thing was altogether beyond them. They felt they could do nothing to assist their unfortunate leader.

But there was no question about Fullwood deserving all he got.

And to be in the hands of this infuriated mother was the worst possible fate that could have befallen him. Billy had told her all about it, and she had lost no time in sallying forth to seek satisfaction.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Yoo-hoo-yah!" shricked Fullwood.

The broomstick descended again and again over his shoulders. And the lady used considerable strength, too. In fact, it was rather surprising that the broomstick remained whole.

"That'll teach thee!" she panted. "Ay, and so will this!"

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Again the broomstick descended—this time much lower down on Fullwood's person. Ralph Leslie danced round in a wide circle, but found it impossible to escape, owing to the crowd.

The latter stood there, keenly enjoying the whole scene. They hadn't had any excitement in the street for weeks, and they felt rather grateful towards Fullwood for bringing this diversion. The crowd stood looking on placidly.

"That's it, mother—gi' it to him!"

"He hasn't had half enough yet!"

"Nay, he's still lively!"

Whack! Whack!

"Ow—yaroooh!" hooted Fullwood feebly. "I—I give in!"

This was somewhat humorous, considering that he had never attempted to do anything else. His desperation grew apace. The crowd was getting bigger, and Fullwood had visions of the police arriving.

And if the police came on the scene, the trouble might be far-reaching. Nelson Lee would get to hear of it, and there would be an inquiry, and the whole story would come out, and——

But Fullwood did not allow his thoughts to go any further.

He felt that there was only one thing to be done—and that was to escape.

And so, rendered absolutely wild with despair, he gave one fearful wrench, and tore himself free. He charged at the crowd, and the latter made way for him. He looked dangerous.

He was dirty, dishevelled, hatless, and his tie was almost at the back of his neck.

His collar was a mere crumpled mass, and his neat flannel suit had several large rents in it. His face was smeared with blood, and his hair was pointing to all quarters of the compass.

Fullwood fled like a rabbit.

And the crowd, entering into the spirit of the thing, thought it would be a good idea to chase him. This, of course, was the worst possible thing that could have happened. The thing was becoming a nightmare.

Fullwood was lucky, however.

Just at that minute a tramcar came along, and Gulliver and Bell stopped it. They yelled wildly to Fullwood as he came tearing along. Fortunately, Fullwood heard them.

He dashed to the tramcar, and managed to get on board. And Gulliver and Bell hauled him up the stairs to the upper deck. Fullwood sank down into one of the seats, panting like a wheezy gas engine. He was not in very fit condition, and the exercise had been strenuous.

He didn't exactly know what happened afterwards.

He heard the crowd shouting and jeering, but the tram was allowed to go on. And in a very short time it was far up the street, and away from the scene of battle. The peril was over.

The conductor came up, and received his fare. He made several inquiries concerning the row, and Gulliver and Bell gave evasive replies. Finally, they were left to themselves.

"My goodness!" gasped Bell. "That was a near thing!"

"I reckon you ought to be thankful to us, Fully!" said Gulliver. "We got you out of it——"

"You—you rotten funks!" snarled Fullwood.

"What!"

"You fools!" hissed their leader. "I've got to thank you, eh? Yes—for leaving me in that mess!"

"Why, we got you out of it!"

"Oh, did you?" panted Fullwood. "What about when that woman grabbed hold of me? Couldn't you have helped me then? You miserable rotters! You beastly cads! You didn't do a thing!"

Gulliver and Bell looked at him aghast.

"Why, we did all that we could," said Bell indignantly. "You don't suppose we were goin' into that crowd, do you? That wouldn't have done any good at all! We should simply have made matters worse!"

"Oh, leave him alone!" grumbled Gulliver. "It was his own fault, anyway!"

"That's right—turn against me!" said Fullwood savagely. "Just what you chaps would do—crawlin' worms! I'm sick of you!"

They managed to maintain silence, for they had found by past experience that it was very unprofitable for them to fall out with their leader. By an effort, they held their tongues.

Fullwood sat there, slowly recovering.

And after a while he attempted to improve his appearance. He was wild with rage against Oldham, its people, and the whole county in general. And for Mark Finch he nursed a violent hatred.

Fullwood did not seem to realise that the whole affair had been caused by himself—that he had started everything by that brutal attack upon the young lad. Ralph Leslie was never in the habit of blaming himself for anything. In his own opinion, he was perfect.

By the time he and his chums got off the tram, he was feeling a little more composed. His raging temper had died down, and only a smouldering fire remained. And his appearance was somewhat improved.

Gulliver and Bell, in spite of the insults that had been heaped upon them, had done everything in their power to tidy up their leader. And Fullwood succeeded in getting to the camp wthout causing any particular comment.

But he was still a bit of a wreck.

"We'll sneak in quietly!" he said, in a surly voice. "We don't want any of the other chaps to see us—or they'll be askin' all sorts of silly questions. And if you fellows say a word about what's happened ——"

"Keep your hair on—we shan't breathe a word. We're not proud of it!"

Fullwood muttered something under his breath, and they all walked towards the camp. There was a big open space here—indeed, nearly a meadow. And the St. Frank's caravans were all formed up in a neat circle, with the big tent in the centre.

And the spot was quite private, too.

As luck would have it, Fullwood and Co. had scarcely moved ten yards towards their own caravan—No. 4—when Nelson Lee appeared. This was the very last thing that the Nuts desired.

Nelson Lee was in sole command of the Travelling Remove, and Fullwood had a wild inclination to bolt as soon as he saw the famous schoolmaster-detective's figure. But it was too late.

Nelson Lee approached, and gazed at Fullwood in surprise.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "What on earth have you been doing with yourself, Fullwood?"

"Oh, I—I—— Nothing much, sir," stammered Fullwood. "You see, I met with a bit of an accident down the road."

"An accident?"

"Yes, sir."

"You look as though you have been fighting," said Lee severely.

"Not at all, sir—oh, no!" declared Fullwood. "I—I slipped, and fell down in the dust. Nothin' else, sir."

Nelson Lee, of course, did not believe a

word that Fullwood had said. In his own mind, he was quite convinced that something else had happened. But he couldn't very well force the boy to speak.

For his part, Fullwood made no complaints.

It was impossible for him to say that a mill boy had knocked him down. In the first place the thing was altogether too undignified, and in the second place, Nelson Lee might have instituted some inquiries—and that would have been absolutely fatal.

"You may go, Fullwood," said Lee. "But I shall watch you. Be very careful how you behave—I do not intend to have any of you boys bringing disgrace upon the name of St. Frank's."

Fullwood crawled away, only too thankful that he had got off without receiving punishment. And he and Gulliver and Bell entered Caravan No. 4, and were greatly pleased to find that Armstrong and Griffith and the others who shared that caravan were not present.

"If I change quickly, it might be all right," said Fullwood. "But that cad Goodwin saw it all, an' he's bound to blab. By gad! I'll make somebody pay—you wait!"

"Better let it drop," suggested Bell. "You'll only make things worse."

But Fullwood was not the kind of fellow to drop anything. And fifteen minutes later he was looking more like his old self. He had changed, and soon emerged in a complete new outfit.

Fortunately for himself, he was not particularly marked, although he was bruised fairly considerably. Outwardly, however, he showed nothing. And now that he was clean and tidy, he felt far better.

As he emerged from the caravan, the first figure he set eyes on was Mark Finch. The mill boy was just coming out of Caravan No. 2 with Dick Goodwin and Fatty Little, and one or two others.

And at the very sight of Finch, Fullwood's gore rose.

"By gad!" he muttered. "So that cad's here! Goodwin's had the absolute nerve to bring the beast into camp!"

Fullwood's face became set and vicious. He remembered the information that he had gained—the news that Mark's brother was in the hands of the police, and practically in prison.

And this brother of a gaol bird was mixing on equal terms with the Remove!

It was too much for Fullwood. He walked towards the group with a feeling of triumph within him. He would show this beast up!

He would tell all the fellows what he actually was! But just as he was preparing his first words, he paused. And, in that moment, he decided that for the time he would keep his own counsel.

But that was no reason why he should not raise objections.

"Oh! What's the idea of this?" he asked sourly, as he cast a venomous glance at Finch. "What's that cad doin' here?"

Handforth, who was with the crowd, looked grim.

"Meaning yourself, I suppose?" he asked. "How do I know what you're doing here—except making yourself unpleasant? If you've got anything to say against Finch, you'd better say it to yourself!"

"Mind your own rotten business!" snapped Fullwood.

"I haven't got any rotten business!" retorted Handforth. "And if you talk to me like that, I'll biff your head off! By George! Telling me to mind my own business! Why, I'll—I'll——"

"You'll do nothing, you ass!" whispered Church. "Mr. Lee is near by!"

"Oh!" said Handforth, sobered.

Fullwood felt that he was safer, and he indicated Mark Finch with a sweep of his hand.

"I don't know whether you chaps know it or not, but this cad is nothin' but a mill hand—a bally factory worker!"

"Thanks all the same, but we know it!" said De Valerie. "And we think that Finch is a good sort. Anything else?"

"Yes, there is something else!" snapped Fullwood. "I think it's a rotten shame that decent chaps should be obliged to mix with a beast like that! I shall complain to Mr. Lee, unless that cad is kicked out!"

Finch looked uncomfortable.

"Perhaps I'd better go," he said quietly.

"Don't take any notice of him, old man," said Dick Goodwin. "He's only a rotter, anyhow. You know that—you've seen what kind of a fellow Fullwood is!"

Fullwood flushed at the remembrance of his encounter with Finch.

"The chap's nothin' but a hooligan!" he shouted. "An' it's a filthy trick that we should have to have him here——"

"What about us?" demanded Handforth. "Don't we have to suffer because of you? Haven't we stood you for weeks and months and years? My only hat! It's a wonder to me you're still alive! You ought to have been exterminated long ago! That's the best treatment for all vermin!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And if you don't like that, you can lump it!" went on Handforth grimly. "And you probably won't like this either—but you'll get it!"

Biff!

Fullwood got it. He tried to dodge, but it was too late. Under no circumstances could this day be truthfully described as Ralph Leslie's birthday. He was getting it in the neck, or elsewhere, continually. This time he got it fairly on the nose.

He gave one howl, and bolted. His nose was sore, and that extra biff was agonising. He felt that his mission was entirely unsuccessful, and he retired. But his hatred against Finch was trebly intensified.

It was lucky for him that he went.

For the anger of the other fellows had been aroused, too. And if he had only

known it, Fullwood narrowly escaped being booted out of the camp. He had disappeared in the nick of time.

CHAPTER V.

WHO IS GUILTY?

MARK FINCH enjoyed himself hugely.

Except for that one marring incident when Fullwood had appeared on the scene, his stay at the St. Frank's camp had been one round of pleasure. And it was all the more enjoyable to this mill lad because it was such a novelty.

He fairly revelled in the whole evening.

He was shown over all the caravans, and the juniors took a great pride in pointing out to him all the wonderful patent contrivances that bristled on all sides. For our caravans were fitted up in the most perfect manner.

Most of the juniors had taken a great liking to Mark, and they enjoyed listening to his quaint Lancashire brogue—which I have set down very imperfectly. And Mark himself was filled with quiet pleasure because these public-school fellows had accepted him so readily, without a shade of swank or snobbishness.

It was a great surprise for the mill-boy.

He was not envious; he was not jealous because he could not share in these good things. He was one of those sensible people—and they are few, I am afraid—who are content with their lot. This was because he had ambition. He knew that he would be able to make a way for himself in the world.

And he remained with Dick Goodwin all the evening.

It was not until the very last moment that he took his departure. Indeed, he even waited until most of the fellows in Caravan No. 2 had retired for the night. He and Dick had gone for a stroll, and they didn't realise until they arrived in camp that it was bed-time.

Dick took Mark into the caravan, and the mill-boy sat in one of the easy-chairs until it was time for lights-out. Then he bade all his new friends good-night, and took his departure.

"One of the best!" was the general comment.

And Dick Goodwin went to sleep feeling that he had given pleasure to one whose young life had ben unusually sad. Another meeting had been arranged for the morrow, when the pair were going out to a cinema together. Dick had promised to be at Mark's lodgings at about tea-time.

The next morning Handforth was the first out of bed.

This was not his usual procedure. Generally he lay in his own bed, and bawled at Church and McClure until they rose. But this morning he awoke with a tremendous thirst, and felt that a large drink was required.

Handforth had an idea that kippers were the cause. He had brought some kippers home the previous night, and had driven practically everybody out of the caravan while he was attempting to fry them.

Indeed, many juniors were quite surprised that Handforth was alive. Reggie Pitt declared that the kippers were a relic from Tut-ankh-amen's tomb, but this was regarded as a slight exaggeration.

Even Handforth admitted that the kippers were slightly niffy, and they were certainly atrociously salt. He wouldn't have eaten them, only Church and McClure refused to do so—and Handforth had to be different.

He tumbled into his clothes and sallied out. And when he returned, soon afterwards, it seemed that he was somewhat larger round the waist. He had consumed so many glasses of water that the camp supply was endangered.

"You lazy bounders!" said Handforth, as he entered the caravan, and found everybody still in bed. "Hi, get up, you fatheads! Breakfast's nearly ready!"

"Breakfast!" said Fatty Little, jumping out with a crash, and nearly causing the caravan to collapse. "Great bloaters! I haven't heard the bell——"

"Fathead! It'll go in about half an hour!" said Handforth. "And don't talk to me about bloaters—they're too much like kippers! I'm blessed if I'll eat another kipper as long as I live! I'm still parched—and I've drunk a gallon!"

"Well, didn't we tell you they were squiffy?" asked Church, from his bed.

"Never mind about that—get up!" growled Handforth.

He proceeded to dress himself thoroughly, and he was in the midst of this process when he suddenly paused. He felt in his pockets again and again, and then looked suspiciously at his chums.

"Who's pinched my money?" he asked.

"Your money?" said Church.

"Yes!"

"How do we know?" demanded Church. "Don't look at us like that, you ass! You don't think we're pickpockets, do you?"

"Of course I don't," snapped Handforth, looking worried. "I don't mean in that way, you duffer! But you might have run short, or something, and borrowed it without asking permission! Come on—out with it!"

Church and McClure looked indignant.

"Don't be dotty!" said McClure. "We haven't touched your silly money!"

"Not a giddy penny!" said Church.

"Well, somebody has!"

Handforth turned round, and looked searchingly at the other occupants of the caravan—De Valerie, Somerton, Solomon Levi, and Handforth minor and Fatty Little. Edward Oswald's gaze remained fixed upon Willy.

"You—you little rotter!" he said accusingly.

"That's right—blame me!" said Handforth minor. "I was expecting it! But if you think I'd touch your giddy cash, you've made a bloomer! I'll admit I've gone down your pockets sometimes, but I've always told you about it. No, my son—try somebody else!"

"Honour bright?"

"Yes, you chump!"

"Well, somebody's playing a rotten joke!" said Handforth. "I had three pound notes in my pocket, and some silver. The silver's there, but the pound notes are gone. Three quid!"

"By my life!" said Solomon Levi. "He speaks as though he'd lost a fortune! And all the time the money's in his other pocket."

But it wasn't!

Again and again Handforth searched his clothing, but in vain. Some of the other fellows searched his pockets, too, and they met with no better success. And while this was going on Solomon Levi gave a roar.

"Some gunuf's been through my clothes, too!" he shouted.

"Some what?"

"Gunuf—thief!" exclaimed Solomon. "By glory! My gold watch has gone—and it cost fifty pounds! My life! What will my father say? A gold watch, worth fifty pounds, stolen while I'm asleep! And it was given to me as a Barmitzvah present!"

"I don't care what sort of a present it was!" snapped Handforth. "You and your silly Jewish presents! If it isn't blue mitzvah, it's Passover! And if it isn't Passover, it's something to do with cider!"

"Cider!" gasped Levi. "You mean sadeh! You ass! That's the first part of Passover——"

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned Handforth. "Once he gets off on his blessed Jewish stuff, he goes on for ever! We'll pass over that part, and talk about my money! I've lost three quid!"

"And I've lost a gold watch!" yelled Solomon. "Any pawnbroker would have lent me thirty pounds on it——"

"Great Scott!" shouted De Valerie. "What's happened to my purse? I had two quid in it, and my tie-pin's gone, too! Here, I say! Somebody's been having a lark here! It's a bit too thick!"

"I should say it is!" snorted Handforth.

"My life! It's worse than thick!" said Solomon. "And it wouldn't matter if we knew who—— Oy! Gevalt! My pocket-book's gone, too! Two fivers I had in it!"

"We'd better report to Mr. Lee, and finish with it at once!" said De Valerie. "It looks to me as if a thief has been in here."

"A thief!" gasped Handforth.

"Well, who do you think pinches things? A saint?" asked De Valerie sarcastically. "We've been sleeping with the windows open, you know, and some rotter must have dropped in while we were all sound asleep—in the middle of the night"

"My goodness!"

"How awful!"

"We'll report to Mr. Lee, and——"

"Look here, we won't do anything of the sort just yet!" interrupted Somerton quietly. "It's quite possible that some of the other fellows have been having a game—Bob Christine, for example. We don't want to get a whole scare up unless there's a real reason. My pocket-book's gone, too, and I don't believe that it was just an ordinary thief."

"Why not?"

"How do you know, you duffer?"

"Because my pocket-book was in my locker, and nobody else has lost anything out of their lockers. That seems to prove that the fellow who took the things knew exactly where to find them," said the schoolboy duke. "I'm not much good at deduction, but that seems to be pretty clear."

"By Jove, he's right!"

"Then it must be one of our chaps?"

"Well, so it seems," said Somerton. "If so, it won't take us long to find him, and I expect it'll turn out to be a joke. There's nobody here who would deliberately pinch the stuff. We haven't got any thieves in the Remove. And if we make a song about it, the joker will only get into a row."

"That's right," said De Valerie. "Let's do the thing quietly."

And so, as soon as all the juniors were dressed, they sallied out, and commenced making inquiries amongst the other caravans. They were very worried, because they couldn't see any point in such a joke. And there was always the possibility that they would never see their property again.

I was called into the affair at the start.

I agreed with Somerton that his theory was probably correct. Whoever had taken the stuff had known exactly where to put their hands on it. Nobody had been disturbed during the night, and nothing was upset or rendered untidy. The thief had possessed advance knowledge.

But all our inquiries were in vain.

Nobody seemed to know anything about it. And at last, when it appeared quite certain that no joke had been perpetrated, real suspicion was turned against those fellows who were known to be unscrupulous.

Consequently, Fullwood & Co. came in for some black looks.

"Oh, you needn't think I took your rotten property!" sneered Fullwood, as he noted several fellows looking at him. "But it wouldn't take me long to guess who the thief actually is. I'll bet I could find him!"

"Oh, could you?" said De Valerie. "Where?"

"In one of the cotton mills!"

"What?"

"In that mill we went over yesterday!" said Fullwood.

Dick Goodwin looked at him sharply.

"You beastly cad!" he exclaimed. "Are you trying to hint that Mark Finch took the stuff?"

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not tryin' to hint anythin'," he replied. "But you ought to know as well as I do that the chap is only a common factory cad. An' don't forget that he was here last night."

"My hat! So he was!" said De Valerie, with a start.

"Yes, by jingo, and he was in our caravan, too!" said Church. "I don't believe a word against the chap, because I like him, but it seems queer. Finch was with us until we were all in bed!"

"By my life!" muttered Solomon Levi. "And he saw where Somerton put his pocket-book! He knew exactly where we hung our clothes! And some of the chaps were even talking about their money!"

The juniors looked at one another in a startled way.

"Well?" sneered Fullwood. What about your wonderful factory pal? As far as I can see he's made good profit out of his little visit. Perhaps you don't know about his brother?"

"His brother?"

"Yes," replied Fullwood calmly. "I don't want to alarm you, but you'd better know that that cad's brother is in chokey—for holdin' up a post-office, an' robbin' it! The whole family seems to be a gang of thieves!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE PLAN OF ACTION.

THERE was a brief silence following Fullwood's statement.

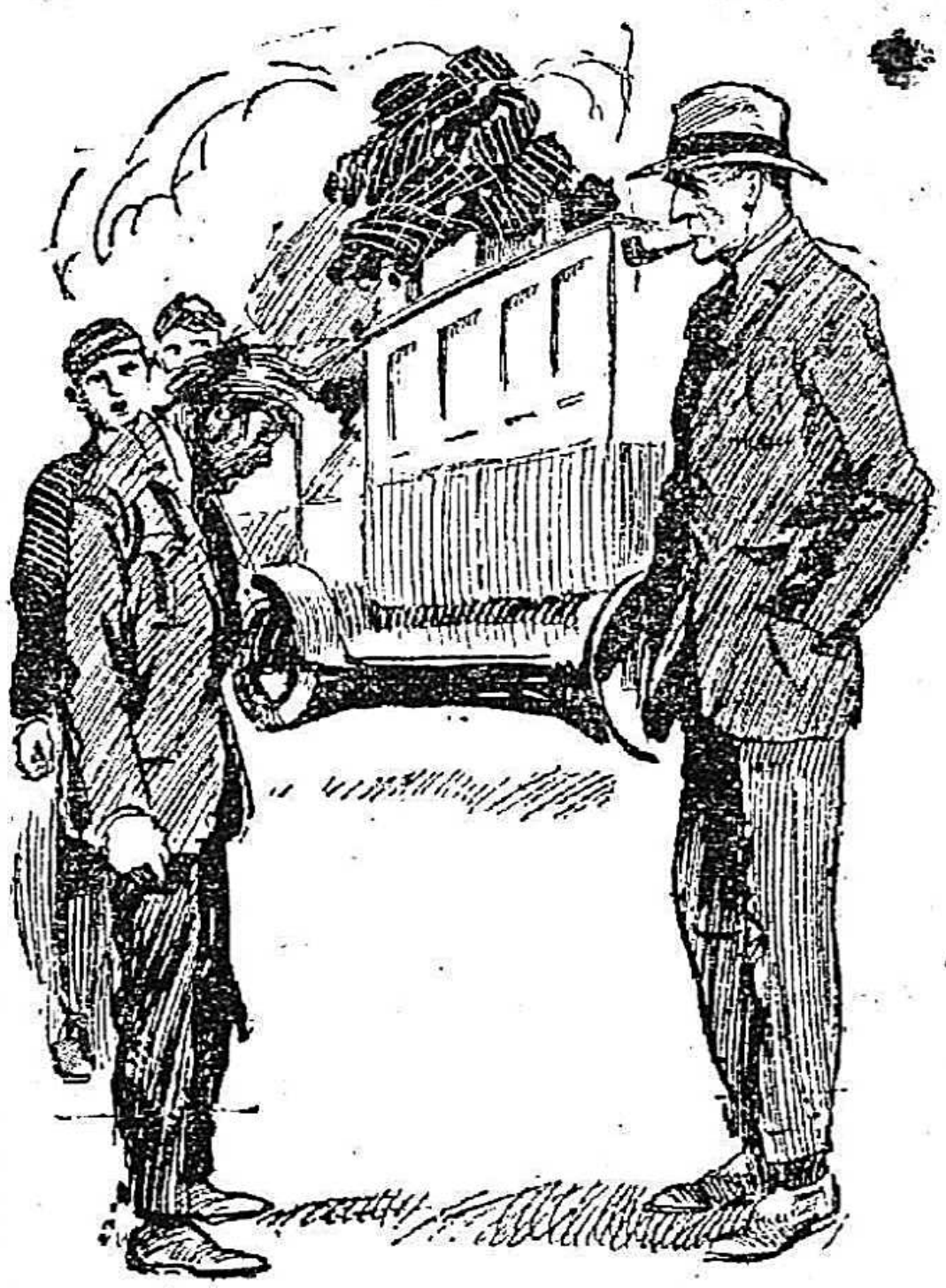
"Well?" said Ralph Leslie at length. "All dumb, or what? Take my advice, and have that factory cad arrested. The quicker you act, the more chance you'll have of gettin' your things back."

"You cad!" shouted Dick Goodwin. You know it's not true——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted De Valerie. "Let's discuss this affair quietly. No sense in getting excited. I know well enough that Fullwood's a cad, but it seems to me that he may be right on this occasion."

"Of course I'm right," jeered Fullwood. "It's obvious."

"Well, we'll see," said Levi. "Personally, I thought the feller was pretty decent, but you can't always tell. It certainly seems queer that his brother should be in gaol!"



"You look as though you have been fighting!" said Lee severely. "Not at all, sir—oh, no!" declared Fullwood. "I—I slipped, and fell down in the dust. Nothin' else, sir."

"Is that true, Dick?" asked De Valerie, turning to Goodwin.

Dick hesitated.

"Well, in a way," he replied at length.

"What do you mean—in a way?"

"Why, I think Mark's brother was arrested last week in connection with that post-office hold-up," said Dick awkwardly. "Mark's awfully cut up, but I can't see that he's to blame. And it's not fair to tar him with the same brush."

"Oh, don't you believe it!" said De Valerie. "What's bred in the bone, you know! If one's a thief, it's just as likely the other will be. Goodness knows, I don't want to harm the chap, but it seems so clear."

"It does!" agreed Handforth. At the same time, I'm doubtful. We all know that the mill chap was in our caravan last night, and he certainly saw what we did with our things. In fact, he's the only one outside of ourselves who could have stolen in and laid his hands on the stuff."

Fullwood nodded.

"Then it's proved——"

"Who told you to interfere?" snapped Handforth, glaring. "I'm simply arguing this out from the point of view of a detective. I'm taking the data, and putting it

through a thorough examination. And when we have got all the inferences, we come to the one conclusion that Finch is guilty."

"I don't believe it," said Dick Goodwin hotly.

"Neither do I," said Handforth. "I didn't say I did—I only pointed out the obvious conclusion."

"You fathead!"

"I can have my own opinion, I suppose?" demanded Handforth. "I like the chap—I don't think he'd pinch any money of mine. And as for Fullwood, I'll smash his blessed face if he starts any more of his rot."

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not interested, anyway," he said carelessly.

And he strolled away.

"That's better, at all events!" growled Handforth. "I can breathe better now that cad's gone. Well, what are we going to do about it? Between the lot of us we've lost some jolly valuable stuff——"

"I should say we have!" interrupted De Valerie warmly. "And, as far as I can see, it's Goodwin's fault."

"My fault!" repeated Dick, staring.

"Yes, of course."

"But that's not fair——"

"You introduced that factory chap here—and you knew all the time that his brother is a gaolbird," said De Valerie. "I don't want to be nasty—but what else can a fellow think? I mean, Finch saw everything last night, and this morning we find our property gone! It's as clear as daylight! And he thought he could get clear with it because we were pally with him."

"I must admit it seems reasonable," said Somerton reluctantly.

"Well, the only think we can do is to go to Mr. Lee," went on De Valerie. "We'll tell him all about it, and then we'll inform the police."

Dick Goodwin looked alarmed

"By gum!" he exclaimed. "Don't do that!"

"But we can't afford to lose——"

"No, no, of course you can't," admitted Dick. "But at the same time, why not give the chap a chance to explain?"

"Do you think he'll admit anything?"

"If he's guilty, he'll deny it," replied Dick. "Every chap with a criminal mind would deny his crime. I'm not sticking up for Mark if he's a thief—I wouldn't think of it. And I've got to grant that it looks beastly suspicious."

"More than that!" growled De Valerie.

"When I knew the chap five years ago we were kids," went on Dick. "He wasn't old enough to steal then. And, as a matter of fact, I know very little about him. They say that clever crooks make themselves more pleasant than anybody else—and I'm willing to confess that Mark may be a wrong 'un. Personally, I don't believe he is, but I won't let any personal feeling come into this."

"What are you trying to get at?" I inquired.

I had been listening to the talk for some time without making any comment.

"I simply mean that I want to be impartial," said Dick Goodwin. "And don't forget that we haven't got a scrap of evidence against the fellow. Just because he was here last night it doesn't mean to say he was guilty. It may be mere coincidence."

"Not likely!"

"We don't get coincidences of that sort."

"Dick's right," I pointed out. "After all, there's no evidence against Finch. And if we told the police, and the chap was arrested, it would be rotten hard lines on him if he was innocent."

"Why?"

"Well, people wouldn't understand—half of them would believe the story straight off, particularly as his brother is a thief," I said. "To have him arrested would be absolutely cruel."

"Then what can we do?" demanded De Valerie. "Lose all our things?"

"No, of course not," put in Dick eagerly. "I'll tell you what. We'll wait through the day, and go to Mark's lodgings just before he comes home after work. In the meantime we won't say anything——"

"And in the meantime the chap will be scooting to London, or somewhere," said one of the others. "That's a dotty idea."

"Finch won't scoot," said Dick quietly. "He couldn't run off at a moment's notice—he wouldn't be such a fool. I suggest that we go to his lodgings, and wait for him. When he comes we'll face him."

"And what then?"

"Why, we'll ask him about the missing property, and if he's guilty he'll reveal it by his manner," replied Dick shrewdly. "Even if he denies it, his very attitude will prove whether he's innocent or not. What do you say?"

"I'm game," replied Handforth.

"Same here," said Somerton.

"It seems a queer thing, but if you chaps are ready for it, I won't be out of it," exclaimed De Valerie. "How about you, Solly?"

Levi hunched his shoulders.

"What matters?" he asked. "Let it go at that—I'm willing."

Dick Goodwin looked at them warmly.

"By gum! You're a set of champions!" he exclaimed. "Ay, but I didn't think you'd be such sportsmen! We're giving the chap a chance—and if he's guilty, I'll finish with him for good."

"I think it's the best idea of all," I said approvingly. "Don't say a word about it to the guv'nor, or anybody else—just keep your own counsel. And we'll form a committee later on and be down at Finch's lodgings, as Dick suggested."

(Continued on page 15)

POWERFUL NEW NELSON LEE SERIAL JUST STARTED!

No. 31. PRESENTED WITH "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY." July 7, 1923.

THE SILVER DWARF

In this amazingly clever detective story, NELSON LEE is matched against the brains and subtle skill of Professor Mark Rymer, an exceedingly dangerous type of intellectual criminal—inhuman, crafty, resourceful and daring.

FOR NEW READERS.

If the rascally cousin of the late Lord Easington, Professor Mark Rymer, can destroy certain documents hidden inside the silver effigy, known as the Silver Dwarf, he will inherit his cousin's title and wealth. There is a son living by a secret marriage of the late peer, evidence of which is contained in the documents aforementioned. So far, the Silver Dwarf has eluded the clutching fingers of the unscrupulous professor. Nelson Lee, who is determined to frustrate Rymer's evil designs, is also in quest of the effigy. Owing to a fire at the late peer's house, the effigy is lost. News comes of its having been taken to Paris, and thither Rymer proceeds, followed by Nelson Lee hot on his heels.

(Now read on.)

OFF TO PARIS!

AFTER leaving the professor, Nelson Lee rode back to Easington Towers. By that time all hope of saving the house had been abandoned, and the firemen were devoting all their energies to preventing the flames from spreading to the stables and kennels.

After chatting for a minute or two to the superintendent of the fire-brigade, the detective was introduced to the late Lord Easington's agent, and afterwards to his lordship's solicitor, both of whom had hurried up from Falmouth on receipt of the news of the fire.

Both these men, like everybody else, had hitherto regarded the professor as the lawful heir to the Easington title and estates, and great was their amazement when the detective told them of Lord Easington's deathbed confession, and of all that had happened since.

"I see trouble ahead," said the lawyer, when Lee had finished his tale. "The professor, no doubt, will insist upon assuming the rank of his dead cousin, and will demand that I should hand over the title-deeds of the estates."

"Which you will refuse to do, of course?" said the detective. "I will call at your office to-morrow morning and file an affidavit, embodying Lord Easington's confession. If the professor goes to law in order to compel you to acknowledge him as the heir, you have only to produce

my affidavit, and the judge will immediately order the action to stand over until I have had a reasonable time in which to produce the missing heir."

"Quite so," said the lawyer. "But suppose you cannot produce the missing heir? The proofs of Lord Easington's marriage have disappeared. If you can recover them, well and good. But suppose you can't? Suppose the Silver Dwarf is never seen or heard of again—what then?"

"Then the professor will take both the title and the estates, of course," said Nelson Lee. "But I have every hope that I shall be able to recover the Silver Dwarf, and the papers it contains, in time to prevent such an undesirable contingency."

With these words he took his leave, and walked to Falmouth, where he put up for the remainder of the night at the Crown Hotel.

Early next morning—or, rather, the same morning—he wired to all the West of England daily newspapers.

To each of these his wire, was the same, and ran as follows:

"Please insert following advertisement in to-morrow's issue and subsequent issues till further notice:

"'£50 Reward.—Lost, early on the morning of the 25th inst., in the neighbourhood of Easington Towers, a small silver statuette, or figure of a dwarf. The above reward will be paid to any person returning the same to the undersigned, or half the reward will be paid for information leading to its recovery.—NELSON LEE, Crown Hotel, Falmouth.'"

Having despatched these telegrams, he once more returned to Easington Towers, which was now little more than a blackened, smoking ruin. Then he saddled his horse—Jack Langley's horse—and rode back to Penleven Grange.

He slept at the Grange that night, and returned to Falmouth by the first train the following morning.

Upon reaching the Crown Hotel, he interviewed the proprietor, and ascertained that nobody had yet turned up to claim the fifty pounds' reward.

He ther walked over to the lawyer's office, and signed the affidavit already alluded to.

Following this, he returned to the hotel, engaged a bed-room and a private sitting-room, and settled down to await the result of his advertisement.

Six days elapsed—six days, during which the Silver Dwarf and Professor Mark Rymer might both have been non-existent for anything he saw or heard of them.

Then his patience met with its reward. At a quarter-past eleven in the morning a waiter knocked at the door of his sitting-room and informed him that a fisherman, who gave the name of Pennock, wished to see him.

"Show him up," said Nelson Lee.

The waiter retired, and presently ushered in a seedy-looking fisherman, who had all the appearance of having just recovered from a prolonged drinking-bout.

"You have come to claim that fifty pounds' reward, I hope?" said the detective, when the waiter had gone.

Pennock shook his head somewhat dolefully, and a look of disappointment crossed the detective's face.

"Then what have you come for?" he asked sharply.

"For twenty-five!" said Pennock.

"Oh, so you want to earn half the reward—eh? That means you haven't got the Silver Dwarf, but that you know where it is?"

"That's right, mister!"

"Very well. Where is it?"

"In France by now, mister—in Paris!"

Nelson Lee gave a start of surprise, and regarded Pennock with a keen, penetrating scrutiny. Then he said:

"I'm not doubting you, my man; but you can't of course, expect me to hand over twenty-five pounds on the strength of your mere assertion that the Silver Dwarf is in Paris. I must have proof that what you say is true."

"And so you shall, mister," said the fisherman. "I'll tell you exactly what happened. Your advertisement says as 'ow the Silver Dwarf were lost on the 25th. Well, mister, on the arternoon o' the 24th, a furrin-lookin' gent come up to me on Falmouth pier and engaged me to take him for a row in my boat acrost the bay. 'E were a haffable, chatty sort o' gent, and 'e told me things about hisself wi'out bein' asked. Said his name was Delafosse; that 'e kept a big silversmith's shop in Paris; that 'e was stayin' at the Royal Hotel, but was goin' back to Paris in a day or two.

"Soon arter we got back from our row I heard that Easington Towers was on fire, so off I went to see the blaze. As I was coming home, shortly after midnight, I found this 'ere Silver Dwarf, as you call it, lying in the mud by the side of the road. There was nothing to show who the thing belonged to, so I shoved it under my jersey and took it 'ome with me.

"After dinner next day I wrapped the thing up in brown paper and went to the Royal Hotel. I showed it to Mr. Delafosse, and asked him if he'd buy it. He examined it, and asked me if I'd come by it honest. I told him to be sure I had; so he offered me a pound for it, and I let him have it. Next day he went away, and by this time I make no doubt he's back at his shop in Paris. And now, if you please, I'll take that twenty-five pound."

"One moment!" said Nelson Lee. "Why didn't you come and tell me this before, instead of waiting nearly a week?"

"Well, you see, sir," said Pennock, with a grin, "ten pound is a lot of money to a chap like me, and it takes some time to spend it."

In spite of himself, the detective laughed.

"Then you haven't told your story to anybody else, I presume?" he said.

"Not a soul! I'll take my oath on that!" said Pennock.

"Good!" said Nelson Lee, opening his cheque-book. "If I make the reward thirty pounds instead of twenty-five, will you also take your oath that you won't tell anybody else what you've just told me—say, for a week?"

"I will! I'll swear it!" said Pennock eagerly.

The detective wrote out a cheque for thirty pounds, and tossed it across the table.

"Now, remember," he said, as Pennock rose to go, "not a word to any living soul for at least a week."

"Right you are, sir!" said the delighted fisherman. "Mum's the word!"

He shuffled down the stairs, and emerged into the street. At the same instant a closely muffled figure glided out of a house on the opposite side of the road, and began to follow him.

The figure was that of Mark Rymer. For the past six days he had been lodging in this house, and for the greater part of that time he had been sitting at one of the upper widows with a pair of opera-glasses glued to his eyes.

The window at which he had stationed himself was exactly opposite the window of the detective's sitting-room at the Crown Hotel, and the consequence had been that, so long as daylight had lasted, and curtains had remained undrawn, the professor had been able to see all that had taken place in Nelson Lee's room.

Needless to say, his object had been to ascertain if anybody answered the advertisement.

For six days he had kept his vigil in vain; but as soon as he saw Pennock enter the room, and especially when he saw the detective hand him a cheque, he knew that at last the time had arrived for him to interfere.

Having hastily donned his hat and cloak, he hurried downstairs, waited until Pennock came out of the hotel, and stealthily glided after him.

As soon as they had turned the corner, and were out of sight of the hotel, he quickened his pace, and tapped the fisherman on the shoulder.

"One moment!" he said, in his silkiest tones. "You have just come away from the Crown Hotel."

"Well, s'pose I have?" said Pennock. "What's that to you?"

"You have given Mr. Lee some information concerning the Silver Dwarf!" said the professor, peering and blinking at him in his usual owl-like fashion. "What have you told him?"

"Find out!" said Pennock bluntly.

He swung round on his heel, and was about to walk away, when once again the professor laid a detaining hand on his shoulder.

"Look at me!" he said, in a sharp, commanding voice.

Scarcely knowing why he obeyed, the fisherman turned and confronted him.

For one brief instant the professor looked him full in the face, his narrowing eyes glittering with a strange, unearthly light, that came and went like the flashes of a will-o'-the-wisp. Then he bared his yellow teeth in a sinister smile of triumph.

"Now tell me what you've told Mr. Lee!" he said.

The hypnotised fisherman promptly obeyed, and repeated, in a listless, mechanical voice, the story he had told to Nelson Lee.

"Good!" said the professor, when he had finished. "Now, walk to the end of this road and take the first turning on the left. Count twenty paces from the corner, and at the twentieth pace you will awake from your trance and forget that you ever saw me!"

Like a man in a dream, Pennock marched away, and Mark Rymer returned to his lodgings.

"Now, let me consider what's best to be done," he mused, as he flung himself into an easy-chair. "Nelson Lee knows that the Silver Dwarf is in the possession of a Parisian silversmith named Delafosse. What will he do? Without a doubt he will go to Paris, hunt up Monsieur Delafosse, and buy the Dwarf back from him. Then my course is clear. I must go to Paris, too, find this Monsieur Delafosse, and secure the Silver Dwarf before Nelson Lee arrives."

He pulled out his watch.

"Five minutes to twelve," he muttered. "I don't think it's possible to catch a boat to-day, but I'd better make sure."

He took down a Bradshaw, and hurriedly consulted it.

"By Dover and Calais; that's no good!" he muttered to himself. "There's a steamer leaves Dover at five minutes past eleven to-night, but I can't get to Dover in time to catch it. By Folkestone and Boulogne—that's worse! By Newhaven and Dieppe—no good, either! By Southampton and Havre. Ah, this looks like being possible! Train leaves Falmouth 12.40, arrives Southampton 9.9; steamer sails at midnight. What time is it now? Two minutes past twelve. By Jove, if I can catch that train, I can get to Southampton in time to catch the midnight boat, and I can get to Paris by half-past eleven to-morrow morning! Mark Rymer you're in luck! It's a thousand to one that Nelson Lee will never think of the Southampton route. He'll wait till to-morrow morning, and cross by Dover and Calais, and by the time he reaches Paris I shall have interviewed Monsieur Delafosse, and the Silver Dwarf will be in my possession!"

He flew up to his bed-room, snatched up his portmanteau, crammed a few things into it, ran downstairs, settled with his landlord, and bolted across to the station.

And the first man he saw, when he rushed into the booking-hall, was Nelson Lee, who was standing at the ticket-office window asking for a "first-class single for Southampton."

Crushing back a venomous oath, the professor quickly stepped aside, and concealed himself behind a pile of luggage.

"So we are to be fellow-passengers, are we?" he muttered to himself. "I am not to have a few hours' start in the race for the Silver Dwarf. We are to start off the mark together. So be it! I do not shrink from the contest. I have one advantage over my rival, at any rate. He doesn't know that I am going to Havre by the same boat as himself, and I'll take good care that he doesn't know; for if I can only keep him in ignorance of that fact, I may be able to steal a march on him."

With this end in view he exerted all his ingenuity in keeping out of the detective's sight, and so well did he succeed that when the detective stepped out of the train at Southampton he had no idea that Professor Mark Rymer had been within less than a stone's-throw of him from a quarter to one in the afternoon to a quarter-past nine at night.

A few minutes before midnight the detective went aboard the Columbia, a twin-screw steamer, of about 1,100 tons. The professor followed suit, and a quarter of an hour later the Columbia slipped her moorings and started on her six hours' voyage to Havre.

The night was dark and bitterly cold. A chill north-easterly breeze was blowing down the Channel, bringing with it occasional squalls of stinging hail.

When the steamer started most of the passengers were on deck; but by the time the voyage had lasted an hour the great majority of them had sought shelter below.

At the end of the second hour, the number of passengers on deck had been reduced to half a dozen. At the end of the third hour there were only two.

One of these was Nelson Lee, the other was Mark Rymer. The detective was leaning over the taffrail of the upper deck, quite close to the steamer's stern, his eyes fixed on the choppy sea, his faculties lulled in a dreamy, contemplative reverie.

The professor was sitting in a deck-chair on the opposite side of the deck, watching him with wolfish, glittering eyes.

Presently the professor stood up. In his right hand was a long leather bootlace, which he had purchased in Southampton, and which he had fashioned into a running noose.

With stealthy, catlike steps he glided across the deck. The detective heard nothing, save the throb of the engines, the grinding of the screws, and the whistling of the wind through the iron stays and rigging.

Suddenly, like a panther leaping on his prey, the professor sprang at him from behind, knocked off his cap, and slipped the noose over his head.

Quick as thought the detective flung up his hands; but even as he did so the bootlace tightened round his throat, biting deep into the tissues of his neck, and strangling his involuntary shout of alarm.

The next instant he felt himself seized by powerful arms, and almost before he had realised what was happening he was lifted off his feet and hurled into the seething foam of the steamer's wake.

IN HOT PURSUIT.

HALF-STRANGLED though he was by the bootlace round his neck, half-dazed by the force with which he struck the water, Lee quietly waited until the natural buoyancy of his body brought him to the surface again, when he turned himself over on his back, and set to work, with the utmost coolness, to slacken the noose which encircled his throat.

Owing to the fact that the knot was at the back of his neck, and owing also to the vicious force with which the professor had tightened it, his task proved long and difficult. And in the meantime he was subjected to all the horrors of partial strangulation.

Strange noises began to echo in his ears, and phantom flashes of light danced before his starting eyes. His temples throbbed as though some internal force was striving to rend them apart; whilst an iron band seemed to encircle his chest with an ever-tightening grip.

Yet never for an instant did his presence of mind desert him, and his cold, cramped fingers continued to pluck at the strangling noose as calmly and deliberately as if he had been seated in his rooms in Gray's Inn Road.

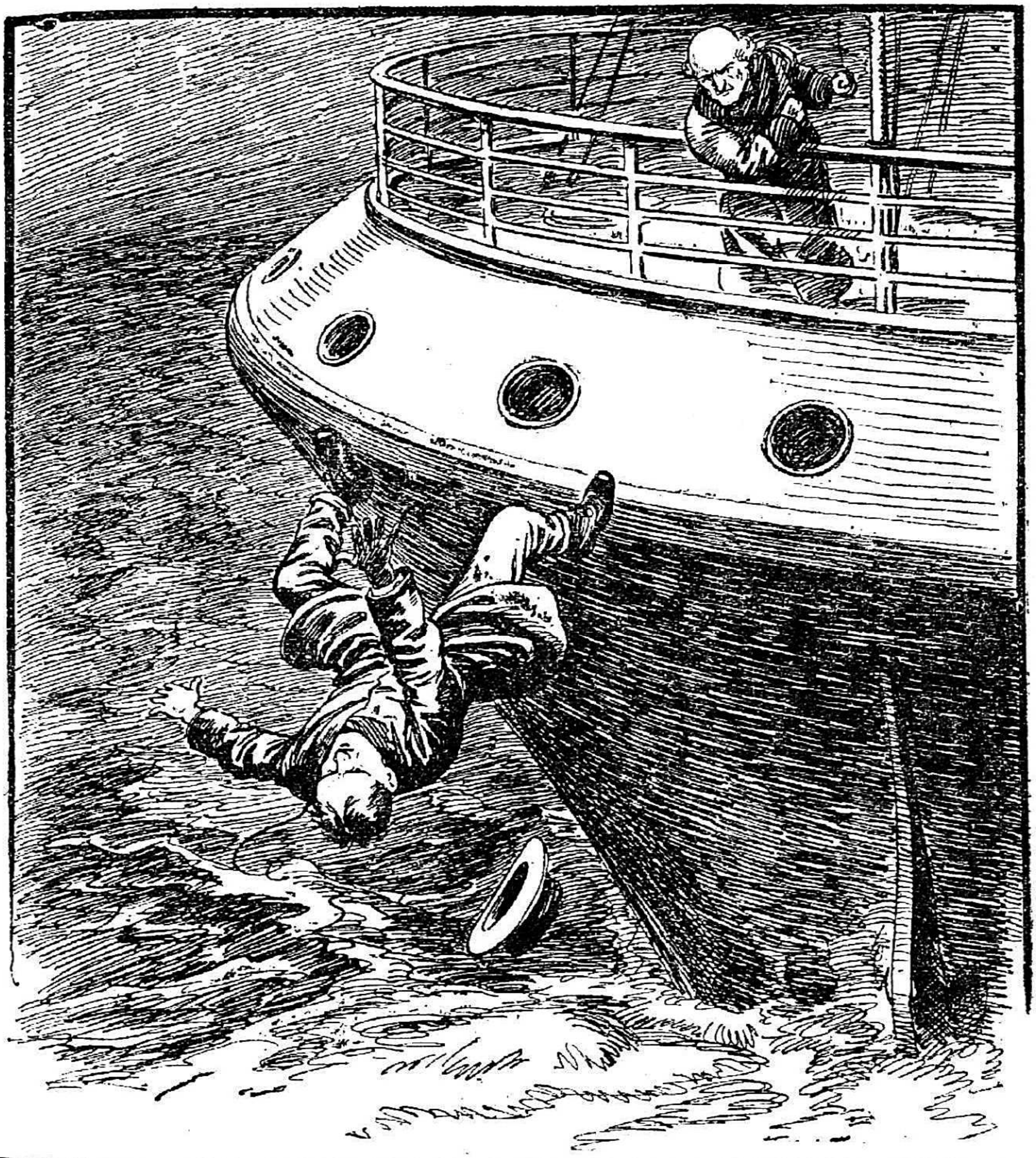
Just when the last shreds of consciousness were slipping away, a sudden relaxation of the bootlace told him that his patient efforts had at length borne fruit. A moment later he had flung the accursed thing aside, and was filling his lungs with deep, exhilarating draughts of salt sea air.

By that time the stern-lights of the Columbia were a good three-quarters of a mile away, and to have shouted for assistance would have been a foolish waste of breath. The fact, however, caused him very little uneasiness, for he knew that in a crowded waterway like the English Channel it would not be long before some passing vessel picked him up.

If he was not alarmed, however, he was both annoyed and exasperated by the turn events had taken. Although he had not seen his assailant's face, he had not the smallest particle of doubt that it was Mark Rymer who had thrown him overboard.

"In some way or other he has got to know that the Silver Dwarf is in Paris," he muttered to himself. "He must have followed me aboard the Columbia without my seeing him."

At that moment his reflections were abruptly interrupted by the sight and sound of a small steam-tug, which was bearing



Almost before the detective realised what had happened, he was lifted off his feet and hurled into the seething foam of the steamer's wake.

down upon him through the darkness at half-speed.

With one or two powerful strokes he swam out of the line of danger, and, as the tug steamed past him he raised his voice in a lusty shout for help.

A shout from the man on the look-out, followed by another from the man on the bridge, told him that his cry had been heard, and in a very short time the tug was hove to, a lifebelt was thrown to him, and he was hauled aboard.

"Me, sir," said a grizzled old salt, who was clad from head to foot in glistening oil-skins. "What——"

"I'll tell you what's happened later," said the detective hurriedly. "In the meantime, where are you bound for?"

"Southampton."

"Are you chartered?"

"No; but——"

"Then there's nothing to prevent you 'bouting ship and putting back to Havre?"

"Do you mean that you want me to take you to Havre?"

"Yes. What will you do it for?"

The skipper scratched his head.

"It ought to be worth a ten-pound note," he said.

"Done!" said the detective. "You see those lights? They're the lights of the Columbia."

"I know it, said the skipper. "We passed her just afore we picked you up."

"Can you catch her before she gets to Havre? If you can I'll give you twenty pounds instead of ten!"

The skipper shook his head.

"It couldn't be done, sir," he said. "The Columbia steams seventeen or eighteen knots an hour."

"And what can you steam?"

"Twelve, at the very outside."

The detective sighed regretfully.

"Then it can't be done, of course," he said. "However, that's a minor matter. The Columbia is due to arrive at Havre about half-past six, but the Paris train doesn't leave till a quarter-past eight. It is now twenty minutes to four. You can't overtake the Columbia, you say, but do you think you can land me in Havre in time to catch the Paris train?"

"I doubt it," said the skipper. "We can try, of course."

"Do," said the detective earnestly. "Bank up your fire and cram on every ounce of steam your boilers will stand. If you land me on Havre quay before eight o'clock, you shall have ten pounds for the hire of the tug, five for yourself, and another five to divide among the crew."

The skipper bawled an order to the man at the wheel, and another through the open hatchway of the engine-room, and in less time than it takes to tell the tug swung round and headed off towards the south.

The skipper then escorted Nelson Lee below, where he provided him with a change of clothes and a glass of steaming grog.

Over a friendly pipe the detective briefly described the nature of the mission on which he was engaged; and then, after giving instructions that he should be called as soon as Havre was sighted, he turned into the skipper's bunk for a few hours' sleep.

During the course of the next four hours and a half the tug broke all her previous records, and from stem to stern she quivered like a thing alive.

From ten knots she increased her speed to eleven, from eleven to twelve, and from twelve, for a short time, to thirteen.

But all in vain!

It was a quarter past seven ere she sighted the light at the entrance to the harbour; eight o'clock was striking as she dashed through the harbour mouth, and by the time she had been made fast, and the detective was free to step ashore, the Paris train was just gliding out of the station

The station was some distance from the quay, so that the detective was spared the mortification of seeing the train depart. He knew, however, that it was useless to attempt to catch her; and as soon as he had settled with the skipper of the tug he made his way aboard the Columbia, which was berthed a little further along the quay.

"Hallo, sir!" exclaimed the steward, upon seeing him. "Then you haven't gone on to Paris along with the rest?"

"No; I'm going on by a later train," said Nelson Lee. "I've come back for my bag, which I left on the saloon table."

"Ah, yes! I wondered whose it was," said the steward, who knew nothing, of course, of the detective's involuntary plunge into the sea. "I'll get it for you."

He hurried below, and presently returned with the detective's kit-bag.

"By the way," said Nelson Lee, as he slipped a coin into the steward's hand, "do you happen to know Professor Rymer by sight?"

"Well, I didn't know him until last night," said the steward. "He was one of our passengers."

"Thank you; that's all I want to know," said the detective. "He's gone on to Paris, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Leastways, he drove from the quay in the station omnibus."

"The train left at 8.15?"

"Yes, sir. It's due to arrive at Paris at half-past eleven."

"And at what time does the next train leave for Paris?"

"Half-past nine."

"And when does that arrive?"

"Five minutes to four in the afternoon."

"Thanks! Good-morning!"

"Good-morning, sir!"

The detective picked up his bag, and stepped ashore.

His bag having been examined by the Custom-house officials, he hired a cab and drove to the telegraph-office, where he sent off a wire—in French, of course—which, when translated, ran:

"To the Prefect of Police, Paris,—Am coming to Paris to interview a silversmith named Delafosse. Do not know his address. Can you supply it? Wire reply, Nelson Lee, railway-station, Rouen."

Half an hour later he took his seat in the Paris train, and a few minutes after twelve o'clock he arrived at Rouen. The Prefect's reply was awaiting him, and ran as follows:

"There are two silversmiths named Delafosse in Paris—Hippolyte Delafosse, 49, Rue de Rivoli; Jules Delafosse, 73, Boulevard de St. Germain. Both highly respectable citizens."

Having read this message, the detective despatched a couple of wires, one to each of the silversmiths mentioned in the Prefect's telegram. To each of them his wire was the same:

"Urgent and important. If you are the man who bought a silver statuette from a fisherman at Falmouth on Christmas Day, you are warned against parting with it, or giving any information whatever concerning it to anybody except myself. Great interests are at stake, and your neglect of this warning will entail the

most serious consequences. Shall arrive Paris 3.55, and call upon you as soon as possible afterwards.—Nelson Lee, Detecti e."

"There! That ought to put a spoke in the professor's wheel!" he muttered to himself, as he hurried back to the train. "He can't apply to the police for information, as I have done, so that in all probability it will take him the best part of an hour to discover the silversmith's address and drive to his shop. Even if he drives to the right shop first, he can hardly be there before half-past twelve, and by that time my telegram will have been delivered, and his little scheme for obtaining the Silver Dwarf will be nipped in the bud."

It was a comforting thought, but, alas! he had yet to learn how cunning was the man who had pitted himself against him.

THE PROFESSOR SHOWS HIS TEETH.

A THICK yellow fog hung over the gay French capital when the Havre express, with Mark Rymer aboard, steamed into the western terminus. Paris was like a city of the dead. Traffic was practically suspended, and the deserted streets and boulevards no longer echoed with the hoot of motor-cars, or the deafening clang of tramcar-bells. In the Place de la Concorde and along the Champs Elysees the arc-lights glimmered through the stifling fog like monstrous floating glow-worms.

Leaving his bag at the station, the professor groped his way across the road to the Hotel de la Republique, where he obtained the loan of a Paris directory. After ten minutes' patient search he discovered the fact—as Nelson Lee had already done—that there were two silversmiths in Paris of the name of Delafosse.

"Humph! I didn't expect to find two," he mused. "The one in the Rue de Rivoli is the nearest, so I had better go there first, and then drive on to the Boulevard de St. Germain, if Hippolyte isn't my man."

He made a note of the two addresses, and sent for a cab. A quarter of an hour elapsed ere a cab could be found. It was twelve o'clock, therefore, when he left the hotel, and it was nearly half-past when the cab pulled up outside the door of the silversmith's shop.

A dapper little Frenchman came forward to greet him.

"Have I the honour of addressing Monsieur Hippolyte Delafosse?" asked the professor, in French, of course.

The little silversmith bowed.

"You were in Falmouth lately, I believe?" continued the professor.

The Frenchman shook his head.

"Monsieur is mistaken," he said. "I was never in Falmouth in my life. I do not even know where it is."

"Then I'll wish you good-morning," said the professor. "Sorry to have troubled you."

And he strode from the shop, leaving the Frenchman staring after him in bewildered surprise.

"73, Boulevard de St. Germain," he said, as he stepped back into the cab.

The vehicle crawled, at little more than a snail's pace, past the Palace of the Louvre, across the fog-enshrouded Seine, and into the Boulevard de St. Germain.

Exactly on the stroke of one o'clock it pulled up at the door of No. 73, and Mark Rymer stepped out. He paid the cabby and entered the shop.

The only person there was a young-looking man, with closely-cropped hair and a tiny waxed moustache.

"Are you M. Jules Delafosse?" asked the professor, closing the shop door, and blinking at the young man like some ill-omened bird of prey.

"No, monsieur," replied the young fellow. "Monsieur Delafosse has just gone out to take his lunch."

"Where has he gone?"

"To the Cafe Napoleon."

"Where's that?"

"It is the second cafe round the corner of the next street on the left."

"What time do you expect him back?"

"Not before two o'clock monsieur."

"Perhaps you can tell me what I want to know. Are you Monsieur Delafosse's assistant?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Was your master in Falmouth lately?"

"Yes, monsieur; he was in Falmouth a week ago."

The professor's eyes began to sparkle.

"Do you know whether he bought anything in Falmouth?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur; he bought a small silver model of a dwarf."

The professor's eyes were now like two live coals; he was trembling from head to foot.

"Can I see that silver model?" he asked, his voice vibrating with suppressed excitement.

"Impossible!" said the assistant, shrugging his shoulders. "Monsieur Delafosse sold it yesterday to a——"

At that moment the shop-door suddenly swung open, and a telegraph-boy marched in.

"Pardon, monsieur—one moment," said the assistant, as he took the envelope from the boy's hand.

He tore the envelope open and drew out Nelson Lee's telegram. A startled look came into his face as he rapidly perused its contents, and he favoured the professor with a furtive glance of suspicion. Then he quietly folded the telegram up and placed it in the inside pocket of his coat.

"There is no answer," he said to the boy.

The boy withdrew. For a moment there was silence—silence in the dimly lighted shop, silence in the all-but-deserted street outside.

"You were saying," resumed the professor, arching his rounded shoulders and blinking his deep-set eyes, "that your master had sold the Silver Dwarf to a——" He paused; but there was no reply. "To whom did he sell it?" he snarled.

"That is a question I am not at liberty to answer," said the assistant stiffly. "Monsieur Delafosse will be here in an hour's time. You had better call again."

For one brief fraction of a second the professor's face was convulsed with demoniac rage. Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said. "I will call again to-morrow morning. In the meantime I have a small diamond here which I will leave for your master's inspection. I am desirious of selling it if I can get a fair price for it."

He half-turned round, so as to conceal his movements from the assistant, and drew from his pocket a small black-leather case in which were a number of oval-shaped glass capsules.

Slowly and deliberately Mark Rymer removed one of the capsules, and replaced the case in his pocket. He then took out his pocket-handkerchief, as though to polish his "small diamond." Instead of polishing it, however, he placed the capsule in the middle of the handkerchief, and then, with a swift and sudden movement, he crushed the capsule between his finger and thumb, leaped upon the unsuspecting assistant, and clapped the handkerchief over his face.

One gasp of terrified surprise, one choking, half-articulate moan, and all was over. Like a man struck by the lightning's flash, the doomed man staggered back, threw up his arms, and fell dead at Mark Rymer's feet.

The professor darted to the door and turned the key. A moment later he was reading the detective's telegram.

"So this is why he refused to answer my question, is it?" he growled. "I knew the telegram had something to do with his sudden change of manner, but I never guessed it came from Nelson Lee. 'Shall arrive Paris 3.55.' Thank you, Mr. Nelson Lee! Forewarned is fore-armed!"

He thrust the telegram into his pocket and glided behind the counter. He opened a desk and took out one or two sheets of paper, stamped at the top with the silversmith's name and address; then he switched off the electric light, opened the door, locked it behind him, pocketed the key, and vanished in the fog.

WHAT IS THE PROFESSOR'S NEXT MOVE?

See Next Week's Thrilling Instalment!

The Case of the Empty Cab!

The Adventures of Gordon Fox, Detective.

EDITOR'S NOTE:—A story about a hansom cab sounds somewhat antiquated in these days, and though the speedier taxi-cab has replaced the once familiar two-wheeler, it may not be generally known that there are still hansom cabs plying for hire in certain parts of London. For the purpose of this story a hansom cab is an essential feature. If it had been a Roman chariot or a Dick Turpin coach, no explanation would be necessary, for the reader would assume that there was some special reason for introducing these ancient vehicles; but a hansom cab in a modern detective story does appear archaic at first sight, and calls for some sort of apology.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT—THE THUMB-PRINT ON THE MIRROR.

"BETTER luck next time!" said Gordon Fox. "Somebody must have dropped our man a warning, and we'll have to start all over again. It was useless to wait any longer, for he should have been there at eight o'clock."

"We'll not catch him now," grumbled Inspector Harkness, "which means that we've let a reward of £500 slip through our fingers."

The detective and his companion were walking down Roslyn Street, after a futile visit to the Holly Bush Inn at Hampstead, where they had hoped to arrest a Hungarian embezzler who was badly wanted for extradition to Buda Pesth. It was past ten o'clock of a March night—a night of blustering wind and drizzling rain, with a white mist in the air; such a night as criminals would be likely to choose for dark deeds.

"No 'buses seem to be running," said the inspector; "and it don't look as if we were going to pick up a cab. Hallo! What does that mean?" he added, as the muffled crack of a pistol rang somewhere ahead.

"Probably some hooligan amusing himself," replied Gordon Fox. "However, it may be something more serious."

The two pushed on a little faster, and at first they were in a quiet, residential neighbourhood near the top of Haverstock Hill—they could hear only the faint and distant murmur of the great city. Then, out of the silence, rose a throbbing sound. The noise came nearer and nearer, until the dark shape of a vehicle loomed in sight.

"A cab," said Inspector Harkness, "but it is going the wrong way for us."

"It is a runaway cab, then," vowed Gordon Fox. "I can tell by the sound that it is not under control."

The horse had settled to a walk on the rising slope, and it stopped dead, breathing heavily, as the two men ran into the street, and barred the way. Before them was an empty hansom, with neither occupant nor driver; and by the aid of a small electric lamp, which the detective always carried, they soon made several curious discoveries. The reins were fastened to the top of the vehicle in the usual way, and inside, on the floor, lay a large cap of check tweed. On the seat were several moist stains, which proved to be ink, and on the surface of the little mirror at one side was the black print of a thumb.

"We are in the presence of a big mystery," declared Harkness. "There has been a struggle here. That pistol-shot came from the cab! How on earth do you account for the ink!"

"I don't account for anything as yet," replied Gordon Fox. "That there has been a struggle is beyond doubt. As for the shot, I don't think it was fired either from or at the hansom. But it came from near by, and the report, I imagine, frightened the horse and caused it to run away. It was standing still at the time, and the vehicle was then empty."

"How do you reason that out?"

"By the fact that the reins were secured. The driver must have dismounted."

"Of course. I might have known that," assented the inspector. "What about the number?" he added, stepping to the rear of the vehicle. "Here it is—No. 12,283."

Gordon Fox was beside him, flashing the lamp on the white enamel plate. "This is an imitation," said he gravely. "A clumsy piece of workmanship, but safe enough for night use. The original plate has been removed and the false one substituted. Look at the design of the crown. One can hardly tell what it is meant for."

OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

"You are quite right Fox. This is a serious business. What had we better do?"

"Climb up there and drive. I will keep pace with you, and we shall probably learn something of the affair before we have gone far."

During the brief interval no persons had been attracted to the spot, and the two were shrouded in mist as they stood listening for a moment.

Then the inspector mounted at the back of the hansom cab, and turning the horse round he drove slowly down the hill, while Gordon Fox followed on the pavement. They went on for nearly a mile, as far as the Chalk Farm Road, but nothing in the nature of a clue was seen or heard. Nobody hailed the vehicle, and of five constables whom the detective met and questioned none had observed the runaway horse and cab. Two of them remembered hearing the pistol-shot, but they had no idea where it came from.

"You had better get in," Harkness said finally, "and we'll drive to the Yard."

"You go on there, and I'll join you later," the detective told him. "Don't lose that cap, and be careful not to touch the thumb-print on the mirror."

It was between twelve and one o'clock when Gordon Fox arrived at Scotland Yard, and was shown into the inspector's private room. He pulled off his wet coat, sat down with a sigh of relief, and lighted his pipe.

"Well, have you discovered anything?" asked Harkness.

"Very little," was the reply. "The pistol-shot was fired by an intoxicated man outside the Three Stars public-house, in Leonard Street, not far from the Chalk Farm Road; but no one appears to have seen the hansom, which may or may not have been near there. In my opinion it was close by, and before it was left standing empty there were two men inside and one on the box. But who they were, and what has become of them, remains a mystery."

"It is a most extraordinary affair," said Inspector Harkness. "A crime has certainly been committed. Everything points to that. I have not been idle myself," he added. "I have found hansom No. 12,283, the genuine one, on the rank at Charing Cross, and I have tested the thumb-mark on the mirror by our Bertillon system. The owner of that thumb is Ned Rudgeley, the well-known criminal, who was released from Portland a year ago. He is on ticket-of-leave, but he has not reported himself for three months, and the police can't find him."

"There's an important clue to start with," said Gordon Fox. "And how about this cap?"—picking it up. "You saw the label inside? 'Bent and Sons, Hatters, New York?'"

"I saw it, but I don't attach much importance to it."

"You are wrong," declared the detective. "The size of this cap is eight and a half, my dear Harkness, and it was certainly made to a special order. Moreover, it is quite new. I think I will leave you now. By the by, you had better keep the affair out of the papers for the present. As for the hansom, it was, no doubt, either borrowed or stolen. If anybody should call here to inquire about it, please send the person round to Queen Street after two o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

From Scotland Yard Gordon Fox went to his lodgings, not far from Westminster Abbey, and the next morning, rising at an early hour, he despatched a cablegram to New York. Then he went off in disguise to the neighbourhood of the Three Stars public-house; and when he returned to Queen Street, shortly before two o'clock, he found a shabbily dressed but respectable-looking woman waiting for him.

"I'm Mrs. Dunker, sir," she said nervously, "and Inspector Harkness sent me to tell you about that hansom. It belongs to my husband, he having saved enough money to buy that and the horse. He has been ill for a fortnight, unable to do any work, and that's why I did such a foolish thing. We live in Welker Terrace, Camden Town, and when a man came there at eight o'clock last evening, and offered to take the hansom out and pay us half of what he earned, I let him have it. He said he was a licensed driver, and that he was a pal of my husband's, giving the name of Sam Brown."

"You referred the matter to your husband, madam?"

"No, sir. He was asleep, and I didn't want to waken him. But when I told him this morning, he said he didn't know anything about the man."

After answering several questions, the woman went away, her visit having proved of no importance, and a few minutes later a cablegram arrived for the detective from New York. He tore it open, and read as follows:—

"Travelling-cap such as described made to the order of Emerson Bradbury, millionaire, of Fifth Avenue in this city. Was forwarded to him in London, two weeks ago, care of Langham Hotel."

Without delay, Gordon Fox drove to Langham Place, entered the hotel, and put an inquiry to the clerk at the office.

"Mr. Emerson Bradbury is now on the Atlantic," was the reply. "He was to sail from Liverpool early this morning. He left here last night for Euston Station, between nine and ten o'clock."

"In a hansom?"

"Yes, sir."

"And alone?"

"No; his valet was with him."

Gordon Fox walked thoughtfully out, and turned down Regent Street.

"The crime and the motive are clear," he told himself. "Mr. Emerson Bradbury is alive, but it is not going to be an easy task to find him. However, I've cracked harder nuts than this."

CHAPTER II.

THE EMPTY HOUSE—THE FIGHT IN THE DARK—MR. EMERSON BRADBURY.

It was on Tuesday night that the empty hansom was found on Haverstock Hill, Hampstead. Queen Street saw very little of Gordon Fox during the next few days, nor did Inspector Harkness hear anything from him until the following Friday afternoon, when he received a letter asking him to come in disguise that same night, at nine o'clock to a certain point in the Chalk Farm Road. The inspector turned up in time, and Gordon Fox, who was also disguised, briefly explained, as the two walked eastward.

"I want you to help me to arrest two scoundrels," he said, "and to rescue a gentleman whom I believe to be in their clutches. A couple of constables are posted in the vicinity, but I hope to do without their assistance. One of the kidnappers, by the way, is Ned Rudgeley. I am not certain of the other."

"Of course, this is the hansom cab affair. I can see that Fox. But how did you get on Rudgeley's track?"

"It was not easy," was the reply. "I started on the assumption that the ticket-of-leave man, who is completely altered by a beard, would be found in this neighbourhood, and after some sharp work I discovered that he frequents the Three Stars public-house. He was there for half an hour last night, and if he is there to-night we will begin our task. I discovered several other things as well, but I won't go into details now. Our object is to rescue the prisoner while Rudgeley is absent. His confederate may be on duty, but if so he is not likely to give us much trouble."

"This is a big affair, Fox?"

"It will startle London, I think."

The two had reached Leonard Street, and within fifty yards of the public-house they stopped. The detective went forward alone, leaving his companion standing in shadow, and ten minutes later he returned.

"All right," he announced, "Rudgeley is drinking in the Three Stars. Come along; the coast is clear!"

He led the way for a quarter of a mile, through lonely and squalid streets, and thence into a gloomy passage.

On one side was a high blank wall, and on the other a wooden fence that looked to be new. Over the top of this could be seen masses of trees and the vague shape of a building.

Then they came down with a crash with such force that the rotten floor broke like paper and let them through.

Gordon Fox pulled out a loose board, and he and the inspector crawled through the opening in the fence. It was a dark night, and they could see little before them.

They cautiously picked their way across the garden, through trees and shrubbery, and among piles of bricks and rubbish, until they came to the rear door of the house."

This Gordon Fox succeeded in unlocking, after half a dozen attempts, with a bunch of keys that he had brought with him. They stopped to listen, but could hear nothing whatever.

Flashing the light with one hand, and carrying a revolver in the other, he led his companion into what had evidently been the kitchen.

They advanced only a few steps and had got no more than a glimpse of the room, when a man rushed at them from behind a table at one side, where he had been crouching.

The attack was sudden and unexpected. Inspector Harkness received a stunning blow on the head from a life-preserver, and, without a cry, he threw up his arms and fell.

Gordon Fox partly dodged a second blow, but it descended on his arm, and hurled his revolver from his grasp.

Before a third blow could be struck he sprang upon his assailant, who skilfully seized him by the throat.

The electric lamp dropped to the floor, and the next instant it was trampled underfoot and smashed, plunging the room in total darkness.

Harkness lay where he had fallen, stunned and disabled; while Gordon Fox fought for his life in the dark room.

Strong and wiry though he was, Gordon Fox had met his match. He would have called for help, but merciless fingers were pressing his wind-pipe, and he could scarcely utter a sound. In vain he tried to break the grip.

Then they came down with a crash, with such force that the rotten floor broke like paper and let them through.

They landed below on the soft earth, and the detective, who was uppermost, managed to free himself.

"Help—help!" he shouted hoarsely, as he rose to his feet.

With that the unseen man was upon him again, fastening on his throat, and the fight was renewed. They rolled over and over in the pitch darkness, kicking and striking, panting for breath, until Gordon Fox felt that he was losing strength.

But now he heard the piercing notes of a whistle from above, and knew that Inspector Harkness had recovered consciousness.

With fresh courage, by a desperate effort he overturned his assailant, and pinned him fast; and thus he held him for a time, kneeling on his chest, until a welcome ray of light flashed, and a constable with a lantern came hurrying down a flight of steps that led from the kitchen.

He promptly lent a hand to the detective, and a moment later a second constable appeared on the scene, thrusting before him a bearded man with irons on his wrists.

Harkness brought up the rear, walking unsteadily, and holding his bruised head.

"Got him, have you?" he exclaimed. "And these fellows have Rudgeley. I didn't blow that whistle any too soon!"

Gordon Fox rose, took the lantern, and flashed it round the damp walls of the cellar.

Lying on a pile in a corner, bound and gagged, was a portly, florid man, with an uncommonly large head. He was quickly cut loose, and the wad of cloth was removed from his lips.

"Your troubles are over, Mr. Emerson Bradbury," said the detective.

"Thank Heaven and you for that, sir!" huskily replied the American millionaire, as he was helped to his feet. "I have been the victim of a diabolical outrage. I was stolen, kidnapped, by these two scoundrels, one of whom is my own valet, Grissom. They pretended they were driving me to Euston Station, but it was a misty night, and they must have taken a different direction. It was Grissom who assaulted me in the cab, who succeeded in stupefying me with some nauseous drug——"

"You had a fountain-pen in your waistcoat pocket, I believe?" interrupted Gordon Fox.

"Yes, and it was broken in the struggle," said Mr. Emerson Bradbury. "You observe the ink-stains on my clothing. When I recovered consciousness," he added, "I was in this vile hole, and here I have been a prisoner ever since. These ruffians compelled me to write a cheque for 50,000 dollars and send it to New York, with a letter, to my son, urging him to forward the money to a certain address in London by the first steamer, and warning him that I would be murdered if he held any communication with the police. But the plot has failed. A cablegram will reach New York days before the letter arrives. I trusted you, Grisson. Why have you repaid me so basely?"

But Grisson made no answer.

"Well, Harkness, this explains the mystery of the empty hansom," said Gordon Fox. "Rudgeley must have dabbled his thumb in the ink, and accidently smeared the mirror while helping to lift Mr. Bradbury from the cab. And now we may as well be off," he added.

. . . . . .

Mr. Emerson Bradbury was little the worse for what he had gone through. He liberally rewarded Gordon Fox, Harkness, and the two constables, and on the following Wednesday he sailed for New York; but he returned six weeks later to give evidence at the trial of Rudgeley and Grissom, who were convicted at the Old Bailey, and sentenced to long terms of penal servitude.

THE END.

(Continued from page 14)

"Good!"

And the matter was settled—the plan of action was made.

The only flaw, as far as some juniors could see, was that Mark Finch might be in flight already, carrying his booty with him. And there certainly was some cause for anxiety in that respect.

However, Dick Goodwin put all doubt at rest.

For, directly after breakfast, he went to the nearest telephone call office, accompanied by two or three others, and asked to speak to the foreman of the department in the mill where Finch worked. Dick got through all right, and spoke to the foreman.

"Yes, Mark had turned up at his usual time, and he was at his usual job.

That was good enough for the fellows. The very fact that Finch was in the factory proved that he had not contemplated flight, and it was only reasonable to suppose that he would remain at his job for the rest of the day.

So those juniors who had suffered loss consumed their impatience. They were particularly worried by the prospect of Mark proving to be innocent—for in that case the real thief would have had a fine start.

But I pointed out that it wouldn't make much difference. If Mark hadn't committed the crime, then some local culprit was responsible—and Nelson Lee would soon get on his track, and recover the stolen property.

For the time being, nothing was said.

But as soon as afternoon lessons were over, and we were released for the day, the special committee which had been selected did not see about preparing tea, as usual.

These fellows set off at once for Mark Finch's address. I accompanied them, for I had consented to be a kind of legal adviser to the committee. Handforth duly nominated himself the chief of the committee—but as nobody else regarded him as such, it didn't matter.

The juniors were very serious as they arrived at Mark's lodgings. Dick Goodwin went in first, and he was at once admitted by the landlady, who recognised him. Dick explained that he had brought a few visitors for Mark, and we all trooped up. We got into the mill boy's little room, and it was practically full.

"Well, what now?" demanded Handforth.

"We've got to wait."

"How long?"

"Not more than about ten minutes."

"Then I think we ought to improve the shining hour by making a systematic search," said De Valerie. "We'll turn everything inside out——"

"I say, that's not fair!" protested Dick warmly. "It's not playing the game to search the whole room while Mark's away. Give him a chance of confessing—supposing he is guilty."

"Yes, Dick's right," I said. "It wouldn't be quite square to take such an advantage."

"All right—I'm squashed," said De Valerie. "And I suppose it would be pretty rotten. I give in. We'll simply stand about here until Mark arrives. It won't be long, anyway."

And the committee waited.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VERDICT!

MARK FINCH left the cotton mill, whistling cheerfully.

He hadn't felt so good for days. His cheery time of the previous evening had bucked him up wonderfully. For quite a time he had been greatly depressed about his erring brother.

But now he felt that life wasn't so bad, after all.

And he was in a particular hurry to get home, because he knew that Dick would be waiting there. He had made the appointment. And after Mark had changed, the pair were going out to get some tea in a restaurant, and then into a theatre. The prospect was alluring.

So Mark hurried.

He managed to get a tram quickly, and as soon as he jumped off he went towards his lodging at a trot. He arrived breathless and warm, but smiling.

"I'll give Dick a surprise!" he told himself. "Ay, but the lad will jump out of his skin! He doesn't expect me for another ten minutes!"

He opened the gate leading to the cottage, and found his landlady on the doorstep. She was regarding him amusedly.

"Tha knows, Mark, theers a whole crowd of lads upstairs waiting for thee!" she said. "Thou'rt best go reet up and entertain them."

"A whole crowd!" echoed Mark. "Why, I only expected one."

She laughed, and Mark ran quickly upstairs. He burst into his room, and then stood in the doorway, staring. The room was practically full, and all the juniors there were staring at him in a curious, searching kind of way.

Dick Goodwin's heart gave a bound as he saw Mark. There was no guilt on the boy's face. He was flushed, perspiring, and his eyes were sparkling with anticipation. It seemed impossible that Mark could be guilty of the camp theft.

"By gum!" said Mark blankly.

There was an ominous silence. The visitors stood looking at Mark, and their faces were all grave and serious. Only Dick Goodwin gave him a smile—and that was a rather strained one.

"Ay, lads, what's up wi' thee?" asked Mark, in surprise.

"I think I'd better do the talking, you fellows," I said quietly.

"Rot!" broke in Handforth. "I'm the chief of the committee, and——"

"Please, old man!" I said earnestly.

Handforth subsided on the spot—he could tell my tone meant business.

"Look here, Finch, we don't want to hurt you in any way, and that's why we've come here to have a plain, straight talk," I said. "We'll just tell you the facts, and then hear what you've got to say."

Mark looked at me in astonishment.

"But—but what's it all about?" he asked.

"I'll tell you," I said, feeling very uncomfortable under his steadfast gaze. "This morning, when the fellows in Caravan No. 4 got up, they found that a good many of their valuables were missing—money, gold watches, and things like that. Caravan No. 4 is the one that Dick's in."

Mark became rigid.

"The—the one I was in last night?" he asked.

"Why, yes," I replied. "You see, these things were missed, and a search was without result. We couldn't find any evidence of the thief, and it struck some of the chaps that you might be able to tell us something."

"Ay, but what can I tell!" asked Mark, in amazement.

"To put it bluntly, they think you took the stuff!" said Handforth. "Mind you, I don't—but that's nothing."

It was just like Handforth to blurt it out in that way—I had intended doing it far more diplomatically. But Edward Oswald was not famed for his gentle methods. He always brought a thing straight out.

"You—you think I stole your money and watches and things?" asked Mark, his face becoming deathly pale.

"Well, we—we—— That is——"

"You see——"

"Ay, by gum, I see!" shouted Mark, flaring up into a great temper. "Sithee, lads, I'm not that kind! But I can see why you suspect me—I'm not blind! Last night I was there—this morning the stuff was gone! And you know that my brother is being held by the police."

There was an awkward silence.

Mark stood there, red to the roots of his hair, and his mouth was set grimly. He clenched his fists until the knuckles showed white.

"You cad!" he shouted tensely "You just told me you've got no proof—you admit that you don't know who the thief is, and yet you come here, expecting that I'm guilty! Ay, but I thought you were decent—I thought you were the reet stuff!"

"Oh, look here!" broke in Dick. "They don't mean——"

"Ay, and thou'rt as bad!" exclaimed Mark. "I thought that thou'rt different to the rest—but now I know different. If you didn't believe it, you wouldn't let these chaps come here."

"But, Mark——"

"And I don't care what tha thinks!" shouted Mark. "Thou'rt no friend of mine—I hate all of you!"

"Steady—steady!" I said quietly. "There's no need to get excited like this! Nobody's accused you, Finch. We simply came here to find out the truth—that's all. The fellows want to satisfy themselves that you were innocent. Don't forget that they know nothing about you—and it's hardly in your favour that your brother was arrested for thieving. But that makes no difference——"

"If it made no difference, you wouldn't accuse me!" exclaimed Mark bitterly. "Well, I don't care——"

"Now, now!" I interrupted. "Don't keep on that tone, old man. If we find that you're innocent, nobody will be better pleased. We want you to be innocent—and you mustn't be offended if we've had any doubts. It's not as though we've known you for years. Even you must admit that the facts look curious."

Mark suddenly became very pale.

"You're reet!" he said slowly. "Ay, lad, I hadn't looked at it that way. Thou'rt reet. I was theer last night, and it does look queer that the stuff should be gone this morning. But I didn't take it."

"You didn't take anything from that caravan?"

"No, I didn't!"

"Ay, Mark, do you swear that?" asked Dick quickly. "On your honour?"

Mark flushed again.

"No, I don't swear it!" he retorted. "Isn't my word good enough—can't you believe me when I speak the truth? You can do what you like—I don't care!"

"Then I think we'd better search the room!" said De Valerie.

"Ay, search it!" shouted Mark. "Dost tha think I care?"

He flung the bedclothes aside, inviting the juniors to begin the search. And several of them lost no time. Mark stood looking on, jaws set again, and his eyes gleaming with bitter anger.

"Thou'rt found a mare's nest," he said quietly. "All thou'll find in this room will be a few coppers. I'm not a rich chap, tha knows. But I don't care. Go on—go reet ahead!"

There suddenly came a shout from Church.

"Hallo! What's this?"

"Eh?" said De Valerie. "What's what?"

Church turned round, his face flushed, and he held a watch in his hand. Solomon Levi gave a sudden gasp.

"By my life!" he exclaimed. "My Barmitzvah watch."

A pin might have been heard to drop.

"By gum!" muttered Dick Goodwin, at last, and his voice was sad.

Mark Finch leapt forward.

"Your—your watch!" he shouted amazedly. "But—but it's impossible! It wasn't in this room! It couldn't have been! Ay, lad, you've made a mistake——"

"Rats!" said Church. "It was under this box in the corner! My hat! There's a pocket book here, too!"

Mark stood looking on, a dazed expression in his eyes. It seemed as though he couldn't believe what was happening—it was too terrible—too awful. There was the stuff, all coming to light!

"Well?" asked De Valerie, after a while.

And Mark had nothing to say—he could only stare in that same dazed way.

CHAPTER VIII.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE!

"EVERYTHING found?" asked Dick Goodwin quietly.

"Yes, I think so."

"The whole lot!"

"And not a single quid missing—not even a penny!"

Several fellows answered the query. And it soon came out that every scrap of the missing property was recovered. Mark Finch had not even taken a piece of silver for his own use.

The juniors were feeling much more content now. They had no qualms about their money or their jewellery—it was back in their possession. But they regarded Mark Finch with open contempt and hostility.

He stood before them a proven liar and a thief.

"The best thing we can do is to get out!" said Handforth gruffly. "I'm blessed if I like standing here. Come on!"

"Yes, rather—let's clear!"

"Good idea!"

Mark strode to the door, and put his back to it.

"Wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "I've got summat to say!"

"We don't want to hear it!"

"Get away from that door!"

"Don't try and stop us——"

"Listen to me!" said Mark passionately. "You think I stole all that property, don't you? You think I did it? I didn't! I didn't! I didn't! I swear on my honour that I didn't know anything about it until I saw it in your hands!"

There was something defiant in his tone.

"My dear chap, what's the use?" asked De Valerie. "There's no sense in indulging in heroics. You can't get away from the facts—you can't deny evidence that's as plain as the nose on your face."

"We're not fools!" said Church.

Mark looked from one to the other.

"Don't you believe me?" he shouted. "I didn't touch it! I didn't——"

"Ay, Mark, why can't you be upright?" asked Dick Goodwin sadly.

Mark turned upon him, his eyes glowing.

"Haven't you got faith in me?" he asked.

Dick was silent.

"Ay, I suppose it's what I might expect!" muttered the mill boy. "You found the stuff here, and you think I did it. Well, tha can all keep on thinking. And if it'll please you, tell the police! Go reet out, and fetch a policeman! I'm a thief—so have me arrested!"

His tone was bitter and antagonistic.

"No, we won't say anything to the police," growled Handforth. "It wouldn't do any good, anyhow—and this might be a lesson to you. Let's hope it is. We don't want to wreck your whole life by having you sent to a reformatory or something."

"Yes, let's go at once—no need to tell the police."

"We've got our stuff back, and that's the main thing."

"You're right, lads!" said Dick Goodwin. "We'll go."

I opened the door, and passed outside on to the small landing. I was only too glad to get out of the painful atmosphere of that small room. Somehow, in spite of the deadly evidence, I couldn't bring myself to believe that Mark was wholly guilty.

He seemed such a decent sort—and he spoke so earnestly. It struck me that there might be something more behind it—but what was the good of inquiring? Far better to let the whole thing drop.

The other fellows piled out behind me, and Dick Goodwin was the last. Mark caught at his arm as he passed out.

"Dick!" he muttered. "Ay, lad, sithee here——"

"Don't—don't speak to me, Mark!" murmured Dick. "It won't do any good. Ay, but I'm sorry—I thought you were such a champion!"

And Dick passed out, without even looking at the mill boy. Dick closed the door behind him. Mark stood there, staring at the closed door. He was like a figure turned into stone.

Dimly, subconsciously, he heard the fellows trooping down the stairs, and then came complete silence after the slamming of the front door.

"Oh, it's cruel—it's a shame!" moaned Mark wretchedly.

He turned, despair on his face, and flung himself face downwards on the bed. Still attired as he was, in his working clothes, he looked a terribly forlorn figure as he lay there, sobbing.

He was in private now, and so it didn't matter.

"They're gone—ay, and they can go!" muttered Mark. "They're no good—they're cads! Ay, and I thought they were such gradely fellows, too! But it's not fair to blame them!" he added miserably. "They found the stuff here—in my room. Who did it? Who was the beast?"

The thought that somebody had plotted against him caused Mark to lose some of his despair. After a while he sat up, and began to think the whole matter out. For the life of him, he couldn't understand what it all meant.

He only knew that his happiness was gone.

Just when he had been expecting to spend such an enjoyable evening—when he had been looking forward to writing to Dick, and receiving replies—this blow had come.

It nearly stunned him at first.

But Mark Finch was a level-headed boy. He didn't allow himself to brood. That wouldn't do any good. But he felt bitter and angry. They were all against him—all ready to believe the worst.

And just because he was a mill boy—just because he was of a different class to them. For a moment, Mark almost became angry again. But this feeling died down, and he calmly set about changing his clothes.

As he washed, he felt that he was rather lucky to have escaped the police. And he began to find some little excuses for the St. Frank's fellows. He tried to look at the affair from their point of view.

They had lost the money, etc., and it had been found in his room. Wasn't it natural that they should be ready to accuse him on the spot. And, when all was said and done, they were rather decent to leave the matter where it was, without giving any information to the police.

By the time he had changed, he was feeling much better.

He didn't form any resolve to clear the mystery up—he felt that he was incapable of doing so. It seemed to him that whatever he did, it would make little or no difference. How could he hope to discover who had planned the affair against him?

And so, after making himself tidy, he prepared to leave.

And he was bending down, tying up a shoe lace, when he noticed something half-tucked away under a piece of loose carpet. He picked it up, and smiled rather bitterly, as he saw that it was a half-worn revolving rubber heel.

"Ay, they left something behind them, after all," he muttered. "I think I'll send it on by post—I don't want to keep anything that's not belonging to me. Maybe they'll accuse me of stealing this!"

He slipped the rubber heel into his pocket, and firmly made up his mind that he would follow the impulse. He would send that heel to Dick Goodwin—Dick had said that all letters addressed to St. Frank's Camp, Oldham, would reach him. Yes, he wouldn't keep anything that belonged to any of the juniors.

Dick passed downstairs, and found his landlady in the little hall.

"Ay, Dick, but it seems theer's been trouble," said the woman kindly. "Them boys weren't friendly, tha knows!"

Dick nodded.

"Oh, just a bit of a squabble, Mother," he said affectionately. "Nothing much—you needn't bother!"

"I don't like to see thee worried, lad," replied the landlady. "And theer was another boy who came—in the morning——"

"Another!" said Dick quickly. "Who was he?"

"Thou'rt got me beat theer, Mark," said the old lady. "He came and went upstairs, and I couldn't stop him, seeing that I wasn't here. 'Twas little Emma who let him in."

"Oh!" said Mark slowly. "Did he stay long?"

"Only a few minutes."

Mark nodded.

"Oh, it was nothing," he said. "Thanks, Mother."

He passed out, his eyes gleaming. He was beginning to understand. Somebody had planted those things especially for the purpose of accusing him. It was a pretty little plot—how could he expose it?

His first impulse was to hasten to the St. Frank's camp, and explain about that early visitor. But, upon due reflection, he came to the conclusion that it would be useless.

Who would believe him?

After the events that had already taken place, who would take his word that somebody had gone to his room in the early part of the day? By going to the camp, he would only lay himself open to further humiliation.

And, after all, what did he care? Why should he worry himself about those schoolboys? They were nothing in his life. It didn't matter to him whether they believed him innocent or guilty.

The affair was over—it was an episode of the past.

But not quite.

For Mark Finch had that rubber heel in his pocket, and although it seemed such an insignificant little item, it was to prove of great importance later on.

CHAPTER IX.

LEARNING THE TRUTH!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH grunted.

"I don't like it!" he exclaimed, with his mouth full.

"All right—don't eat it!" said Church. "Two minutes ago you said these muffins were the best you'd ever tasted. And now you say you don't like 'em! Blessed if I can understand you, old man."

Handforth glared.

"Fathead!" he said witheringly. "I wasn't talking about the muffins at all!"

Handforth and Co. were partaking of tea. It was the following day, and everything was going on smoothly in the St. Frank's camp. Lessons were over, and it so happened that Handforth and Co. had Caravan No. 2 to themselves. The other fellows were out.

"I don't like it!" repeated Handforth. "About Finch, I mean."

"Oh!" said Church and McClure.

"Somehow, it didn't seem right to me," continued Edward Oswald. "I'm not soft, but there was something about the chap

that made me feel rather rotten. He looks such a good sort, and——"

"Oh, give him a rest!" growled Church. "It's all over and done with—why not forget all about it?"

"Because I can't forget!" roared Handforth, banging the table. "Don't argue with me!"

"Help!" gasped McClure, rescuing his tea-cup just as it was about to slide into his lap. "You—you dangerous ass! Look what you've done!"

"I've done nothing," snorted Handforth.

"Nearly upset all my tea!"

"Nearly isn't quite!" said Handy. "Any-how, I wish I had! You chaps need a few bombs now and again, to wake you up! I tell you, I don't like all that business about Finch."

"No?" said Church sarcastically. "Let me see, I think you said that about fifty-seven times during to-day and yesterday. You remind me of the Heinz advertisements!"

Handforth gave a cackle.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed derisively. "That's supposed to be funny, isn't it? Ass! Fathead! And look here, don't make jokes like that!" he roared. "If you can't show any common-sense, you'd better turn yourself into an oyster! I'm not in the mood to stand any rot!"

Church and McClure sighed.

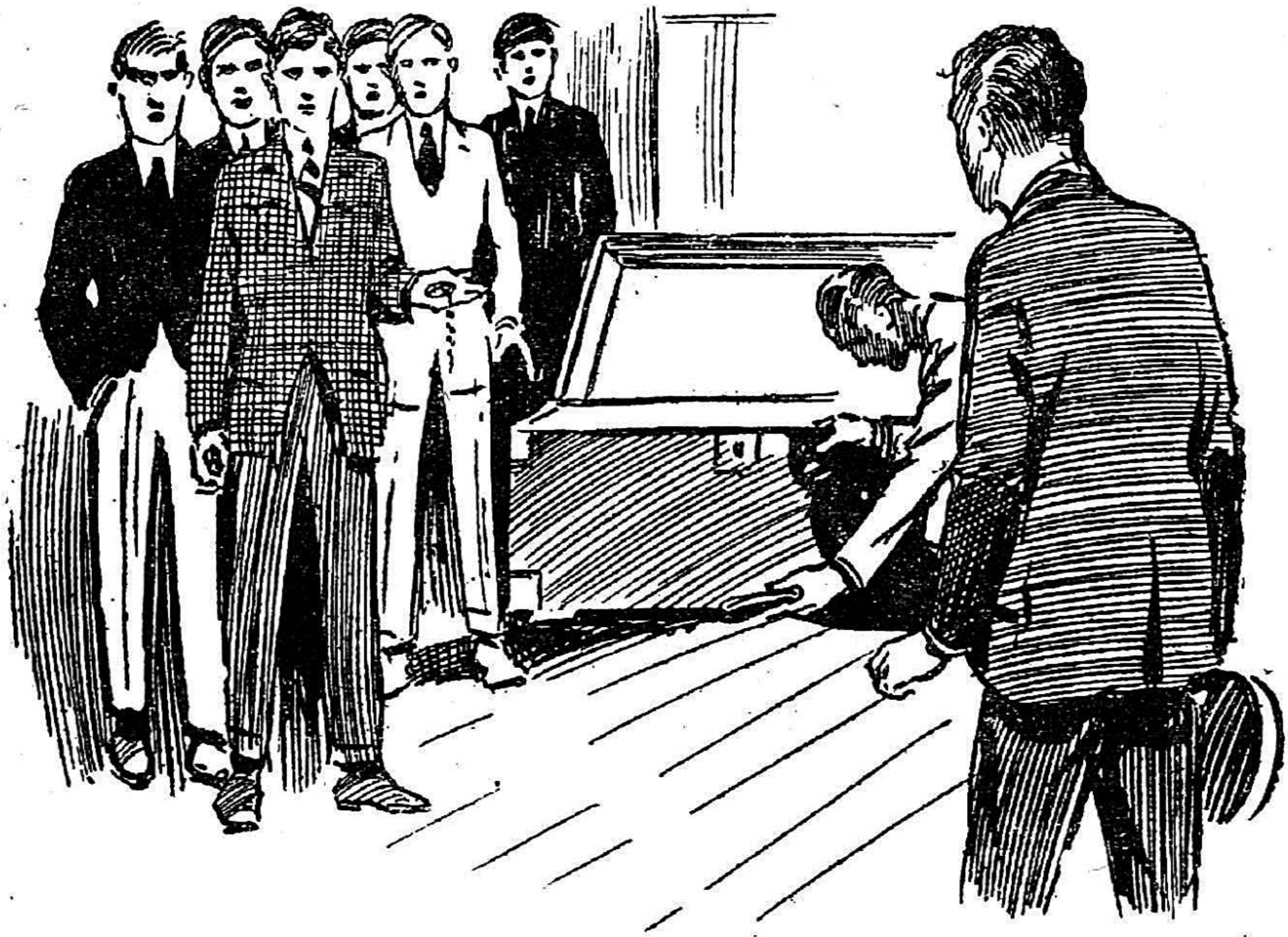
"Oh, go on!" said Church weakly. "I'll give in—you win!"

"Well, it's a good job you've taken the sensible view," said Handforth. "There's that chap Finch, accused of stealing all our goods, and I don't believe he did it! I've been thinking the whole thing over, and I've formed a theory."

McClure groaned.

"What's that?" asked Handforth.

"I didn't say a word!" said McClure stoutly.



Church turned round, his face flushed, and he held a watch in his hand. Solomon Levi gave a sudden gasp. "By my life!" he exclaimed. "My Bar-mitzvah watch!"

"No, but you made an animal-like noise!" sneered Edward Oswald. "Whenever you chaps are afraid of me, you resort to all sorts of sounds like dying elephants or wounded alligators! I repeat, I've got a theory!"

"Are you off on the detective stuff again?" asked Church, in alarm.

"What do you mean—off on the detective stuff again?" demanded Handforth. "And why do you speak in a tone like that? I tell you, I've got a theory. I believe that Finch's brother came to our caravan that night."

"Finch's brother?"

"Yes. It was he who pinched the stuff," said Handforth knowingly. "You see, I've got it all as clear as a bell. Finch knew that his brother was the culprit, and he daren't say so. At least, he was decent enough to keep quiet. He took the blame for his brother's crime—just like they do on pictures. I expect that's where Finch took the idea from!"

"And is that your theory?" asked Church.

"Yes."

"I don't like to mess it up, but it seems to me that a flaw's somewhere," said Church. "Of course, you may have noticed it, but I'd better point it out. Even a marvellous chap like you may miss a tiny detail."

Handforth glared.

"A flaw?" he repeated. "Tell me what it is!"

"Oh, hardly anything—a mere trifle," said Church. "But I suppose you know that Finch's brother is in prison?"

Handforth started.

"By Georg'!" he said. "So he is!"

He seemed quite astonished for a moment, but then he nodded.

"Of course, that's a bit of jag, I'll admit," he said, at length. "All the same, it doesn't destroy my theory. You see Finch's brother must have hopped out of prison for the occasion, and then he was collared again."

Church and McClure felt rather weak. A master detective who argued in that way was something quite novel. But Handforth was not going to be done. He wasn't going to see a wonderful theory ruined by his own chums.

Handforth's attitude was very much the same as the other fellows.

All the chaps who had suffered loss—and who had now regained their losses—had an uncomfortable feeling that they hadn't pursued their inquiries far enough. And the very suspicion that they had acted unjustly towards Mark Finch made them flush at the thought.

However, it was over now, and it couldn't be revived.

That was the way the juniors looked at it. It wasn't worth bothering about. And after all, Mark hadn't come to any harm—nobody knew anything about the affair. So it was allowed to drift on.

And while Handforth and Co. were arguing in Caravan No. 2, a very different individual was attempting to doze in Caravan No. 1. This individual was no less a person that Archibald Winston Derek Glenthorne.

Archie, to use his own expression, was sampling forty of the best.

So far, he had only secured about a dozen, and was well in arrears. This was partly owing to the fact that Handforth's voice penetrated into the first caravan. And then, as soon as Handforth subsided, other voices came.

Archie sat up, at last, rather impatient.

"This, he observed, is positively foul. I mean to say, a chappie can't get any dashed sleep at all! I might just as well be sitting in the middle of the bally tramway lines!"

There was a note of complaint in his voice, and he eyed the open window reluctantly. He didn't want to close it. The evening was warm, and the air sultry. But even stuffiness was preferable to noise.

But just then Archie became more alert.

He detected the voices of Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell. The three cads of the Remove were taking a quiet walk outside on the grass—probably believing that this part of the camp was nearly deserted. In any case, their conversation was not absolutely private.

"The fools!" Fullwood was saying. "Fancy lettin' the cad off like that! They ought to have had him arrested!"

"Just like 'em—the soft asses!" said Gulliver. "An' we were expectin' to see the report in the papers, an' all that! What was the good of you plottin' an' plannin', and——"

"Shush, you idiot!" growled Fullwood. "Do you want to tell the whole camp!"

"Oh, rats! There's nobody here."

"Whether there is or not, there's no need to talk about it in the open," grunted Fullwood. "Confound! Rats to the bally heel!"

"What are you talkin' about?"

"I've lost one of my rubber heels!" snapped Fullwood. "I meant to put my other boots on to-day, but I forgot to. That's the worst of those rotten revolvin' things—I won't have any more!"

The juniors passed out of hearing, and Archie lay back.

"It seems that Archie is about to have a little peace at last," he murmured. "Good! I might even go so far as to say dashed good! In fact, good twice! Now for the good old tissue reviver!"

Archie closed his eyes, and pondered over the few words he had overheard. He did so idly, and not because he wanted to dwell upon them. Sleep somehow would not come, although he wooed it assiduously.

"I mean to say, plotting—what?" murmured Archie, after a while. "Taking it one way and another, that's a somewhat poisonous word. I mean, it suggests all sorts of dashed villainy, and what not!"

Again Archie pondered.

"Plotting and planning!" he went on. "Of course, there's all sorts of plotting, when you come to think of it. But those blighters were talking about the mill chappie the poor old cove who got it largely in the neck. Somehow, I feel a huge supply of sorrow for the lad."

Archie dropped off at last, and after dozing for a while he was soon in a sound sleep. And by the time he woke up he had forgotten all about the affair. It passed completely out of his mind.

And the next day the Travelling School moved on.

The occupants of Caravan No. 2 were

relieved. They felt that it was better to get out of the district—when they would soon be able to forget all about the unfortunate affair with the mill boy.

Nelson Lee had decided to take the Remove up into the Lake District; but, before actually getting there, we were due to stay for a short period near Blackpool. Most of the juniors were eager to see the famous northern watering-place—the summer Mecca of all the cotton operatives.

And, although we should still carry on with lessons just the same as usual, there would still be heaps of opportunity for seaside enjoyment. After leaving Blackpool we should work our way up the coast, passing through Lancaster and Kendal, and so on to the banks of Lake Windermere.

It was a fine programme.

We arrived in Blackpool without incident, and the first evening of our visit it poured with rain, and effectively kept us bottled up in camp. But all our chauffeurs attended to our various wants, and we were quite comfortable.

That same evening, while Dick Goodwin was chatting with some of the fellows in Caravan No. 2, a few letters arrived. Many of them had been re-directed on from Oldham.

There were one or two visitors in Caravan No. 2, including Archie Glenthorne. Archie really wanted to go to his own caravan, but was afraid of the rain. So he was making the best of a bad job, and lounging elegantly in an easy chair.

Dick had been doing his best to forget all about Mark, but had not succeeded. He told himself that he had, but he was wrong.

And when a somewhat bulky letter was handed to him he looked at it closely.

It was addressed in a neat, boyish handwriting, and Dick saw at a glance that the envelope bore the Oldham postmark.

"By gum!" he muttered. "It's from Mark!"

He tore the envelope open quickly. A sudden idea had come to him that Mark had discovered something, and was able to prove they had accused him wrongly. But it was the wish that was father to the thought, and Dick was disappointed.

As soon as he had opened the letter he was astonished to find a single rubber heel—much worn, and rather dirty. It had been wrapped in a plain sheet of paper, and Dick looked at it in amazement.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he murmured.

And then he found that there was another slip of paper, too. He opened this out, and saw that there were some words written upon it. There were only a few, and there was no date or address:

"This belongs to one of your pals, I expect. They must have overlooked it when they were here after their property. I suppose they'll think I tried to steal this, too, and so I return it now.

"MARK."

Dick compressed his lips.

"Ay, but he needn't have been so bitter as that!" he said sadly. "I didn't think Mark could act——"

"What are you mumbling to yourself for?" asked Handforth. "And what's that you've got there?"

"Don't be so jolly inquisitive!" muttered Church.

"Inquisitive—who's inquisitive?" said Handforth warmly. "I don't want to know what the letter's about! Huh! I'm blessed if I care anything about Dick Goodwin's affairs! But it's jolly queer that he should receive worn rubber heels through the post!"

"What?"

Dick Goodwin handed the letter to the fellows, and held up the heel.

"It explains itself," he said quietly.

Archie gazed at the heel with mild interest. Then, quite abruptly, his monocle dropped out of his eye. A flush came over his face, and he leaned forward in his chair.

"I mean to say, that's dashed queer!" he exclaimed. "That rubber heel, don't you know! Gadzooks! It seems to me that it ought to provide a pretty decent kind of a clue."

Everybody in the caravan turned and looked at Archie with great curiosity.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRIAL!

"CLUE?" said Dick Goodwin quickly.

"Absolutely!"

"Clue to what?"

"Well, I mean to say, about this chappie, Finch?" said Archie. "It seems to me, dear old sportsmen, that we ought to look into this business. When it comes to brains, I think I'm somewhat out of the running; but there are others. Nipper, for example. Nipper has got vast stores of brain packed away——"

"Blow Nipper!" growled Handforth. "What about me?"

"Oh, absolutely!" said Archie. "Of course! I mean, when it comes to brains, I think you can count yourselves among the also-rans, old onion——"

"Oh, can I?" snorted Handforth.

"Steady on—don't get fighting!" exclaimed De Valerie. "What's the excitement about, anyway? Oh, here's Nipper! Just the man!"

"What's the argument about?" I asked, as I entered the caravan.

Dick Goodwin quickly explained about the note he had received from Mark Finch, and he exhibited the rubber heel. I read the note, and I looked at the heel. Then I looked at the Lancashire boy.

"Well, I can't see much to write home about," I said. "I expect the chap was feeling a bit upset, and——"

"You don't understand!" said Dick. "Archie declares that that rubber heel ought to provide a clue. I don't know what

he means, but Archie isn't such a duffer, on the quiet."

"Archie is as keen as mustard when he likes," I agreed, nodding.

Archie beamed.

"That, of course, is rot!" he said. "At the same time, a certain amount of gratification is oozing down the old spine. The fact is, laddies, I should like to ask a few questions about this priceless affair."

"Go ahead," I said briskly.

"I'd like to know the names of the dear chappies who went into Mark Finch's room that day," said Archie.

I supplied the names in a string, and added that all the juniors were present. Archie looked them over, and donned his monocle.

"Now, about the rubber heel," he said. "Who, as it were, lost it?"

Nobody accepted liability. It came out, in fact, that not one of the juniors wore revolving rubber heels. It was quite impossible, in fact, that any one of them could adopt that article in Mark's room.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "That's pretty cute, you know! Archie isn't such a duffer, after all!"

"But what does it prove?" asked De Valerie.

"I won't be sure," said Archie; "but I think I can safely say that this rubber heel belongs to Fullwood!"

"Fullwood!" gasped Dick Goodwin.

"Absolutely!"

A great light dawned upon the Lancashire lad.

"Fullwood!" he repeated huskily. "Then—then that proves as clear as daylight that Fullwood was in Mark's room—even before we were! And Fullwood hated Mark like poison, because Mark knocked him down! Ay, lad, I can see it all! Fullwood took those things, and planted them——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "Not quite so fast. Let's get this thing clear. Archie, how on earth do you know that Fullwood lost a rubber heel?"

"Well, I don't like to admit it, old lads, but it so happened that I enacted the part of one of those frightful eavesdropper chappies," confessed Archie. "You see, I was attempting to buzz off into the good old arms of Morpheus——"

"Cut it short, you ass!" growled Handforth.

Archie attempted to do so, but he insisted upon going his own way to work. But at last we heard all about it. We heard the few words that Archie had listened to just before we had left Oldham.

"You see, Fullwood distinctly said that he had dropped a rubber heel somewhere," concluded Archie. "And, I mean to say, there was that chatter about plotting, and so forth. Rather like two and two—what? I've always heard, old darlings, that a brace of twos make four!"

I took a deep breath.

"Archie, old son, you've found the missing link," I said. "Until this evidence came to hand we had nothing whatever to connect Fullwood with the affair. We didn't even know that he was interested."

"But it seems to be as clear as daylight!" said Dick eagerly. "Fullwood must have put those things in Mark's room——"

"It won't do any good to make conjectures," I said briskly. "We'll confront Fullwood with this heel, and see how he acts. We'll put him through the third degree, and, if he's guilty, we'll make him confess."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good wheeze!"

"Why not hold a kind of trial?" suggested Pitt. "I'll be the prosecuting counsel, and Nipper can be the judge. We've done it before, but that doesn't matter. We'll send Fullwood into the dock, and cross-examine him."

"You don't cross-examine prisoners?" said De Valerie.

"That doesn't matter—we needn't keep to court procedure," said Pitt calmly. "You can't beat a trial, especially on a wet evening like this! But we won't hold it for a bit—we'll get our evidence together first."

The fellows were enthusiastic over the idea.

It was something new. The rain was coming down so hard that we couldn't get out, and we were hemmed in the caravans anyhow. And for quite a while Pitt and I and one or two others were busy.

We didn't keep to our own caravan—we went into some of the others. But at last all was ready.

Inside Caravan No. 2 preparations had been made. Some of the movable chairs had been turned about until the place looked something like a court. There was the dock, and the judge's chair, and the witness-box.

And a couple of warders—in other words, Handforth and Church—were despatched to bring the prisoner. By the time they arrived, the court was sitting, in all its stateliness.

Fullwood was fairly dragged into the caravan, looking rather alarmed. He gave a start as he saw what was taking place.

"What's the idea of all this rot?" he asked sourly. "Lemme go, you asses! I'm not going to stand this sort of thing——"

"You're the prisoner at the bar, and you'll stand anything!" said Handforth grimly. "By George! Insubordination from the dock! The nerve of it! Get to your place, you rotter!"

Fullwood was hustled into the dock, and he stood there, very uneasy.

Gulliver and Bell had come in after him—not because they had been called, but because they were very anxious to know what had happened to their leader. And nobody threw them out, because it was hoped that they might be of use.

"You—you cads!" snarled Fullwood. "What do you think you're doing? What's the idea of putting me here?"

"Prisoner at the bar, you stand in the dock accused of conspiracy and villainy against one Mark Finch!" said Pitt severely. "Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

Fullwood started, and turned pale.

"See that?" roared Handforth. "He's guilty!"

"Silence in court!" I commanded. "Dry up, you fathead!"

"I'm not guilty, of course!" said Fullwood harshly. "You—you fools! What's the good of reviving that old affair——"

"Ah! You don't want it revived—eh?" exclaimed the prosecuting counsel. "I dare say not. But it so happens that this court demands that it shall be revived. Do you or do you not confess that you took various articles from this caravan on a certain night early this week, and planted them in Mark Finch's room in his lodging?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" said Fullwood unsteadily.

"I think you do!" said Pitt. "We will give you every chance to admit your guilt—and it will be all the better for you if you confess at once. Now then! What have you got to say?"

"Nothing!" snarled Fullwood. "I never knew anything about Finch."

"Glenthorne, I call upon you as a witness," said the prosecuting counsel. "Kindly step into the box."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Anything to oblige, old lad."

"Now, Glenthorne, kindly repeat the evidence you overheard."

Archie did so, at length.

"What have you got to say, prisoner?" demanded counsel. "You have heard the witness carefully describe that he heard your voices outside his caravan—he heard you say that there had been plotting——"

"The idiot doesn't know what he's talking about," snapped Fullwood.

"Do you admit that you lost one of your rubber heels?"

Fullwood stared.

"Of course I do!" he said.

"Ah!" exclaimed counsel, pointing an accusing finger. "Now, I think, we have got you! You freely admit that you lost a heel?"

"Yes, you madman!"

"Goodwin, kindly enter the witness-box," said Pitt. "Exhibit the heel which was sent to you by Mark Finch through the post."

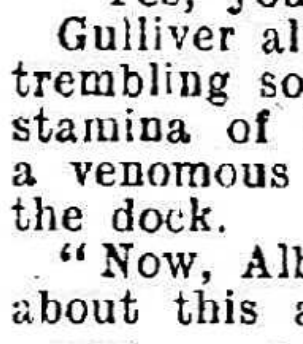
Dick Goodwin entered the witness-box, and exhibited the heel. Fullwood looked at it, aghast.

"Now," said counsel, "I have here one of Fullwood's boots—in fact, a pair of boots. From one boot the heel is missing. Goodwin, be good enough to compare the heel which Finch sent with this one on Fullwood's boot."

Dick Goodwin did so—and the two heels were identical.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PUNISHMENT!



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD stared at the heels dazedly.

"That—that proves nothin'!" he blustered, at length. "You're tryin' to fake up a case against me."

"On the contrary, the case is plain and clear," interrupted counsel. "This heel came by post to-night—and it was sent by Finch That heel was found in his room. And the evidence proves, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that you, prisoner at the bar, visited Finch's lodging."

"It's a lie!" snarled Fullwood desperately.

"Do you admit that you visited Finch's lodging?"

"No, I don't!"

"Well, whether you admit it or not, the evidence is plain," said Pitt. "For the moment, you may stand down. Warders, look after the prisoner. Albert Gulliver, step into the dock."

"Me!" gasped Gulliver faintly.

"Yes, you!"

Gulliver almost had to be assisted—he was trembling so much. He did not possess the stamina of his leader. Fullwood gave him a venomous glance as he took his place in the dock.

"Now, Albert Gulliver, what do you know about this affair?" demanded counsel.

"Nun-nothing!" faltered Gulliver.

"Did you take part in the plotting?"

"Nunno, I didn't!"

"Then you admit that there was some plotting?"

"Why, yes—I—I mean nunno!" gasped Gulliver. "Bell an' I were against it all the time! We told Fully that he would get found out——"

"You infernal blabmouth!" hissed Fullwood.

"I think," said prosecuting counsel, "that the evidence is now complete. It would be a waste of time to proceed further. The judge will now pass sentence on all three prisoners. Bell will be included."

Bell started forward.

"That's not fair!" he said hotly. "Gulliver and I didn't take part in it at all! We didn't do a thing! It was Fullwood's plot from the first. He slipped into this caravan that night, an' took all the things. And he went down to Finch's lodging the next morning. We didn't know anything about it until afterwards! Fullwood thought that Finch would be arrested."

Pitt smiled blandly.

"I thought the little trick would succeed," he said. "How's that, judge? I had an idea that one of these chaps would tell the truth about Fullwood. It seems that there is only one prisoner, after all. But we've got to the truth. That's the main thing."

I'll slaughter you for this, you cads!" snarled Fullwood hoarsely.

"Silence!" I commanded. "Allow Gulliver and Bell to go. They're a couple of cads, but I don't think they took any part in this dirty plot. Fullwood, you stand there accused of a particularly mean and contemptible crime!"

Ralph Leslie nearly choked.

"If—if you touch me——" he began.

"And the sentence of the court is that you shall be sent to Coventry for a period of seven days!" I proceeded.

"What!" gasped Handforth. "Is that all?"

"Kindly allow me to finish, warder!" I said gravely. "Don't chip in, you ass! Allow me to complete the speech for the bench! Now, prisoner at the bar, in addition to being sent to Coventry for a week, you will now receive a sound and complete flogging."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth warmly.

"If you touch me, I'll yell——"

"That, of course, will be entirely your own affair," I continued. "But I think it only fair to point out that if you do yell Mr. Lee will undoubtedly make inquiries."

Fullwood started.

"Ah, that makes you think—eh?" I said grimly. "And if Mr. Lee makes inquiries, this unfortunate affair will all come out. And I rather fancy that our flogging will not be quite so severe as a flogging from the guv'nor—to say nothing of possible expulsion."

Fullwood gave a kind of snarl.

"All right—go ahead!" he muttered. "You've got me! I can't do a thing!"

"I'm glad you realise it," I said. "Executioner, step forward!"

I didn't exactly know who the executioner was going to be, but Handforth was the first one to move. He seemed to take keen pleasure in the prospect. He looked at Fullwood in very much the same manner as a spider might look at a fly.

"Where's the stick?" asked Handforth, with relish.

"You—you beasts!" muttered Fullwood. "Don't touch me——"

"You said that before, and it cuts no ice!" I interrupted. "The flogging will now proceed—and don't forget the warning."

In a few moments, one of the easy chairs was brought forward, and Fullwood was laid across it. He was held down on both sides so that he was slightly arched—and his rear portion was invitingly handy.

"That's the idea!" said Edward Oswald. "How many strokes?"

"Twenty!" I ordered.

Handforth seemed to think that this was altogether too light, but I didn't. And then the punishment commenced. It might have been supposed that Handforth was rather brutal, but, actually, he wasn't.

He knew exactly how far to go.

And when he started whacking the prisoner, he did so with nice judgment. He laid it across Fullwood properly, but not viciously. And every one of his cuts smarted fearfully.

"Ooooh!" gasped Fullwood. "Yaroooh! Wow!"

But all these sounds were subdued—Fullwood dared not raise his voice. For once in a while he was compelled to take his punishment without howling.

"Good!" said Handforth, after he had counted fifteen. "Now then, you cad, you've got to do something else. Blow the judge! I'm in command now! You've got to say that you're a worm and a reptile!"

"Hang you, I won't!" hissed Fullwood.

Slash!

"Wow!" gasped the prisoner.

"Say you're a worm!"

"I won't!"

Slash!

"I—I'm a worm!" hooted Fullwood wildly.

"You are!" agreed Handforth. "Go on—and you're a reptile!"

"I'm a reptile!" repeated Ralph Leslie, between his teeth.

"That's the way! I'm glad you admit your breed! And now you've got to say that you're not fit to eat out of a pig trough!"

Fullwood hated saying it, but he was compelled to. And when, at last, he was allowed to crawl away, he was thoroughly subdued. And he had received a punishment that was thoroughly deserved.

"And we've got to thank Archie for all this, strictly speaking," I declared, after Fullwood had gone.

"Oh, absolutely not!" said Archie modestly. "That is, I didn't actually mean to display any large amount of brain power. The fact is, it simply whizzed into my belfry like a kind of draught. One of those dashed brain waves, you know."

"And there's Mark—left alone!" murmured Dick Goodwin. "Oh, what a shame! Ay, lads, it was rotten, the way we treated him!"

"My hat, yes!" said De Valerie, his conscience pricking him. "The way we went on at him—the way we refused to take his hand!"

"And the way we refused to believe him!" said Somerton. "I say, we're a lot of cads, strictly speaking. We might have known that there was something like this at the bottom of the affair. What are we going to do?"

"I'll tell you what we'll do," I replied grimly. "I've got an idea."

"What is it?" asked Dick.

"We're going to Oldham."

"Eh?"

"We're going back to Oldham!" I repeated. "We're going to find Mark, and ask him to forgive us. It's only right that we should. He is one of the best, and we treated him badly."

"But—but how?" asked Dick eagerly.

"By train, of course!"

"I'll tell you what we'll do," I replied grimly. "I've got an idea."

"What is it?" asked Dick.

"We're going to Oldham."

"Eh?"

"We're going back to Oldham!" I repeated. "We're going to find Mark, and ask him to forgive us. It's only right that we should. He is one of the best, and we treated him badly."

"But—but how?" asked Dick eagerly.

"By train, of course!"

"Train!" said Handforth. "It's all very well to talk about going by train, but Mr. Lee will probably have something to say about that."

"Of course he will," I agreed. "But leave it to me. It's comparatively early in the evening, and Oldham isn't such a tremendous way off. For a special occasion, the guv'nor might allow us to pop over."

"I'll bet he won't!" said Pitt doubtfully.

"It'll be all right if we promise to get back by midright," I said. "We shall be late for once, but a little less sleep won't do us any harm. We shall have about half-an hour with Mark, and that'll be enough."

"Good!" said Handforth, after he had counted fifteen. "Now then, you cad, you've got to do something else! Blow the judge! I'm in command now! You've got to say that you're a worm and a reptile!"

CHAPTER XII.

ALL SERENE!

"Good!" said Dick. "By gum! Try and work it, lad."

"I will!" I promised.

I really felt that the occasion demanded some extra special effort.

The thought of Mark Finch made me quite uncomfortable. The poor chap had been treated horribly rough. He was innocent all the time—the victim of Fullwood's vindictive plotting.

And, when I remembered that scene in

Mark's room, I marvelled at the splendid way in which the mill boy had composed himself. Being innocent all the time, he had nevertheless managed to keep himself under control. He had even attempted to excuse the fellows for accusing him.

"Poor chap!" I muttered. "We've got to go—that's all there is about it!"

I saw the guv'nor, and told him how rotten it was to be hemmed in during the rain. I used all my persuasive powers, and gave him a vague, sketchy outline of the facts.

I didn't go into any details, because I knew he didn't want them. I didn't mention any names. But I let him know pretty clearly that it was of the utmost importance that we should receive the pass.

And Nelson Lee like the good 'un he is, gave his consent. But he looked up the train for us, and said that unless we were back by a certain time we should all receive stiff punishments.

I carried the news back to the anxious crowd with a smiling face.

"O.K.!" I said, as I entered the caravan.

"What!" gasped Reggie Pitt.

"All serene!"

"Mr. Lee is willing to let us go?" asked Dick eagerly.

"Absolutely!" I grinned.

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, good!"

"But we'd better not waste any time!" I warned. "The station's a good way off, and we shall have to rush like the dickens if we're going to catch the train. It's all mapped out, and we reckon to have not more than twenty minutes with Finch. But that will be enough. As for the fares——"

"Sithee, lads—I'll pay the fares!" shouted Dick enthusiastically.

But nobody allowed this—the fares were paid individually.

And before long we were all in a fast train for Oldham, jubilant and keenly looking forward to the meeting with the badly treated Mark. We didn't care anything about the rain now. As a matter of fact, it had nearly stopped.

And by the time we had reached Oldham, the summer's evening was almost clear. And we made a bee-line for Mark's lodgings. By the time we arrived we found that we should only be able to stay about fifteen minutes. We simply had to catch the specified train back to Blackpool.

We hammered on the door, and the landlady opened it.

"Ay, sakes alive!" she exclaimed. "What's all this? Them lads again! Tha' mustn't coom here——"

"Is Mark in his room?" asked Dick quickly.

"Ay, he is."

"Hurrah!"

The worthy lady was not able to make any protests—at least, she made them, but nobody took any notice. Dick Goodwin rushed past her and tore up the stairs, and the other juniors rushed in his wake.

The noise was terrific.

Dick Goodwin burst into Mark's room, his face flushed and excited. Mark, as a matter of fact, was sitting down, engaged in writing a letter. He turned round, rather alarmed at all the commotion.

"By gum!" he gasped. "Ay, lad, what——"

"Mark!" shouted Dick. "You—you poor old bounder. We've come back to apologise—to ask you to forgive us!"

He grabbed Mark by the shoulders, and then grabbed his hand.

"Sithee, lad——"

"It's all out—we know the truth!" exclaimed Dick. "It wasn't you at all—it was one of our own crowd! Fullwood! You remember Fullwood? That chap who kicked the little kid! You knocked him down! Well, it was Fullwood who took those things, and planted them in your room, here."

Goodwin got it out in one breathless rush.

"Ay, lad, I—I don't understand!" exclaimed Mark, although the very fact of all these juniors coming here was eloquent enough. "Sithee, I—I——"

He simply wasn't allowed to speak.

The fellows all crowded round him, and seemed to be under the impression that his arm was a pump handle. They worked it up and down vigorously, they slapped him on the back, and generally knocked him about until he was breathless.

At last the excitement died down a bit.

"And now perhaps I can get a word in edgeways!" I said. "It's all very well to come here and knock Mark about in your enthusiasm—but what has Mark got to say? Don't you think we all ought to apologise in a humble manner? Don't you think we ought to ask him to forgive us for being such rotters?"

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth.

Mark looked at us with gleaming eyes.

"Ay, I knew it!" he said. "I could feel it in my bones! I couldn't believe that you chaps were all against me. Forgive you? Tha' knows I do! Reet heartily I forgive you! Everything's all right now!"

"Rather!"

"And I don't blame thee, neither," continued Mark. "It was black against me—particularly as my brother was in the hands of the police——"

"What!" exclaimed Dick. "What do you mean—'was'?"

"Isn't he in the hands of the police now?" I asked.

"Nay"

"He's—he's been released?"

"Ay"

"You—you mean that he's innocent?" shouted Dick joyfully.

Mark looked at us proudly.

"Ay, it's been proved that he was wrongfully arrested," he said. "Tha knows, my brother happened to be in the post-office at the time, and some fools mistook him for one of the robbers. But it coom out in the evidence that he wasn't one of the party at all!"

"Hurrah!"

"Absolutely!" exclaimed Archie. "That's topping, old laddie. I mean to say, everything in the dashed garden appears to be somewhat lovely!"

"Ay, I'm feeling champion," declared Mark. "I was just writing to Dick telling him all about it. By gum! I never thought that you chaps would be here to-night—I never hoped for it. I've never been so happy in my life. It's all coming out fine!"

"Rather!" said Handforth warmly.

"And now we've got to rush off again!" I said, glancing at my watch. Time's up! We've been here, and Mark has forgiven us. That's the main thing. Bustle about, you chaps—look lively!"

Mark was disappointed.

"Ay, but I wanted thee to stay and meet my brother——" he began.

Then he broke off, and gave a glad cry as a well built young fellow entered the door, looking extremely astonished to find such a crowd there.

And during the next few moments we were all introduced to Harry Finch. He didn't seem to have the strong, sturdy character of Mark, but there was plenty of good in him. And that post-office affair had taught him a lesson he would never forget. He was not likely to mix with any questionable company again.

And after we had bade Mark good-bye, we dashed off at full speed to the station.

And we just had time to stop at the jeweller's, lump some money together—every fellow contributed—and to buy a gold watch and chain. These we instructed the jeweller to pack up, and send to Mark.

It was just a little token of our regard for him.

And when we got into the train, and lay back among the cushions, we felt all the better and all the happier. We felt that we had made some slight amends for the wrong we had done to the Lancashire mill boy.

And, as Archie remarked, everything was frightfully priceless!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

My dear Readers,

Next week's story, "THE MYSTERY OF LAKE THIRTLEMERE; or, St. Frank's in the Lake District," concludes the caravan school series, and, at the same time, is the introductory story to Our Grand Summer Holiday Adventure series—a feature that has made our paper stand out supreme in the romance of adventure, as it has been in rollicking school tales and thrilling detective mysteries.

THE AUTHOR GOES TO AMERICA.

Realising the great number of new readers who every year are attracted by our special Holiday Adventure stories, the author has determined this year to excel himself in this series by actually travelling to America—where the Holiday Party this time will visit—and study the people, their customs and their great country for your special benefit, my chums. He has provided himself with a wonderful amount of first hand material, facts and information from the New York underworld to New Mexico, the Arizona Desert and California. And he is writing these fascinating tales while 'over there' and mails them to me every week. He has been in America some months now, and from this you may be sure that his stories will bear the stamp of authority of one who writes from personal observation.

I WANT YOU TO BOOM THESE STORIES!

I do not suppose there is another boys' paper in England to-day which has gone to this trouble in getting the real atmosphere as we have done. I know that all of you who read these lines will not fail to read our coming great adventure series. But I want you, in addition, to BOOM these stories to your friends and so make "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" read throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain. Now pull together, my lads, and do your very best, as I am doing for you!

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

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