

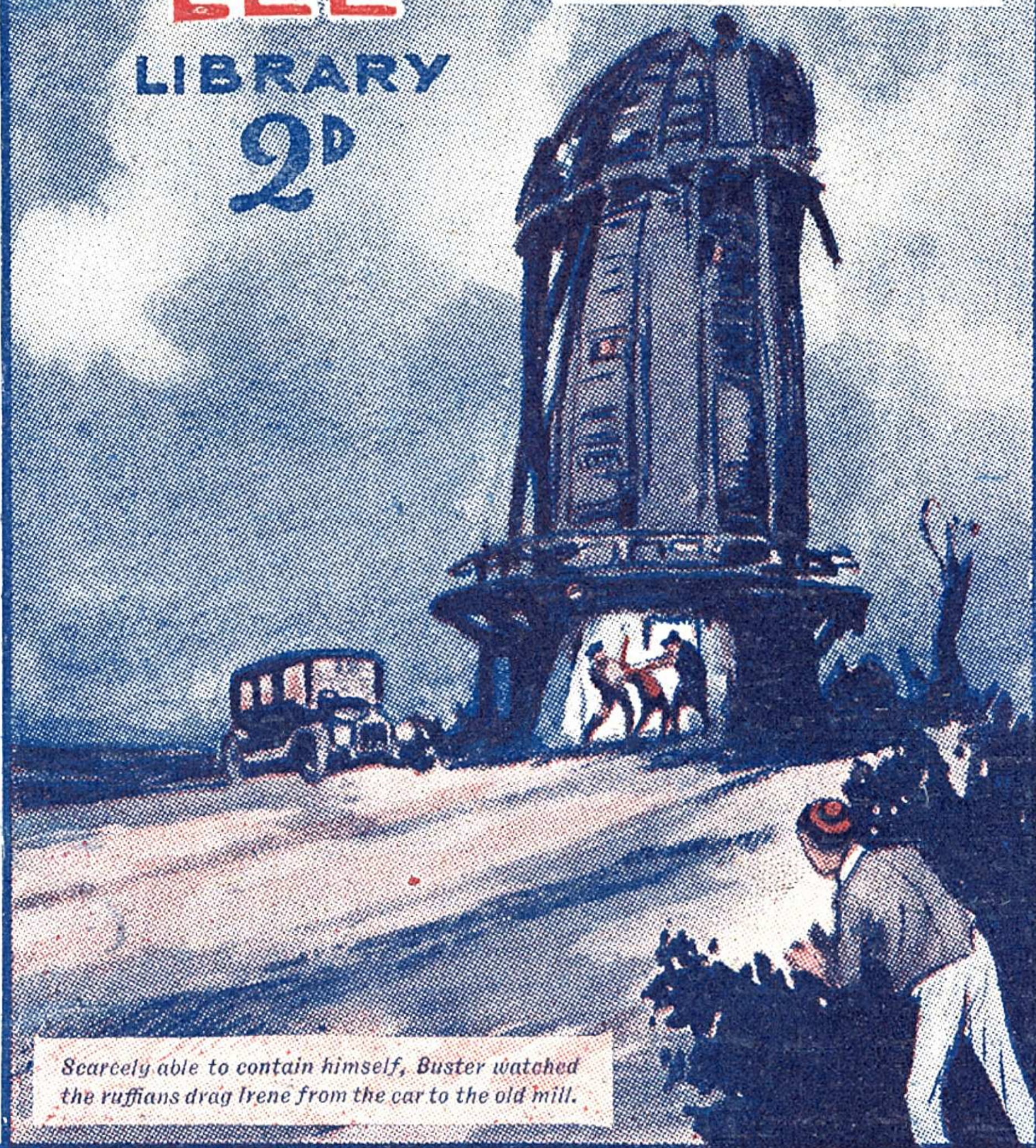
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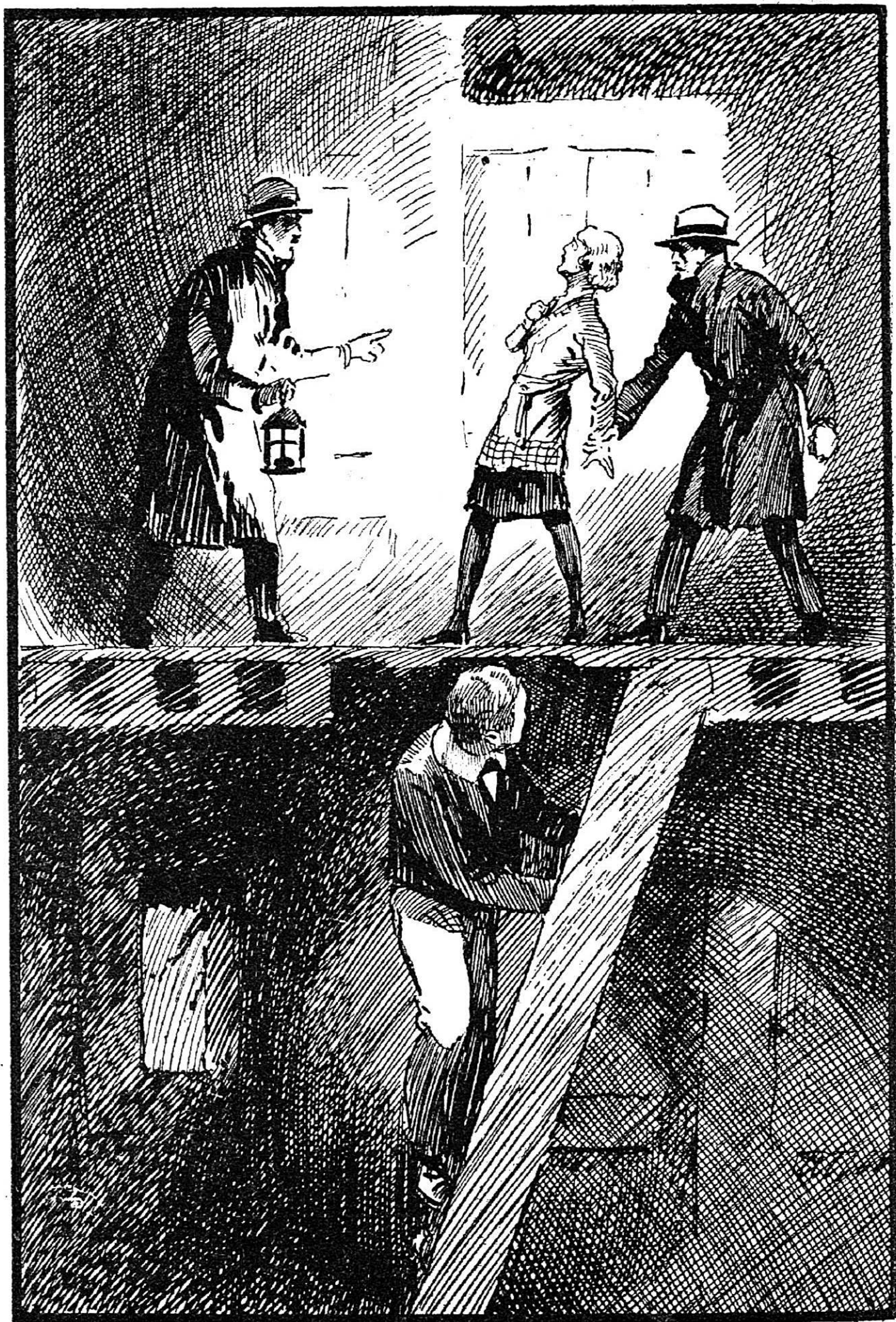
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*Scarcely able to contain himself, Buster watched
the ruffians drag Irene from the car to the old mill.*

The above dramatic episode is taken from this week's
thrilling narrative of St. Frank's :—

**THE GREEN CAR ; OR, BUSTER
THE BRICK !**



He clung there, listening intently. And through the old rotten boards he could hear every word that was being spoken !



This is the concluding story of the famous Buster Boots series. The amazing new boy, whose meteoric career at St. Frank's, as brilliant as it was short lived, compels admiration even though we do not agree with the means by which he achieved his end. From what we know of Buster, he did not bully merely for the sake of bullying. It was power and leadership that he coveted, and he found that he could more quickly attain success by instituting a reign of terror and defeating his opponents by systematic persecution than by any other way. As we have seen, Nipper proved to Buster that two could play at that game, and when the new Remove leader began to experience some of his own medicine he realised that there was some truth in the saying that "He who lives by the sword perishes by the sword." The light of reason brought home to him at last the folly of his mad lust for power. He was sobered, and felt ashamed of himself. His old supporters now turned against him. They regarded him as a bully and a coward, and it remains for Buster to prove to the school that at heart he is neither. In the following story the real Buster Boots comes to the surface.

There is a rumour floating about St. Frank's that Nipper is about to launch a new magazine very shortly. I hope to be able to publish a definite statement next week as to whether there is any truth or not in what I have heard.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS GREEN CAR!

"O H, what's the good?" The muttered remark was bitter and almost despairing. John Busterfield Boots, of the Remove at St. Frank's, savagely kicked against a tuft of weeds as he slouched along the Bannington road.

By the expression on Buster's face, and by his whole attitude of despondency, it was

easy to see that he was in a fit of the blues. The junior scarcely knew which way he walked, and he didn't care, either.

It was a half-holiday, and the November day was overcast and muggy. Rain on the previous day had left the road in a shockingly muddy condition, and Buster was keeping to the comparatively clean footpath.

He had been to Bannington—in the Palladium Picture Theatre. He had gone by train, but was walking home because he

wanted to be alone. Of late, Boots had been very fond of his own company.

"They've all turned against me—all the rotten crowd!" muttered Buster, between his teeth. "Might as well be dead! They look upon me as dirt, and even jeer! I'm sick of it!"

Again he kicked at the turf as he walked. Anything to relieve his savage feelings. John Busterfield Boots was hardly a nice fellow to meet at the moment. Disaster had left him soured and morose.

The change in the ex-skipper of the Remove was astonishing.

Only a few days earlier he had been the most powerful fellow in the whole Remove. Not only was he the captain of the Form, but literally the Boss. He ruled supreme. Any fellow who dared to dispute Buster's word was dealt with grimly and without mercy.

He had been the Big Dictator, ruling College House and Ancient House alike. And the only juniors who cut themselves adrift from him were the Die-Hards—the remnants of the old regime. In other words, I still managed to keep a few of my closest friends round me; and I had formed the Die-Hard Party, hoping to overthrow J.B.B. and his autocratic tyranny.

How I succeeded, even beyond my own hopes, I have already described. Gradually at first, I had begun to weaken Buster's power. Then, with dramatic suddenness, the collapse had come. And within the course of a single afternoon, the Remove rallied to my banner and proclaimed me skipper again. And Buster Boots was rejected—cast aside. His day was over.

His downfall had been inevitable, sooner or later. No captain of a Form at a big public school can set himself up as a little tin god and meet with permanent success. For a time Buster had had his own sweet way, fondly believing that his methods were the only ones to be employed. And the juniors, as blind as bats for the most part, had followed him like sheep.

But the instant the tide of favour began to turn against him they deserted the sinking ship. Certainly, Buster's ship deserved to be deserted. He had merely received his due.

Terrorism and bullying never pay.

Boots' disgraceful mismanagement of the junior sports had been one of the main causes of his downfall. He believed that the majority of the fellows cared only for hectic pleasure. For a time the Remove thought so, too. But when the sports began to become a scandal, interest was revived.

And a list of players for the important Helmford match put the lid on it. Buster included all his own pals—the Faithful Five—and only allowed two Ancient House juniors to play. And it was known far and wide that all the finest footballers belonged to the Ancient House.

A number of Fossils had got up an agitation. Within an hour Buster's majority had

dropped alarmingly, and I was re-elected captain. Within another hour events brought about a fight between Boots and myself. I thrashed him thoroughly and soundly. His downfall was earthquake-like.

But, somehow, Boots had seemed to take it well at the time. He had shown signs of being a better fellow. His conceit had gone; he had openly admitted many of his faults. And it really seemed that J.B.B. would prove himself to be worthy of consideration.

Just when there seemed to be a big chance for him, however, certain incidents led the Remove to believe that Buster, in spite of all his coolness and confidence, was a rank coward—a funk. The juniors judged him without trial—quite a little habit with thoughtless schoolboys, by the way. And his remaining supporters left him, and he had been virtually ignored since.

The slur upon him had embittered Boots so much that for days he had been morose and sullen. He went everywhere by himself. Even his own five chums dared not try to console him. He was liable to lash out with deadly effect. For, with one exception, he was the finest fighter in the Remove.

Bob Christine had been set back in his old place of leader of the Monks. And Buster, keeping to himself, had got into the habit of going for long walks. He had become a changed being.

This afternoon he had gone to the pictures, but he hadn't enjoyed himself. He had hardly seen the show at all. Success got into his blood and made him gay and happy. Failure got into his blood, too—with the opposite effect.

He was a fellow who expanded like a sun-kissed flower in the exhilaration of popularity. He lived on it—he soaked it in. Ever since he came to St. Frank's he had set out to make himself a popular idol.

And for a time he had been an idol—with feet of clay.

Now he was ignored, almost despised. And under the icy blast of disfavour he withered. Not only was he bereft of his former arrogance, but he even seemed to be smaller. When he walked he slouched, with his head down. Defeat and humiliation showed itself in every inch of the unfortunate junior.

I had been watching Buster with concern.

It seemed to me such a pity—for I was convinced that he had a great deal of good in him. Once I had attempted to quietly talk with him—but only once. He had rebuffed me curtly, brusquely. So I decided to let him go his own road. Perhaps he would find his feet. Self-imposed isolation would not do him any harm for a while.

What Buster needed was something to lift him out of this rut of self-commiseration. Healthy excitement—healthy sports—either would do. But, unfortunately, Boots wouldn't look at sports. And just at present St. Frank's was the dullest place in the

county. Excitement was not to be found there.

But if Buster had only known it, his walk from Bannington this afternoon was to have amazing results. He did not know, as he walked morosely along, that he would soon stumble upon an affair of startling dramatic import.

He was about half-way home, and trudging along where the road was quiet and deserted. No houses were within sight—not even a cottage. Over on the hill-top, towards Edgemore, some old farm buildings could be seen, but that was all. Already dusk was beginning to settle over the countryside.

Subconsciously, Buster became aware of a closed motor-car. It had turned out of a little lane a considerable distance ahead. It was green, and was moving quite slowly.

Boots paid no attention to it.

He was not interested; it is doubtful if he actually knew the car was there at all. He saw it, but that was all. If it had disappeared back into the lane, Buster would have forgotten all about it.

But five minutes passed—and the car was still there. It was still about the same distance away from the junior. This was rather curious, for it was moving. But why should it be merely crawling at a walking pace? Big cars don't do that sort of thing as a rule.

In fact, if Buster had not been so eaten up with his own gloomy thoughts, he would have decided that the green car was deliberately hanging about for some purpose or other—waiting for somebody, or something like that.

Once or twice a head appeared at the side window of the car, and at intervals the automobile would stop for a few moments. It is doubtful if John Busterfield Boots was seen, for in the gloom of the November afternoon his slowly slouching figure was inconspicuous. He was not walking on the road itself, where he would have been noticeable—but on the footpath, with a drab background of hedge which blended with his own colouring.

At any other time Boots would have been keenly alive to the peculiarity of the green car's movements—for Buster was an alert fellow who seldom allowed anything important to escape his notice.

Then something occurred to awaken Buster from his reverie.

A figure appeared in the dim distance—a figure on a bicycle, and coming from the direction of Bellton. Even in the dusk, Buster could see that the cyclist was a girl. Instinctively, he pulled himself together, and managed to walk upright.

Boots recognised the check-patterned sports coat that the girl wore, and as she drew nearer he saw that a mass of fair hair peeped from beneath her becoming hat.

"Irene Manners!" muttered the junior, with a flush.

He had reason to colour up, for the fight between Buster and myself, some days

earlier, had been brought about by Boots' ungentlemanly conduct towards Irene Manners and her girl chums.

Certainly, Buster had behaved handsomely after the fight—every fellow in the Remove was prepared to admit that. Completely whacked, he had been the reverse of sullen. His apology to the girls had been open, frank and altogether spontaneous.

All the same, Buster had rather avoided the girls of late—he felt that he wanted to be in better humour before meeting any of them. And here was Irene herself, serenely riding towards him on her bicycle!

Buster's absent-mindedness left him. He became aware of the green motor-car now—he saw that Irene was just on the point of riding past it. And Buster quickly decided that it would be an act of wisdom for him to discreetly vanish. He didn't want to have any talk with Irene just now.

So he glanced round for some way of escape, hoping that she had not recognised his figure. There was a gap in the hedge five or six yards away, and Buster made for it—still watching the on-coming girl.

And then the thing happened.

Buster stopped dead in his tracks, staring—his heart thumping like mad. In a flash he knew why that green car had been there so long. For, exactly as Irene drew opposite, two men leapt from the car.

They were both wearing dark overcoats and caps that were pulled over their eyes. Buster believed they wore goggles, too. He couldn't be certain of this—the distance, assisted by the dusk, hid the details.

But the actions of the men were sufficient.

Jumping from the car, they barred the girl cyclist's progress. One of the fellows held up his hand for her to stop. Irene attempted to get past by swerving—for obviously she had taken alarm.

But it was too late.

The man reached out an arm, grasped the handlebars of the moving machine, and jerked it to a standstill. The next moment, with a scream, the girl was pulled from the bicycle.

CHAPTER II.

THE PRISONER OF THE OLD MILL!



BUSTER BOOTS gave a gulp.

He was amazed—staggered. That an incident such as this could occur upon a quiet country road was altogether too extraordinary. The road between Bellton and Bannington was popularly supposed to be so safe that any child could go along it without fear. Nothing exciting had occurred here during the whole period of a year.

And yet here was Irene Manners roughly forced from her bicycle by two strange men out of that lurking green car! There was something dramatic in it, something mysterious and sinister.

During the first moment Buster had an odd sensation that he was looking at a scene being enacted for the films, or something like that. It didn't seem possible that this could be true—that it was an actual happening.

But Irene's second scream was sufficient to awaken Buster to a full sense of the grim reality of the occasion. For some reason, only known to themselves, these men were deliberately attacking the pretty schoolgirl. To Buster it looked like an attempt at kidnapping.

He didn't pause to ask himself why—he didn't stop to consider the reasons for this scoundrelly attack. The one thing was to rush to the girl's rescue. And Buster fairly flew up the road.

His pulse was beating rapidly, his heart thumping against his ribs. This incident, indeed had changed him from a fellow of melancholy gloom to a modern knight-errant, eager to rescue the fair damsel in distress.

Unfortunately, Buster was too far distant to render swift assistance.

The men wasted no time—they dragged Irene from the machine, and bundled her with one swift movement into the closed car. Her screams had now died away, for a thick cloak had been thrust over her face.

The bicycle was kicked hastily into the grass, and as the door of the car closed a puff of smoke belched from the exhaust. The car literally leapt forward, while Buster was still fifty yards away.

"Good heavens!" muttered the junior. "I—I can't do a thing!"

Alarm filled him. And now all sorts of wild thoughts surged through his brain. He could arrive at no explanation as to why these strangers should kidnap a young girl like Irene. The affair was absolutely unprecedented in Buster's experience.

He realised the futility of chasing the car on foot. It had just turned out of the main road, and had disappeared down one of the various by-lanes which led, with many windings and twistings, into the wooded country in the direction of Edgemore Hamlet and beyond.

Buster Boots felt his heart give a jump. During the last few days he had trudged the lane so assiduously that he knew it almost by heart. And he knew, furthermore, that the particular lane which the car had taken was the narrowest of them all—with so many twists and sharp corners that speed was utterly impossible for a motor-car.

In addition, this lane kept up its serpent-like formation for fully two miles, passing the hollow at the edge of the hamlet, and finally emerging upon the moorland road beyond the wooded region.

And Irene's bicycle was lying there, in the grass!

Buster came to a swift decision. There was a chance—a bare possibility—that he would be able to keep the car in sight. If he could follow it on the bicycle as far as the moor he might be able to do something to

help the imprisoned girl. Buster didn't dwell upon the possibility of the car getting beyond him after the moor was reached.

The main thing was that the chance was here for him to give chase.

He grabbed the machine, and a glance was sufficient to tell him that it was unharmed. He leapt into the saddle, and raced down the road. For the first few moments he felt somewhat at sea, for a lady's bicycle, with its low gear, is scarcely adapted for racing.

However, Buster managed to get up quite a good speed. He swung into the by-lane so recklessly that he nearly came to grief at the very beginning of his chase. The bicycle skidded in the sticky mud, and it was as much as Buster could do to save himself from crashing over.

After that he went more cautiously—but still thrilled by the excitement of the whole affair. And this by-lane was more suitable for speed than the main road. Usually, the opposite is the case—but after the fashion of some misguided Urban District Councils, the main road had been neglected, and the side roads carefully attended to.

This lane, for example, had been treated in the manner which is most favourably adopted. Loose stones had been spread generously upon the road surface, and the powers that were had deemed it quite unnecessary to do anything further. Time, assisted by farm wagons and the hoofs of massive horses, would do the rest.

The result was pitiful—but eminently satisfactory to Buster.

For, while the loose stones on the main surface rendered any speed for the car quite impossible—the centre of the lane had been trodden so successfully by farm horses that the loose stones were beaten down. And by keeping to this central track, Buster was able to gather considerable speed.

But, even so, it needed all his skill to avoid isolated stones which lurked in his path, hoping to upset any unwary traveller. The mud was fortunately scarce.

After he had turned the third bend a long, steep hill came into view—descending in a big swoop to a hollow. And there, crawling cautiously down the hill was the car.

Urgent as escape was, the driver of the automobile had not dared to take this hill at speed—for in addition to the loose road surface, a sharp corner at the bottom spelt disaster for any reckless motorist.

Buster immediately applied the brakes, and swung to the side of the lane, where he was concealed by the hedge. It wouldn't do for him to be seen. By the time he got back into the centre of the road the car had turned the sharp corner.

Buster coasted down the hill with caution.

And now a fresh alarm seized him. This shadowing business was not so easy as it

looked. It was all very well for him to keep out of sight, but by doing so he was compelled to give his quarry a big advantage.

It was easier for the car to ascend the opposite hill than to descend this one. But not so easy for cyclists. When Buster turned the corner he pedalled with all his strength. Under any ordinary circumstance, he would have walked up this hill, but now he was possessed with great strength.

As he laboured at the pedals, and listened to the creaking of the chain, he silently prayed that there would be no breakage. The chain of a lady's bicycle is never supposed to stand such treatment as this.

But it was a good machine, and nothing gave way. Arriving at the top of the hill, Buster shot along the level, whizzed round several turns, and came within sight of the car again.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

But the fact was becoming more and more obvious to him that this sort of thing couldn't go on very long. The dusk of the gloomy November day was now gathering so rapidly that along this hedged lane it was practically dark. But Buster didn't mind this so much—it assisted him in his chase.

The one satisfactory feature was that the quarry had no knowledge of Buster's activity. The junior was quite certain that the men in the car were unaware of their shadower. And it behoved Buster to maintain his caution.

But here, along this twisting stretch of lane, where the surface was fairly level, he was able to think. Previously, he had chased blindly, his one idea being to keep the green car in sight.

But now he began to consider the matter.

The problem was a tricky one. Something, without doubt, was badly wrong—schoolgirls are not usually torn from their bicycles and hustled into closed motor-cars. There was something here that demanded investigation.

Buster thought of changing his plans, and giving up the actual chase. After all, it was too mad of him to hope that he could keep this car in sight for ever. Already he was aching in every limb, and his breath was short and strained. He savagely railed at himself for not taking more exercise.

His new idea was to dash into Edgemore Hamlet, and go to the telephone at the little post-office. It wouldn't take him long to get into communication with the Bannington Police. He would give an account of what had happened, and supply a description of the green car.

This, indeed, seemed to be an eminently sensible scheme.

But, upon second thoughts, Buster discarded it. Indeed, he hardly gave the idea a moment's consideration. There



Buster crouched as low as possible. But the two men descended without seeing him.

were many things against it. In the first place, the police would probably believe that he was spinning a yarn—the country police are stolid as a rule, and are not very keen upon taking instructions from a mere schoolboy.

Furthermore, it would be a long time before the police got to work. And by the time any general alarm was sent out, the green car would probably be so far away that all hope of tracking it would be gone.

And again—and most important of all—the very fact of Buster telling the police would make the affair public. Buster could see the local papers coming out with

adventure was just what he needed. It had pulled him completely out of that lethargy which had threatened to destroy all initiative and leave him despondent and listless.

It had awakened in Buster the desire to do something big. Failure was crushing to him—and here was an opportunity for him to shine again. He grasped at it as a drowning man will clutch at a straw.

Almost before Buster knew it, he shot out of the lane, and found himself upon the wide, desolate expanse of Bannington Moor. The car, as he knew, had turned

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big headlines. There would be a scandal. Not only Irene's name would suffer, but the high standing of the Moor View School would be questioned. It would mean grave distress for Miss Charlotte Bond, the principal. And Irene herself would be the cause of endless local gossip.

Most decidedly it would be better to keep this affair quiet until all possibility of rendering assistance was at an end. As long as there was the slightest chance of Buster acting alone, he would keep on. And he was given fresh strength by the thought that he might be able to rescue Irene singlehanded.

If Buster had only known it, this

to the left, and he peered this way with anxious eyes.

It was now practically dark.

But there was still sufficient light for Buster to distinguish the form of the car as it went sedately along the moorland road. Buster was aware of a vague sense of astonishment.

He had expected the car to go in the other direction—towards the north. But it had turned south—and the road in this direction merely led back towards the village of Bellton!

Buster could see the towering mass of Bellton Wood near by. And, close against it at this point, he distinguished

the picturesque runs of the old mill—that famous landmark which the St. Frank's juniors knew so well.

Light dawned upon Buster a moment later.

For the green car, instead of keeping to the road, passed on to the moor itself, and made straight towards the ruined mill. Buster caught in his breath sharply, and a great feeling of jubilation gripped him.

So the chase was ended!

This was far better than Buster had hoped for—far better than he had ever dreamed of. Without the slightest doubt, the men were taking Irene Manners to the old mill. So Buster's tracking work had been successful. He thanked his stars that he had not given way to the impulse to inform the police.

Jumping from the bicycle, he allowed the latter to drop into the ditch. It was comparatively dry here, and the weeds concealed the machine. Buster cautiously advanced on foot, keeping near the hedge so that he would be invisible.

On one side of him lay the cultivated fields and meadows, and on the other the moor stretched away until it intermingled with the murky sky.

Buster was right—the car pulled up close against the mill. Buster ran along the hedge until he was near enough to see with a fair amount of success—although he himself was invisible.

He gritted his teeth with inward rage as he saw Irene forced out of the car. For a few moments she struggled, beating at her captors helplessly. Then she was forced into the mill, and silence reigned.

The car did not wait for the two men to reappear. The exhaust throbbed, and the car swung round, and came back along the road. Buster quickly pressed himself far back into the hedge.

He was infinitely glad that the car had not turned its lights on—for he remained undiscovered by the driver. The possibility of the car returning in this way had never occurred to the junior.

And its going was significant.

For it instantly suggested to Buster Boots that the girl's forced visit to the mill was not a temporary affair. Obviously, she was to be kept there—held a prisoner!

And Buster fairly boiled at the thought. A great fury surged within him—intermingled with the hope that he would be able to effect her rescue. It was his big chance.

He didn't wait long in the hedge.

The sound of the car grew less and less, until nothing but the silence of the coming night brooded over the moor. A dim light had appeared in one of the upper windows of the mill.

Buster, being a comparatively new junior to the Remove—he had only come to St.

Frank's at the beginning of this term—had never explored the old place. He had seen it frequently enough during walks, but had never gone inside.

Very cautiously, he left the shelter of the hedge, and worked his way across the moor towards the mill. Here and there were patches of gorse, and by crawling from clump to clump he hoped to escape attention. There was always the possibility that somebody was on guard, watching.

But, at last, Buster reached the ramshackle doorway, and stealthily crept in. Nobody was there. Only the black opening yawned before him. With his heart beating rapidly, he stepped inside.

Discretion told him that he was acting unwisely, but he couldn't help himself. He simply had to investigate. Capture would mean disaster, for then there would be nobody to help. And any encounter with those two men would certainly mean capture for Buster Boots.

But he crept into the darkness—instinctively, he felt that it was the only thing to do, risk or no risk.

After a few moments his eyes grew accustomed to the blackness. He found that he was in a big open space with a brick flooring. And by glancing up he saw light trickling through some open seams.

So the men were up there—on the next floor.

After a while, the light seemed to grow stronger, and Buster could dimly make out some objects in this lower section. A pile of boxes stood up one corner, and there was a ladder—old and ramshackle—fixed to one of the walls. Gazing up this ladder, Buster could see the light in three seams. He detected the form of a trapdoor.

So that was the way up! His heart sank somewhat. The prospect of effecting a rescue was growing more dim. What could he do? If he opened that trapdoor, he would be grabbed before he could lift a finger—for he would be in a defenceless position.

As far as he could see, there was only one chance.

And that was to creep up the ladder, and listen. He would hear the dull sound of voices—now and again one of them would be raised. He caught a chance word here and there.

But by climbing the ladder, and placing his ear close to the trapdoor, he might be able to get an inkling of the truth.

It was risky—it was foolhardy—but Buster didn't hesitate.

He stepped to the ladder, and cautiously mounted. His heart leapt into his mouth time after time as the rungs creaked beneath his weight. But at last he reached the top, and he had given no alarm.

He clung there, listening intently.

And through the rotten boards he could hear every word that was being spoken!

CHAPTER III.

BUSTER'S QUANDARY!



"MISS MANNERS, it grieves us very deeply that we should be compelled to claim your attention in this seemingly brusque and brutal manner, but circumstances have rendered it necessary, and we beseech you to remain calm!"

The voice that came through to Buster Boots was smooth, suave and gentlemanly. But, in spite of the refined touch, there was a note of grim determination in the tone.

"What... want... me?"

Buster could not catch Irene's full reply. Her voice was a mere whisper, vibrant with indignation and anger. Buster wanted to push open the trapdoor and leap to her assistance.

But he knew that by so doing he would only render her position all the more acute. For he was the only outsider who knew of her predicament, and her rescue lay entirely in his hands. It was up to him, and to him alone, to save her from these kidnappers.

"Well, Miss Manners, we don't want very much," went on the smooth voice. "In fact, it is so trifling that you will probably think we are fooling you. Just listen, and—"

The girl whispered something that Buster couldn't hear.

"Come, come!" said the man. "That won't do, my dear young lady! You mustn't refuse to listen. Let me inform you that this matter closely concerns your father, and—"

"My—my father!" breathed Irene quickly.

"Quite so," said the other. "You are more reasonable now, eh? All right, Benson—all right—don't keep hold of the young lady's arm if she doesn't like it. And you come over here, too, Radley. Now, Miss Manners, I want you to understand that you are in no danger whatever."

Buster heard movements on the floor above as the men shifted their positions. For an instant the junior feared that the trap door was going to be opened, and he prepared to drop to the floor if necessary.

But he was left undisturbed.

And it did not add to his comfort to discover that there were three men up there, instead of two—as he had reason to believe. Obviously, one fellow had been on the spot in advance—waiting to receive the kidnappers and their victim. But Buster was certainly relieved to find that the men appeared to be gentlemanly, and that Irene was in no immediate danger.

"That's better," continued the man who was apparently the leader. "I'll put the matter to you in a nutshell, Miss Manners.

Time is very short, and there is none to waste. I require your answer at once."

"Who are you?" came Irene's whisper, fierce and angry.

"My name is Willmer, but I fail to see how that interests you," said the man. "And please don't regard us as scoundrels. You must admit that we have treated you quite gently, and will continue to do so if you are reasonable. Our requirements are insignificant—we merely want you to introduce us to your father as friends. That, and nothing more."

"What... mean?" came Irene's voice.

"You can easily say that we are the fathers or uncles of some other pupils at your school," said Mr. Willmer. "In other words, we want to meet Mr. Manners on a good social footing, and in such a way that he will not suspect the truth. We happen to know that you were on your way to Bannington with the intention of joining your father's train there. He is due to arrive in Bellton Station at six-fifty—in just over a half-an-hour from now. And as the station is a good twenty minutes away, we cannot waste time."

Again, Buster failed to hear the girl's reply, but Willmer's next remark supplied the deficiency.

"Of course you fail to understand," he said smoothly. "It is not necessary that you should understand. Even if I explained all the details, you would still be mystified. It is just a mere business matter."

"Business!" repeated Irene, with scorn.

"Precisely," said Mr. Willmer. "Your father, as you know, is the managing director of one of the greatest engineering firms in the country. Well, there is something we must discuss with him to-night, without fail. We are strangers to Mr. Manners, and it is highly important that we should have an introduction that he cannot possibly question. We decided that his own daughter would be the most suitable person—and for that reason we brought you here. We feared that you would refuse if we broached the matter to you on the open road. But you will not refuse here."

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed the girl. "But I will!"

"Really?" said Mr. Willmer complacently.

"Let me make the position quite clear to you. We shall all go to the station to meet your father. You will introduce us—"

"I will not—indeed, I will not!"

"You will introduce us, and you will tell your father that we are friends of yours—parents of the other girls at the Moor View School," continued the man. "If you attempt to give your father any warning of the true state of affairs, you will do so at your peril, or, to be exact, your father's peril."

"I—don't—mean," came the girl's whisper.

"You don't know what I mean, eh?" repeated Mr. Willmer. "It is very simple: Both Mr. Radley and myself are carrying revolvers, and if you dare to intimate the truth to your father there will be a regret-

table incident. Do I make myself quite clear?"

"Oh, you—you scoundrels!"

"I am quite sure, Miss Manners, that you will agree to our little plan," went on Mr. Willmer, almost mockingly. "And we will start at once. Are you ready to come—quietly?"

"I won't—I won't agree!"

Irene said more than that, talking in a low, intense voice. Buster admired her greatly for her open defiance. The junior grimly suspected that these men were the agents of a rival company. He had read of such tricks as this being resorted to.

"Come, this won't do!" said Mr. Willmer, changing his tone. "And please understand that time is short. Unless you agree to our proposal at once we shall leave you here and deal with your father in a much more drastic manner. In short, we intend to way-lay him in the lane between the village and the school, and I can give you my word that he will not get off lightly."

Above Buster there was a tense silence for a few moments. Just the movement of somebody's foot now and again, but no voices. The junior pictured the scene to himself; Irene standing there, defiant, and the three men anxiously awaiting her decision.

Finally, it came.

"No!" she exclaimed tensely. "I will never agree!"

"Very well, my fine young lady!" snapped Mr. Willmer. "I do not intend to argue the point. You have had the chance to save your father, and you've refused. Enough!"

"Look here, chief—" began one of the other men.

"We've got no time to argue, Benson," cut in Mr. Willmer. "Put the girl in that cupboard, and lock the door. You will remain here on guard. Don't release her until we get back. If she tries to cry out and make an alarm, deal with her drastically."

"Leave it to me," said Benson.

There came a scuffle from the floor above—a gasp or two—and then a door closed with a slam. John Busterfield Boots, clinging to the ladder, boiled with fury.

There was that girl being brutally treated by these crooks—whose game was connected with her father. And Buster could do nothing—against three powerful men he was helpless.

He was so intensely angry that he almost left it until too late. The trap-door above his head was partially lifted, as though in a preliminary move. And it gave Buster a start.

Slithering down the ladder, he reached the brick floor—expecting every moment to hear a shout from above, announcing his discovery. But no shout came. And he had squeezed himself behind the litter of old boxes before the trapdoor was fully lifted.

The shaft of light that came down seemed absolutely brilliant after the dark-

ness that had previously prevailed. Buster hardly believed it possible that he could escape discovery. He crouched as low as possible.

But the two men descended without seeing him. And after all, it was easy enough to understand this, for they had just come out of the bright light, and everything here seemed dim to them. They didn't even attempt to look round. And they paused for a few moments before going out.

"Obstinate little cat!" growled Radley.

"You never can tell with these young girls!" said Mr. Willmer calmly. "I was pretty sure she'd agree—otherwise I wouldn't have gone to all this trouble. But that look in her eye was enough for me—she's got plenty of pluck, and it wouldn't do to take any risks."

"But it means—violence."

"In a way, yes," said Mr. Willmer curtly. "It can't be helped. And I dare say it'll be the best way, after all. In any case, one of our main objects is gained. Manners will be alone on his walk from the station to the school. We had to get the girl out of the way—that was absolutely essential."

"Yes, I forgot that," said Radley.

"And we've got no time to waste, either," said Willmer. "If our information from London is correct Manners has got those estimates on him. We've got to get them, Radley—we've got to know what those estimates are like. This contract means a profit of fifty thousand pounds clear if we land it. It's worth risking something for. I'm pretty sure the Manners Engineering Company has undercut our own estimate, and we've got to know the truth. By working in this way we shall be able to close the deal in our own favour. And Manners will suspect nothing—he'll think that he was merely set upon by a couple of tramps. So don't forget your part, when the critical moment arrives. I'll prime you up on the points as we go along."

They passed outside, and Buster could hear their voices dying away as they walked across the moor to the road.

And J.B.B. was in a dreadful dilemma.

He left his place of concealment, and passed out into the open air. It was quite dark now, and the sky overhead was thick with murk. There were signs of a mist coming up. The November air was raw and chill.

So these men were representatives of a rival engineering firm! They wanted to undercut the estimate for a great contract that the Manners Engineering Company was negotiating for! It was just one of those big business plots which so seldom receive the light of publicity.

And it was in Buster's power to frustrate the designs of these rascally rivals—men who were willing to resort to foul play to "land" their own contract! Buster would have given much to learn the name of the unscrupulous company they represented! He pictured himself denouncing them—he saw

his name in the newspapers as the fellow who had exposed the tricksters!

But there was something more important to do than dream.

Buster was in a dilemma. What was he to do? The time was so short, and yet he had to act in some decisive way. With this vitally important information in his possession he could not remain still.

There was the girl upstairs—a prisoner in a noisome cupboard! And in order to save Mr. Manners from the attack of those two men, Buster would have to go away and leave the girl a prisoner.

It was an awful thought, but what else was there to do?

If he attempted to rescue her, he would almost certainly fail. For all the odds were with the man Benson, who was upstairs there, in charge of the fair captive. He would have no difficulty in overpowering Buster if the latter opened an attack.

Single-handed, Boots had to be cautious. And it suddenly came to him that help was very near at hand, after all—help of such a kind that there would be no publicity.

While Buster thought, he moved across the moor towards the road. He hated leaving Irene a prisoner in the mill, but it would not be for long. And he was satisfied that she would come to no harm. These men had no evil intentions towards the schoolgirl; they were after her father.

Buster's course was quite clear.

By acting quickly he would be able to warn Mr. Manners of his danger. Then he could come back and rescue the girl. And he would call in the assistance of the Remove!

CHAPTER IV.

THE RESCUE PARTY.



BUSTER'S face was glowing as he turned along the dark and deserted road.

What a difference in him in the course of one short hour!

It was almost startling. Gone was the lethargy—gone was the shambling slouch—gone was the expression of melancholy. John Busterfield Boots was a changed being.

And why?

Simply and purely because he had been lifted out of that fatal mood of self-pity. He was himself again, and it seemed more than likely that this adventure to-night, no matter how it turned out, would improve permanently.

The thought of saving Mr. Manners and rescuing Irene single-handed thrilled him, but he thrust it aside. It couldn't be done. And even if there was a remote possibility of success, he daren't risk it.

There was too much at stake.

Buster's only course was to call in help, and to whom should he turn but the Remove? Willmer and Radley could only

choose one spot for their intended attack upon Irene's father. This spot was opposite Bellton Wood. At no other part of the lane was the ground suitable.

Therefore, the two crooks would have to pass St. Frank's. Buster, following them, could nip into the Triangle and get hold of some of the fellows—Bob Christine, Handforth and some more.

His only fear was that the juniors wouldn't believe him. And there was just a possibility that he would have some trouble in locating the fellows he wanted. On a raw evening like this they would all be indoors.

But Buster couldn't worry about such details.

He hurried on, calmer now, but still grimly determined to do everything in his power to render the assistance that was so badly needed. And for the sake of Irene and her father he would avoid publicity. The juniors, the ones he would select, could be trusted.

The Moor View School was passed, and Buster saw nothing there except a few lighted windows. None of the girls were visible, although the junior certainly heard feminine voices.

Then he found himself on the quiet stretch between the Moor View School and St. Frank's. He broke into a run here, after glancing at his watch. The time was six-thirty-nine. The train was due in within eleven minutes. But it would probably be a few minutes late, and then it would take Mr. Manners a quarter-of-an-hour to walk through the village and get opposite Bellton Wood.

So there was plenty of time, but not too much.

As Boots came within sight of the school-gates he dimly discerned two figures passing down the lane in the direction of the village. Mr. Willmer and his accomplice! They would conceal themselves in the hedge lower down the road, where it was dark and lonely.

Buster fairly dashed through the gateway into the Triangle. He was thankful that they wouldn't be locked until seven o'clock. He nearly ran full-tilt into three figures that were just emerging.

"Hallo! What the——"

"Oh!" said Buster breathlessly, coming to a halt.

"Steady!" exclaimed one of the juniors. "That's you, Boots, isn't it? What's the idea of dashing about like an unleashed steam-engine?"

The three juniors were the famous chums of Study D, Handforth, Church and McClure. They regarded Buster curiously. And Buster himself glowed with pleasure. Nothing could have been more fortunate.

"Quick! I want you chaps to help me!" he said tensely. "Two crooks are going to waylay somebody down the lane——"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

"Don't fool!" exclaimed Buster. "This

is serious, I tell you! "I've just been shadowing two crooks, and they're going to waylay somebody down the lane—a man who's coming in on the six-fifty train."

Handforth and Co. gazed at Buster in astonishment. There was such a tremendous change in him that they could not fail to observe it. When they had seen him last, soon after dinner, he had been in his usual state of morose despondency. He had mooned off alone somewhere.

Even his own chums of the College House, the fellows who called themselves the Faithful Five, had been leaving Buster strictly to himself of late. It was therefore astonishing to find Boots so changed.

"You've been reading some cheap fiction!" said Handforth severely. "That's about the size of it! Who ever heard of crooks here—in the lane? You must be dotty!"

Buster grasped Handforth's arm, and clutched it tightly.

"Are you going to be serious, or not?" he demanded, his voice fierce and intense. "There's no spoofing about this—I mean every word of it! Let's cut out all that's happened in the past. This is important—honour bright!"

Handforth and Co. could not fail to be impressed by Buster's tone.

"My hat!" ejaculated Handforth. "Do—do you mean to say that there really are some crooks?"

"Yes!"

"Then I'm your man!" declared Handy crisply. "When it comes to investigating mysteries, and running criminals to earth, I'm the very chap for the job. Just tell me the facts, and leave it to me! Give me all the data, and in two minutes I'll have a working hypothesis on which I can conduct my investigation."

Handforth rolled the words off his tongue lovingly. He had read so many detective stories, that he had all the novelists' jargon of terms on his lips. He knew all about investigations, and theories, and everything else.

And in less than a minute he changed his attitude completely, and became charged with energy. He turned to Church and McClure, looked at them doubtfully, and then nodded.

"Pity you chaps heard anything about it, but it can't be helped now," he said sharply. "You'll look upon yourselves as my assistants. Now, what we've got to do, is to spread ourselves out. I'll go first, and get on the trail. Buster can go indoors, and take a rest—"

"You—you blithering idiot!" snapped Buster curtly.

"What?"

"Oh, don't start arguing now, for goodness sake!" panted Boots. "Don't you realise that this is serious? I mean to be in it—and you can't keep me away. Mr. Manners is going to be waylaid by two criminals named Willmer and Radley. They went down the lane only three minutes ago."



And the light from my torch played upon two figures gagged and bound. Buster Boots started as he gazed at them.

"Mr. Manners!" ejaculated Handforth, with a start.

"Yes, that's the name of the gentleman who's coming on the six-fifty train."

"By George! You—you don't mean that he's any relative of Miss Irene's?" asked Handforth breathlessly.

"Her father."

"By George!" said Handforth again. "These crooks are going to jump on Irene's father? Quick! Let's rush down, and grab hold of them! We'll give 'em over to the police, and—"

"And Irene herself is a prisoner, too!" interrupted Buster. "She is being kept at the old mill—"

"Irene a prisoner!" gasped Church. "Good heavens!"

Handforth fought for breath.

"We can't bother about her father!" he roared. "We've got to go and rescue Irene—blow her father! Come on, you chaps—let's shoot away now!"

"Wait!" said Boots grimly. "What's the good of getting excited? I wish I hadn't told you anything about it, now! You're too confoundedly jumpy! The only thing is to save Mr. Manners first, and then release Irene. She's in no danger, so you needn't worry."

And, quickly, Buster explained just what had happened—how he had seen Irene kidnapped on the Gannington road, how he had followed the car, and how he had tracked the crooks to the old mill. Boots thought it better to tell everything, for then there could be no misunderstanding. And there was plenty of time. Mr. Manners would not be coming up the lane for another ten minutes.

Handforth & Co. listened with gleaming eyes.

All their scepticism had vanished. There was something so convincing about the way Boots told the story that to doubt him was impossible. And by the time he had done, the chums of Study D were thoroughly worked up.

"Will four of us be enough?" said McClure quickly.

"Well, we could do with more," said Buster. "But there's no time to go round chasing the chaps together. We can't tell anybody—they'll have to be picked. An affair like this must be kept quiet—"

"Wait a minute—somebody's coming out of the College House now," put in Church. "By Jingo! Christine & Co.! How about them? I think we can trust them to keep it mum, eh?"

"Rather!" said Handforth. "They're as decent as ever now—since Nipper got back into power—"

Handforth paused, realising that the subject might be a painful one to Buster. In the darkness they failed to observe the slight flush that came to Boots' cheeks. He, himself, was beginning to realise how atrociously he had ruled the Remove.

"Yes, we've got to have them in this affair," he declared quietly. "Too risky for four of us to attack a pair of desperate criminals. I daresay we could stop them from attacking Mr. Manners, but they'd probably get away. And that's not worth risking. The brutes have got to be handed over to the police."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth.

Church had dashed across the Triangle, and now he returned with Bob Christine and Yorke and Talmadge and Oldfield. The Monks were attired in gymnasium togs—having been on their way to the gym. for exercise. They gathered round Buster, eyeing him in astonishment.

"What's all this about a plot to attack somebody?" asked Christine.

"Can't go over it all again now—too long," said Buster. "But you can take it from me that the thing is genuine. Are you game to lend a hand? That's the point."

"Game for anything," said Christine promptly.

Again Buster glanced at his watch. He was surprised to find that the time was only just six-fifty-five. The train could only have been in a minute or two, and there was not much likelihood of Mr. Manners appearing in the lane for another six or seven minutes.

In a nutshell, Buster retold the story to Christine & Co. They drank it in eagerly, and then a short consultation was held.

"Couldn't you chaps save Mr. Manners while I dash off to rescue Irene?" asked Handforth carelessly. "I can easily deal with that one chap—"

"It's not worth while," interrupted

Buster. "We shall be along ourselves in ten minutes, and she won't come to any harm. We might as well do the thing thoroughly while we are at it."

"Hear, hear!" said Bob Christine.

"It won't do for us to walk down the lane in the ordinary way," went on Buster. "We shall only give those crooks the alarm, and that'll spoil everything. I vote we divide ourselves into two parties, and creep along on the other side of the hedges."

"Good," said Christine. "That's a brain wave."

"I'll dash in, and tell Nipper," said Church. "I think he's in Study C, with Watson and Tregellis-West. Yes, there's a light there—"

"No—we don't want Nipper!" interrupted Buster curtly.

"But, you ass, he's an expert in these things—"

"We can easily do without Nipper!" insisted Boots. "I'm not keen on having him in this affair at all."

"Well, we don't blame you," said Yorke. "It was Nipper who knocked you off your perch, wasn't it? Not that we need dwell upon painful subjects. Let's be getting along."

"I should think so!" growled Handforth. "Time's going!"

Handforth & Co. and Buster took one side of the lane, and Christine & Co. the other. Beyond the hedges, bordering the road, were fields and meadows—until Bell-ton Wood started. To begin with, at all events, the juniors would be able to keep to the cover of the hedge.

They went cautiously.

In the lane itself there was complete peace and stillness. The chilly November evening was now very dark. The lane was just a mere shadowy line, merging into complete blackness where the wood overhung the road.

And while the juniors were preparing to outwit the audacious Mr. Willmer, a figure was striding briskly up the road from the direction of the village. It was the figure of a rather portly gentleman attired in a silk hat, great-coat, and carrying a grip.

Mr. Manners had apparently stayed a few moments in the village. No doubt he had been surprised and disappointed to find that his daughter did not meet him at the station. And now he was coming along with sharp strides.

And he was just a little beyond the rustic stile when two figures loomed out from the hedge, and stepped in front of him. Mr. Willmer and Mr. Radley were not looking themselves. They had pulled their caps down over their eyes, and in the intense gloom they looked very rough characters.

"Arf a mo', sir!" growled Wilmer, in a coarse voice. "Got any loose change to spare for a poor cove wot ain't 'ad a bite since yesterday?"

"Just a copper, guv'nor!" wailed the other man.

Mr. Manners came to a halt, and by no means liked the look of the situation. On this lonely road, in the darkness, he would be quite at the mercy of these two tramps—for such they apparently were.

"Go away—go away!" he said curtly. "Let me pass!"

"Oh, so that's yer tone, is it?" snarled Willmer. "Grab 'im, Bill!"

With one accord they hurled themselves upon Mr. Manners—their one object being, of course, to empty his pockets, and to secure the valuable estimates that they so much desired. But Mr. Manners would believe that they were just ordinary footpads, after cash and valuables.

"You—you infernal rogues!" shouted Mr. Manners in alarm. "Help! Stand back, confound you! Help!"

"By thunder! Make 'im keep 'is mouth shut!" hissed Willmer.

Mr. Manners' hat went flying, and the next moment one of his legs was seized, and he was tripped. But as he floundered to the ground, with the two men on the top of him, there came a sound of crackling bushes and scurrying feet.

The Remove fellows had heard the cry for help—and they threw all further caution to the winds. Forcing their way through the hedges, they jumped into the lane, and raced to the rescue.

CHAPTER V.

VANISHED!



SWOOPING down like so many charging Red Indians, the eight juniors fairly wiped Willmer and Radley off their feet. They were knocked flying—and had not the slightest

chance to make a dash for freedom.

But they put up a stiff fight.

Struggling, gasping, and thoroughly alarmed at this sudden change in their fortunes, they were subdued with difficulty.

"Who—who are you?" snarled Willmer, his voice harsh with hatred.

"We know all about you—we've got you taped!" said Handforth triumphantly. "As for Miss Irene, she's as good as rescued! I've been investigating this case, and I know everything!"

Unconsciously, Handforth was beginning to take most of the credit upon his own shoulders—not because he was conceited in any way, but for the simple reason that he actually believed he was the star performer. This was one of Handforth's favourite little hallucinations.

"Yes, I followed you, and heard everything!" put in Buster. "That's right—hold them, you fellows. I'll look after Mr. Manners."

Mr. Willmer and Mr. Radley were help-

less in the grasp of their youthful captors. Mufflers were jerked off, and used as binding ropes. The pair were tied in such a way that escape was out of the question. To be exact, Mr. Willmer's left leg was secured to Mr. Radley's right leg. And their arms were bound behind them. By walking in unison they could manage to travel fairly comfortably, but any dash for freedom was impossible.

"I think that's fixed you up all right," said Bob Christine genially.

In the meantime, Buster was helping Mr. Manners to his feet. The unfortunate gentleman was greatly flustered. He was smothered with mud, his hat had vanished, his grip was nowhere to be seen, and one side of his collar had come loose from its moorings.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, in distress. "This—this is dreadful!"

"It's all right, sir—we've got the brutes!" said Buster.

"Splendid!" declared Mr. Manners. "Thank you, boys—thank you! But for your timely assistance I should probably have been bludgeoned and robbed of everything I possess! I have to admit I was completely taken aback. I am grateful—very grateful!"

"That's all right, sir," said Boots. "We'll see that the fellows are given in charge."

"Upon my word! They deserve imprisonment for this outrageous attack!" said Mr. Manners, trying to straighten himself out a bit. "These country lanes, I declare, are becoming quite infested with tramps and footpads. But I never dreamed of being attacked so near the school—"

"We don't have tramps like that about here, sir," put in Handforth. "These rotters aren't tramps—they are only spoofing you. They're desperate criminals—members of an international gang—"

"What!" ejaculated Mr. Manners, startled.

"I don't know about an international gang, sir—Handforth's a bit excited," said Buster. "But they're not ordinary tramps. They were trying to steal some estimates that you are carrying—"

"Good heavens!" interrupted Mr. Manners.

"Their names are Willmer and Radley—"

"Willmer!" echoed Irene's father. "Why, great goodness! Impossible—quite impossible! Mr. Willmer is the London manager of the Gatesby Iron and Steel Manufacturing Company! It is impossible that he should descend—"

Mr. Manners broke off, and pressed forward. He peered closely into the faces of the two prisoners.

"Oh, don't be a fool, Manners!" snarled Willmer. "The boy's right!"

"You—you unscrupulous wretch!" exclaimed Mr. Manners, his voice trembling

with indignation. "So! So this is the way you attempt to do business! I am shocked—inexpressibly shocked!"

Mr. Manners turned away, almost overcome with the shock of the revelation. And John Busterfield Boots turned to Bob Christine.

"Will you see after those two men, Christine?" he asked. "Take three fellows with you——"

"Leave it to me," said Bob. "We'll hand the rotters over to the police, and Mr. Manners can make his complaint afterwards."

"No, no—I will come with you——" began Mr. Manners.

"But you can't, sir," interrupted Church. "Your daughter is a prisoner in the old mill! We've got to go and rescue her, and we want you with us. These crooks kidnapped Miss Irene——"

"What!" shouted Mr. Manners furiously. Quickly, Buster explained the facts, and Irene's father listened with growing rage. Then, without waiting for anything further, he turned up the lane. His one desire was to get to the mill as quickly as possible.

Christine & Co. were left to carry the prisoners to the police-station.

Mr. Manners, walking along in the midst of Handforth & Co. and Buster, was fuming with impatience. And as they walked Buster told the story in full; Mr. Manners breathed hard.

"The villains!" he said tensely. "If they have harmed my little girl——"

"She's all right, sir," put in Buster. "All the same, the sooner we release her the better. I'm jolly glad to have been of some service——"

"My dear boy, you have done wonders," said Mr. Manners enthusiastically. "I shall never be able to thank you sufficiently. You are a brave, resourceful boy, and I am grateful to you for your excellent services."

"That's all right, sir," said Buster modestly.

"It was thoughtful of you to keep the affair as private as possible," went on Mr. Manners. "I shall not hesitate to prosecute with regard to those ruffians in the lane—but I am extremely pleased Irene will not be dragged into this affair—publicly, I mean."

"I thought you'd rather have it that way, sir," said Buster.

"Yes, yes, indeed. But where is this mill? How far?"

"Only about a mile, sir."

"A mile! That's a terrible distance!"

And Mr. Manners almost broke into a trot in his eagerness to arrive. Handforth & Co. were far more interested now. For Buster had proved that his story was not an effort of the imagination. And more excitement was to come.

Handforth was looking particularly pleased. He had a special liking for Miss Irene—not that Miss Irene had any special liking for him. Handforth tried to assure himself that she was impressed by his strong personality, but the question was in doubt.

By the time the moor was reached the first trace of a fog was coming up. The great expanse of the moor itself lay almost hidden. There was a misty layer clinging near to the ground, and threatening to increase in intensity. Before very long the moor would be foggy and bleak in the extreme.

But at present the mill could easily be seen.

Coming out from the lane, and entering upon the moor, the little group saw the outline of the ancient building silhouetted against the sky—but in a shadowy kind of way that made it seem unreal.

Buster gave a muttered exclamation as he caught sight of the light on the first floor. Everything was quiet and still. Benson was still there, in charge of the girl—calmly waiting for the return of his chief.

"The best way is to make a rush for it, sir," said Buster. "There's only one man, and he won't be able to do much——"

"You are right, my boy—you are right!" said Mr. Manners. "But please let me climb up that ladder first. I want to be the first one to come face to face with this infamous rascal."

"Very well, sir."

Benson would assume that those ascending the ladder were his own friends. So all conversation was stopped. Arriving in the lower section of the mill, Mr. Manners ascended the ladder first, with Boots just behind him. Handforth & Co. brought up the rear.

One fact which surprised Boots was that the trap-door was open.

He had not expected this. He had believed that the door would be closed. And the mill lay in absolute quietness. Indeed, it almost seemed as though something was wrong.

Mr. Manners proceeded very cautiously until he was almost at the top of the ladder. Then, with an agile swing, considering his bulk, he leapt on to the floor above.

"Now, you scoundrel——"

Mr. Manners broke off, and Buster, scrambling up beside him, stared at the room. This was the first time he had gained a look at it. On his previous visit to the mill he had only listened.

The place was dusty, old, and on an up-

(Continued on page 15.)

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HOMeward BOUND.

WHEN Dick recovered consciousness, he found himself lying on a couch in a sumptuously-furnished apartment in the Waldorf-Astoria—that magnificent New York hotel which cost over twelve million dollars to build.

Standing by his side were a white-haired American doctor and a stalwart young Englishman, with a clean-shaved, boyish face, and curly, flaxen hair.

"He's coming round," said the doctor, when Dick opened his eyes. "May I trouble you to ring the bell and ask one of the waiters to bring up a glass of brandy?"

"I'll fetch it up myself," said the young Englishman. "We shall get it more quickly that way."

Suiting the action to the word, he turned on his heel and hurried from the room.

"Feeling better now?" asked the doctor, as he readjusted the cushions beneath Dick's head.

"Yes, thank you," said Dick, gazing around him in bewilderment. "But where am I, and who are you?"

"You are in Mr. Langley's private sitting-room at the Waldorf-Astoria," said the doctor. "Mr. Langley heard your shout for help as he was making his way through the Bowery, and ran to your assistance. He wasn't in time to capture your assailant, who took to his heels on hearing somebody coming; but, finding that you were unconscious, Mr. Langley placed you in a cab, brought you here, and sent for me."

"You are a doctor, then?"

"I am."

"And was that Mr. Langley who left the room just now?"

"Yes. You may count yourself as exceedingly lucky to have attracted his attention. There are many of my fellow-countrymen, I am proud to believe, who would have been equally ready to risk their

lives for an unknown dweller in the Bowery, but only an Englishman, I am sure, would ever have dreamed of bringing the man he had rescued to the most expensive hotel in New York. Most men, I fancy, would have considered they had done their duty if they had sent you to the nearest hospital."

"Mr. Langley is an Englishman, then?"

"Yes. Surely you have heard of Jack Langley, as he is always called? He is one of the foremost electrical engineers in the world. He lives, I believe, at Penleven Grange, in Cornwall. He is at present in New York on business, and is staying at this hotel."

Needless to say, this information did little to enlighten Dick Scymour, who had never heard Jack Langley's name in his life. The reader, however, will doubtless remember that Jack Langley was one of Nelson Lee's most intimate friends. It was to Jack Langley's house that the Earl of Easington—Dick's father—had been carried after his accident in the hunting field. It was at Jack Langley's house, moreover, in the presence of Mark Rymer and Nelson Lee, that Lord Easington had breathed his last, after telling the story of his secret marriage.

All this, of course, was absolutely unknown to Dick Seymour. He did not know that he was Lord Easington's son—he had never even heard Lord Easington's name. He had heard of Nelson Lee, of course; but he had no idea that the great detective had travelled from England to Australia, and from Australia to America, in search of him. Still less did he know that it was Jack Langley who had telegraphed for Mark Rymer and Nelson Lee on that memorable day when the dying earl had uttered those strange words: "The proofs of my marriage—go to my house—the Silver Dwarf!"

As for Jack Langley, he was almost as ignorant of the true state of affairs as Dick himself. He knew, of course, that Lord Easington had been secretly married, and had left a son and heir. He also knew that the proofs of his lordship's marriage, and the name and last-known address of his son, had been cunningly concealed in a hollow statuette, which was known as the Silver Dwarf. He knew, moreover, that Nelson Lee and Mark Rymer had both set out from England in search of this statuette, and he knew—for Nelson Lee had written to him from time to time—that the detective had succeeded in tracing the statuette to New South Wales.

But what had happened after that Jack Langley did not know. He was ignorant of the fact that Nelson Lee had discovered that the name of the missing heir was Richard Seymour. He had no idea that the detective had followed Dick from New South Wales to New Zealand, from New Zealand to the Sandwich Isles, and from the Sandwich Isles to New York. He had heard—quite by

accident—that Nelson Lee was in Boston, but never for one single instant did he ever suspect that the young man he had rescued in the Bowery was the very man for whom the detective and Mark Rymer were searching.

"Do you think he's seriously hurt?" he asked, when he returned with the brandy.

"No," replied the doctor, as he held the glass to Dick's lips. "He has had a nasty knock on the head, but there are no bones broken, and no other injuries that one need worry about. What is serious, however, is his pitiable weakness. He appears to me to have been half-starved. In fact, what he needs, far more than drugs, is a thorough rest and plenty of good food."

"And he shall have both," said Jack, with characteristic generosity.

A few minutes later the doctor took his departure. As soon as he had gone, Jack seated himself beside the couch, and endeavoured to draw Dick into conversation. This did not prove a difficult matter, for there was a charm about Jack Langley's manner which invariably inspired confidence, and in less than half an hour's time Dick found himself—to his own surprise—telling the story of his life.

Briefly, and in a voice that was oft-times broken with emotion, he told Jack how his father (whom he had never known, but whom he believed to have been an English lawyer) had died when he was an infant, and how his mother had emigrated to Australia. He told of his mother's death, of his early struggles in Sydney, and of his life as a stockman at Macpherson's station on Garoo Downs. He related how he had emigrated to New Zealand, and how he had lost every penny he possessed through the failure of the frozen-meat concern in which he had invested all his savings.

He told how he had gone to the Sandwich Islands, and had risen to be manager of Mr. Pryde's estate—only to be turned adrift because he had dared to fall in love with his employer's daughter.

He described the attempt which had been made on his life on the summit of Kilauea, the second attempt at Honolulu, when his chum was shot in mistake for himself, and the third attempt in the sleeping-car of the Overland Limited Mail. He spoke of the life he had led in New York, and of his haunting fear of a fresh attempt to murder him. He showed Jack the paragraph in the "New York World," announcing that Mr. Pryde and Nellie were staying at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. He told him how he had gone to the hotel, how he had followed them to the Opera House, and how he had returned to the hotel in order to obtain a last brief glimpse of the girl he loved.

"And now you know everything," he said, when he had narrated his adventure in the Bowery. "Why I have told you all this I

hardly know, for I don't suppose you are interested."

"Not interested!" cried Jack indignantly. "Why, it's far and away the most interesting story I ever heard, especially that part of it which deals with those four mysterious attempts on your life. Are you sure they were all committed by the same man?"

"I am not sure," said Dick. "That is to say, I have no proof that they were; but, nevertheless, there isn't the slightest doubt in my own mind that the man who tried to push me into the crater of Kilauea, and the man who shot my chum in Honolulu, and the man who wrecked the sleeping-car, and the man who attacked me in the Bowery to-night were one and the same individual."

"But I have no idea who he is, nor why he wants to murder me; for, so far as I know, I never did anybody a bad turn in all my life, and I'm absolutely certain that nobody has anything to gain by my death."

"What is your mysterious enemy like—in personal appearance, I mean?"

"Strange to say, I cannot tell you. I never saw his face on the first two occasions that he tried to kill me. I saw him plainly enough in the sleeping-car, of course; but somehow or other the terrible mental shock which I received on that occasion appears to have destroyed a portion of my memory, for whenever I try to conjure up a picture of him, all I can see is two deep-set, glittering eyes, and all the rest of his face is a complete blank to me."

"But you saw his face to-night, didn't you?"

"Yes; but not very distinctly, for the alley was very dimly lighted. Besides, I'm pretty sure he was disguised to-night, for the whole of the lower part of his face was concealed by a black beard and moustache."

"Well, now, look here," said Jack, laying his hand on Dick's arm. "I don't want to assume a patronising air, but, if you'll let me, I should like to help you."

"You would?" cried Dick, half rising from the couch in his excitement. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"Then lend me sufficient money to pay for a steerage passage to England," said Dick, in eager, rapid tones. "I'm tired of this side of the world. I want to go back to my native land. I want to escape from my unknown foe. If I can only get to England I shall be a new man. I shall be able to pull myself together, and shake off my fears, and work like I used to work in the old days. I swear I'll pay you back. You shall never have cause to regret your kindness. You will give me a new lease of life, and some day perhaps—who knows?—I may be able to go to Mr. Pryde and claim his daughter's hand!"

Suddenly his manner changed. His excite-

ment died away as quickly as it had arisen. He sank back on his cushions with a wistful, half-ashamed sigh.

"I am an ass to talk like this!" he said. "But you'll forgive me, won't you? You'll forget what I've said. It was a piece of gross presumption on my part to ask you to lend me money. Because you have befriended me once—"

"I'll befriend you again!" said Jack, interrupting him. "But I won't lend you money; I'll find you a situation."

"When and where?" asked Dick.

"Now, and in England," said Jack. "Shortly before I left home I was induced to invest a few thousand pounds in a limited company which has been formed for the purpose of importing Australian and New Zealand mutton into England. We are in want of a general manager—somebody who has lived in the Colonies, and who knows all about the frozen-meat trade."

"Now it seems to me that you are just the very man we want. At any rate, seeing that I am the chairman of the board of directors, I'm going to take upon myself to appoint you our general manager. Your appointment will date from to-day, and your salary, to begin with, will be eight hundred pounds a year, part of which I shall be prepared to pay in advance as soon as you are fit to leave for England. The cost of your passage, of course, will be paid by the company."

Dick's eyes brimmed over with grateful tears. His heart was full to overflowing.

"You are too good to me," he murmured. "How do you know that I am worthy of such generous treatment?"

"I know an honest man when I see him," said Jack simply. "You accept the appointment?"

"Need you ask?"

"Then we'll consider that settled. I leave here for England on Tuesday. Do you think you will be well enough to sail with me then?"

"Well enough by Tuesday!" cried Dick, his pale face aglow with new-found happiness. "I'm well enough now! Your kindness has made a new man of me. You have given me something to live for, something to hope for. My only anxiety now is to get away from New York at the earliest possible moment. There are two steamers sailing for England about noon to-day—the Dardania and the Alaric. If it makes no difference to you, I should like very much to sail in one of them."

"It makes no difference to me, of course," said Jack. "But do you really think you are fit enough to undertake a sea voyage at such short notice?"

"Perfectly fit," said Dick eagerly. "The mere prospect of leaving New York has already worked wonders for me, and the short sea voyage is just the thing I need to complete the cure."

"Of course, if you are very anxious to sail to-day, I won't stand in your way," said Jack. "But there is just one thing I should like to mention before you finally decide."

"On Thursday morning I heard, quite by accident, that a very great friend of mine, Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective, was in New York, and was staying at the Continental Hotel. I called at the Continental later in the day, and was told that Mr. Lee had gone to Boston, but was expected back at the end of the week."

"I should here explain that Mr. Lee is at present engaged on a very difficult case. He and a scoundrel named Mark Rymer are trying to find the missing heir to the late Lord Easington's title and estates. Mr. Lee wants to find him in order to restore him to his inheritance. Mark Rymer wishes to find him in order that he may kill him and secure the inheritance for himself. I haven't heard from Mr. Lee for several months, but from all accounts he appears to have traced the missing heir to Boston, and has gone there to interview him."

"Now, if you met Nelson Lee as my guest, and told him your story, and got him interested in your case, it is just possible that he might take it up and unravel the mystery of your unknown foe, and his motive for trying to murder you. Mind you, I can't promise that he would. All the same, I can't help thinking that it might be worth your while to wait until he returns to New York, on the off-chance of securing his assistance."

"It's awfully good of you to think of such a thing!" said Dick. "But, as I said before, I should very much like to leave for England to-day. I want to get away from America; and now that you have given me the chance of doing so, I grudge every moment that delays my departure. Of course, if you would prefer that I should stay until Mr. Lee returns——"

In the midst of Dick's speech Jack suddenly burst into a merry laugh. He had just remembered that Mr. Pryde and his daughter were leaving for England that day by the *Dardania*.

"What a thick-headed numskull I am!" he exclaimed, regarding Dick with a quizzical air. "Of course you want to leave for England to-day, and, of course, you shall! What is an interview with Nelson Lee compared with five days and a half of Miss Pryde's company? You needn't blush, my boy! I've been that way myself, and I know the feeling."

"Then I may go to-day?" asked Dick shyly.

"Of course you may," replied Jack, pulling out a roll of notes. "Here's three months' salary in advance. Buy yourself a new rig-out as soon as the shops are open; and whilst you're engaged in that interesting occupation I'll go down to the steam-

ship office and book you a first-class passage in the *Dardania*."

"Not first-class," protested Dick.

"First-class," repeated Jack. "The manager of our company has a position to keep up. It would be bad form to go steerage."

"But——"

"Not another word!" said Jack firmly. "You go by the *Dardania*, and you travel first-class!"

He was as good as his word, and ten hours later he and Dick were standing on the *Dardania's* upper-deck, not more than a dozen yards from Mr. Pryde and Nellie.

"Now, remember," said Jack, as he took Dick's hand, "you are to stay at my house, Penleven Grange, until I return. That note which I have just given you to give to my wife will explain everything to her, and will ensure you a hearty welcome."

A bell rang and a siren hooted. Then came the order, "All ashore!"

The two men shook hands, and a moment later Jack Langley was crossing the gangway. He was the last to leave, and as he stepped ashore a man came racing down the wharf, elbowed him aside, dashed across the moving gangway, and sprang aboard the steamer just as her moorings were cast off and she was moving out from the landing-stage.

Two minutes later the *Dardania* was steaming down the river, and Jack Langley was staring after her in blank bewilderment.

For he had caught a glimpse of the face of the man who had elbowed him and leapt aboard the vessel.

And he recognised the face as that of Mark Rymer, Professor of Chemistry at Westminster University!

THE LAST LAP.

IT was half-past twelve when Jack Langley returned to the Waldorf-Astoria.

"There's a gentleman upstairs in your room, sir," said the hall-porter, touching his gold-laced cap. "He came just after you went out. And when I told him that you had only gone down to the wharf to see a friend off to England, he said he would go up to your room and wait for you."

"And you allowed him to do so? You gave him the key of my private sitting-room?"

"Yes, sir. I know you won't mind when I tell you what the gentleman's name is."

"And what is his name?"

"Mr. Nelson Lee."

Jack didn't mind! He dashed up to his room three stairs at a time.

"By Jove, Lee, this is a pleasant surprise!" he exclaimed, as he wrung the detective's hand. "You've got back from Boston earlier than you expected, haven't you?"

"Yes," replied Lee. "As a matter of

fact, I returned to New York last night by the midnight mail. They told me at my hotel that you had been inquiring for me there on Thursday afternoon, so as soon as I had had my breakfast this morning, and attended to my letters, I came on here to see you."

"And does your early return mean that you have been successful in your visit to Boston?"

"I'm sorry to say it doesn't. On the contrary, it means that I have failed."

"You haven't found Lord Easington's missing heir, then?"

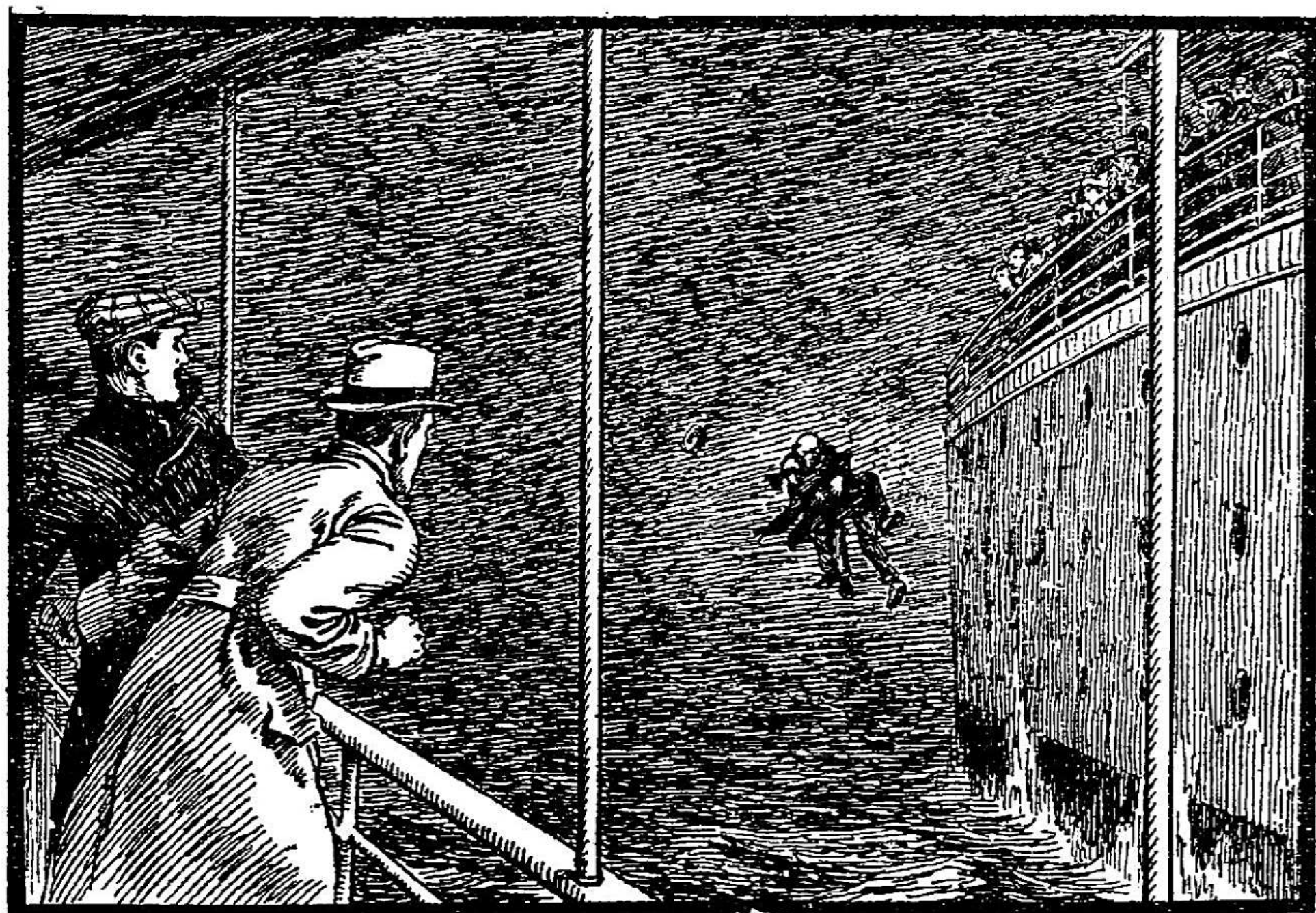
"No. The patient in the Boston hospital who was thought to be the man I was

exactly! What do you know about him? Quick! Don't keep me in suspense!"

"I—I have just parted from him!" groaned Jack. "Oh, what a blind fool I have been!"

And then he told Nelson Lee of his midnight adventure in the Bowery, of his subsequent long conversation with Dick Seymour, and of the latter's departure for England in the s.s. Dardania.

"And to think that he was actually in New York all the time!" sighed Nelson Lee regretfully. "After pursuing him all round the world, I have missed him at last by a hair's-breadth, as it were! However, it doesn't really matter, except that I should



The two men overbalanced, crashed against the taffrail, and toppled over backwards into the sea, still locked in each other's arms.

looking for turns out to be an escaped convict, and not Dick Seymour at all."

"Dick Seymour!"

Jack Langley leapt to his feet, white and trembling.

"Lee—Lee," he almost moaned. "for Heaven's sake don't tell me that Lord Easington's missing heir is a young man named Dick Seymour, who was formerly employed as a stockman on Garoo Downs, in New South Wales, and afterwards emigrated to New Zealand, and from there to the Sandwich Islands, and from there to New York!"

"That's the man!" cried Nelson Lee excitedly. "You have described his history

dearly like to have the honour and glory of escorting him back to his native land. If he's going to stay at your house until you return, I've only got to cable to him before I leave New York—"

"But I haven't told you the worst," interrupted Jack, whose face had grown strangely haggard and drawn within the last few minutes. Just as the Dardania was moving away from the wharf, a man rushed past me, and leaped aboard. I caught a glimpse of his face as he darted across the gangway. It was Mark Rymer!"

The detective recoiled as though he had been struck.

"Mark Rymer—Mark Rymer!" he gasped.

"Yes," groaned Jack, rocking himself to and fro in an agony of self-reproach. "I have sent Dick Seymour to his death!"

"Now you're talking nonsense," said Nelson Lee, laying his hand affectionately on Jack's shoulder. "The outlook is sufficiently black, I admit, but there is no blame attaching to you, my dear fellow. You only did what any other generously-disposed person would have done under similar circumstances. You didn't know that Dick Seymour was the man I was hunting for. Neither could you be expected to know, when you booked Dick's passage in the Dardania, that Mark Rymer had booked his passage in the same vessel."

"But I am wasting time," he continued. "I must make arrangements for leaving New York at once. If possible, I must overtake young Seymour before Mark Rymer finds an opportunity to do him mischief."

"You can't possibly overtake the Dardania!" said Jack Langley. "There isn't a fast boat until Tuesday."

"But there are two fast boats for England on Saturdays."

"Yes, I know that. But they sail within a few minutes of each other. The Alaric is certain to have left by now."

"One never knows!" said Nelson Lee, and, crossing to the telephone, he rang up the office of the world-famous steamship line which owned the Alaric.

"Has your boat—the Alaric—sailed yet?" he asked.

"No, sir," came the reply. "She ought to have sailed at noon, but at the last moment it was found that something was wrong with her steering-gear. The defect is now being remedied, and the vessel will sail about four o'clock. Do you wish to book a berth?"

"Yes, please. One, first-class——"

"Two!" said Jack, interrupting.

The detective turned round and regarded him with an air of genuine surprise.

"You are coming with me?" he asked.

"You bet!" said Jack.

"But I thought you had business in New York which would keep you here until Tuesday."

"Business can wait!" said Jack. "Business or no business, I'm going to see this affair through!"

"Right you are!" said Nelson Lee.

He turned to the telephone again.

"My friend will come with me," he said. "Reserve us the best available double-berth deck-cabin you have left. We'll be down at the office in about an hour's time."

He was as good as his word. At half-past two he and Jack, with all their baggage, drove up to the steamship office. By three o'clock they were crossing Christopher Street Ferry, on their way to the departure-pier. By half-past three they were safely aboard the steamer.

At four o'clock the Alaric was gliding majestically down the Hudson River, and Nelson Lee had entered on the last lap of his arduous race for Lord Easington's missing heir.

"He says we shall do it," said Nelson Lee, a couple of hours later.

"He? Who?" asked Jack Langley.

"The captain. I've just been having a chat with him."

"And what is it that he says we shall do?"

"Overtake the Dardania before she reaches Plymouth. He says that the Alaric is a good knot an hour faster than the Dardania, so that he calculates we shall pass her some time on Wednesday afternoon."

"And it's now Saturday afternoon," said Jack dolefully. "I don't see much consolation in that! Why, Mark Rymer will have time to commit half a dozen murders between now and Wednesday afternoon!"

"Oh, don't be a croaker!" said Nelson Lee impatiently.

The captain was right when he said that the Alaric would overtake the Dardania before she arrived at Plymouth. But he was wrong when he prophesied that they would pass the latter vessel on Wednesday afternoon.

It may have been that he had overestimated the sailing powers of his own vessel, or it may have been that he had underestimated those of the Dardania. Whatever the cause may have been, however, the fact remains that up to daybreak on Friday morning, when the Alaric was abreast of the Scilly Isles the Dardania had not been sighted, much less overtaken.

Shortly after passing the Scilly Isles the Alaric ran into an impenetrable bank of fog, in consequence of which her engines were first reduced to half-speed, and afterwards to quarter. At this pace she crawled up the fog-enshrouded Channel for an hour or more when suddenly, out of the fog immediately ahead came the warning blare of a steamer's siren, followed a moment afterwards by the lurid flash of an ascending rocket.

Instantly the Alaric's engines were reversed, and in less time almost than it takes to tell her decks were crowded with alarmed and excited passengers, some of them in their pyjamas.

"What's the matter?" asked Nelson Lee, addressing the chief officer, who was coming down from the bridge.

"Nothing at present!" was the surly reply.

The chief officer had been in charge up to then, but had just been superseded by the captain, and was consequently not in the most gracious humour.

"If nothing's the matter, why have the engines been reversed?" asked Jack, who was standing by the detective's side.

"Because there's evidently another vessel just in front of us."

"But I heard somebody say a rocket had been fired. Is the vessel in front of us on the rocks?"

"It may be so."

"Then, if the other vessel is on the rocks, and is just ahead of us, we can't be far from the rocks ourselves! In other words, you must have lost your bearings and come too near inshore."

An angry scowl overspread the officer's face, but ere he could frame a reply the air was rent by a shout of terrified amazement.

For at that moment the fog had suddenly lifted, revealing the fact that the *Alaric* was bearing down on the *Dardania*, which was stranded on the rocks at the mouth of Penleven Cove, immediately underneath Jack Langley's house.

NELSON LEE'S TRIUMPH.

THE voyage of the *Dardania* had not been a pleasant one for Dick Seymour. As the reader will remember, Jack Langley had appointed him manager of a company in England, of which the young engineer was Chairman of Directors. In addition to this, Jack had given him a quarter's salary in advance, and had paid for his passage to England in the same boat as Mr. Pryde and his daughter.

Strange to say, neither Nellie nor her father noticed that Dick was on board until the voyage was several hours old. In fact it was not until the passengers assembled for dinner that Nellie's eyes, roaming round the crowded saloon, fell on the care-worn face of her lover.

With an involuntary cry of delighted surprise, she pointed him out to her father, who, as soon as the meal was ended, drew Dick aside and asked him how he had fared since he had left the Sandwich Isles. When Dick had told his story, the old man laid his hand on his shoulder and spoke to him, not unkindly, perhaps, but in unemotional, business-like tones, from which sentiment was conspicuous by its absence.

"You seem to have had a pretty rough time since you left my employment," he said. "Everything appears to have been against you; but you've got your foot on the bottom rung of the ladder now, with this new appointment of yours, and no one will be more sincerely pleased to see you at the top than I shall."

"And your promise?" said Dick eagerly. "That still holds good?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Pryde, smiling at the absurdity of the idea. "Come to me in two years' time or less, and prove to me that you have an assured income of twenty thousand dollars a year—four thousand pounds a year in English money—and if Nellie still wishes to marry you, I won't say no. That was my promise, wasn't it?"

"It was," said Dick.

"And, in the meantime, of course," said Mr. Pryde. "I shall expect you to keep

your part of the bargain. You promised me, you will remember, that until you had an income of twenty thousand dollars a year you wouldn't speak to Nellie, or write to her, or communicate with her in any way whatever. I trust you haven't booked your passage in the *Dardania* with the intention of breaking that promise?"

Dick coloured to the roots of his hair. As a matter of fact, he had chosen the *Dardania* partly because he would be able to see Nellie every day, but partly also in the hope that her father would at least allow him to act towards her in the same way as he acted towards the rest of the lady passengers.

Never for an instant had Dick dreamed of breaking the spirit of his promise—that is to say, he had never intended to speak one single word of love to Nellie—but he had certainly looked forward to the delight of chatting with her across the dinner-table, of passing the time of day to her on deck, and of indulging in the ordinary small-talk of society when her father, or some other passenger was with her.

"Am I to understand," he asked, "that you wish me to keep to the strict letter of my promise?"

"Of course," said Mr. Pryde.

"I am not to speak to Nellie—not even to exchange the ordinary conventional greetings with her?"

"That is my wish," said Mr. Pryde, in a hard, matter-of-fact voice. "You pledged your word to me that you wouldn't speak to her until you had an income such as I have named, and I expect you, as an honourable man, to fulfil your word."

Dick inclined his head.

"Very good, sir," he said, in a husky voice. "It shall be as you say."

Mr. Pryde's decree was not the only thing which made the voyage an extremely unpleasant one from Dick Seymour's point of view. On the third day out from New York, Mark Rymer contrived, unseen by the rest of the passengers, to empty the contents of a small glass capsule into Dick's cup of after-dinner coffee.

By a phenomenal stroke of luck, the cap was upset by a clumsy waiter before Dick had drunk much more than a quarter of its poisonous contents; but even the little he had drunk proved quite sufficient to give rise to exceedingly unpleasant and dangerous symptoms.

For the whole of Tuesday night, and for the greater part of Wednesday, Dick was in the hands of the ship's surgeon, who never left him for a single instant, and who plied him with a stomach-pump, and nauseous emetics.

On Wednesday evening he was pronounced to be "cured," but was not allowed to leave his bunk. On Thursday he was permitted to sit up, but was still kept a prisoner in his cabin, which nobody but the doctor was allowed to enter. And at daybreak on Friday morning, to complete the tale of his woes, he was awakened by a sudden and

violent shock, which jarred the liner from stem to stern and flung him out of his bunk.

No; most decidedly it was not a pleasant or an agreeable voyage for Dick!

But the most unpleasant part of it was still to come.

As soon as he had collected his senses, he picked himself up, dressed himself in feverish haste, and hurried on deck, where he found himself a unit in a surging crowd of alarmed passengers. Several minutes elapsed before he could obtain a coherent account of what had happened; but at last he learned—what the reader already knows—that the Dardania had lost her way in the fog, and had run aground at the mouth of Penleven Cove.

"No, there's no danger—absolutely none," said the captain, in answer to the passengers' frantic inquiries. "The sea, as you can see for yourselves, is as calm as a mill-pond, and there isn't a breath of wind. We have sustained no damage worth mentioning, and the vessel will probably float off at high tide. In the meantime, in order to alleviate all anxiety, the boats shall be got ready to be lowered at a moment's notice, and we'll signal for the lifeboat to stand by, in case it should be required."

Reassured by the captain's words, a goodly number of the passengers returned to their cabins to complete their toilets. The great majority, however, still remained on deck, and amongst the latter were Mark Rymer and Dick Seymour.

For several minutes the two stood shoulder to shoulder—surrounded by a crowd of fellow-passengers, of course—striving in vain to pierce the veil of yellow fog which hid the shore from their view. Then, for no particular reason except a desire to "stretch his legs," Dick elbowed his way through the crowd, and strolled away in the direction of the after-part of the upper deck, which was then completely deserted and in almost total darkness.

In the twinkling of an eye Mark Rymer was gliding after him, his hand in the inside pocket of his coat, nervously fingering an ivory-handled weapon that was half dagger and half stiletto.

"Dame Fortune has relented!" he mused, when he saw Dick halt and lean over the steamer's taffrail. "At last she has given me the chance for which I have waited so long! I have only to steal up to him from behind—"

His musings ended in a startled gasp, for at that moment the Dardania's steam-siren uttered a discordant roar, whilst an instant later a rocket soared into the fog-enshrouded sky.

This, which was meant as a signal to those on shore, not only had the effect of interrupting the professor's musings, but it also sent Dick hurrying back to join his fellow-passengers. A few moments later, however, he again returned to the deserted upper deck, and again Mark Rymer followed him.

With stealthy, catlike steps the professor

crept towards his unsuspecting victim. Shorter and shorter grew the distance between them, until at last it was less than half a dozen yards. Then suddenly Dick spun round on his heel with hoarse shout of alarm. Indistinctly, through the fog, he had just caught sight of another steamer, which appeared to be bearing down on the Dardania in such a way as to render a collision inevitable.

The next instant, however, he had forgotten all about the approaching steamer, for upon turning round he found himself face to face with the professor, who was then in the act of crouching for his spring, with his weapon in his upraised hand.

Almost before Dick had time to realise what was happening, the other leaped upon him; but, with marvellous agility, Dick dodged the descending dagger, and dealt the professor a sharp, swift blow on the wrist which caused him to drop the weapon.

For a second the two men stood glaring at each other like gladiators. Then, with a low, fierce snarl, the professor once more rushed at Dick, and in the twinkling of an eye they were locked in each other's arms, and were reeling to and fro across the deck.

In the midst of their struggle the fog suddenly lifted. At the same instant a chorus of ear-splitting yells burst forth from the rest of the Dardania's passengers—yells of excitement at the sight of the two men struggling on the upper deck, and yells of alarm at the vision of the Alaric, which was then but half a length away, and had only just succeeded in altering her course in the nick of time to avert a collision.

Needless to say, the excitement on board the Alaric was every whit as great as that on board the Dardania. Jack Langley and Nelson Lee, who were standing side by side on the promenade-deck, were amongst the first to see the stranded liner and the struggling figures of Dick and the professor. Both men recognised the figures at the self-same moment, but Jack was the first to speak.

"Lee—good heavens—look!" he cried, his voice vibrating with intense excitement. "Dick Seymour!"

"And Mark Rymer!" added Nelson Lee.

Scarcely had he spoken ere the air was rent by a perfect pandemonium of shouts and women's screams. For even whilst Mark Rymer's name was trembling on the detective's lips the two men overbalanced themselves, crashed against the taffrail, snapped it in two like matchwood, and toppled backwards into the sea, still locked in each other's arms.

"Stop him!"

The cry burst from a hundred throats. But it came too late. Like an arrow from a bow Nelson Lee had darted from Jack's side, had cleared the taffrail at a flying leap, and had plunged into the sea.

Amid a scene of indescribable excitement he swam towards the spot where Dick and the professor had disappeared. Before he reached

(Concluded on page 30.)

ONLY THREE MORE SETS TO COME!



Competition Rules and Conditions

Which must be strictly adhered to.

1. The First Prize of £100 will be awarded to the competitor who sends in the correct, or nearest correct solution of all eight sets of the pictures, according to the Editor's official solution.
2. The Second Prize of £50, and the others in the splendid variety of prizes, will be awarded in order of merit.
3. All the prizes will be awarded. If two or more competitors tie, however, the prize or prizes, or their value will be divided, and the Editor reserves full rights in this respect.
4. No solutions may be sent in until all the sets of the pictures and the necessary coupon have been published. Full directions will then be given.
5. The names under the pictures must be written IN INK.
6. Employees of the proprietors of this journal are not eligible to compete.
7. Entry to this competition is on the full understanding that the Editor's decision is final and legally binding throughout.

Readers of "The Champion," "Boys' Friend," "Union Jack," "Boys' Realm," "Pluck," "Magnet," "Young Britain," "Gem," "The Popular," "The Rocket," and "Boys' Cinema," are also taking part in this Contest, so that additional attempts may be made with the pictures from these allied journals.

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO

is to write IN INK in the allotted space under each of these puzzle-pictures the name of the Footballer which you think the picture represents. In previous issues you have had the full list of names used throughout the competition, so that you have only to fit the right name to the right picture. In all, there will be EIGHT SETS OF PICTURES, so keep your solutions until the other sets appear.

DO NOT SEND YOUR ENTRIES
YET

Editorial Announcement.

My dear Readers,

I must ask you not on any account to miss the opening story—"U.S.A. At St. Frank's,"—of a powerful new school-detective series commencing next week. Two new outstanding characters will make their bow before you. One of them Ulysses Spencer Adams, who will become better known as U.S.A., is a new boy hailing from New York City. He is a wonderfully drawn character representing Young America as the author saw him in his recent tour of the States.

THE NIGHT OWL!

The other character, somewhat less prepossessing, goes by the sinister pseudonym of the Night Owl, his real name being Caleb Droone. He is the head of a notorious criminal gang known as the Alliance of Thirteen, and he is one of the most dangerous types of criminals Nelson Lee has ever had to encounter. Look out for his portrait on next week's cover and you will understand why he is called The Night Owl, for he is not

the kind of customer one would care to meet in the dark.

THAT RUMOUR.

Another item of interest to watch for in next week's issue is an important announcement concerning the alleged rumour that Nipper is busy preparing the first number of a new Mag.

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL SKETCHES.

For weeks past I have had to hold over the magnificent sketches by Mr. Briscoe of famous public schools. I hope to be able to resume this popular feature from next week onwards, beginning with an excellent full-page drawing of Winchester College, showing the school crest of this most ancient of our public schools in the left-hand corner of the sketch.

Your sincere friend,
THE EDITOR.

(Continued from page 14.)

turned box there was a candle, burning steadily. On one side there was a cupboard, the door of which stood wide open. And the place was quite empty.

"Why, why—they've gone!" gasped Buster, in alarm.

"Yes—gone!" muttered Mr. Manners. "Irene! What has become of Irene?"

Handforth & Co. came tumbling through the opening in the floor. They looked about them expectantly—but were disappointed.

"Oh, I was a fool not to rescue Miss Irene first!" exclaimed Buster wildly. "But I didn't know—I thought——"

"Steady, my boy—steady!" interrupted Mr. Manners quietly. "Under very trying circumstances, you did your best. But this is terribly alarming. Where can the scoundrel be—what has he done with my little girl?"

"There's another floor above this, you know!" put in Church eagerly.

They gazed at the low roof. A second trapdoor could be seen—but this was bolted on the underside, and there was no ladder leading up to it. It was therefore clear that Benson and his fair captive had departed the other way—they had left the mill together.

What could be the meaning of this fresh mystery?

CHAPTER VI.

SOMETHING LIKE A SHOCK!



HANDFORTH gave a grunt.

"Well, it's queer—that's all I can say,"

he said bluntly. "This was to have been the end of it.

I wonder where the asses could have got to? They ought to have stopped here until we came up—that was the arrangement——"

"Arrangement," echoed Buster Boots, staring.

"Why, what—what is this?" exclaimed Mr. Manners, ignoring the others, and hurrying across to the cupboard. Bending down he picked the loose leaf of a notebook from the floor.

"Why, great Scott!" he exclaimed, with concern.

The others crowded round, and read the words that were scrawled upon the paper in pencil:

"Unknown man came here. Rough customer. Thought it was you fellows, so dodged in cupboard as arranged. Jack captured and taken. Mysterious. Am following. Stop fooling—this is serious. Follow trail of oats—I found mouldy bag in cupboard. Come at once. Urgent.—Reggie."

"Well I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Handforth. "Then—then Pitt and Grey have met with some real excitement!"

"Looks like it, old man," said Mr. Manners grimly.

Buster looked at them in bewilderment.

"But—but I don't understand!" he shouted.

Mr. Manners gave the juniors a quick look, glanced at the note again, and nodded.

"Things have gone a bit wrong, but this was the agreed upon time to finish up the game, so we'll do it," he said. "The fact is, Buster, things aren't quite what they seem."

Buster gazed at Mr. Manners as though in a dream.

For Mr. Manners appeared to be a very false gentleman. Hitherto, Buster had only seen him in the intense gloom of the wintry evening. Even the candlelight was dim, and at first Mr. Manners had taken care to remain in the shadow. But now he calmly proceeded to remove his grey hair—a simple proceeding, considering that it was only a wig.

His side whiskers followed. And while Buster continued to stare in startled amazement, "Mr. Manners" produced a handkerchief and a little bottle of spirit. He poured some on to the handkerchief, and then wiped his face. By the time he emerged he was a changed being.

The lines of age had disappeared—the bronze had gone—and he was now extraordinarily boyish.

"Nipper!" gasped Buster thickly.

"Exactly," I grinned. "A bit of a shock, eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Handforth and Co.

"Now then—no cackling!" I said sternly.

"Buster's a brick—he's turned up trumps far better than I ever hoped for. Good for you, Buster—I'm proud to call you a pal of mine! Sorry I'm not Mr. Manners, as you believed. I'm just little me!"

"Good heavens!" stuttered Boots. "But—but—but— You—you— What the dickens does it mean? You cads! What do you mean by dragging Miss Irene into a rotten spoof business like this——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted gently. "Miss Irene isn't dragged into anything. If she's the sweet girl we believe her to be she's probably cosily tucked away in her own little study at this moment, reading a book, or writing letters. She hasn't been mixed up in this affair at all."

"You idiot! Didn't I follow her?"

"No, you didn't."

"I tell you she was dragged off her bicycle——"

"Oh, that was your little mistake," I said sweetly. "It was Reggie Pitt who was dragged off the bike."

"Reggie Pitt!" gulped Buster.

"He didn't look himself at the moment, but that was all planned," I went on. "You see, we knew that you wouldn't get any close view. And at a distance Pitt looked the part to the life—with his check sports coat and fair hair, and all the rest of the make up."

"Well I'm hanged!" said Buster bluntly. He was so staggered that he almost forgot to be angry. He couldn't grasp the full meaning of the big deception at first. It was almost impossible for him to bring home the fact to himself that there never had been any danger.

Irene hadn't taken part in the plot at all—Mr. Manners was a myth. The Manners Engineering Company was another myth. Mr. Willmer and his associates were——"

"What about Willmer?" demanded Buster fiercely.

"Oh, De Valerie," I replied. "Pretty good acting, eh? His accomplice, Radley, was Singleton. And the other two, as I've told you, were Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey—taking the parts of Irene and Benson. I drove that green car, of course. And we knew exactly what you were doing from the very start."

"You—you knew?" breathed Buster.

"Everything," I said calmly. "My dear chap, we counted upon you doing everything in just the way that you did do it. We knew that you were following, and picked our roads so that we shouldn't go too quickly. De Valerie and Singleton paused conveniently on their way out of this mill so that you would overhear their plans."

"You—you spoofing rotters!" said Buster hotly. "Then it was all a fake from start to finish?"

"Of course it was——"

"I suppose you're feeling pretty pleased with yourselves!" snapped Boots. "You—you cads! Oh, I've been fooled—I know it! And now, of course, you'll spread the yarn over the school, and make me a laughing stock!"

He spoke bitterly, with a touch of his former sullenness. But I quickly grasped his arms, and slapped him on the back.

"Don't take it the wrong way, old son," I said cheerfully. "We're not going to spread the yarn about the school—it's quite a private affair. It was just a test—a test of your character!"

"You're taking a lot of interest in me!" sneered Buster.

"As a matter of fact, we are," I admitted. "It so happened that a few days ago—just after that affair when you were called a funk—some of the fellows were saying that you were spiritless, and that if it came to a pinch you'd show the white feather. In a position of real danger, according to these fellows, you'd crumple up and bunk."

"Oh!" said Buster. "Do you think I care what they say——"

"Don't ride the high horse!" I insisted. "I won't tell you who these chaps were—it won't do any good. But Christine and Handforth and I and the rest stuck up for you. We had a long argument with those others, and maintained that when it came to a crisis you'd prove yourself to be a chap of action and courage!"

"Very kind of you," said Buster, with a grunt.

"Anyhow, we decided to put the thing to

the test," I went on. "And we planned a most elaborate affair—as you know. While we were waiting for our opportunity, we rehearsed our parts. This was no hurried jape. It was almost like a play. I picked my cast, told the fellows exactly what their characters were to be, and rehearsed them until they were perfect in their parts."

Buster began to lose his sullen look.

"And then we watched and waited," I said. "We got to know your ways—we found out that you went to Bannington with the intention of walking home in the dusk. And so we decided to bring off the great event this afternoon. Thanks, Buster, for playing into our hands so beautifully."

"My hat!" said Boots ruefully. "What a mug I've been!"

I was delighted at his changed attitude.

"Mug!" I echoed. "Don't you believe it. You looked upon all these things as genuine—and we've received the very proof we needed. You proved yourself to be resourceful and ready to meet the tense demands of the occasion. And besides that, you displayed heaps of pluck."

"Oh, rot!" growled Buster. "I didn't do anything——"

"And we're jolly proud of you!" put in Handforth warmly. "Look here, Buster, now that we know that you're all serene, let's shake hands. We'll let bygones be bygones—see? Forget the past, and all the rest of it. We'll start from now on a new basis."

"My idea, exactly," I said heartily.

Buster looked at us, and his eyes were glowing. I had known, from the very first, that once Buster Boots was brought out of his melancholy condition, he would become a changed person.

My only fear had been that he would lapse back into his bitter spirit upon finding out that he had been fooled. But the excitement of the evening had lifted him so far out of himself that he couldn't drop back.

After the first few minutes of indignation and anger, he realised that the game was a good one—and that we had acted our parts thoroughly. So thoroughly, in fact, that he had been deceived all along the line.

And even Buster couldn't ignore the fact that he had come out with flying colours. He hadn't known the truth, but he had acted well—he had comported himself with determination and dogged courage.

"Oh, all right," he said, at length. "I don't blame myself for falling into the trap—you chaps did the thing marvellously. I didn't have an inkling of the truth."

"Well, we can't stop to discuss it now," I said briskly. "Something's gone wrong."

"What do you mean—gone wrong?"

"Why, we left Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey up here, as you know," I went on. "The scheme was to come here, and all meet together, and expose ourselves. But Jack and Reggie aren't here!"

"Oh, I suppose they're fooling a bit on their own!" growled Buster.

"Of course they're not," I said. "They

wouldn't depart from the arrangement like that. Besides, look at this note. I don't like the look of it. What the dickens does Pitt mean? An unknown man came here!"

"Some tramp, perhaps," suggested Handforth.

"Yes, but even so you'd think that those two chaps could have scared him away," I said, frowning at the note. "Reggie is so confoundedly brief! Look at this—'Jack captured and taken.' What does that mean? And what's this about following a trail of oats?"

"And a mouldy bag in the cupboard?" said Church.

I glanced into the cupboard, and then strode in. Sure enough, up one corner, there was an ancient sack. It was half filled with oats that had seen their best days. They had probably been there for years.

"By Jove! I understand the wheeze!" I said quickly. "Pitt found that he was too late to help Jack, so he decided to follow the chap who had attacked Jack. So he filled his pockets full of these oats, and has left a trail!"

"My hat! That's about the truth!"

"Then—this is real?" asked Buster quickly. "No spoof about it?"

"Spoof!" I said impatiently. "Don't be an ass! While we were all away somebody came here! That's what we didn't bargain for. Instead of this affair being a fake, it's become genuine! There's something very queer about it all!"

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"There's only one thing—we've got to go down and see if this trail of oats is really to be found," I replied. "I don't like the look of it at all—I've just remembered something that's given me a bit of a turn."

"Remembered something?" repeated Handforth.

"Yes, that escaped convict."

Church and McClure looked at me, and went pale.

"You—you think——" began Church.

"I don't think anything—but it's a possibility," I said grimly.

"Great Scott!" muttered Church, in a husky voice.

"Escaped convict?" repeated Buster quickly.

"Didn't you hear the report this morning?" I said, turning to him. "You know there's a big convict settlement on Bannington Moor here—about four or five miles away. A convict escaped last term, and he was captured somewhere near Bellton. This fellow who escaped to-day hasn't been recaptured yet."

"He's been lurking about on the moor all day!" put in Handforth, taking in a deep breath. "I'll bet a penny to a pound that it was that fellow who came up here and attacked Jack Grey! These convicts are desperate, you know—and it's just the right kind of evening for dirty work! Foggy and thick, and generally murky! I expect we shall find Jack's remains on the moor!"

"Look here, my son, don't let your imagi-

nation run away with you," I said curtly. "I almost wish I hadn't mentioned the convict now. After all, it was only a passing idea. We've got no definite information at all—in all probability I was wrong. The chief thing is to find out what's become of those two asses. Pity they couldn't look after themselves!"

I spoke with feeling, for it was certainly annoying that the end of our little game should partially fizzle out. As I told Buster, we had planned quite a little comedy for the finish, with "Irene" taking part in it. But that, of course, was now knocked on the head.

Grim reality had taken the place of make-believe.

We passed down the ladder, and I took my flash lamp from my pocket. I felt pleased with myself for having slipped the handy little instrument into my clothing before setting out.

Arriving on the ground floor, I pushed the switch over, and a beam of light shot out. There were no oats on the floor here—not a sign of any trail whatever.

We emerged into the open.

"My hat, it's getting more foggy every minute!" said Church.

And indeed it was. The murk of the evening had greatly increased. We found ourselves surrounded by wreathing masses of mist. And my torch sent forth a beam of light which only increased the surrounding foginess.

"Not much good trying to find them in this fog!" said Handforth dubiously.

I gave him a withering look.

"And you pretend to be a detective," I said scornfully. "You're the chap who makes out that he can conduct investigations."

Handforth turned red.

"Look here, you ass——"

"Haven't we got that trail of oats to guide us?" I asked. "And haven't we got this electric torch to show us the way?"

Handforth coughed, and walked forward.

"There's nothing I like better than getting on the trail!" he said carelessly. "We might as well get on it while it's hot! One of the chief points about detective work is to pick up the trail while it's warm."

I chuckled at Handy's calm attitude, and the way in which he had ignored my rebuke. But I had hardly commenced to search round for the first sign of the trail when Handforth spoke again.

"Well?" he asked sarcastically. "Where's the giddy trail? A fat lot of good looking round with that spot of light!"

"If we can't pick up the oats, we'll follow the footprints," I said.

"Footprints—in this grass!" repeated Handforth sourly.

"A trained detective can find footprints anywhere!" I pointed out. "Marks that are quite invisible to the ordinary eye are easily distinguishable to the trained eye. That's just the difference, old man."

Handforth apparently didn't feel up to

answering this remark in the way it deserved, for he lapsed into a huffy silence. Fortunately, there was no need for us to look round for footprints. I don't suppose I could have followed a trail of that kind, in spite of my little bluff—which Handforth had swallowed.

And I uttered an exclamation of satisfaction after walking for a few paces. For there, in the coarse grass, I detected numbers of loose oats. They led away in a distinct line across the moor.

"Great!" I said tensely. "It's the trail! Good for Reggie!"

CHAPTER VII.

REGGIE PITT'S THEORY!



BUSTER BOOTS recovered his full eagerness and enthusiasm by the time the chase had been in progress for five minutes.

He had been keenly disappointed at first.

It was all very well to know that he had acted with resourcefulness and courage, but it took a good deal of gilt off the gingerbread to find out that the whole thing was a fake—that Irene was not Irene, and that Mr. Manners was more or less of a phantom personality.

As a matter of fact, I hadn't the faintest idea what Mr. Manners was really like, and his business was equally unknown to me. In all probability he was very different from an engineering contractor.

But as Irene would never know anything about the affair, these trifles didn't matter.

The chief fact was that our object had been achieved. John Busterfield, Boots had been brought out of his peculiar depression, and this fresh excitement was causing him to forget the trick.

It was very foggy once we got fairly on the moor. The mist had rolled up from the sea, and was increasing in intensity. We moved along in a little patch of light to ourselves, hemmed in all sides by the surrounding blanket of grey.

"How much farther is this trail going?" growled Handforth, at length.

"I don't know—but we'll follow it until it comes to an end," I replied. "What I'm worried about is how Reggie could have allowed the stranger to take Jack all this way without doing something."

"Looks fishy to me," said Church. "I believe there's been foul play."

"Good!" said Handforth absently.

"Eh?"

"I—I mean, that'll be pretty rotten for Jack," said Handforth, with haste. "But this is just the kind of night for foul play, you know. It wouldn't surprise me a bit to find ourselves suddenly surrounded by a gang of crooks. Probably it's the work of a secret society—something like the Circle

of Terror, or the League of the Green Triangle—"

"Your imagination is too vivid, old man," I interrupted. "The best thing you can do is to allow your brain to become dormant."

"That ought to be easy," murmured McClure.

Fortunately, Handforth didn't hear this insulting remark, and we continued on our way in silence. I knew, from my sense of direction, that we were inevitably getting nearer and nearer to the old deserted quarry.

This was situated less than half a mile from the mill, and we had covered practically that distance already. And as there was no guarding rail round the edge of the quarry, I moved with extreme caution.

"Better go easy, you chaps," I warned. "Stick behind me."

"What for?" asked Buster.

"Quarry's pretty close," I replied briefly.

Even as I spoke the words, the ground seemed to drop away in front of my eyes. I pulled up short, and found that I was on the extreme edge of the cliff. The trail of oats led right over this edge.

"Steady on," I said cautiously. "We'll have to go easy now."

The cliff was not sheer, but steeply sloping, with many jagged boulders. In full daylight it was quite an easy matter to swarm down. But at night there was always the risk of an ugly slip.

In single file we commenced the descent. And, sure enough, never for one yard was the ground free from a few grains of oats. The trail was very easy to follow.

Reggie Pitt, of course, had allowed the oats to trickle through his hands as he walked along, replenishing his supply at intervals from his well-filled pockets. In his "Irene" disguise the big check sports-coat was supplied with two ample patch pockets.

Arriving at the bottom of the cliff, we were down in the very heart of the quarry. It had been in a state of disuse for years. Over on the other side were the caves—one of which led into a tunnel which burrowed its way underground to the old monastery ruins.

But the trail did not lead in this direction.

We passed along the cliff-face until, after about thirty yards, we arrived at a small cleft amid the rugged stonework. The oats led straight into this spot, and I noticed that they were here strewn about very lavishly.

I flashed my light further into the cleft, but could see nothing. But then I heard a muffled exclamation—a kind of grunt—from amid the rocks. Moving forward quickly, with the others close behind, I turned a corner and came to a little shallow cave.

And the light from my torch played upon two figures.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed, hurrying forward.

"Here they are!" yelled Church.

Buster Boots started as he gazed at the two forms. One was roughly dressed, and would easily be taken for a man. A thick muffler was tied round his face so that he could make no outcry, and he was bound hand and foot.

The other figure was that of a girl—Irene Manners herself. For one brief instant Buster almost told himself that it really was Irene. There she was, in neat shoes, silk stockings, and that well-known check sports coat. But, taking a pace nearer, Buster saw that the illusion was destroyed.

For the "girl's" head was uncovered, and there was the short, curly hair of Reggie Pitt revealed. And Pitt, too, was gagged. His face was "made-up" slightly.

In less than a minute the two juniors were cut free. They were helped to their feet, and stamped about for a few moments to restore their circulations.

"What the dickens happened?" I asked bluntly.

"Oh, so you've brought Buster along," said Pitt. "What about it, old man? Did everything go off all right?"

"Yes, confound you!" growled Boots.

Pitt gave a perfect imitation of a girlish voice, and chuckled afterwards. Buster turned red, reminded of that conversation he had overheard in the old mill.

"Never mind all that now," I said impatiently. "What's the idea of us finding you here, trussed up like a couple of chickens—"

"I'm the only chicken!" said Pitt, with a grin. "Still, you're right. This is no time for lightness, O chief. The fact is, we had a bit of excitement. At least, Jack had. He ought to have a bump on his head the size of an egg!"

Jack Grey rubbed his head tenderly.

"Yes, but what happened?" I insisted.

"If you don't keep demanding explanations, you'll get one," said Pitt. "Jack and I were up in that mill, chuckling over the whole affair, and wondering how long it would be before you fellows turned up. Buster had gone, and we had nothing to do but wait. Well, we heard somebody moving downstairs, and we kept as quiet as mice—"

"Why?"

"Because we thought at first that Buster had come back," replied Pitt. "It wouldn't do for him to hear us talking, would it? Well, we heard him coming up the ladder, so I dived into the cupboard—pretending to be locked in, a prisoner."

"Yes, and practically as soon as Reggie had vanished, a man turned up," put in Jack Grey. "A big, rough fellow, who was on me almost before I realised it. You see, I was sure he was Buster, and I pretended to be dozing on a box. And when I looked up, this rotten chap was standing over me!"

"Was he a convict?" asked Church quickly.

"A convict—no!"



The man leapt upon him like a tiger, and even in the gloom Buster could see the ugly prison garb.

"But we thought—"

"There you are—that proves that it isn't always wise to jump to conclusions," I put in. "Well, go on, Jack. What happened?"

"Why, before I could say 'Jack Robinson' the man grabbed hold of me, took me round the throat, and nearly throttled me," said Grey. "I think he must have bashed my head against one of the wooden posts, because I became all dazed and silly. I didn't remember much until I found myself here."

"But I don't see the object—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Pitt. "While I was in the cupboard I began to suspect that something was wrong. So I peeped out, and you can imagine how surprised I was to see Jack completely knocked out. And the man was bending over him and binding up his hands and feet. I thought of the convict, too—and I shall have something more to say about that in a minute. I've got a theory."

"A theory?" repeated Handforth eagerly.

"Yes; but let me finish first," said Reggie. "Well, you can imagine the situation. How could I hope to overpower this burly stranger single-handed? In any case, there wasn't any time for me to decide. He started looking round, and made straight for the cupboard. Fortunately, there's a kind of wooden button inside, and I turned this so that the door wouldn't open. The man tried the door, but gave up after a minute or two."

"And what then?"

"He started carrying Jack down, and I decided the best thing I could do would be to follow. Well, I spotted those oats in the corner, and it didn't take me long to fill my pockets. I followed the fellow across the moor, and right down into the quarry to this spot."

"Don't you know what he was going to do with Jack?"

"No," said Reggie. "I was just getting ready to crack him on the head with a chunk of rock from behind when he caught sight of me. The fog hadn't come up then, you know, and it wasn't quite so black. He was staggered at first—probably because he thought I was a girl. Anyhow, he came for me, and I had no chance at all. He had me bound up inside of two minutes, and in the course of the struggle my giddy wig fell off, and he knew the truth."

"Didn't he ask any questions?"

"Yes; but he seemed too anxious to get away," replied Reggie. "He knew that we were schoolboys disguised, and offered the remark that we were probably engaged in some joke or other. Then he buzzed off, leaving us here."

Handforth scratched his head.

"An escaped lunatic?" he said brilliantly.

"No, I hardly think so," replied Pitt.

"I've got another explanation."

"Let's hear it," I said.

"Well, you know that a convict escaped this morning?"

"Yes."

"It looks to me," said Reggie, "that the fellow who attacked us is a member of a criminal gang—the same gang that the convict belongs to. You know as well as I do that these fellows always stick to one another—they're clannish. And as soon as the gang heard that their pal had escaped, they sent a chap down to rally round him."

"That's possible," I admitted. "In fact, there may have been some bribery at the prison—one of the warders might have been won over. Still, we can't speak definitely about that."

"Anyhow, it's an idea," said Pitt. "This man had a big bundle with him, and it's a ten to one chance that the bundle contained clothing. And don't you think it's highly probable that the old mill was fixed on as a rendezvous?"

"As a which?" asked Handforth.

"As a meeting-place," replied Reggie. "It's handy for the moor, and very lonely. Couldn't find a better place to change clothes and to have a jaw. Of course, the fellow took us away because he was expecting his convict pal to turn up. It's quite likely that he's waiting there still."

"By Jove, I believe you're right!" I said tensely. "In fact, it's about the only possible explanation."

"It's not too late, is it?" asked Buster keenly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, there are seven of us here, and we ought to be able to overpower two men be-

tween us," replied Buster. "Why not get back to the mill as soon as we can, and see what's doing? If that crook is there we'll collar him, and then lie in wait for the convict."

"Yes, that's a good suggestion," I said briskly. "We'll do it. The only trouble is that so much time has been wasted. I expect both the brutes will have gone by now. Still, it's a chance."

And without any further ado we left the quarry, and made all speed back across the moor to the mill.

The tracks that we had made on our outward journey were clearly visible, for we had trodden the grass down pretty thoroughly. And in such a mist as this it was necessary to have something to guide us.

Reggie Pitt was very incongruous in his costume. His feminine clothing merely consisted of a blue serge costume—jacket and skirt—and the big check travelling coat over the top. Underneath, Reggie was wearing an ordinary Norfolk suit. His disguise had not been designed to bear any close scrutiny.

He had discarded the feminine part of his attire—getting some of the other fellows to carry it. So now he was walking along in a Norfolk suit, with silk stockings and ladies' sports shoes. In full daylight he would have looked somewhat striking—especially with the make-up on his face.

But in the excitement of this adventure he had forgotten all about his appearance. In fact, we were all thrilled by the thought of capturing both the convict and his accomplice.

When we were nearing the mill I called a halt.

"There may be danger," I said. "It's quite possible that the convict hasn't turned up yet, and we don't want to give the other chap any warning. So we'll spread out in a circle and approach the mill singly from different quarters."

"That's a good idea," said Buster approvingly.

"If one of us spots the convict, or is attacked for any reason, he's got to give a yell of warning," I went on. "That'll bring the rest of us round him in no time."

"Good!" said Handforth. "That's just what I was going to suggest."

And a minute later we had spread out in accordance with the plan, and were closing in on the mill from different quarters.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CALIBRE OF BUSTER BOOTS!



THE mist lay thick upon the moor as Buster Boots crept along in his appointed direction. He had been warned, like the rest, not to travel too fast. The idea was for

all to meet at the mill at about the same time.

A great silence brooded over the moor.

Pausing every now and again, Buster could hear nothing at all. The mist closed round him, and it seemed that he was living in a world apart. But, by peering intently ahead, he could just make out the ghostly form of the mill in the distance. The mist seemed thicker than it actually was.

I had purposely waited until the mill itself was visible before spreading my men out. Otherwise several of them would probably have lost themselves. But now they always had the ghostly form of the ramshackle old place to guide them.

Buster's sensations were mixed.

His feeling of annoyance and anger at being fooled in the earlier part of the evening had passed. He was beginning to realise that he had much to thank us for. We had lifted him out of that rut into which he had sunk. And he grimly told himself that he wouldn't sink back into it.

If only he could distinguish himself now!

That was the thought that came to him as he crept forward. But he had little real hope of doing anything. For he was certain in his belief that the convict and the other man would be gone.

And he was just thinking in this way, and getting nearer to the mill, when he thought he heard a crackle of a twig near-by. He turned sharply, and gazed into the murk.

A form rose up from behind a gorse-bush—silent, dim, and shadowy.

"Who's that?" asked Buster quickly.

"Best keep quiet, my lad, or I'll croak you!" snarled a harsh whisper.

Buster Boots opened his mouth to shout a warning, but the man leapt upon him like a tiger. Even in the gloom Buster could see the ugly prison garb, liberally marked with the broad arrow.

He caught a glimpse of a leering, twisted face, and his hand was seized in a vice-like grip. Even so, Buster would have given fight to this man and yelled for help—but for one fact.

And that fact was quite sufficient.

The convict held a wicked-looking revolver and he thrust this into Buster's chest, and clicked the trigger in a manner that made the junior's heart almost stop beating.

"One sound, hang you, and it'll be all up!" snapped the man. "I'm desperate!"

Buster had more sense than to shout. The very tone of this man was sufficient. He was a convict, escaping from justice, and was probably in a starving condition. A man in such a frame of mind as his would not hesitate to kill.

And Buster Boots proved his calibre now.

Instead of becoming fluttered and excited, he remained calm—deadly calm. Although help was so near at hand, he could not call for it. His only course was to obey this desperate crook.

"Well, what do you want?" he whispered.

"A kid, eh?" said the man. "All right—you'll do! Got any money?"

"About twenty-five shillings!"

"Better than nothing!" snapped the man. "Look here—take them clothes off, an' be quick about it."

"Take—take my clothes off?"

"Yus, that's what I said!" repeated the man. "And no larks! If you breathe a durned sound, I'll plug you!"

Buster commenced undressing. His very coolness was an indication of his pluck. In a crisis, Buster was proving himself to be ready. But he had a strong desire to live. To make an outcry would be fatal. And it was all the more galling, because the slightest sound from him would have brought assistance.

But what good would assistance be after he was shot? And there was another point to think of. By shouting, he would only bring the other juniors into the danger zone. Once having fired, the convict would have no compunction in shooting the others.

So Buster clenched his teeth, and commenced disrobing.

He removed his jacket and waistcoat, and then bent down to unlace his boots. As he did so, he had a sudden inspiration. He didn't wait to consider the danger—he didn't even think of it.

As he bent low, unlacing his boots, he made a swift dive forward. With one movement he grabbed the convict's legs, and swept the fellow completely off his feet.

The man thudded down with a gasping grunt.

The revolver fell from his fingers, and dropped into the grass.

Gasping with excitement, Buster grabbed the weapon, and clutched it in his fingers. In a flash, he pushed the muzzle of it into the convict's back.

"Now!" he panted. "I've got you!"

"You infernal young fool!" gasped the man. "Don't shoot—don't touch the trigger! You'll kill me!"

"If you attempt to escape, I'll fire!" said Boots steadily.

"I won't try to escape, guv'nor!" whined the convict, his aggressive tone completely gone. "'Ave mercy on me, young gent!"

Buster didn't reply.

His face was flushed, and his heart beating rapidly. His first impulse, upon getting the upper hand, had been to yell for help. But something prevented him from doing so. Another startling idea had occurred to him—an idea that was at once daring and enterprising.

Why shouldn't he conduct this affair single-handed?

The odds were in his favour, and he saw no reason why he should call for help. He was excited, but by no means flustered.

"Undress!" he said curtly.

"What the—"

"Undress!" commanded Boots.

The convict was too scared of the revolver to disobey. He knew that he had a boy to deal with, but a boy with such a deadly

weapon in his grasp was probably more dangerous than a man. For, being unaccustomed to firearms, the junior might easily jerk the trigger by accident.

Hastily, fearfully, the convict got out of his outer garments. He sat in the damp grass shivering—more with fright than with cold.

"Now take this piece of string, and tie your ankles up!" ordered Buster. "And tie them tightly, without any foolery!"

"I'll do it, young 'un!" faltered the convict.

He took the piece of stout string that was tossed to him, and bound it round and round his ankles. Buster satisfied himself that it was secure.

Then the junior commanded the man to turn over on his back, and to lie still. The man having obeyed, Boots knelt in the small of the fellow's back, and laid the revolver down. He quickly tied the convict's hands behind his back.

Buster was breathing quickly now—his success had been better than he had hoped for. Single-handed, he had overpowered this armed ruffian. And, without wasting any time, he donned the convict suit over his own Etons. They were plenty large enough for the purpose.

"You ain't going to leave me lyin' like this, are you?" asked the man.

"Yes."

"I'll die of cold!"

"You won't come to any harm——"

"Look 'ere, guv'nor, I ain't had a bite of food for twenty-four hours," wailed the man. "An' without no clothes, except this 'ere underthings, I'll be dead within an hour! You can't do it!"

"Ten minutes won't hurt you—and after that you'll be well looked after," said Buster curtly. "It may interest you to know that I'm going to collar your pal!"

The convict started.

"My pal!" he muttered. "Why, you're mad! I ain't got no pal!"

"Didn't you arrange to meet somebody here?"

"No, I never!"

But there was something about the man's tone that convinced Buster that he was lying. The junior made certain that the cords were tight, and then he rubbed his hands in the damp earth until they were muddy.

He applied the unsavoury mixture to his face—until his fresh complexion was completely concealed by the film of mud. In the gloom he now looked an awful specimen.

Without even another glance at the convict, he turned and made his way towards the mill. He had hold of the revolver again, and was thrilling with joy of victory.

His satisfaction was all the greater because he knew that in very close proximity the other juniors were creeping along. Well, he would show them! They had fooled him the first time, but now he would fool them!

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAPTURE!



WITHIN the old mill the light burned just the same.

The candle was getting lower, but there was still plenty of it left. And in that upper room stood the

man who had come here to await the arrival of his expected visitor.

Reggie Pitt's theory, without doubt, was the true solution.

The man was a rough-looking customer, with a thick muffler round his neck, and with a cap pulled low over his eyes. His face was coarse and ugly—the typical face of a common ruffian.

He was impatient, for he paced up and down. At last, he passed down the ladder, and stood at the door of the mill, gazing out into the misty gloom.

But everything was silent—still and mysterious.

The mist covered the moor, and no sounds could be heard. The man could hardly imagine that so many figures lurked near by. There was no indication of their presence.

"The guy's late, blame him!" muttered the fellow audibly.

He moved out from the doorway, and then suddenly came to a halt. In the gloom he caught sight of a figure. It came towards him. The man recognised the ill-fitting prison garb—the ugly, detestable cap.

"Jim!" he muttered gladly. "I thought you was never comin', mate!"

John Busterfield Boots felt a jump in the region of his heart. He had hardly expected to find his quarry out here. He had seen the figure, certainly, but at first he believed it to be one of the other juniors.

The time for action had come with dramatic swiftness.

"It's all right—no need to be scared!" exclaimed the man, as Buster hesitated. "Nobody here, Jim. And not much likelihood of any interruptions on an evening like this."

Buster came nearer, and he held the revolver in readiness. He was extremely glad that he had this weapon, for it would enable him to gain the upper hand. No doubt the real convict had taken the revolver from one of the warders of the prison.

The thought that the revolver might have killed somebody gave Buster a bit of a turn, but he steeled himself to be calm and cool. Everything depended upon that now. And he was triumphant within him.

Seven fellows, including himself, had set out to capture the convict and his friend.

And Buster Boots was making the capture single-handed!

That was what made him so elated. The worst ruffian was already bound up, and this second man would not prove to be so difficult. Buster's first idea had been to sharply order the man to hold up his hands,

and then shout for help. This would bring the rest of the fellows dashing up.

But Buster changed his mind.

He would have this fellow roped up in the same way—and then he would calmly give a hail, and bring the chaps to inspect his handiwork! Again, he thanked the stars that he had that revolver to aid him.

He stepped up close to the dim figure near the doorway of the mill, and with a sudden movement he jammed his revolver into the fellow's chest.

"Why, Jim, what the——"

"Hands up—and don't make a sound!" hissed Buster curtly.

"You're mad!" snarled the fellow, aghast.

"It's me—Bert!"

away. Buster had seen, to his satisfaction, that the man was wearing a "choker." This would come in very handy for the purpose that Buster had in mind.

"Well, what are you going to do?" asked the fellow hoarsely.

"Take that scarf from your neck?"

"Do which?"

"You heard me!" rapped out Buster.

The man obeyed.

"Now take the end of it, and tear the scarf in two—longways," commanded Buster. "That's the way! Completely in two! Good!"

"You're looney!" snarled the prisoner.

"What's the idea of ripping a good scarf like this!"



"The guy's late, blame him!" muttered the fellow audibly. He moved out of the doorway and halted, for a dim figure was approaching.

"Hands up—or I'll drill you!" commanded Buster, conscious of the fact that the turn was rather a neat one. "I'm not Jim—I'm here to arrest you for being implicated in aiding and abetting an escaped convict."

"My gosh!" gasped Bert. "A—a 'tec!"

"Not so much talk—and remember my warning!" snapped Buster. "Walk backwards, and go into the mill. That's right! And don't attempt any trickery, or I'll drop you in your tracks!"

The man's hands were high above his head.

"All right—all right!" he muttered. "I know when I'm beat!"

He was genuinely frightened, and backed

"Throw one half on the floor, and use the other half to tie your ankles," said Boots grimly. "Sit down on the floor, and tie your ankles round, and make a fast knot. I'm watching, and if you make one false move I shall take action!"

His idea became obvious to the captive, and for a moment or two he looked as though he were about to turn nasty. But his fear for the revolver was greater than his pluck, evidently. With a snarling grunt he sank to the floor, and tied up his ankles as ordered.

"Now turn on your face, and lie flat," said Boots, following the same formula with

this man as with the convict. "That's right—now stop there."

With a sudden movement Buster flung himself on the man, kneeling in the small of his back. At the same time he grasped the other half of the scarf. The prisoner knew that Buster was about to tie his wrists—and in order to do this he would have to relinquish the revolver.

He made a swift turn, and grasped quickly at Buster's arm. It was a fierce grip, and in a second the two were rolling on the floor, with Buster underneath. The thing had been so quick that the junior hardly knew it.

"Now, hang you!" said the prisoner hoarsely.

He lifted his fist to bring it crashing into Buster's face, but the latter, wriggling sideways, managed to avoid the blow. The next moment he brought the revolver round and pressed it hard against Bert's side.

"Keep still, or I'll shoot," he panted.

Bert stiffened, and then relaxed.

"You've got me!" he muttered. "I give in!"

Buster was glad that he had not given way to the impulse to yell for help. It had been a near thing, but he still held the upper hand.

And this time Bert offered no further resistance. He allowed his hands to be tied behind his back. And he lay there, trussed up and helpless. Buster rose to his feet, breathing hard.

"Both of 'em!" he muttered. "By Jimmy! Now the chaps will stare!"

He waited for a moment or two so that he could get thoroughly cooled down. Then he went to the door of the mill and gazed out into the misty night. It struck him that the hour must be terribly late—somewhere between eleven o'clock and midnight.

He glanced at his watch, which was provided with one of those handy luminous dials. At first he thought his watch had stopped, for the hands showed him that the hour was just seven-forty-five.

"Quarter to eight!" muttered Buster.

"Well I'm blessed!"

So much had happened that he had completely lost track of the time. They would be able to get back to St. Frank's in plenty of time for supper. At the very worst, they would only be given a paltry hundred lines for being late for calling over. Buster felt very elated.

"Hi, Nipper—Handforth!" he hailed.

"This way, you chaps."

From out of the mist he heard one or two startled exclamations.

"It's all right—no need to get alarmed," sang out Buster coolly. "I'm here—just in the doorway."

Several figures loomed up out of the gloom. Handforth was among the first, and he started back as he caught sight of Boots.

"Great pip! The convict!" he gasped.

"No, it's all right—only me!" said Buster calmly.

"What!"

"Just a little game of mine," said Boots. "You needn't worry—I've collared the convict, and the other chap as well. They're both trussed up like turkeys in readiness for the Christmas market!"

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

The other figures had crowded round by now—Church, McClure, Pitt, Jack Grey and myself. We all looked at Buster in surprise.

"But—but nothing's happened!" I said quickly. "Didn't we arrange to yell out if we spotted either of the crooks?"

"I thought it advisable to change the plan," said Buster coolly. "The convict's lying out on the moor, all bound up—and the other fellow is in here. If you don't believe me, come and look."

He turned, and led the way into the mill. We all crowded round the bound figure on the floor. Bert was jerked to his feet, growling fiercely. The man was in a sullen humour.

"Well, you've got me—why don't you fetch the police?" he snarled.

"My goodness!" I exclaimed. "So you captured the chap single-handed, Buster? Good man! How on earth did you manage to overpower him?"

"This!" said J.B.B., holding out the revolver.

"Oh!" I said. "That explains it! But you must have had a nerve to carry the thing through, all the same. And we were waiting out there, expecting somebody to yell. You've whacked us all, Buster."

"I had the opportunity, and so I took it," replied Boots.

"Well, it's all over now, bar shouting," remarked Pitt. "I suppose we'd better bring this brute along with us. And you can get out of those convict things, Buster, and let the other prisoner get dressed again. He's probably feeling cold." And Bert was jerked to his feet and the ripped scarf was untied from his ankles. Held firmly between us, the man was marched across the moor, with Buster leading the way.

"You're a wonder, old man," I said admiringly. "but wasn't it a bit risky to do all this alone?"

"I never thought of risk," replied Boots simply.

There was something so different about him that he hardly seemed the same fellow. His former arrogance and lofty superiority had gone. His more recent sulkiness was no longer in evidence.

In short, Buster was natural.

He had dropped all pretence of every kind. And when he allowed his own personality to dominate his usual pose, he was changed. In other words, John Busterfield Boots himself was made of the right stuff. Until now we had only seen him in one of his affected roles. Buster had always preferred to act in a theatrical kind of way—mistakenly believing himself to be a big man. Now he

was finding out his blunder. To be natural, and to live like any other junior was far better than his former method.

Buster himself was glowing with the effect of the change.

Inwardly, he knew that he had won a big fight. He marvelled at his former style of living. And in future, he told himself, he would be content to live at St. Frank's like any ordinary schoolboy—without any inflated idea of his own importance.

This one evening's work had changed J.B.B. completely.

And I was more glad than Buster was—for I had always had an inkling that he was far better than most of the fellows gave him credit to be. On one or two occasions he had allowed a glimpse of his own personality to peep out.

We arrived at the spot where the convict had been left.

Handforth gave a yell as he caught sight of the prone form. And we were soon gathered round, gazing at the ruffian. He glared up at us, muttering to himself. And Buster was relieved of anxiety.

He had had a faint fear that the convict might have worked free from his bonds—for, after all, they were not of the tightest possible kind. The convict lay there, miserable and shivering.

"Well, ain't you satisfied," he whined.

"Quite," replied Buster. "Now look here I think we'd better stay here in charge of these two crooks while somebody goes for the police—"

"No—that would be a waste of time," I put in. "We can march them into Bell-ton ourselves. With their hands bound behind their backs, they won't be able to break away. Besides, we can bind them together—the same as we did the other two."

"Yes but the other two were only fakes," said Buster doubtfully.

"Never mind—they won't escape."

Boots commenced undressing—that is, removing the prison garb which he had donned over his ordinary attire. He soon had the clothes off, and he dropped them to the ground.

"Better let the fellow get dressed," he suggested.

By this time the convict had been jerked to his feet, and his ropes were cut. But there was no fear of his escape, for he was held firmly. He gave a disdainful glance at the convict attire.

"I'm fed up with those things," he said coolly. "Chuck me my Etons, you chaps!"

"Yes, and take off this silly scarf!" said Bert. "I'm tired of being held like a prisoner! Good man, Singleton—you did fine!"

Buster Boots felt a curious sensation in his throat. He gave a gasp, and peered forward at the two prisoners he had over-powered singlehanded. They certainly

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looked desperate ruffians—but they now spoke in the voices of Cecil de Valerie and the Hon. Douglas Singleton!

CHAPTER X.

GOOD FOR BUSTER!



"DON'T leave me shivering here for an hour!" went on the convict impatiently. "Hi, Christine! It's all right—show yourself!"

Several other figures loomed up out of the mist—Christine and two or three more Monks. They were all grinning.

"O.K.?" asked Bob Christine cheerfully.

"Yes—went off a treat!" said the convict. "Now, buck up with my clobber! I'll catch a cold over this unless I'm careful!"

Buster suddenly came out of his trance. He jerked forward, and grabbed the convict by the shoulders, staring into the leering face.

"You—you're Singleton!" he gasped.

"Exactly," said the convict. "I don't look it, but I am."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Buster suddenly twirled round, breathing hard.

"Then—then this was all foolery, too?" he shouted savagely.

"Yes, old man—but don't take it so badly—" I began.

"You—you miserable rotters!" panted Boots. "I—I—"

Words failed him, and he turned away, almost choking with anger, humiliation, and disappointment. I didn't blame him. To him, it certainly seemed like an ill-natured practical joke. But it wasn't—as I would soon point out to him if he became reasonable.

Singleton, who had acted his part surprisingly well, lost no time in dressing himself in his own suit—which Christine and Co. had brought along. Of course, Singleton had not been allowed to lie there in the grass with only his underthings on. As soon as Buster had gone the waiting Monks had come up with a warm blanket, in which Singleton wrapped himself until the final moment.

Everything, in fact, had been planned out before-hand as a general map out a battle. Not a single detail had been left to chance. For hours and hours we had discussed ways and means, and had finally planned every minute of the affair in advance.

That was why it had all gone off so smoothly, and without any hitch. As I had impressed upon the fellows time after time, nothing good can be done in a hurry—one must take one's time, if a thing is to be thorough. And in any scheme of this kind preliminary planning is of paramount importance.

Just as Singleton had finished dressing,

and was preparing to wipe off the disguise from his face, Buster Boots turned round, and faced us. He was calm and quiet.

"Perhaps you did this with the best of intentions—but I look upon it as an outrage!" he said, his voice vibrating with inward rage. "And I'm sick of you—I'm finished with you for good!"

He turned on his heel, and walked away into the fog.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Pitt. "That's rotten!"

I ran after Buster, and caught him by the shoulder.

"Look here, old man—"

"Leave me alone!" muttered Boots, shaking my hand away. "You may think it clever to fool a chap like this, but I don't. You can talk all you like—I don't want to speak to you!"

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "After what has happened this evening, Buster, I was pretty sure you'd be sensible. Isn't it better, taking everything into consideration, that the whole thing was a fake? Your own actions aren't any the less praiseworthy because you were spoofed—"

"Aren't they?" said Buster bitterly. "What if these chaps had been real crooks? They wouldn't have let me truss them up like that—and I thought I was doing something wonderful! Put yourself in my place—"

"No need to," I interrupted. "We proved our point."

"What do you mean?"

"We put you to the supreme test," I replied. "You were attacked by a convict—the fact that he was a spoof convict make no difference. He held you up with a revolver, and you turned the tables on him. That act alone proved your pluck. You're the right stuff—clean through!"

Buster merely grunted.

"Don't you see?" I went on quickly. "You didn't know the convict was a fake—you thought that the revolver was loaded—which it isn't—and that at any moment you might be shot. In spite of that, you tricked Singleton, and gained the upper hand. Why, if you had been a funk, as some of the chaps made out, you would have knuckled under, and howled for help."

Still Buster made no comment.

"The first part of the programme was only a preliminary," I said, seizing the advantage of Buster's silence. "We talked it all over between us, and decided that it would be better to work the dodge in two spasms, so to speak. We feared that you might begin to suspect. Besides, this was about the only way in which we could make it seem plausible."

"Well?" said Buster, at last.

"Well, there you are!" I replied, smiling. "Come on, Boots—don't get into the sulks! Why, my dear chap, you've covered yourself with glory. The supreme test was when you were face to face with that convict and the revolver. And you not

only did twice as good as we expected, but you proved yourself to be a fellow of quick action, too. We never dreamed that you would go along and collar De Valerie, too."

"All the same, it was a mean trick!" muttered Boots.

"That's where you've got it all wrong," I explained. "We believed that you were made of stern stuff, and the only way to decide the question was to put you to a severe test. We might have waited ages for a real case to come along. So we planned all this."

Buster was thawing rapidly. He even grinned.

"Hang it all, it was pretty smart," he admitted. "You fooled me the first time, and I'm blessed if you didn't do it again! Why, I never knew that those chaps were such good actors!"

I laughed.

"It's not such a difficult matter to act in a fog like this!" I chuckled. "Mostly a question of disguising the voice—and they were pretty good at that, I'll admit. But don't forget I rehearsed them for two solid days in their parts—until they were pretty well perfect. But in full daylight we could never have attempted the thing. You'd have spotted the fake in two minutes. We relied on the darkness—and the fog came to our assistance."

Buster allowed me to lead him back to the others.

"It's all right," I said cheerfully. "Didn't I tell you that Buster was a reasonable fellow? He knows that we did it in a good spirit, and he's forgiven us all."

"Good man!" said the juniors.

They came forward, and grasped Buster's hand one after the other. They thumped his back, making all sorts of complimentary remarks. Buster had not received anything of this nature for weeks. And, being perfectly human, he rather liked it.

And there was something else, too.

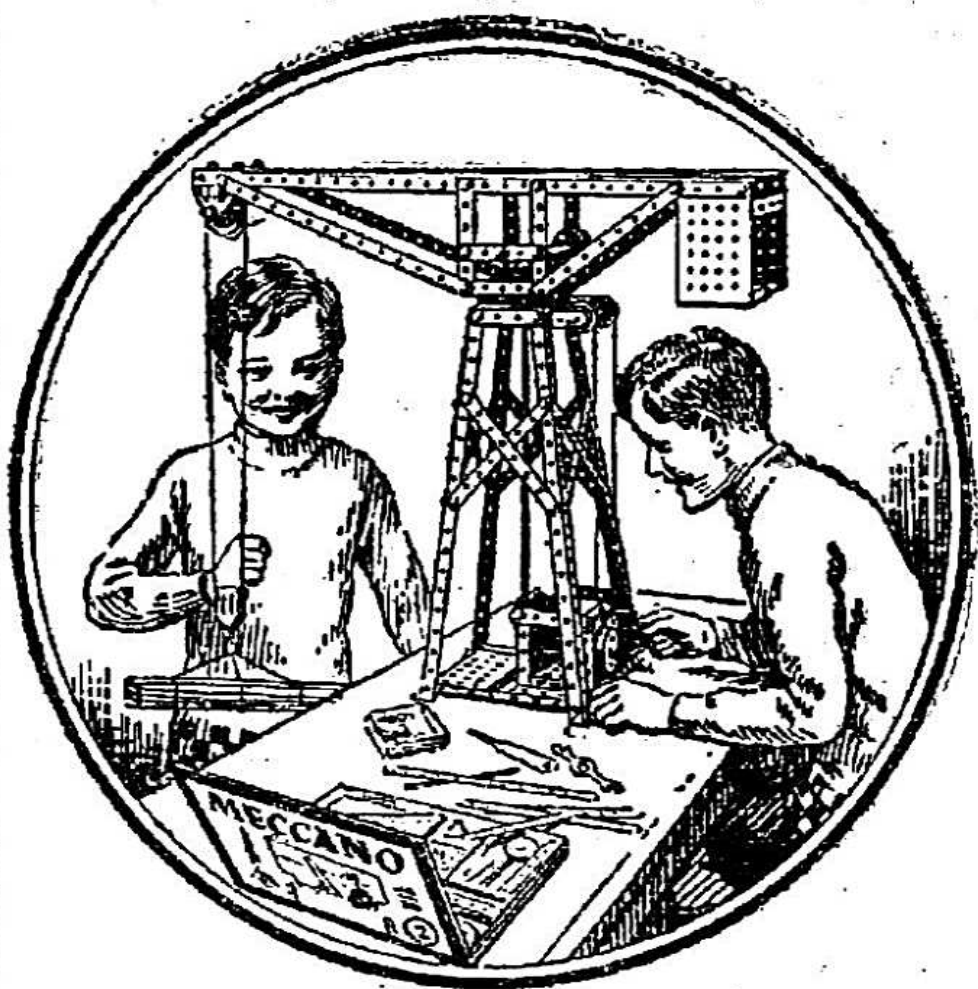
During his earlier success at St. Frank's he had been hailed with enthusiasm by the cads and the rotters; his supporters had been drawn from the ranks of the fellows who didn't matter.

But now it was different. He was being shaken by the hand by Pitt and Grey and Watson and Tregellis-West and Handforth—and all the fellows whom Buster had secretly wished to be pally with.

In fact, J.B.B. had found favour with those juniors who were the real backbone of the Remove. They generously forgot his former misdeeds—and these had been many—letting bygones be bygones.

And Bob Christine was generous to a degree.

"Look here, Buster, I'm the leader of the Monks, but if you like, I'll step down in your favour," he said handsomely. "You're rather partial to being a leader, and—"



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"No, Christine—it's your job," said Buster quietly.

"But—"

"As a leader, I've been a rank failure," admitted Boots frankly. "I tried to rule the Remove, and I made a hopeless mess of it. When I'm in a position of authority, I don't know how to use it—I get swelled head, and start throwing my weight about. I know it—and I'm game enough to admit it. In future, I'll be content to follow your lead."

"Good old Buster!" shouted the Monks enthusiastically.

"Rather!" said Handforth. "He's a brick!"

"Hear, hear!"

And before Buster knew what was happening, he was mounted shoulder high by the Monks, and carried along in triumph. The evening's work had had a far better effect than any of us had hoped for.

Of one thing I had been certain—that Buster would be improved by the lesson that we had given him. But I had been very doubtful regarding his attitude. I had half feared that he would get on the high horse, and hate us all. Even so, I knew it would only be for a short period—I knew that he would eventually come round, and admit that we had done right.

His candid behaviour was quite refreshing—and, indeed, characteristic of the chap. Whether acting rightly or wrongly, he had always been perfectly open. Even when conducting that infamous Recreation Club of his, Buster had done so without any attempt at secrecy or conspiracy. But the Recreation Club was forgotten now—and we had arranged that we should never remind him of his past.

Buster was making a fresh start, and his failures would only give him the greater courage to make good in real earnest. There is no better teacher than experience, and Buster had learned a lesson that he could never forget. He had found out that caddishness is a contemptible quality. His better self had been brought to the surface.

Buster was not allowed to walk until St. Frank's was almost in sight—as far as that he was still carried shoulder high by Christine and Co.

He needed no telling with regard to the plot. De Valerie and Singleton, of course, acting upon previous instructions, had adopted the fresh disguises as soon as we had gone off to rescue the mythical Irene.

And all the rest of the game had been worked out so minutely that a hitch had been almost impossible. Buster needed no details—he could easily imagine them for himself.

In spite of every precaution, the news of the affair leaked out to the other Remove fellows. They didn't know the exact facts—simply that Buster had been put to a test, and had emerged with flying colours.

Fullwood and Co., and fellows like him were suspicious and sneering. In their opinion, Buster had become a weakling. They had no further use for him. But this didn't matter, for Buster certainly had no further use for them.

He had found out what trashy stuff they were made of. With the decent fellows he was now on a totally new footing. He had proved his calibre, and he was accepted as one of the best.

The Monks were so delighted that they had a rapid whip round, and an elaborate feed was prepared to take place that very night—in the dormitory after lights out—it was to be a feed in honour of John Busterfield Boots. The juniors were all the more enthusiastic, because they would take very active parts in the festive proceedings.

And just before going to bed, Buster voluntarily cleared out of Study Q—which was rightfully the property of Christine and Co. Buster insisted upon going to another study, and he chose one further down the passage—Study V, which he occupied with Percy Bray.

Here the Supreme Six collected.

They were no longer the Supreme Six—Buster made it quite clear that this title was to be dropped at once. He and the other five fellows who had come to St. Frank's in a bunch from Kendis College—determined to conquer the Remove by sheer force—were now merely just ordinary juniors.

The Faithful Five were not quite pleased.

"You're not taking this rot to heart, are you, Buster?" demanded Crooks, with a stare.

"Which rot?" asked Buster steadily.

"Why, all this twaddle about learning a lesson—"

"I'm not going to argue with any of you," interrupted Buster. "But I'm just going to make a few observations. I don't need to remind you that I'm capable of wiping up the floor with any two of you, single handed. You know it. So just take heed to my words."

"No need to start threatening us—"

"I'm not threatening you," said Boots. "But here's the position. When we came to St. Frank's we made up our minds to behave like cads and hooligans—"

"I say—"

"Cads and hooligans!" repeated Buster curtly. "And for the first week or two we kept up our game. Now that I look back upon all we did, I'm so confoundedly ashamed of myself that I feel like getting somebody to kick me."

"I'll oblige," said Bray readily.

"You!" said Buster, with scorn. "You'd far better kick yourself! And that applies to all of you, because I'm ashamed of you, too! You backed me up in my rotten

game, and helped me all along. But if you fellows haven't got the pluck to admit your faults, I'm disappointed in you."

"We certainly haven't made much of a success," admitted Denny.

"Success!" repeated Boots. "Our campaign has been about the most dismal failure anybody could imagine. And I'm glad of it, too—a campaign of that kind wasn't deserving of success. St. Frank's is a fine school—fifty times as good as Kendis."

"I'm with you there," said Bray heartily.

"At Kendis we learned all sorts of caddishness," went on Buster witheringly. "It was instilled into us by the very atmosphere of the place. And we were fools enough to believe that the same spirit ruled St. Frank's. It doesn't, thank goodness—and we've found it out. Caddishness doesn't pay. There's nothing makes a fellow feel so fine and happy as acting on the straight. Some chaps think it's humiliating to admit it, but I don't. And when a fellow's in the wrong, it gives him the most acute satisfaction to admit it. If only some of you would realise that, you'd be different."

"If you're going to start lecturing—"

"Not a bit of it," interrupted J.B.B. "I'm just pointing out that St. Frank's has put the right spirit into me. And if it hasn't had the same effect upon you, it soon will have—I'll see to that!"

The Faithful Five didn't admit their faults straight away, but their changed attitudes in the day that followed proved conclusively enough that John Busterfield Boots' influence had worked on them for the good.

As for myself, I had never felt better pleased in my life.

For, through my long and intensive campaign, ably assisted by the other chaps, I had changed six cads into six ordinarily decent fellows. They hadn't turned into saints, by any means—and it would have been a pity if they had. But, at least, they were as good as the average junior. I had no fear that they would backslide into that old, misguided rut.

But if the Remove believed that it was to have a quiet spell between now and Christmas holidays—well, the Remove was slightly mistaken!

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THE MISSING HEIR

(Continued from page viii. of Detective Section.)

It, however, the two men rose to the surface again, separated from each other by a distance of perhaps a dozen yards. Dick was evidently quite exhausted, and blood was streaming from an ugly gash on his forehead, caused by the head having come into violent contact with one of the jagged spurs of the rocky reef already mentioned. Mark Rymer, on the other hand, was apparently as fresh as ever; but his eyes were glittering with a wild, unearthly light.

The moment the professor rose to the surface, therefore, he thrust his hand into his pocket, whipped out a clasp-knife, and was just about to plunge his weapon into Dick's heart when Nelson Lee, with a couple of powerful strokes, swam up to him from behind and seized his uplifted arm.

With a venomous oath the professor wrenched himself free and turned on Nelson Lee. Quick as thought the detective lashed out with his fist and sent the weapon flying from Mark Rymer's grasp. Nothing daunted, however, the professor hurled himself through the water and fastened his hands on Lee's throat.

"It was here that our duel started—it is here that it shall end!" he yelled, with a maniacal laugh. "We have circled the globe from west to east, and from east to west again. The hand of Fate has guided us back to our starting-point. On the summit of this cliff we first crossed swords and opened our campaign. At the foot of it we will make our final bow, and quit the stage together!"

As he uttered these words he loosed his hands from Nelson Lee's throat and flung his arms around his waist, whilst at the same time he wound his legs round the lower part of the detective's body.

Down, down, down they sank, till at last they came to rest on the rocky ocean bed. In spite of all that Nelson Lee could do, in spite of the ceaseless shower of blows which he rained down on his adversary's face, Mark Rymer only clung to him more tightly, and never for an instant allowed his grip to relax. He had evidently made up his mind that he and his rival should perish together, and, with this end in view, he refrained from returning the detective's blows, but contented himself with holding him down and preventing him rising to the surface.

Slowly, but surely the pangs of impending suffocation began to creep over Nelson Lee. Feebler and feebler grew his blows, wilder and more erratic became his struggles. At last, however, with a superhuman effort, he managed to plant one hand on the professor's forehead, and the other on his chin. Then, summoning up all his strength, he forced the professor's jaws apart and compelled him to open his mouth.

There was a gurgling sound, as the imprisoned air, escaping from Mark Rymer's lungs, rose bubbling to the surface, and the sea-water rushed in to take its place. The encircling arms and legs, after one convulsive

spasm, rapidly unwound themselves, and Nelson Lee began to rise.

A moment later he had reached the surface, where his appearance was greeted by a rousing cheer from those on board the liners. He glanced around, and saw that Jack Langley had leaped overboard and was supporting Dick Seymour's half-conscious form. Then he filled his lungs with a long deep draught of cool, refreshing air, and once more dived below the surface.

For half a dozen seconds those on board the liners held their breath in tense and excited suspense. Then a mighty roar of applause rent the air. The detective had risen to the surface again, no longer alone, but bearing on his arm, the lifeless form of his vanquished foe.

As the professor had truly said, it was the hand of Fate. On the summit of the cliff which guards the entrance to Penleven Cove the duel between himself and Nelson Lee had commenced. At the foot of the self-same cliff, after a journey round the world, the long, stern duel had ended.

And Nelson Lee had triumphed all along the line. The Silver Dwarf had given up its secret, the Missing Heir had been found, and Professor Mark Rymer was dead.

The rest is soon told. Nearly a couple of months elapsed before Dick Seymour recovered from the effects of the terrible grueling he had received at Mark Rymer's hands. By that time the Silver Dwarf, together with its precious contents, had been taken from the strong-room of the bank at Sydney, and had been sent to England. Lord Easington's confession and the proofs of his secret marriage were then submitted to the courts, and a formal application was made that Dick should be declared to be the late earl's son, and the heir to his title and estates.

The application was immediately granted, and before the end of the summer Dick was duly installed as the tenth Lord Easington.

As soon as the requisite formalities had been complied with, he sought an interview with Mr. Pryde and reminded him of his promise.

"An income of twenty thousand dollars a year was what you insisted I must have before you would give your consent to my marriage with your daughter," he said. "I haven't yet had time to ascertain the exact amount of my rent-roll, but from what my lawyers tell me, I rather think it will be somewhere in the neighbourhood of a hundred thousand pounds a year. It was enough! Three months later Dick and Nellie were married at St. George's Hanover Square. Nelson Lee, by special request, fulfilled the duties of "best man," and to-day there is no more welcome visitor at Easington Towers, which has lately been restored to its former magnificence, than the famous detective, to whom the youthful owner of that fair domain is indebted for his title, his estates, and his wife!

THE END.

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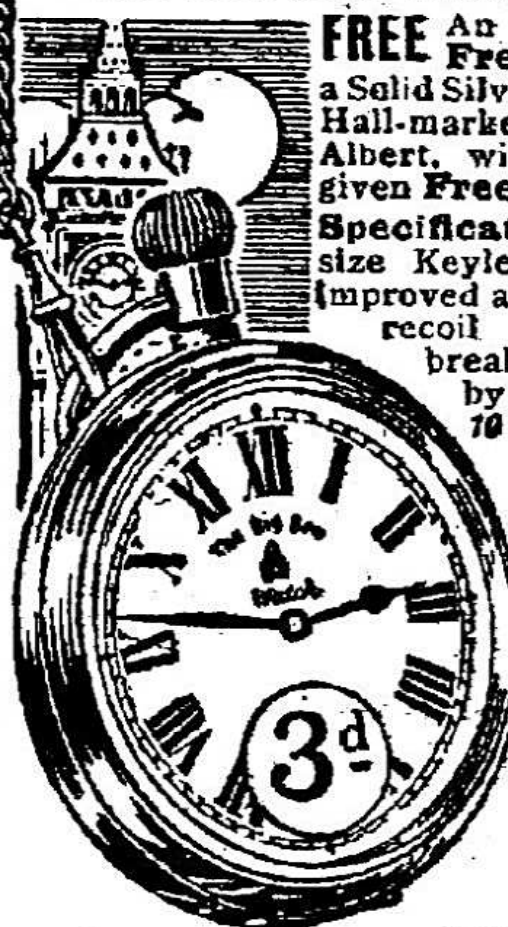
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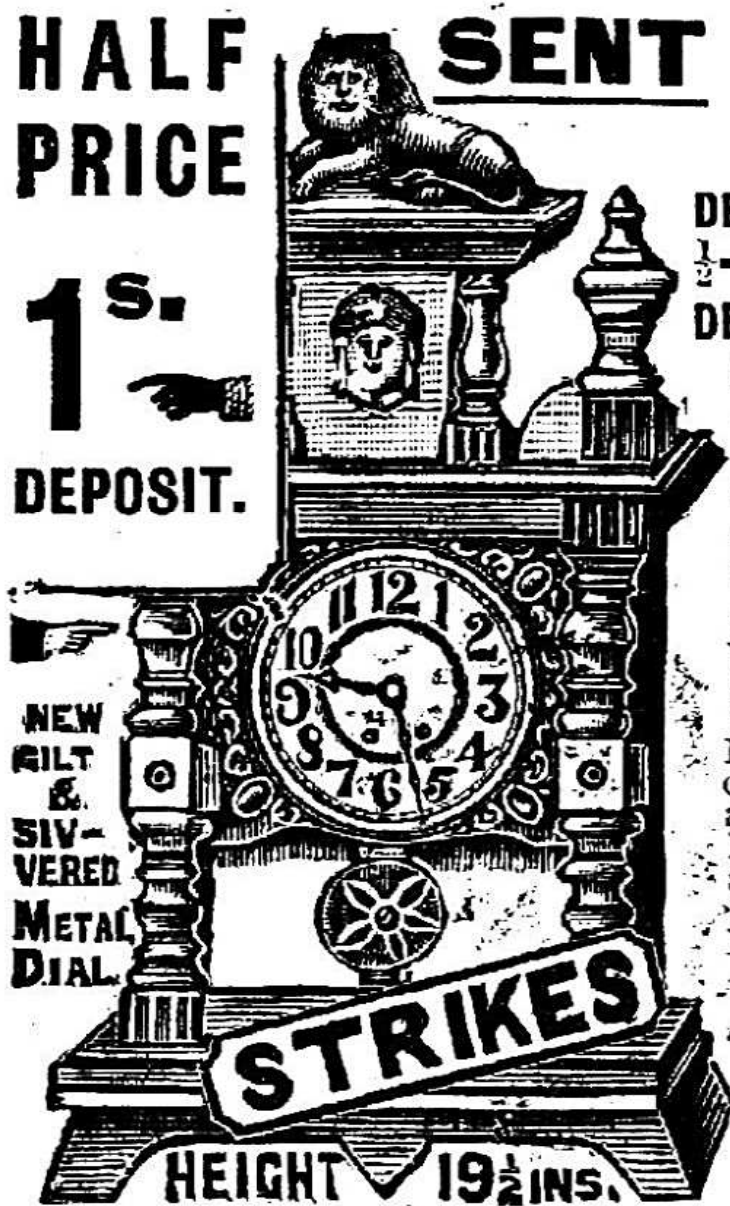
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