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THE MYSTERY OF THE UNSTAMPED LETTER.

Another Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S. Specially written by the Author of "The Problem of the Copper Frog," "Fullwood's Cunning," "The Case of the Japanese Schoolboy," etc., etc. *January 12th, 1918.*

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Another Tale of **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER** AT **ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE**. Prepared for publication by the Author of "The Problem of the Copper Frog," "Fullwood's Cunning," "The Case of the Japanese Schoolboy," etc., etc.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the school in the characters of master and pupil, Nelson Lee and Nipper, nevertheless, find many opportunities to utilise their unique detective ability in various mysterious and adventurous cases.

CHAPTER I.

(Set down by Nipper.)

IN WHICH TOMMY WATSON PAYS FOURPENCE FOR SOMETHING HE DOESN'T WANT!

"**FOOTBALL!**" exclaimed Edward Oswald Handforth disgustedly. "A fat lot of football we shall have in this rotten downpour!"

"It's shockin', dear fellow!"

"Awful!"

"Too rotten for words!"

"Just about the limit!"

There wasn't a single dissentient voice. Every member of the Ancient House junior football-eleven agreed with singular unanimity that the weather was simply vile. I thought worse things of it personally, but didn't voice them. But Handforth, who was never to be suppressed, continued his wail at great length.

"Never knew such beastly weather!" he shouted, glaring round as though somebody had disputed the statement. "For weeks past it's been freezing and snowing, and we've had a fine lot of skating. But footer's been forgotten. What with the snow and frost, the game wasn't suitable. And now, when the weather's turned mild again, I'm jiggered if it doesn't rain cats and dogs on the very first day we arrange a match! It was gloriously fine yesterday, too!"

"My dear chap, it's no good growning at me!" I said cheerfully, finding that Handforth was fixing his indignant eyes upon me. "I ain't responsible for the weather, am I?"

"No; but you're responsible for football fixtures," declared Handforth. "You're skipper of the team—although that's sheer rot, on the face of it! I'm the chap to lead the Fossils to victory—"

"Fathead!"

It was rather remarkable how that word issued from a dozen mouths at the same time. But Edward Oswald Handforth merely sniffed.

"Oh, I'm used to this jealousy!" he said bitterly. "As I was saying, Bennett's responsible for football fixtures. Why the dickens couldn't he arrange to have this match on a fine day? Just like his rot to choose a wet afternoon——"

"You silly ass!" I roared. "This match was fixed with Christine a week ago! How were we to know what the weather would be like this afternoon? If you can't talk sensibly, Handy, you'd better dry up!"

"Dear fellow, that's impos.," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West languidly. "Handforth can't dry up, you know. He runs on like the ripplin' brook—only the brook must be in flood, begad!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a very half-hearted laugh, for

everybody was feeling pretty miserable. Handforth snorted as he turned his withering gaze upon Tregellis-West.

"I suppose you think that's funny?" he sneered.

"Dear boy, not at all! You are."

"I am what?"

"Funny, Handy boy," said Sir Montie sweetly.

"I've heard it's always the fate of great men to be sneered at," said Handforth, shrugging his shoulders. "That's why you sneer at me, I suppose."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fat lot of greatness in you!" grinned Owen major. "Perhaps you're right, though," he added reflectively. "Come to think of it, you are great, Handy."

Handforth nodded.

"Glad to see somebody recognises it," he said pleasantly.

"Your head's great," continued Owen major. "The chap's call it a fat head, but that's a rude way of referring to it. It's my opinion, Handforth, that its greatness is because of a natural swelling. That's what you've got, old chap—swelled head. It might be water on the brain that's causing it. Anyhow, you're great."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth didn't look quite so satisfied.

"I don't want any of your rotten cheek, Owen major!" he bawled. "If you ain't careful I'll punch yor silly nose!"

I grinned and turned to the doorway, leaving Handforth and Owen major to wrangle it out between themselves. We were all in the lobby of the Ancient House, crowding round the door.

The Triangle was deserted and dreary. Rain was drenching down with pitiless regularity. It drove across the Triangle in sheets, and everything was soaking and sodden. The rain had started on Thursday, and had continued for hours; but on the Friday afternoon the sun had shone with almost spring-like brilliancy. Everybody had felt happy.

But now, on the Saturday half-holiday, black clouds had rolled up, and they were delivering themselves with unusual force. I hadn't seen it rain so hard all the winter. By the look of things at present, there wasn't going to be any change for months.

The River Stowe, which ran at the bottom of the playing-fields, was already overflowing its banks in certain districts. Some of the fellows—especially the

seniors—were shaking their heads gravely.

Several years before a serious flood had occurred at St. Frank's, and if the rains continued much longer there would probably be a repetition. And the thought of the playing-fields being flooded wasn't a pleasant one. But it was no good worrying over what might happen.

"It's no good growling," I remarked to my two study chums, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. "There are other half-holidays coming, and we shall have plenty of chances of whacking the College House before the season's over. This rain's only saved the Monks a defeat."

"Begad, that's one way of lookin' at it," smiled Sir Montie. "There's nothin' like lookin' at the cheery side. What's the good of bein' miserable? Just think of the good this rain's doin'!"

"Yes, to ducks!" grunted Watson. "Rain like this does a lot more harm than good, Montie. I reckon—— Hallo! What the dickens——"

Something had suddenly bumped into Tommy's back, and we turned from the doorway. The "something" was a football, and Tommy glared.

"What's the game?" he demanded. "Who kicked that dirty thing at me?"

"Sorry!" chuckled Hubbard, of the Remove. "It's not dirty, Watson——"

"Look here! You'd better not kick that ball about in the lobby," I interrupted, frowning. "Dash it all, there's not room for footer here! Besides, it's against the rules, and you'll only have a prefect down on you!"

"Rats! We'll risk that," said Hubbard.

"If we can't have a proper game, there's no harm in a bit of fun," added Owen major. "On an afternoon like this the prefects will wink at us. Pass it over, Hubby! I'll bet you can't dribble like this!"

Owen major got the ball, and gave an exhibition of "dribbling." Unfortunately he tripped on the mat, and the exhibition ceased abruptly, amidst much laughter. Football in the lobby was not exactly ideal; but in less than a minute half the team were engaged in an exciting scramble.

I only made one attempt to put a stop to it. There was some excuse for the Removites on such a miserable afternoon. Sir Montie and Tommy and I

stood well back, looking on. If a prefect came we should probably be given lines with the others, but we had to risk that.

The weather had made nearly everybody irritable and gloomy. Some fellows, of course, were quite content—fellows such as Fullwood and Co. and Cecil de Valerie. Just lately De Valerie had come out of his shell, so to speak. He had been very reserved and exclusive during his first week or two at St. Frank's, and his unpleasant manners had caused the juniors to nickname him the Rötter.

And now, as I had anticipated all along, he was chumming with the Nuts. This afternoon he was probably helping to make the smoke denser in Study A, and joining in a game of banker or nap. Fullwood and Co. considered themselves gay and manly; everybody else considered that they were rank outsiders.

In the lobby the juniors were paying attention to the wild scramble after the football. Nobody paid any heed to the hissing rain out in the Triangle. I nudged my chums after a while.

"Let's go along to the study," I said. "It's getting chilly here."

"Just as you like, dear boy," agreed Sir Montie languidly.

We were about to move away when we heard a footstep on the soaking gravel outside, and then a scraping of feet on the stone steps. Just at that moment, however, Handforth charged like a bull into the crowd of juniors. He trapped the football by sheer weight, bowling Hubbard and Owen major and Church over in the operation.

"Watch me kick a goal!" roared Handforth.

He kicked hard, obviously with the amiable intention of shooting the ball out into the Triangle. Then he would chuckle while somebody went to fetch it. Handforth's sense of humour was sometimes rather curious. He quite overlooked the fact that he would probably be pitched out after the ball himself.

The leather shot from his foot and whizzed towards the doorway. I only just dodged in time. But the next second there was a loud thud, followed by a gasp. This, again, was followed by sundry bumps on the steps.

I turned round swiftly, and the others pressed round the doorway. Sprawling on the steps was Mr. Jeremiah Mudford, the local postman. He was simply

smothered, and a smear on his cap showed where the football had hit him.

"Oh, my lor'!" he gasped, sitting up in a puddle. "What will you young gents be hup to next? Took me fair by surprise. Oh, my lor'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're muddy now, ain't you, Muddy?" grinned Hubbard.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Your name suits you down to the ground!" chuckled Tommy Watson. "But it's a bit rotten, you know. Handforth ought to be chucked out himself—"

"Rats!" bawled Handforth. "How was I to know that Muddy was just coming in? It was his own silly fault! Like his cheek, anyhow, butting in just as I was kicking a goal!"

Considering the result of Handforth's kick, this remark was not only unfeeling but most uncalled for.

Mudford picked himself up and grinned. He was a most good-tempered chap in every way, and, in consequence, the juniors took advantage of him. Other postmen would probably have reported the matter to the Housemaster.

"Regular young warmints—blowed if you ain't!" murmured Muddy. "Not as I'm a blamin' of you, young gents! I allus says a boy can't help himself, an' so it's no good a-punishin' of 'em. But I'm reg'lar soaked, I am—reg'lar soaked!"

"Never mind, Muddy! We'll attend to Handforth afterwards!" I chuckled.

"Rats!" roared Handforth. "It was Muddy's fault——"

"I'm real sorry if it was, young gents," put in Mudford. "But, seein' as I didn't receive no warnin', I wasn't prepared like."

"Of course it wasn't your fault, Muddy," I said. "But these accidents will happen when fathends like Handforth get playing about. You're early this afternoon, ain't you?"

"Got any letters for me?" asked Teddy Long, pushing his tubby form through the crowd. "I'm expecting two or three remittances——"

"Sorry, Master Long, but there ain't no letter for you."

"Oh, rotten!" said the meek of the Remove. "I shall have to borrow ten bob off you, Hubby."

Hubbard grinned.

"If I had ten quid, you wouldn't borrow anything off me," he said candidly.

"As it happens, I've got sevenpence and a bent halfpenny."

Mudford commenced distributing several letters to the fellows. Usually, of course, he delivered them to a prefect or a master. But on a half-holiday, when the fellows were about, they took their own letters. Juniors who weren't handy had to wait until the usual distribution later on.

"Begad, one for me!" said Sir Montie, taking a letter. "It's from my uncle, I suppose. Dear boys, we shall be able to have shrimp paste for tea! What on earth's that you've got, Tommy?"

Mudford was handing Tommy Watson a bulky envelope of foolscap size.

"I reckon this must be for you, Master Watson," said the postman. "There ain't any other young gent o' your name at St. Frank's, is there?"

"No, I'm the one and only!" grinned Watson.

"This 'ere letter ain't addressed proper, as you might say," explained Mudford. "It jest says 'Watson'; no initials, nor nothin'. An' this 'ere letter looks queer to me, somehow," he added, frowning at another. 'Sesme Younker,' or summat like that. It seems to be furrin'—"

I grinned.

"Why, that's for Yakama," I said. "You there, Jappy?"

The Japanese junior in the Remove, Sessue Yakama, pushed forward, and took his letter. I saw that Tommy Watson was frowning at the long envelope.

"I say, Benny, what's this funny-looking stamp here?" he asked.

"Why, there's fourpence to pay on that letter!" I said. "That's the special post-office mark, you know. The giddy thing was posted without a stamp on it. You've forgotten to collect fourpence, Muddy!" I added.

The postman looked almost scared.

"There! I knew there was summat!" he exclaimed. "I'm that muddled an' flustered, I don't know wot I'm a-doin' of! That'll be fourpence, Master Watson, if you don't mind. I'm real sorry," he added apologetically. "It worn't my doin', an' if I don't take the money I shall have to pay it—"

"That's all right!" said Watson, handing over a sixpence. "Blow the change, Muddy! I'm blessed if I can make out what this thing is, Benny! Let's go

along to the study and squint at it properly."

We left the crowd, and passed along the Remove passage until we came to Study C. We went in and closed the door. A cheerful fire was burning, and the little apartment looked very cosy.

"It's a fiver, dear fellows!" said Sir Montie, with satisfaction. "It's a shock-in'ly small amount, but we mustn't grumble these hard times."

"Rats to your fiver!" growled Watson, going over to the window. "What do you make of this? I can't think where it's come from, or who sent it! Just look at the scrawling writing, too!"

We all examined Tommy's letter with interest.

It was certainly a most unusual mis-sive to receive. The envelope was a foolscap one, and the contents seemed to be somewhat bulky. But the most surprising thing was the manner of the address. It was simply marked: "Watson, St. Frank's," in a wretchedly pencilled scrawl. Just below this, in blue pencil, were the words: "St. Francis's College, Bellton."

I frowned as I gazed at it.

"That last bit was added by the post-office people," I said. "The letter was insufficiently addressed, and so they shoved that on. And what's that up in the corner?"

I took the letter and examined it more closely. It had been dropped in the mud—not on the steps of the Ancient House—for the mud was all dried. And with difficulty I deciphered the words: "Please post."

"That's queer!" I remarked. "'Please post'! Why couldn't the sender post it himself? Left it for a clerk or somebody, I expect. It looks like a business thing. And the clerk must have forgotten to stamp it."

Tommy Watson scratched his head.

"But it was posted in Helmford," he said, looking at the postmark. "That's only ten or twelve miles away! I don't know a giddy soul in Helmford. I suppose there can't be a mistake?"

"The name is Watson right enough!" I said. "And you're the only Watson here, Tommy. There can't be any bloomer. Don't you recognise the handwriting?"

"That scrawl!" said Tommy, wrinkling his brow. "Seems to be a bit familiar somehow, but that may be only fancy."

Sir Montie yawned.

"May I make a suggestion?" he asked languidly.

"Well?"

"Why not open it, Tommy boy?" said Tregellis-West. "That'll stop all this borin' conjecture, won't it? People generally open letters to see who they're from, I believe. It's quite a well-known method, begad."

Tommy Watson grinned and slit the envelope open.

CHAPTER II.

(*Nipper continues.*)

THE MYSTERIOUS PLANS—AND THE PARAGRAPH IN THE "SUSSEX TIMES."

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST and I looked on with interest while Watson opened the mysterious letter. We were naturally curious, and we had no secrets from one another.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Tommy blankly.

He had pulled out the counter's, and now held in his hand another toolscap envelope of a slightly smaller size. It was absolutely blank, and a heavy red seal secured the flap.

"Well, of all the rummy goes!" went on Tommy. "What the dickens is this?"

"Ain't there a letter, dear boy?"

Watson looked into the outer envelope and shook his head.

"Nothing more!" he replied. "I say, I wonder if this is a fat-headed practical joke of somebody's? One of those silly Monks may have done it, just for a lark, so that I should have to pay fourpence for nothing!"

I grinned.

"That may be the explanation," I replied. "Bob Christine might have done it, but I can't quite believe it, somehow. Not much fun in it, anyway. And it's a rotten trick to post a letter without a stamp on!"

"Christine's idea of a jape, I suppose," growled Watson. "We shall find another envelope inside this one, and then another and another until we get to a scrap of paper at the finish. I expect we shall find some words like 'Ever been had?' or 'Sold again!' Silly lot of rot, I call it!"

Tommy was inclined to be grumpy, and Sir Montie and I chuckled.

"Dear boy, why will you keep supposin' all these things?" asked Tregellis-West

mildly. "You're only guessin', an Benny's often told me that guessin' is a frightfully bad habit."

Watson tore open the other flap, and grinned rather sheepishly as he prepared to take out another envelope. He was quite sure that the thing was a joke of some sort. But there was no other covering, and Tommy drew out some folded sheets of thick, expensive paper.

"Hallo! We were wrong, after all!" he exclaimed. "What the deuce——"

He was unfolding the sheets, and we then saw that they were plans of some sort, intricately executed drawings of some machine or other. There was nothing to show whom they belong to or what they represented, and there was no letter or wording of any sort.

"My hat! I'm blessed if I can understand it!" I exclaimed, rubbing my left ear thoughtfully. "It isn't a joke—that's certain! Don't you know anything about these, Tommy? Can't you guess who sent 'em?"

Watson looked bewildered.

"My dear chap, I'm in a fog!" he declared. "I don't believe they can be for me, after all. From Helmford, too! I don't know anybody there, and I'm jolly certain nobody knows me. Do you think these plans are worth anything?"

"All depends what they are," I replied. "They may be copies and valueless, or they may be worth hundreds of quids."

"Begad!"

"I'm not exaggerating," I went on, as my chums stared at me. "Look here, Watson! As you're so uncertain about this letter, there's a chance that it was meant for somebody else. We'd better go along and see old Alvy about it."

Watson nodded at once.

"That's a jolly good idea!" he exclaimed heartily. "I don't want to keep the rotten thing, I can tell you! Why, I might get into trouble over it! Do you think Mr. Alvington will be in his study now?"

"We can go and see, anyhow," I replied.

Watson stuffed the plans back into their envelope, and we left the study. My chums, of course, knew that "Mr. Alvington" was really Nelson Lee, and that I was "Nipper." They had been let into the secret long since, and had kept it faithfully, but, of course, they always called me "Bonnett" through sheer

habit. Nelson Lee was in his study when we arrived. He looked very cosy, sitting before the cheerful fire. Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster of the College House, had passed us in the passage, so I assumed that he and the guv'nor had been having a chat.

"Well, boys, what's the meaning of this invasion?" smiled Nelson Lee as we piled in. "The weather's upset your plans, eh? Never mind! There'll be some more fine weather before long."

"I told Watson to come to you, sir, for advice," I said. "He's just received a letter, and he doesn't know who it's from or why it was sent. He had to pay fourpence on it, too!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"That's very unfortunate!" he remarked. "I'll give you any advice I can, Watson. Tell me all about it."

Watson explained in a very few words, and then handed the curious letter to the guv'nor. Lee took it and examined the whole thing, exterior and interior, with great interest. He did not speak for fully five minutes, and when at last he looked up there was a keen light in his eyes.

"Well, sir?" asked Tommy, who had been growing impatient.

"Haven't you any idea who this is from, Watson?" asked Nelson Lee quietly.

"No, sir."

"Isn't the handwriting familiar to you?"

"You mean 'Watson, St. Frank's,' sir?" asked Tommy. "Well, it does seem a bit familiar, but I can't say who wrote it. I can't quite explain what I mean, sir. It's not exactly familiar, but yet I seem to have seen the handwriting before."

"In other words, you can't place it?"

"That's right, sir."

"H'm! It is very curious," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "These plans, I may tell you, appear to be of great value. But I cannot, of course, be quite certain about that. It is just possible that the explanation will come by a later post. This letter was obviously despatched in a great hurry. Indeed, if it were not too melodramatic, I might even suggest that the letter was thrown from a window by somebody who was a prisoner within; but that explanation is rather absurd, and we must not seriously consider it."

"If that had been the case, guv'nor, the chap would have addressed it more fully, wouldn't he?" I asked.

"That depends upon how much time he had at his disposal, young 'un," replied Lee. "But, as I said, I must not encourage these wild ideas. However, the affair is rather puzzling, and certainly interesting. Can't you think of anybody, Watson?"

Tommy scratched his head.

"I think it must be a mistake, sir," he said at last.

"Well, it is quite certain that you know nothing, and we will therefore drop the matter for the time being," said Nelson Lee. "I think it is highly probable that an explanation will turn up of its own accord. In any case we had better wait."

"And what shall I do with these plans, sir?"

"I was going to suggest that you should leave them with me, Watson——"

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Tommy eagerly. "I should like you to look after them. They'd only worry me if I kept 'em in Study C."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I will take good care of them, my boy," he promised. "If you think of anything further, however, or hear any news, come to me at once!"

And we left the guv'nor's study and gave our thoughts to preparing tea. Under the influence of that cheerful meal we soon forgot the rain and the postponed football. Naturally we discussed Tommy's mysterious letter over the meal, but decided at the finish to forget all about it until something else turned up.

Christine and Co. came over after tea, and it was arranged that the House match should be played on the following Wednesday afternoon. Christine was rather glad, as a matter of fact, for he wanted to get his team into better form. It wasn't long since the Ancient House Eleven—my own team—had been the laughing-stock of the school, but now the College House fellows were rather afraid of us.

By bedtime Tommy Watson's letter had practically been forgotten. The next day was Sunday, and it rained as hard as ever, without a stop. Fellows began to pull long faces, for the prospect of a flood at St. Frank's wasn't very alluring, for it would mainly affect the playing-fields.

On Monday, however, the rain stopped,

although the sky was leaden. On Tuesday the sun came out for a while, but the afternoon set in wet and stormy. It seemed as though another wet half-holiday lay in store.

We had completely forgotten that letter of Tommy's by this time. He had received nothing further, and the matter was as puzzling as ever. Our thoughts now were mainly centred upon the weather.

There was much satisfaction when the rising-bell went on Wednesday morning. The sun was shining in at the windows clearly. The day was bright and cloudless, with no promise of further rain.

After morning lessons Montie and Tommy and I adjourned to Study C. Here we made final dispositions of the team. There had been some talk of leaving Hubbard out in order to make a place for Sessue Yakama; but Hubbard had kicked up such a fuss that I decided to wait until the next match. Yakama had shaped well at practice, but he hadn't played much football, and needed coaching. Later on, I believed, he would turn out to be a valuable man.

While we were talking the door opened and Handforth looked in.

"Thought I'd find you here!" he said, nodding.

"Don't interrupt now," said Tommy, waving his hand. "We're just jawing about the match, Handy. It might be necessary to leave you out!" he added, with a wink at me. "If we can find a better man——"

Edward Oswald Handforth glared.

"Leave me out!" he roared. "Well, I'm jiggered! I suppose you want to lose the match? I suppose you want to give the game away to the Monks? Rats! I ain't going to be left out——"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" I grinned. "Tommy was only rotting!"

Handforth snorted, but he looked relieved.

"I should say he was rotting!" he exclaimed indignantly. "It's not my nature to boast, but I'll bet there's not another goalkeeper at St. Frank's who can touch my form! I wanted to show you something, Watson; but if you're anxious to act the goat, I'll go away again——"

"Oh, rot! What do you want?" asked Tommy.

"There's a paragraph in this paper," explained Handforth, holding up a crumpled newspaper.

"A good many paragraphs, I should

say." I remarked. "What about 'em, Handy?"

"It's the 'Sussex Times'—this morning's," replied Edward Oswald. "There's some chap named Watson mentioned here, and I was wondering if he had anything to do with the freak in this study."

"Look here——" began Watson warmly.

"Benjamin Watson," went on Handforth. "He seems to have been getting into trouble of some sort—scooting with money or something!"

"What!" roared Tommy. "Let me look!"

He grabbed the paper from the grinning Handforth, and we all read the paragraph together, Sir Montie and I looking over Watson's shoulder. The paragraph wasn't so very long, but it was interesting. It ran like this:

"THE MISSING ENGINEER.

"In spite of all the efforts of the police, there is no further news to report regarding the strange disappearance of Mr. Benjamin Watson, of the well-known firm of Marsden and Watson, Limited, engineers, London. As reported in our columns on Monday last, Mr. Watson has been missing since Friday of last week. It appears that Mr. Watson was motoring from the South Coast to London on Friday evening, and that the car was seen to pass through Helmford. Since then nothing whatever has been seen or heard of it. Both Mr. Watson and his chauffeur have completely disappeared, and needless to say the motor-car has vanished also. The local police have been very busy, but have been unable to discover any clue. We may add that there have been some rather unpleasant rumours gaining currency during the last day or two, the nature of which we consider it unwise to publish. It is to be hoped that this mystery will soon be cleared up satisfactorily."

"He ain't one of your people, is he?" asked Handforth curiously.

Watson had been staring at the paper almost dazedly, but now he looked round with excited eyes.

"He's—he's my uncle!" he gasped.

"Your uncle?" yelled Handforth.

"Yes—Uncle Ben!" said Watson huskily. "What the dickens can have happened to him? I—I don't understand it, you chaps!"

Handforth stuck his chest out.

"I thought I wasn't wrong!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "It ain't often I'm wrong, as everybody knows. Fancy this chap turning out to be your uncle, Watson! Looks a bit squiffy, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Tommy fiercely.

Handforth backed away a little.

"Oh, nothing——"

"What do you mean by 'squiffy'?" roared Watson.

"Well, what about those rumours?" said Handforth, pointing to the paper. "They're squiffy, ain't they? It looks to me as if your uncle's been up to some sort of game—— Oh, goodness! Yow!"

Handforth let out a yell as Tommy Watson's fist smote him upon the chest with terrific force. He disappeared through the doorway backwards, and Watson slammed the door, putting his back against it.

Then he looked at us with wild, anxious eyes.

CHAPTER III.

NELSON LEE'S DEDUCTIONS—HE STARTS OUT ON A TOUR OF INQUIRY.

NIPPER and Sir Montie regarded Tommy Watson with great interest. A thump on the door sounded, but the three juniors took no notice of it. The loud voice of Handforth sounded in the passage, but soon died away.

"Dear boys," said Tregellis-West, "let's talk it over calmly and collectedly."

Nipper nodded.

"Is this chap really your uncle, Watson?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, my hat! What a question to ask!" panted Tommy Watson. "Uncle Ben is the junior partner of Messrs. Marsden and Watson, Limited. And he's been missing since Friday! Great Scott! What can have happened?"

"It's appallin'," said Sir Montie vaguely.

Nipper wrinkled his brow.

"Last Friday evening!" he muttered. "And that letter arrived on Saturday afternoon, Tommy! I'll bet there's a connection! That letter has got something to do with your uncle's disappearance."

"Do you think so, Benny? Do you really?" asked Montie mildly.

"My dear chap, it's practically obvious!" declared Nipper. "What about that handwriting, Tommy? Was it your uncle's?"

Watson stared.

"By Jove, that's right!" he exclaimed quickly. "Of course! I knew the writing reminded me of somebody's fist! It was Uncle Ben's, I'll bet a quid! But what does it mean? What the dickens can we do?"

Nipper moved towards the door.

"What can we do?" he said crisply.

"Why, we can go straight to the gov'nor! He'll know how to get to work. Come on! We shall just catch him before the dinner-bell rings!"

The trio hurried out of the study, taking the newspaper with them. Handforth had already spread the story. It wasn't to be supposed that he could keep it quiet—and many Removites looked at Nipper and Co. curiously as they hurried along.

In the lobby they ran right into Nelson Lee.

"Can we speak to you a moment, sir?" asked Nipper respectfully.

There were several other juniors within hearing, which accounted for Nipper's unusual deference of tone.

The schoolmaster-detective nodded.

"Come to my study, boys!" he said, walking on with rustling gown.

In less than a minute they were in "Old Alvy's" cosy quarters. Lee closed the door, and regarded his three visitors with interest.

"What is it, Nipper?" he asked. "You are excited over something, I see."

Watson thrust the newspaper into Nelson Lee's hand, and the detective looked over the paragraph keenly. After a few moments he raised his eyes and then thoughtfully lit a cigarette.

"Most interesting," he said slowly—"most interesting and instructive! What do you make of it, Nipper?"

"Why, gov'nor, there's a connection between this affair and that rummy letter!" replied Nipper promptly. "Watson says that the handwriting was his uncle's. He remembers it now. That chap mentioned in the paper is Watson's uncle——"

"I gathered that the gentleman was a relative of some sort," interrupted Lee. "This paragraph throws a good deal of light upon the whole matter. I am afraid, Watson, that you must prepare yourself

for a shock. It is fairly certain that your uncle met with foul play on Friday evening."

"Foul play, sir!" gasped Tommy blankly.

"There can be no other explanation," said Nelson Lee. "Mr. Watson's car was probably held up in the darkness by robbers, who were attempting to gain possession of the plans which now repose in my bureau."

"Oh, my hat!" said Watson, rather dazedly.

"Begad, it's like a story—it is, really!"

"If you had had as much experience of the world as I have, Montie, you would know that events are happening almost daily which eclipse the most sensational fiction," said Nelson Lee quietly. "But let me think for a few moments, boys. It seems to me that this is a case which requires careful attention."

Nipper winked at his chums delightedly. Anything in this line was just what Nelson Lee revelled in. It was a mystery, with some unusual points about it.

There was silence in the study for several minutes, except for occasional whisperings between Nipper and the other two boys. At last Nelson Lee rose from his chair, and stood with his back to the fire.

"We will attempt to reconstruct what happened on Friday evening," he said reflectively, as though speaking to himself. "First and foremost, we have the significant fact that Mr. Watson's car was last seen passing through Helmford. If you remember, boys, that letter was posted in Helmford."

"By George, so it was!" said Nipper, nodding.

"Well, we must now venture to embark upon a little guesswork," continued Nelson Lee. "A theory is, after all, guesswork to a certain extent. It has always been my policy to avoid conjecture, but sometimes it is necessary. In this particular instance we have no other alternative. Therefore, as I said, we will make an effort to reconstruct what occurred."

"Begad, it's wonderful!" murmured Tregellis-West admiringly.

"We know that your uncle's car passed safely through Helmford, Watson," continued Lee. "What happened to it after that? It has not been seen since, nor has any trace of it been discovered. There

must have been distinct tracks left by the car upon the muddy roads, but the torrential rain of Saturday naturally obliterated them. Thus the police were at a standstill. It is possible that the motor-car finished its journey to London, but very improbable. Somebody or other would have seen it in one of the big towns which intervene between Helmford and London. The inference is that the car did not proceed very many miles beyond Helmford itself."

"Then where is it, sir?" asked Watson eagerly. "And where's my uncle?"

"We mustn't be in too much of a hurry, my boy," said Nelson Lee. "And don't forget that we are merely forming a theory. I should suggest that the motor-car was attacked upon the bleak expanse of road beyond Helmford. Your uncle was quite aware that his assailants were bent upon securing the plans he carried. We are assuming, of course, that he did carry the plans. Mr. Watson managed, somehow, to enclose them in an outer envelope. This he dropped upon the road in desperation, jotting the words 'Please post' in the corner."

"You've got it, guv'nor!" declared Nipper. "Why, anybody might think that you'd been present! Oh, but what about the rain? Wouldn't that letter have got soaked through in the rain?"

"If my memory is not at fault, the rain held up on Friday evening until well into the night," replied Nelson Lee, rubbing his chin. "Therefore, if the letter had been picked up before midnight, it was comparatively dry. But I am afraid we are getting beyond our depth. We are constructing a story upon our own account. We are making the tale fit the slim facts in our possession, and that won't do, boys. We must stick to——"

"But it must be true, guv'nor!" declared Nipper. "There couldn't be any other explanation!"

His master smiled.

"My dear boy, there could be a dozen other explanations," he contradicted. "We have merely chosen the most obvious. The attackers, having failed to find the plans, apparently kidnapped Mr. Watson and his chauffeur, and have been holding them ever since. In that case, Watson, your uncle is imprisoned somewhere not so very far from Helmford."

Tommy Watson fairly danced with excitement.

"Can't—can't we rush off, sir?" he asked.

"Rush off to where?"

"I—I'm blessed if I know!" confessed Tommy, looking dismayed.

"That's just it, my boy—where to?" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "We haven't the slightest clue to your uncle's whereabouts. We don't even know for certain that he has been kidnapped. Don't make the mistake of accepting this theory as the literal truth. I may be quite off the track."

"But—but can't we 'phone to the police or—or something?" asked Watson vaguely.

"The police, as this paper intimates, have failed in their search," replied "Old Alvy," patting Watson gently on the back. "Perhaps, if I told the police all I knew, they would gain a clearer insight into the case. But I am rather keen to look into the matter on my own account. I have a certain advantage over the official police, Watson. You may rest assured, in any case, that I will do my utmost."

"When, sir?" asked Tommy.

"Immediately!"

"This—this afternoon?"

"Why, of course!" smiled Lee. "I will devote the whole afternoon to your uncle's cause, my boy. There, don't look so worried! I dare say the matter will be cleared up very shortly. Try and dismiss the subject from your mind. You may be content that everything possible is being done."

"Thank you, sir," said Tommy Watson quietly. "You're—you're splendid, sir! It's marvellous the way you've invented all that story!"

Nelson Lee laughed heartily.

"Quite so, Watson—quite so!" he chuckled. "You used the correct word. The story was invented, and we mustn't assume that it fits in with the actual facts. A careful investigation will show us where we are wrong. But isn't it somewhat curious that you should have learned of your uncle's disappearance only this morning—and then by chance?"

"I don't know, sir," replied Watson thoughtfully. "I don't suppose my pater thought that I'd better know anything about it. Besides, he's right up in Scotland just now. Perhaps my people didn't want to worry me."

This was, of course, quite probable, and it was positively certain that Watson's people had no hope whatever of gaining any assistance from the junior member of the family who was at St. Frank's.

Watson had to be satisfied with Nelson Lee's assurance that he would do his best, and that he would do it at once. And so Nipper and Co. left the Housemaster's study just as the dinner-bell was booming out.

Nelson Lee lit another cigarette and sank into his armchair again. He had quite forgotten dinner. He considered the facts once more at length, and decided that he would commence his investigation by making inquiries at Helmford. It seemed that Helmford would provide a starting-point.

"Upon my soul, this is quite a puzzle!" mused the detective. "I never believed that a public school would provide me with so many interesting cases. It only goes to prove that there are problems of life to be unravelled no matter where one happens to be. And, upon consideration, that is only natural."

There was a tap at the door, and Morrow, the head prefect, entered.

"Oh, I thought that you were busy, sir!" said Morrow, hesitating. "Dinner's ready, sir! We're just starting the second course!"

"Why, to be sure, Morrow," smiled Lee, jumping up.

He always made a point of dining in the Big Hall, at the head of the Sixth-Form table. Lee chuckled as he went to his place, for it was very seldom he missed grace. The mystery of Watson's uncle, however, had gripped him.

After the meal was over, Lee returned to his study and prepared for the afternoon's tour. Fortunately, the weather was amiable. The sun shone, and the sky was blue.

The problem as to how he should reach Helmford was soon solved. Lee rang up his friend, Dr. Brett, and secured the latter's car for the afternoon. The doctor was a good fellow in every way, and Lee often visited him for a game of billiards or a chat.

Brett was quite unaware of his friend's real identity, and more than once the detective had been inclined to let him into the secret. At present, however, this was not necessary.

On his way out, Lee paused at the playing-fields, to watch the activity on Little Side. The House match between the Monks and the Fossils had just started. Nipper and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were all playing for their own side.

"It is just as well," Lee told himself.

"The game will make them forget this affair, and by teatime I hope to have something definite to tell them."

The ground was somewhat sodden and slippery, but the juniors did not mind a little mud, and it was quite certain that by the time the game was finished almost every player would be smothered.

Lee was about to walk on when he saw that Nipper had trapped the ball from Clapson, of the College House. In a second there was a yell from the Ancient House juniors, and Nipper streaked down the field in fine style.

Nelson Lee watched with interest.

It was quite a tense moment. The game wasn't five minutes old, and the Monks' goal was already in danger. The opposing backs rushed at Nipper, but the latter passed beautifully to Sir Montie.

For a moment it seemed as though Tregellis-West would be beaten, for he slipped upon a patch of mud. Just as the ball was about to be wrested from him, however, he passed it back to Nipper with amazing neatness, considering the difficulty of the position.

And Nipper, without a breath, slammed the ball towards the net. The goalie made a frantic effort to save. His fist touched the leather, but its muddy surface slid over his knuckles, and the ball dropped into the net.

"Goal!"

"Oh, good!"

"Hurrah!"

"Well kicked, Bennett!"

"Goal!"

The juniors were enthusiastic, and Nelson Lee felt something of a thrill. He always enjoyed watching a game of football, and it was particularly pleasant for him to see his young assistant taking part in the manly sport with such distinction.

"Quite a good opening!" he told himself. "Nipper is benefiting greatly by his stay at St. Frank's. He could do with a year or two of it. H'm! First blood to the Ancient House. Very good indeed!"

Lee would have remained under ordinary circumstances, but there was more important work for him to perform, and he left the school grounds and walked briskly down to Dr. Brett's comfortable dwelling near the village.

He found the worthy medico waiting for him. The motor-car, a small two-seater, was standing ready in the road. And Nelson Lee, after expressing his

thanks, dropped into the driving seat and started out for Helmford.

He wondered how far his investigation would lead him.

CHAPTER IV.

AN OLD FRIEND—NELSON LEE MAKES INQUIRIES—ON THE ROAD TO MELHAVEN.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD, of Scotland Yard, filled his pipe thoughtfully.

"It's a queer business, Kemball," he remarked, stuffing the tobacco down with his first finger. "If some crooks have been at work, they've played their game in a deucedly clever way. But it's my opinion that Watson himself is the crook."

Inspector Kemball, of the Sussex police, grunted.

"Well, we've done our best, Mr. Lennard," he said. "I'll swear that the man isn't anywhere in this vicinity. That motor-car isn't within a hundred miles of Helmford, I'm willing to wager a crown!"

Lennard grinned.

"I shouldn't be rash, if I were you," he said, lighting his pipe. "Crowns are too scarce nowadays to throw about, Kemball. If I can't get any further by this evening, I shall toddle back to London."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lennard——"

"My dear man, it's no good being sorry," said the Yard detective. "I've handled scores of failures before now. We're not sleuths of fiction—we can't always bring off triumphs with a blaze of trumpets."

In spite of his non-success, Detective-Inspector Lennard was quite cheerful. He had long since learned that it was useless being gloomy. He was one of the most able men at Scotland Yard, and was a personal friend of Nelson Lee's. He and the renowned criminologist had been engaged on many cases together.

The inspector had been sent down from London to investigate the strange disappearance of Mr. Benjamin Watson. He and Inspector Kemball were now sitting before the fire in the latter's office, at the Helmford police-station. It was early afternoon, and the sunlight was streaming in at the window.

"Not a clue!" went on Detective-Inspector Lennard musingly. "We know

for a fact that the car passed through this town, but we can't trace it further. That confounded rain did us a lot of harm, Kemball. It washed the roads as clean as a billiard-table. Mr. Watson was carrying valuable plans—unpatented plans of a new machine of some sort—and I believe he bunked with 'em."

"That's rather improbable, isn't it?" asked the local inspector.

"Very likely; but it may be the truth," declared Lennard. "As you know, I interviewed Mr. Marsden, the head of the firm, yesterday. He had nothing but praise for his junior partner, and almost ordered me out of his office when I let drop a hint that Mr. Watson was acting on the crook."

"Well, I must admit it's rather unpleasant."

"Of course it's unpleasant—but men have succumbed to temptation before to-day," said Lennard grimly. "These plans were worth thousands—hundreds of thousands. And I know for a fact that an American firm was willing to pay a tremendous figure for them. Well, I'm forced to the conclusion that Mr. Watson disappeared deliberately. The whole thing, in fact, was a put-up job. By this time Watson may be out of the country."

"You don't think there's been foul play, then?"

"I'm almost sure there hasn't," said the Scotland Yard inspector, shaking his head. "I'm going to run over to that village now, Kemball—it's five or six miles out, isn't it? If I can't pick up a clue there, I'm going to get on the evening express for London. I'm fed-up with this mooching about."

And, a few minutes later, Detective-Inspector Lennard left Holmford in a trap. He was frankly of the opinion that his mission would be unsuccessful; he only went upon it as a matter of duty.

And, meanwhile, from the opposite direction, Nelson Lee was approaching Holmford in his borrowed motor-car. He made no attempt to go to the police-station, but pulled up in front of the post-office, in the High Street.

Going inside, Nelson Lee inquired for the postmaster, and that gentleman, a be-whiskered little person, with genial manners, took him aside.

"I am Mr. Alvington, of St. Frank's," said Lee, introducing himself. "I've come here with regard to a letter which was posted from this office on Saturday

morning last. It was a bulky package, addressed to a junior named Watson—"

"Oh, to be sure!" exclaimed the postmaster. "I remember the letter distinctly. It was insufficiently addressed, Mr. Alvington, and I added the full name of the school myself. I hope it arrived safely?"

"My presence here is proof of that," smiled Lee. "But can you give me a few details? Was the letter dropped into the box or handed across the counter?"

"Mr. Simpson brought it in on Saturday morning."

"Ah! Mr. Simpson?"

"You will find him just along the High Street—he is the proprietor of Simpson's Grocery Stores," said the postmaster. "We had quite a little chat concerning that letter, my dear sir. Mr. Simpson brought it in, saying that he had found it upon the road. I examined it, and advised him to post it in the usual way, notwithstanding the fact that no stamp was attached."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Then, perhaps, I had better go along and see Mr. Simpson," he said pleasantly. "I am rather anxious to obtain all the information I can concerning that letter."

"I am afraid I cannot tell you much more," said the postmaster. "Mr. Simpson brought the letter in to me because he was rather puzzled as to what he should do with it. I hope there has been no mistake? It was intended for St. Francis's College, was it not?"

"Oh, yes; there was no error," replied Lee.

And a couple of minutes later he left the post-office and observed that Simpson's Stores lay a little further down the High Street, on the other side of the road. Nelson Lee left the car outside the post-office and walked across.

There were several customers in the shop, and the staff was girl assistants. From what Nelson Lee could gather they were attending to anything and everything except the customers' requirements; gossip seemed to be the main occupation.

Nelson Lee stood in the centre of the shop, ignored and deserted. He smiled slightly to himself, and walked to the cash-desk. An attractive young lady was sitting behind the glass, deeply immersed in the pages of a novelette.

"Is Mr. Simpson available?" asked Lee pleasantly.

"Sorry, sir. He's out at present."

"Thank you."

Lee turned towards the door rather disappointed, for he had no wish to waste time. But the light from the doorway was suddenly obliterated, the space being filled by a great many stone of flesh and blood.

Instinctively Nelson Lee knew that the newcomer was Mr. Simpson himself. He was somewhat short, but easily made up for lack of height in other directions. The grocer, indeed, was nearly as broad as he was high.

"Now, then, Miss Smith," he rapped out sharply. "See that this gentleman is served at once——"

"I think I am addressing Mr. Simpson?" said the detective.

"I am Mr. Simpson, certainly," puffed the fat man, with a slight air of importance. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I was advised to come to you by the postmaster," explained Nelson Lee. "It appears, Mr. Simpson, that you picked up a letter in the roadway, and that you took it into the post-office——"

"That is quite correct," interrupted the other. "Well, sir, what of it? Did I do wrong?"

"On the contrary, your action was most intelligent and praiseworthy," said Lee, with a smile. "I am Mr. Alvington, of St. Frank's College, and I should like you to give me a few details concerning that letter, if you would not consider my request too impertinent."

Mr. Simpson laughed heartily.

"My dear sir I'll tell you everything you want to know" he exclaimed. "So the letter was for St. Frank's? I thought so—I thought so. I found it upon the road late on Friday night and took it to the post-office on Saturday morning."

"So the postmaster informed me," nodded Lee. "But can you tell me, Mr. Simpson, how you found the letter? Can you describe the exact circumstances? The matter is rather important, otherwise I should not have bothered you."

"Why, bless your life, there's nothing much to tell," declared the grocer. "On Friday evening I ran over to Melhaven in my trap, and didn't return until rather late. It was dark, and just as I was coming round the double bend my mare shied slightly. And then I saw, in the lamplight, a white package lying on the ground. I thought that it was merely a piece of paper at first, but got down and

looked at it. Then I saw that the thing was a letter, and stuffed it into my pocket."

"And then?"

"Once I had reached home I examined the letter, and could make nothing of it," continued Mr. Simpson. "The address seemed to be shockingly badly written. Well, in the morning, before breakfast, I took it across to the post-office."

"Thank you, Mr. Simpson," said Lee. "The letter, I presume, was quite intact when you found it?"

"Oh, quite."

"You found nothing else upon the road?"

"Nothing at all," was the grocer's reply. "Good gracious, what should I find? I made no search, if that's what you mean. Is there something wrong, Mr. Alvington. It was queer that the letter should be lying upon the open road, but I assumed that somebody dropped it by accident."

"That is quite possible, of course," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "Now, Mr. Simpson, you referred to the double bend?"

"Exactly. That is where I found the letter."

"How far is that spot from Helmsford?"

"Well, roughly, about three-and-a-half miles."

"Can you describe it to me?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Simpson. "You cannot mistake the spot, for the road runs nearly straight all the way. Just before the bend is reached the lane continues straight on to another village, and the Melhaven road turns abruptly to the left, and then again to the right."

"Thank you very much, my dear sir," said Lee. "The letter was for one of my boys, and you must allow me to thank you, on his behalf, for having acted so shrewdly. I assure you, he is very grateful."

"Don't mention it," puffed Mr. Simpson. "Always ready to oblige, you know. It cost me very little trouble, after all. A dishonest man might have kept the letter, but I'm not one of that sort. I saw that it was my plain duty to put the thing into the post, and I did so."

A minute later Nelson Lee emerged upon the High Street again.

He was feeling satisfied, in a measure. At least, he had obtained the informa-

tion which was most important at the moment. He was not very hopeful of discovering much at the "double bend." Several days had elapsed since the finding of the letter. At the same time, it was just possible that he might hit upon a clue. The police, of course, knew nothing of Mr. Simpson's find, and the latter gentleman in no way connected it with the disappearance of Mr. Watson.

Thus, in a measure, Lee had the advantage. There was not the slightest doubt, in his mind, that the missing engineer had met with foul play. It was, moreover, safe to assume that the act of violence had occurred at the double bend, where the letter had been dropped.

Of course, Mr. Watson might have been conveyed a hundred miles away after that incident; but this was not at all likely.

The road to Melhaven was narrow but fairly straight, and Nelson Lee had no great difficulty in locating the spot which Mr. Simpson had described. He turned the first bend and stopped the car.

The place was very deserted, not a house or a cottage being in sight. Trees grew thickly on both sides of the lane, and the detective realised that it was an ideal spot for a hold-up.

But one point puzzled him, and he frowned.

"Mr. Watson was travelling from the South Coast to London by the main road," he murmured. "Why did he make this detour—why did he come through Helmford? The car must have gone several miles out of its way."

It was an important point, and one that Lee did not overlook. He searched the lane thoroughly, examining the hedges and ditches with great care. But he found nothing whatever; there was no sign, no clue.

The detective was not exactly disappointed. He had anticipated failure, and therefore was prepared. It was a sheer waste of time to remain on the spot; and at last he determined to continue his way to Melhaven itself.

But just as he was about to start the engine of the car, he heard the sharp beat of hoofs upon the road. A trap was evidently coming along the straight stretch, from the direction of the neighbouring village.

The vehicle appeared in sight a moment later, and Nelson Lee eyed it casually. Something familiar about the figure of the driver, however, drew his

attention. He walked quickly to the corner, and stood waiting.

And then Lee smiled with genuine pleasure.

"Lennard!" he murmured to himself. "Detective-Inspector Lennard, of all men! Well, upon my soul, this is most surprising—and welcome."

He waved his hand cheerily, and the trap came to a stop.

"Well, sir?" asked the Scotland Yard inspector curiously.

"I am delighted to meet you, Lennard," said Lee genially. "Man alive, don't you know me? Have I altered so much—"

Detective-Inspector Lennard started.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "It's Lee!"

He jumped down in a moment, and rushed forward with outstretched hand.

"No, you've made a mistake, inspector," smiled the detective. "You've got my name wrong—I'm Mr. Alvington, of St. Frank's!"

CHAPTER V.

LEE'S ADVICE—THE GENIAL MR. DANBY—NIPPER ISN'T HOODWINKED!

THE pair shook hands warmly.

"By George!" laughed Detective-Inspector Lennard. "Mr. Alvington, of St. Frank's, eh? It's an infernally good disguise, Lee. There's such a little of it that you're wearing nothing false. And yet you've changed—you look older and more sedate."

"I didn't expect to find you on this road, Lennard."

"Well, you can be quite certain that I didn't expect to find you," declared the inspector. "Oh, you've got a car, I see. Just out for a run, I suppose?"

"Yes, in a way. But I was looking into that affair of the missing Mr. Watson—"

"The deuce you were!" exclaimed Lennard, staring. "I've been pottering about over that business for a day or two past. How in the name of wonder did you come to get mixed up in it?"

"Mr. Watson has a nephew at St. Frank's," explained Lee.

"Upon my soul, you simply can't keep out of these affairs, Lee!" chuckled the inspector. "Why, if you were sent to prison for a stretch, you'd sit in your cell unravelling the mysteries—"

"My dear man, don't talk of such a thing!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "I

don't think I shall ever qualify for penal servitude. I'm glad I met you, Lennard. This is a quiet spot, and we can have a little chat. What do you make of this mystery?"

Detective-Inspector Lennard became serious.

"To be quite frank, I think that Watson himself planned the whole game," he declared. "He was carrying some highly valuable documents, or plans, and it's my belief that he left his partner in the lurch, and bunked."

"Why have you come to that conclusion?"

"Well, there's no sign whatever of foul play," argued the inspector. "The whole thing has the appearance of a put-up job. And Watson, don't forget, had a strong motive for disappearing. Again, why did he come round these by-lanes instead of sticking to the main road?"

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"Has it ever struck you that the chauffeur may have been in league with the crooks?" he asked. "Supposing the chauffeur had deliberately led his master into a trap? Couldn't he have left the main road without Watson being aware of it?"

"It's possible, of course," admitted the inspector. "But why?"

"Why? In order to deliver the unfortunate man into a trap," replied Lee. "I may as well tell you, Lennard, that your theory is wrong—totally wrong. Mr. Watson has not bunked, as you put it. He met with foul play—and I have every reason to believe that the treachery happened very near to this spot."

Lennard stared.

"If I didn't know you so well, Lee, I should be wild," he declared. "How the deuce do you manage it? I thought you were a schoolmaster—and yet you find time to investigate an affair like this. And, hang it all, you speak as though you're dealing with positive facts!"

"So I am," smiled Lee. "Just listen for a few moments, and I'll tell you. I'm not half so smart as you give me credit for being. To tell the truth, I was practically pitchforked into this business."

Lee told his companion all about the unstamped letter, and its contents, and Lennard listened with interest. He was glad to learn that his theory was wrong, and that there was some crooks to deal with, after all.

"Naturally, I'm rather bowled over,"

he admitted. "But it's good to hear that Watson isn't a scoundrel himself. Marsden, his partner, has blind faith in him. Well, what's to be done now? We seem to be at a dead end."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"We are," he agreed. "The unfortunate man evidently threw the plans out of the motor-car at the time of the attack. And now, in all probability, he is being kept a prisoner—until he reveals the whereabouts of the package. And it is my belief, Lennard, that we sha'n't have to search very far."

"Well, I have scoured the whole district, and I can't find the slightest trace," said Lennard. "I don't feel inclined to hang about indefinitely."

"There's no reason why you should," went on Nelson Lee. "I advise you to remain in Helmford until the end of the week. We may take it for granted, Lennard, that there will be a fresh move before long. The rascals who have got hold of Mr. Watson won't remain at a standstill. And, as soon as they act, we shall be able to jump. The plans are quite safe—and that is important. As soon as I hit upon anything I'll ring you up. If, on the other hand, you get wind of fresh activity, you will ring me up."

The pair discussed the matter at some length, and the arrangement was fixed. Then Nelson Lee went off in his—or, rather, Brett's—car, and Lennard followed at a more leisurely pace in the trap. Lee was not quite satisfied. He had done much, and yet nothing was done!

He did not know that the mysterious crooks had already moved.

The nature of this move was obscure for the time being, however. It would not be very long before events went apace.

While Nelson Lee was taking his leave of Detective-Inspector Lennard, the junior House match at St. Frank's was drawing to a close. The spectators and the players were all agreed that it was an Ancient House victory.

The score stood at 3-2, and it was very unlikely that the Monks would equalise before the whistle blew. Bob Christine and Co. had done their utmost, but Nipper's team was in splendid form.

Within five minutes of the finish the Collego House juniors tried desperately to score. Again and again they broke through, and two goal-kicks—swift and difficult—were frustrated by the redoubt-

able Handforth. Everybody agreed that between the "sticks" Handforth was irreproachable.

As Church and McClure remarked, their leader seemed to be all hands and feet. This description didn't exactly please Handforth, whose hands and feet were somewhat large in proportion to the rest of his person. But there was no denying that they stood him in good stead.

The game had a somewhat surprising finish. There was more excitement in the last four minutes than in all the previous eighty-six. Clapson, of the College House, headed the ball into the Fossils' net more by chance than anything else. Handforth slipped in the act of making a desperate dive to save. And a mighty roar went up from the Monks.

"Goal!"

"Oh, jolly good!"

"Equalised!" panted Bob Christine, shaking Clapson's hand as they ran up the field. "That was ripping, old son. We're safe now."

The game restarted, and there was just under three minutes of play left. Nipper and his men were looking very grim. They felt that they had been robbed of a victory that had seemed certain. And Nipper urged his men to do their utmost. There wasn't much hope of pulling the game out of the fire, however.

Almost at once the Fossils were away. The College House team, already puffed, considered that the game was over, and they expected a minute or two of ding-dong play before the whistle went.

But the opposing forwards swept down the field in magnificent style. It was quite clear that they were bent on making a determined effort to score another goal. Sir Montie had the leather, and he tricked two of the half-backs in succession, and went straight on.

The position became too hot for him, however, and he made a pass to Farman. The American junior was off like a flash. He dodged the only back who stood in his path, and looked round hastily.

"Kick!" roared Nipper, in desperation.

There was no time for hesitation. It was a long shot, but there was nothing else for it. The referee already had the whistle between his lips.

Bang!

Justin B. Farman kicked with all his strength. The ball sailed from his foot,

and a groan went up as it was seen that the ball would pass over the cross-bar. Nation, the goalkeeper, grinned as he watched. But the next second he received the surprise of his life.

The ball curved down unexpectedly, caught by a gust of wind. It struck the cross-bar fairly, instead of passing over, and rebounded back into play. It fell right at Tommy Watson's foot, and Tommy lost no time.

The ball was in the net in a twinkling, passing clean between Nation's legs. The expression on his face was almost comical as he twisted round. But his remarks were drowned in the gasp of delight which went up from the Fossils.

"Goal!"

"Well played, Watson!"

And then the whistle blew.

Bob Christine looked rueful as Nipper clapped him on the back.

"Well, I thought we'd equalised," grunted Christine. "My hat, that was a smart piece of work. I'm blessed if you chaps don't have all the luck!"

"My dear kid, it's not luck," said Nipper sweetly. "We know how to play, that's all! Still, it was a jolly good game."

The teams went off the field in groups. Nipper and Tommy Watson and Sir Montie were together, and Tommy was glowing with delight. He was a good footballer, but somewhat steady, and not addicted to brilliancy. It wasn't often he kicked a goal. So he was rather pleased with himself now.

"It wasn't my goal, really," he said modestly. "Farman kicked it——"

"Rats! If you hadn't been jolly smart, Farman's kick would have been nothing," interrupted Nipper cheerfully. "You won the game for us, Tommy."

"It was a rippin' kick," said Sir Montie. "Dear boy, you're gettin' better an' better. I was shockin'ly afraid that you'd be off colour this afternoon, owin' to that beastly paragraph in the paper. But bad news seems to buck you up, begad! When we have the next big match, we shall have to make you believe that your pater is dyin', or some-thin' like that!"

Watson lost his smile.

"I'd forgotten all about Uncle Ben, as a matter of fact," he said seriously. "I hope old Alvy finds out something this afternoon. Do you think he is back yet, Bennett?"

"Give him a chance," said Nipper.



"My two assailants at once went to the rescue of their man while I was locked inside the tonneau, and before the door opened I slipped the package through the little window at the back of the car."—(See page 29.)

"I don't suppose he'll return until after tea, at the earliest. By Jupiter, I'm hungry! Let's go and change quickly."

They weren't long in the dormitory, and when they came out they hustled along to Study C with the intention of preparing a hearty meal. In the passage, however, they saw the porter, Warren, conducting a stranger along.

"Old on a minute, Master Watson," said Warren. "There's a gent come to see you. This is Master Watson, sir—these 'ere young gents are 'is chums."

They regarded the stranger with interest. He was a smallish man, but looked as though he had plenty of strength. He was brisk in his manner, and his smile was genial and open.

"Ah, Master Watson, I have found you easily," exclaimed the visitor, shaking hands with Tommy. "My name is Mr. Danby, and I have come on a somewhat important mission. If possible, I should like to have a few words with you in private."

"Er—certainly, sir!" stammered Watson, who wasn't used to receiving visitors. "This is our study, if you'll come in, sir. It doesn't matter about these chaps, does it? They're my chums, and we don't have any secrets."

"I would prefer to speak to you alone, my boy," said Mr. Danby, as he entered Study C. "My business is rather intimate——"

"About—about Uncle Ben?" said Watson eagerly.

"Yes—exactly," replied Mr. Danby, "about your Uncle Ben."

"Call us when you're ready, dear fellow," said Montie, from the door. "Benny and I will trot along to another study——"

"Oh, rot!" interjected Tommy. "You two chaps had better come in. If it's only about Uncle Ben it doesn't matter a jot. I'd rather have them here, sir," added Watson to his visitor.

"As you like, my boy—as you like."

They entered the study, and closed the door. Mr. Danby, who was dressed with immaculate neatness, brushed a chair with the corner of his handkerchief, and seated himself.

"Now, Watson, I have come to you on behalf of your uncle——"

"But Uncle Ben's missing, ain't he?" asked Watson breathlessly.

"Tut-tut! Nothing of the kind—no-

thing of the kind," laughed the stranger. "I suppose you have been reading that absurd paragraph in the local paper? Your uncle, Mr. Benjamin Watson, merely met with a slight accident, my boy. He is quite well, except for a sprained ankle, and he has sent me here to see you."

Watson breathed a sigh of relief.

"By jingo, that's fine!" he exclaimed. "Fancy the idiots putting that report in the paper!"

"Of course, it was absurd," said Mr. Danby, producing a card, and laying it upon the table. "This is your uncle's card, Watson—I brought it as a mere formality, because we are strangers. Now, while travelling to London, Mr. Watson remembered that he was near St. Frank's. It reminded him of you, my lad, and he jotted your name upon a package so that he could not overlook the fact later. You see, he intended writing to you, enclosing a little present—a tip, I suppose you would call it. I have brought it for you."

Tommy Watson grinned.

"That's jolly good of Uncle Ben, sir," he exclaimed, noticing two or three pound notes in the other's hand. "So that's what the writing was? It was just a jotting to jog my uncle's memory?"

"Merely that, and nothing more," smiled Mr. Danby. "Unfortunately, Mr. Watson dropped the package when the accident happened—it was merely a skid. Somebody, apparently, picked up the package, and put it in the post. You, I have reason to believe, received it."

"Of course I did, sir," said Watson promptly. "I suppose you want to take it back with you?"

Mr. Danby nodded, and smiled.

"That was the object of my coming," he replied. "Have you the package here?"

"Well, not exactly here, sir——"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Danby quickly. "Then where is it?"

"It seemed to me that there was something queer about it, and so I asked Mr. Alvington, our Housemaster, to look after it," said Tommy. "He's got it locked in his bureau now. I'll buzz off and fetch it, if you like."

"Please do, my boy—please do!" smiled the visitor. "I am in a hurry to get back to the station, for the trains are none too frequent down here. This

evening, probably, your uncle will write to you personally. He intimated, indeed, that he would visit you some time next week."

"That'll be ripping!" said Watson gladly. "You'll thank him for this tip, won't you? I'll just pop along and get that package now."

Tommy rose to his feet, his eyes shining with relief, and moved towards the door. Nipper got up from his chair and yawned.

"I'll come with you if you like," he said carelessly. "We might as well bring the eggs back for tea, too. Perhaps Mr. Danby will stay and have grub with us?"

The visitor smilingly shook his head.

"Oh, dear, no!" he exclaimed. "I really cannot spare the time, my boys. Thank you all the same. It is very generous of you!"

Tommy Watson and Nipper left the study, and Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez, and commenced giving the stranger a general outline of the school. Outside, in the passage, Nipper and Watson hurried away.

"Fancy that paragraph turning out to be wrong!" said Tommy, with a chuckle. "Why, Uncle Ben's only sprained his giddy ankle! Hallo! Where are you off to? That's not the way to old Alvy's study——"

"Come in here a minute!" exclaimed Nipper briskly.

He led his wondering chum into the cloakroom, which was empty and deserted. They retired to the far corner, and then Nipper turned. His eyes were shining with excitement and eagerness.

"You fathead!" he whispered tensely.

"Eh? What the——"

"You slow-witted chump!" hissed Nipper. "Thank goodness I was handy! You'd have given that chap those plans——"

"Of course I should!" exclaimed Watson, staring. "Well, what of it? Hasn't he come from my uncle? Why, he brought Uncle Ben's card——"

"Oh, you potty idiot!" exclaimed Nipper sharply. "The man's a fraud!"

"A—fuf-fuf-fraud!" stuttered Tommy Watson.

"A beastly crook!" went on Nipper. "Don't you spot the wheeze? He's one of the gang, come here to get hold of those plans! His yarn's plausible enough, and you swallowed it whole!"

Tommy Watson was speechless.

"The whole thing was palpably false, in spite of its plausibility," went on Nipper. "The rotter didn't deceive me so easily! It's a trick, Tommy—a clever trick! We've got to diddle him somehow!"

"I—I don't believe it!" burst out Watson indignantly. "You're a fathead, Benny! Didn't Mr. Danby say he'd come from my uncle?"

Nipper snorted.

"What does that matter?" he demanded. "Have you seen him before?"

"No," admitted Tommy.

"Have you heard of him before?"

"Nun-no."

"Did he bring a letter from your uncle—the most likely thing?"

"Great Scott!" gasped Tommy. "Do—do you think——"

"Think! Why, it doesn't need any thinking!" cut in Nipper. "This Danby chap is one of the gang who kidnapped your uncle. That paragraph in the paper was dead right! These rotters are keeping Mr. Watson a prisoner, and I expect they've forced him to say where the plans were sent to. That's why the man's come here. My only hat! And you were going to deliver the package up!"

"I—I didn't know!" said Watson, in dismay.

"Well, we've got to dish the boulder somehow!" said Nipper grimly. "Look here! The guv'nor hasn't come home yet, and I want to tell him all about it before Danby goes away. We shall have to go back to the study and say that the Housemaster is away, and that we shall have to wait until he comes back. That's true, anyhow. We'll detain the rotter to tea, and then I'll ask old Alvy's advice."

"Can't we show him up now?" asked Watson.

"Not likely! We might go and spoil everything," was Nipper's prompt reply. "No; the guv'nor's the chap to deal with this, Tommy. He'll know what to do. We'll go and tell Danby that he's got to wait. And, for goodness' sake, don't give the show away by your manner or expression!"

"Trust me!" said Tommy Watson, taking a deep breath.

And the pair hurried back to Study C.

CHAPTER VI.

(Set down by Nipper.)

IN WHICH MR. DANBY IS DETAINED UNTIL THE GUV'NOR ARRIVES—AND THEN I GET BUSY!

TOMMY WATSON was rather dismayed by my statements. This wasn't surprising, for he had swallowed Danby's yarn in one gulp, so to speak. But I didn't swallow it. I had scented trickery at the very start.

Of course, I didn't blame Tommy in the least. He wasn't experienced; he didn't know criminals as I knew them. And if any tale was a faked one, Mr. Danby's was. It simply couldn't be accepted.

He and his precious confederates—supposing there were any—had been under the impression that they had to deal with junior schoolboys, and, perhaps, a schoolmaster. I dare say the story would have been received unsuspectingly in those circumstances. But I wasn't an ordinary schoolboy—and I'm not boasting when I say that. A chap can't help having experience, can he?

Poor old Tommy Watson would have been diddled beautifully if he had been left alone. I didn't suspect that Danby was a fraud—I knew it.

If Mr. Watson had really been safe, he wouldn't have sent a perfect stranger to St. Frank's, armed merely with his card. He would have written, too. And this visit would have been made on the Monday—not to-day. I could see quite easily that the crooks had wrested the truth from their prisoner after days of waiting.

All this flashed into my mind at once, and I couldn't explain to Tommy everything I thought. But I had thoroughly convinced him of the fraudulent nature of his precious visitor's yarn.

At first I was afraid that Watson would give the game away. But he had assured me so seriously that he wouldn't that I believed him; and when we got to Study C again, he was looking as cheerful as ever. If Watson was easily hoodwinked, he could certainly act all right.

We entered the study, and Mr. Danby rose from his chair.

"You have brought the package?" he asked pleasantly.

"Sorry, sir," replied Tommy—"it can't be did!"

"Can't be did—I mean done?" he said sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Well you see, sir, the Housemaster's away just at present, and the package is locked in his study," explained Watson cheerfully. "I dare say he'll be back before long, and then I'll buzz along to him."

Mr. Danby looked at his watch.

"It is very annoying," he said, somewhat irritably, "but I see that you are not to blame, Watson. How long do you think your Housemaster will be before he returns?"

"Might be half an hour, or more," replied Watson vaguely. "I say, I'm jolly glad to hear that Uncle Ben is safe! I'd been thinking all sorts of queer things, sir. You'll thank him for that tip, won't you?"

"I think you entrusted me with that message once before," smiled Mr. Danby. "Yes, I will certainly tell your uncle what you say. Now, you mustn't let me interrupt you. I would prefer to remain here until I take my leave from the school."

"I'm not surprised at that!" I thought. "You don't want to wander about and be questioned, do you? What a sauce the chap's got!"

I was rather pleased with Tommy. He had kept up the pretence splendidly, and Mr. Danby hadn't a suspicion. Montie, of course, knew nothing. He lay back in his chair with languid ease. A thoughtful expression in his eyes gave me the idea that he had an inkling of Danby's ruse.

"If you're going to remain in the study, sir, perhaps you'd honour us by having tea?" I said, bustling about. "We'll give you a decent feed—boiled eggs or sardines, or both, if you like."

Mr. Danby laughed.

"Dear, dear! Such extravagance in war-time!" he exclaimed, his eyes twinkling. "Thank you, boys! I will certainly have some tea with you. It is not really necessary for me to bother the Headmaster with a formal visit."

The man did it jolly well. I saw Tommy glance at me half doubtfully. The silly ass was beginning to believe in Danby again! But a clever scoundrel can always make himself highly affable when he likes. Criminals aren't always fellows of the "Bill Sykes" type, as some people seem to believe. The trickiest crooks of all are those with smooth tongues and gentlemanly manners.

We weren't long in getting tea ready. Sir Montie helped us nobly, for he

actually laid the cloth and set the cups and saucers out! This was a most unusual thing for Montie to do, for he was usually a frightful slacker when it came to getting tea ready. But he felt that he was compelled to do something now, under the eyes of a guest.

Several fellows looked in—some of them burst in—but they soon retired when they saw that we were entertaining a gentleman to tea. I distinctly heard Handforth speculating with his chums as to who the “funny-looking old merchant” could be. Handforth never took the slightest trouble to lower his voice.

Mr. Danby made himself very pleasant during the meal, but he took good care to steer the conversation clear of Watson's uncle. He had come to St. Frank's expecting to leave within a few minutes. A prolonged visit like this would prove awkward if there were many questions asked.

Tommy, however, scarcely mentioned his Uncle Ben. He was very tactful, and I could have patted him on the back. Mr. Danby thought that he was merely waiting for the return of the House-master, so that he could get the package.

Just before the meal was over, I decided to hurry to the gov'nor's study. If possible, I wanted to have a word with Nelson Lee on the quiet. But I had to be careful not to arouse Danby's suspicions.

Fortunately Yakama, the Japanese boy, helped me just at the right moment. He had shared Study C with us during his first week or two at St. Frank's, but had since shifted into Study I, with Kemp and another chap.

Yakama knocked on the door and entered.

“I am wishful of having a brief conversation with you, Bennett,” he began, in his soft voice. “Oh, a thousand pardons for interrupting—”

“That's all right, Jappy!” I said. “Anything you want?”

“It is really of insufficient importance to warrant your incommoding yourself in the most infinitesimal degree,” smiled Yakama, bringing out a string of long words, as usual. “Please, Bennett, do not take any notice of my stupendous rudeness—”

“Rats!” I grinned.

Yakama's interruption was just what I wanted. I rose from my place, and moved towards the door, murmuring an apology to Mr. Danby. He nodded smil-

ingly, and I left the study with Sessue Yakama. The Japanese boy had quite a pained expression upon his nearly perpetually smiling face.

“I am of the deep sorrow, Bennett,” he exclaimed. “It is the greatest rudeness on my part to obtrude myself—”

“My dear chap, I was anxious to come out,” I interrupted. “Did you want to speak to me about anything important?”

Yakama shook his head.

“I was merely concerning my mind with unnecessary thoughts of the magnificent game of football,” he explained. “I am of the anxious wish that you should give me the tremendous instructions, for I am vainglorious enough to believe that I may shape satisfactorily at the wondrous and beautiful game.”

I couldn't help chuckling.

“Oh, that'll do any time!” I said briskly. “As a matter of fact, Jappy, I think you'll turn out to be a jolly good player. If you work hard at practice during the next week or two, I'll play you in a House match before long.”

Jappy's eyes shone.

“You are the kind skipper,” he said warmly. “Indeed, Bennett, I find it impossible to express my gratitude—”

“Then, my dear chap, don't try,” I said. “I'm in a bit of a hurry, but I'll talk to you about this later on. Sorry I can't stop now.”

And I passed down the passage without giving Yakama time to enter upon another flow of elegant language. Once he started, there was no telling when he would stop.

I buzzed along to Nelson Lee's study, but found it locked.

“Rats!” I grunted. “Not back yet!”

I was disappointed, for this would have been a splendid chance to have a few words with the gov'nor. I walked slowly into the lobby, and had a look into the Triangle. It was rather fortunate I did, for just at that minute I saw the gov'nor stride briskly in through the gate.

“Good!” I murmured to myself.

It was practically dark outside, but I had seen Nelson Lee's figure beneath the light of the lamp which hung in the centre of the wrought-iron arch. The Triangle was deserted, and I quickly crossed over.

“Well, Bennett, what is it?” asked Lee, as I halted before him.

“Are we private here, sir?” I breathed quickly.

Something in my voice told him that I

needed him urgently. He glanced round and drew me out into the very centre of the Triangle. There, surrounded by space, we could converse without any fear of anybody overhearing.

"Well, Nipper, what is it?" asked Nelson Lee quietly.

"First of all, guv'nor, have you found out anything?" I asked.

"Very little," he replied. "But have you stopped me just because you are curious, Nipper?"

"No, of course not, sir," I exclaimed. "I've got a reason for asking."

"I have found out nothing beyond the fact that the plans were dropped at a spot on the road somewhere between Helmford and the village of Melhaven," said Nelson Lee. "I met Detective-Inspector Lennard——"

"Great Cæsar! Old Lennard!" I gasped.

"None other," laughed the guv'nor. "We had a chat, young 'un, and both agreed that we were at a loose end. That is all, except for details——"

"Well, we needn't go into them, guv'nor," I cut in. "And that loose end isn't loose any longer. The rotters who kidnapped Mr. Watson have made a move, and if we're up to snuff we can nab the whole crowd!"

Nelson Lee regarded me keenly.

"Come along—out with the story!" he said crisply.

And, as briefly as possible, I explained how Mr. Danby had come, and how I had been suspicious of his story. When I had finished, Nelson Lee patted me on the back, and chuckled softly.

"Splendid, Nipper—splendid!" he said in a low voice. "You have done exceedingly well—far better than I. By James! I told Lennard that there would soon be a move made, but I hardly expected it to be so early as this."

"You think I'm right, guv'nor!" I asked rather anxiously. "This chap isn't genuine, is he?"

"Genuine?" Nelson Lee laughed. "My dear lad, you have been very shrewd. Danby is merely an emissary of the gang—I say 'gang' for want of a better expression. We really don't know who these criminals are. It is an impudent attempt to get those plans away from us. Needless to say, Nipper, the attempt will fail."

"But can't we do something, sir?"

"We can do quite a lot," replied Lee. "At least, you can. This visit of

Danby's provides us with the very opening we were looking for. Upon my soul, the enemy has made a very grave blunder by coming here. All the better, Nipper—all the better! There is only one thing to be done."

"And what's that, sir?"

"I haven't gone indoors yet, have I?" asked the detective.

"Gone indoors?" I repeated, puzzled. "Of course you haven't, guv'nor."

"Then you will be telling the perfect truth if you go back to Study C and tell Mr. Danby that your Housemaster has not come in," said Lee calmly. "I shouldn't like you to resort to fabrication, young 'un—even in a good cause. One lie generally leads to another. Tell Danby that I haven't come in, and that you don't know when I shall. I intend to walk about outside for some little time, and you needn't ask me when I shall go indoors."

I grinned.

"I see, guv'nor," I said. "Well?"

"Tell Mr. Danby what I said, and suggest that it would be futile for him to wait," went on Nelson Lee. "Request him to come again in the morning—or some time to-morrow, at all events."

"But I don't see the point——"

"You will if you give me time to get to it, you impatient young rascal. As soon as Mr. Danby goes—and that will probably be at once—you must follow him," said the guv'nor grimly. "Follow him, Nipper, and stick to him like a leech. Don't let him become aware of your intentions—— But I needn't warn you as to that point. You have done quite a lot of shadowing at different times, eh?"

"Rather, sir! But supposing he goes to London?"

"Stick to him just the same," said Lee. "In a time like this we must adopt bold measures. But I don't believe you will have to go to London, my boy. In any case, as soon as you track the man to his destination, and satisfy yourself that it really is his destination, go to the nearest 'phone, and ring me up. I will see about informing Lennard, and after that—— Well, that is sufficient for the present."

"Right, sir!" I said promptly. "You can trust me!"

I didn't wait another minute. I had got my instructions, and that was all that mattered. I went back into the Ancient

House, and the gov'nor passed out through the gates again. Going through the lobby I happened to pass Conroy major of the Sixth—a prefect. An idea struck me, and I hailed him.

"I say, Conroy, where's Mr. Alvington?" I asked.

"Out, I think," said the prefect. "Why?"

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Haven't the slightest idea, kid," said Conroy major. "Might be an hour, might be two. I'm not responsible for Mr. Alvington's movements, you young ass!"

"All right, keep your hair on," I said, as I went into the Remove passage. Conroy couldn't have given me better answers. I went into Study C fully armed, so to speak. Montie and Tommy and Mr. Danby were still at the table.

"What did young Jappy want?" asked Watson casually.

"Oh! I'd forgotten that," I said. "Only about the football, Tommy. But I say, Mr. Danby, I'm awfully sorry, but I don't think it'll be any good your waiting——"

"Eh?" said the man, starting to his feet, and revealing, just for a flash, his true character. "What? Don't be foolish, boy! I intend to remain here until I receive that letter!"

"You see, sir, Mr. Alvington hasn't come in yet," I said truthfully. "I don't exactly know when he will, either. I just asked Conroy—he's a prefect—and he told me that the Housemaster might be an hour, or he might be two hours. It's rotten, Mr. Alvington being out this evening."

Our visitor snapped his fingers impatiently.

"It is absurdly exasperating!" he exclaimed, restraining his anger with difficulty.

"If you had written beforehand, it would have been all right," I remarked. "But Watson didn't know anything about it, and he didn't like to keep that letter in the study—studies ain't exactly private, you know, sir."

Mr. Danby nodded.

"You are quite right, my boy—quite right," he said, changing his tone. "But it is most annoying, all the same. I will come again to-morrow afternoon—and then, perhaps, you will have everything ready. Or, better still, could you arrange to meet me, Watson?"

"Meet you, sir?" asked Tommy wonderingly.

"Exactly. It will be an excellent plan," said the man. "Meet me at the station, Watson, at five o'clock exactly, and bring the package with you. Will you promise me that?"

"Yes, sir—of course, sir," said poor Tommy, not knowing what else to answer.

"Then I will be off at once."

And Mr. Danby picked up his hat and stick and gloves, and bade us all a very cheery good-night. His manner was now so genial and open that it was difficult to believe that he was anything other than he seemed. Tommy offered to see him to the door, but he shook his head.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "There is no necessity for you to disturb yourself, my boy. I can make my way out quite easily, thank you."

He passed out, and shut the door. Tommy Watson looked at me in a scared kind of way.

"Was that right about old Alvy?" he asked, in a breathless whisper.

"I haven't got time to say more than a dozen words!" I exclaimed sharply. "I'm going to follow that chap, wherever he goes! See? He'll lead me right to the hiding-place of Mr. Watson."

"But—but——"

"Can't stop!" I said, with my hand on the door-knob. "I'll tell you all about it when I come back. I've got to get on the trail, my sons! And don't forget—not a word to a giddy soul. If anybody asks where I am, let 'em ask!"

And, with that very brief explanation, I slipped out of the study, and pelted to the cloak-room. Here I grabbed my overcoat and cap, and emerged from the Ancient House just in time to see Mr. Danby passing out of the gateway.

I was fairly on the track!

CHAPTER VII.

(Nipper continues.)

IN WHICH I RECEIVE A BIG SURPRISE, AND THEN CARRY OUT MY INSTRUCTIONS WITH ENTIRE SUCCESS.

BELLTON STATION was looking as dim and dreary as ever.

I had arrived twenty minutes earlier, having shadowed Mr. Danby easily from the school. A train was almost due now, and I needed no

telling that my quarry was waiting for it. People generally wait at stations for a train, I believe.

Danby was in the booking-office, pacing up and down, smoking a cigarette. I could see him distinctly from the goods-yard gate, where I was crouching in the darkness. It was necessary for me to be jolly cautious.

I had heard Mr. Danby take a ticket for Melhaven. That was the place the guv'nor had mentioned, and I knew it wasn't far off—only a little way beyond Holmford. I was glad of this, because I wasn't anxious to go flying to London.

The train came in, and I ventured to leave my place of concealment, and hop over the gate. It only took me a couple of ticks to reach the end of the platform. It would have been unwise for me to have taken a ticket, for Danby might have spotted me doing so—and that would have "put the lid on it," so to speak.

There was an empty third-class compartment right in front of me, and I hopped into it in a flash. There was no need for me to see if Mr. Danby had entered the train; he had booked for Melhaven, and that was good enough. But, as a matter of fact, I did see him.

And just as the train was about to start, I got a surprise of the double-barrelled variety. There was a sudden rush and scamper from the gravel platform. The door was torn open, and two panting forms bundled in.

They belonged to Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West!

As I gasped, the train started moving out of the station. My two chums looked at me almost defiantly as they flopped on to the opposite seat.

"Begad! We've done it, dear boy!" panted Sir Montie triumphantly.

"Rather!" said Tommy Watson, straightening his collar.

I glared at them.

"What the—what the dickens do you mean by this?" I demanded hotly. "You silly asses, I didn't tell you to come after me—"

Sir Montie held up his hand.

"Benny boy, we ain't actin' under your orders," he said mildly. "I suppose we can go where we like, can't we? Tommy and I thought that a train journey would do us good, begad!"

"You—you followed me!" I growled.

"Of course, we did!" exclaimed Tommy warmly. "My batt! Do you

think we were going to stay behind? A fine thing, ain't it? It's my uncle who's in danger, and I ain't even allowed to join in the search for him!"

"But you don't understand," I began.

"Dear fellow, we understand everythin'," said Sir Montie serenely. "It's no good your bein' wild, or frownin' at us. We're here—an' we're goin' to stick to you like glue—we are, really!"

"Like your giddy cheek!" went on Tommy Watson. "Thought you'd leave us out in the cold, didn't you? Well, that game won't work, my son. If there's any excitement going, Montie and I are going to be in it. Why, you might get into a hole, or something!"

I couldn't help grinning.

"I suppose you followed me?" I asked, calming down.

"That's it, dear boy," nodded Tregellis-West. "You see, your explanation was so frightfully hurried that we couldn't understand you. But we knew that you were goin' after that Danby chap. So we slipped out and kept you in sight. It was a shockin' surprise for us to see you get into the train, but we weren't goin' to be done, Benny. Not likely, begad!"

"Where are we off to?" asked Tommy. "London?"

"No, ass!" I replied. "Only Melhaven."

"Whero's that?"

"A little place on the other side of Holmford," I explained. "That's where Danby booked to. Well, I must say that you're a couple of bounders. And do you really mean to tell me that you shadowed me all the way from the school?"

Sir Montie nodded languidly.

"We turned ourselves into sleuths, dear boy," he explained. "Rather excitin', ain't it? An' you didn't know anythin' about it, begad! It's rippin' sport."

I looked at them half-amusedly. They were still somewhat defiant in their manner—as though they were expecting me to bundle them out of the carriage, neck and crop. They fully recognised me as their leader, and it was very seldom they kicked over the traces.

"You did it jolly well," I said admiringly. "I didn't know anything about it until you bundled into this compartment. You're a couple of fatheads, but I'm glad you've come along."

"That's all right, then," said Montie.

with relief. "It would be awfully painin' if you disapproved, Benny."

"Rats!" I grinned. "You were expecting a row, weren't you? It's no good having one, even if I wanted to. But you'll have to be jolly careful, my sons. There's a lot more chance of being spotted——"

"I've been thinkin' of that," interrupted Montie. "When we get out, Benny, Tommy an' I will have to wait until you've gone on ahead. Then we'll follow as we did before. We took the precaution to put on plain caps, instead of the school colours; they ain't so noticeable."

I nodded approvingly.

"Good idea," I said. "Well, I don't see that it'll make such difference, and if you're careful when we restart the shadowing, it'll be O.K. I suppose you want to hear what the gov'nor and I arranged?"

"Of course we do," said Tommy Watson. "Choke it up, Benny!"

I wasn't quite so drastic as all that, but I told my chums what the game was. As I had suspected, Montie had had a suspicion all the time. Tregellis-West, in spite of his habitual langour, was as keen as mustard. But, as he explained, he knew that I was quite on the alert, and trusted to me.

"You see, that visit of Danby's was a falso move," I declared. "He thought that he only had silly schoolboys to deal with, and that he could hoodwink 'em as easily as anything. He hoodwinked Tommy——"

Watson snorted.

"Are you calling me a silly school-boy?" he demanded hotly.

"Well, you acted jolly thoughtlessly, anyhow," I replied. "Why, if you'd been by yourself, Danby would have gone off in triumph. He would have pinched the plans, and nothing more would have been seen of him. And they may be worth a million, for all we know."

Tommy looked rather startled.

"Blessed if you ain't right, Benny!" he admitted. "I was a silly fathead, wasn't I?"

"You were!" I agreed emphatically.

"Begad, silly ain't the word, Tommy!"

"Well, you needn't rub it in!" growled Watson. "Thank goodness you were on the scene, Bennett! As it's turned out, we stand a jolly good chance of finding out where Uncle Ben is, and the plans

are safe all the time. Why, we hold all the trump cards!"

"Of course we do!" I agreed. "And if we play 'em properly, the game's ours. Any slip, though, may mean disaster. That's why you chaps have got to be jolly careful. Danby will be wary, and if he has a hint that he is being followed he'll lead us a fool's dance, and leave us stranded at the finish."

Sir Montie smiled.

"We ain't fools, an' so we ain't goin' to be led a giddy dance!" he exclaimed. "Begad, we're at Bannin'ton already. Keep your head in, Tommy, old boy."

The train had pulled up at Bannington. As it did so, I took off my cap and peeped cautiously out of the window, just round the edge of the door. There was no sign of Mr. Danby, and only a few people got in or out.

There were two more stops before Helmford, and Melhaven came just afterwards. As the train drew up, I was glad to see that the station was very dimly lighted. We had no tickets, but that couldn't be helped.

"There's only a low wall just here," I said, as the train pulled up. "We shall have to bunk over that and trust to luck to see us through."

"But we've got to pay our fares, Benny!" protested Montie. "Good gracious! We can't swindle the railway company——"

"Do you think we're going to waste time by paying up?" I hissed. "That'll do afterwards, Montie. We can pay when we take the train home."

"Oh, I see, dear fellow!"

We slipped out, and were over the wall in no time. By a piece of good luck the guard was pulling a hamper out of the van, and had his back towards us. Once over the wall, we crouched down and waited.

The exit of the booking-hall was just visible, with a lamp over the doorway. The night wasn't exactly dark, but misty and gloomy. Mr. Danby came striding out, and made off across the station-yard at a brisk pace.

"You chaps stop here until I'm nearly out of sight, and then follow," I whispered. "Come singly—one behind the other. If you don't, you might jaw—and sounds carry at night."

I left my chums as I spoke, and followed in the track of Mr. Danby. He was quite unsuspecting, and did not turn his head once. He was smoking, and I

caught an occasional whiff. He did not go through the village itself, but struck off up a side lane, which had high hedges on either side.

It was one of the easiest shadowing jobs I had ever done, and I must admit that Sir Montie and Tommy did their parts well. I only caught a glimpse of them now and again, and it was quite certain that Danby saw nothing at all.

I was glad that my chums had come. I hadn't been exactly comfortable in leaving them out of it, but at the time no arrangement could be made. They had acted on their own account, however.

The walk wasn't a very long one, and fortunately we didn't pass anybody on the way. Of course, it wasn't late—only just after seven; but in this quiet district the country folk were in their cottages, snug for the night.

At last, Mr. Danby suddenly disappeared.

I paused and listened. The sound of a creaking gate came to my ear, and I crept forward quickly and cautiously. Tucked away between heavy trees there was a ramshackle wooden gate, with the dim outline of a house beyond. All the windows were dark, and the building seemed to be totally deserted.

My quarry was quite near the house, and I faintly heard the rattle of a key. This was followed by the sound of a softly closing door, and bolts were shot home. Then dead silence followed.

"That's good enough!" I told myself grimly. "Mr. Watson's here, as sure as a gun! Danby's gone in, and bolted himself up. He wouldn't have shot those bolts if he'd only been making a chance call. Now, the next move is to ring up the guv'nor. By jingo, I didn't think I should be so successful as this!"

It had been dead easy all along. In a few minutes Montie came up very cautiously, and just behind him crept Tommy.

"Come on!" I whispered. "It's all safe!"

"Begad, I was getting in a fog, dear boy!"

"He's gone in here," I went on. "This place seems to be an old farmhouse, and it looks empty. I'll bet a quid that your uncle's here, Watson! It's just the kind of place where a prisoner could be kept."

"Shall—shall we break in?" asked Tommy excitedly.

"No, you fathead! I'm going to ring up the guv'nor from the station," was my whispered answer. "You two chaps stay here, and keep your eyes open. If anything happens while I'm away, do as you think best; but don't act rashly."

I didn't wait for them to put all sorts of questions, but started back along the lane at a sharp trot. Within ten minutes I was back at the station, and I found it dark and deserted. By hammering at the booking-office door, however, I soon discovered a uniformed individual with whiskers, who turned out to be the station-master.

"Have you got a telephone here?" I asked breathlessly.

"Yes, but it's not for schoolboys to use!" replied the man, eyeing me with an air of suspicion. "What's the matter, youngster?"

"I haven't got time to explain fully," I went on, "but it's important. Can you tell me anything about an old farm along this side road—a place standing back from the road?"

"The Elms Farm, you mean?" said the station-master. "Why, yes! That place belongs to the Rogers' family. They've been in London for some time. The farm is to let furnished, but it's locked up now."

I whistled to myself.

"I must use that 'phone!" I said urgently. "Look here! I'm from St. Frank's, and I want to ring up the Housemaster. He'll explain everything when he comes along. It's important—really!"

The station-master allowed me to use the telephone after a little demur. I hadn't mentioned anything to him about the kidnapping, realising that he would only suspect a joke if I did so, and in less than a couple of minutes I was talking to Nelson Lee.

"Is that you, sir?" I asked. "It's O K! I know the place."

"Splendid, Nipper!" came Nelson Lee's voice. "Well?"

"Come to the Elms Farm, Melhaven," I said, bearing in mind that the station-master was listening. "Anybody will tell you how to reach it once you get to the village. I'll be waiting there."

"Right, my boy!" said the guv'nor crisply. "You may expect Detective-Inspector Lennard and myself in about an hour's time—possibly under."

Five minutes later, I was hurrying

back to Sir Montie and Tommy. Events were moving rapidly, and it seemed as though a climax would come at once.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ATTACK—MR. WATSON'S RESCUE—ALL CLEAR!

NELSON LEE pulled up in front of the police-station at Helmford. He had borrowed Dr. Brett's car again, the Bellton medico being a very good-natured man.

The detective had hurried from St. Frank's, having previously 'phoned to Detective-Inspector Lennard to be ready with several constables. And now, as Lee entered the police-station, he found everything waiting.

"Ah, Mr. Alvington, this is very good of you, I'm sure! You are taking quite a large amount of trouble over this affair," said the Scotland Yard inspector, with the faintest suspicion of a wink. "Indeed, I feel somewhat small, for you have been successful while the official police have failed!"

Nelson Lee smiled. Lennard could afford to speak in that tone, for he knew that the new-comer was Nelson Lee, and not a schoolmaster.

Inspector Kemball, however, was rather indignant.

"Excuse me, Mr. Lennard, the police have not failed," he said coldly. "Mr. Alvington's help is valuable, I will admit, but he would have been quite useless alone. And, even now, we may be going on a fool's errand."

"Good gracious me!" cried Lennard. "We don't want to quarrel, do we? Personally I have an idea that we shall be successful. And we sha'n't do any good by squabbling here, Kemball."

This was a gentle thrust at the local inspector, and he made no reply. The party prepared itself for departure. Three brawny constables formed the other members, and a start was made at once.

Nelson Lee and Lennard went in the doctor's car, while the police followed in a big six-seater. As Lennard said, it was necessary to have a certain amount of spare room for the prisoners.

The journey was only a comparatively short one, and Melhaven was reached in good time. It wasn't necessary to ask directions, for the constables knew the

district by heart. At the station, however, the cars were left behind, and the party proceeded on foot.

Before the gate of Elms Farm was reached a slight figure came running along, and it turned out to be Nipper. Sir Montie and Watson were still waiting at the farm.

"You've been quick, sir," whispered Nipper. "Watson and Tregellis-West are here, you know. We've located the place, and Danby's there now."

Inspector Kemball growled.

"Schoolboys!" he exclaimed. "Bah! We're being made fools of—"

"Schoolboys are not always fools, inspector," said Nelson Lee quietly. "If you will wait in patience for a short while, you may have cause to thank these boys for what they have done."

"I hope so—I really hope so!" said Kemball sourly.

For the sake of appearances, Detective-Inspector Lennard took the lead. He gave all the orders and directed the operations. Lee, however, knew that the Scotland Yard man was well capable of dealing with an affair of this kind.

The constables were posted in different parts of the farm grounds. Sir Montie and Tommy Watson followed the others to the rear of the house, but remained outside. They were to give the alarm in case of any dash at that quarter.

A rear window presented no difficulty. It was that of a rear scullery, and Lee and the Scotland Yard inspector and Nipper slipped through. Kemball had remained at the front door.

The intruders found themselves in a large, stone-floored apartment. They crept forward cautiously, for they had no idea how many men they had to deal with, or where they were situated. Once in a long passage, however, a chink of light was visible from beneath a doorway.

"That's queer!" murmured Lennard. "There's no light showing outside!"

"Shutters!" whispered Lee. "Didn't you see them? Shutters outside, and a heavy curtain within, probably. This place is supposed to be empty, and a light would have given the game away. We'll make a bold dash, Lennard."

And, without any further ado, they hurried forward and burst the door open. The scene within the room was a strange one.

A shaded lamp stood upon the table and an oil-stove warmed the apartment.

comfortably, and seated at the table were three men. They were in the act of playing cards, and the air was blue with cigar and cigarette smoke.

All three started to their feet with rage and dismay. One of them, Nipper saw at a glance, was the genial Mr. Danby. At the same second the man saw Nipper, and his face contorted itself with rage.

"By Heaven, so—so you followed me!" he snarled. "This is a trap! The police are here!"

"Exactly!" cut in Detective-Inspector Lennard pleasantly. "I am sorry to interrupt, but these little things will happen, you know. I should advise you all to act sensibly. The farm is surrounded——"

"It's a lie!" rapped out one of the other men. "I guess we're being bluffed, Danby! Those guys ain't police, and we'll soon make hash of 'em! Schoolmasters—that's what they are!"

Before Lennard or Nelson Lee could deny the statement, the surprised men pushed the table aside and made a dash. The inspector attempted to slam the door, but it had jammed, and he only succeeded in putting himself at a disadvantage. He received a heavy blow on the jaw, and fell sprawling.

But Lee and Nipper were fighting like fury with the two bigger men, Nipper yelling for assistance as he struggled. Danby, with a choking cry, leapt over Lennard's prostrate form, and was out in the passage in a second.

Lee was dealing with the man who had knocked Lennard down, and it was easy to see how the tussle would end. Nipper, on the other hand, had his hands overfull, and there could be but one result unless help came quickly.

Help did come. Lennard staggered to his feet, gave a roar like a bull, and charged in. Nipper, gasping, retired, bruised and half-dazed. The fight continued desperately for another two minutes, and then, with a rush, Inspector Kemball burst in with a constable.

The prisoners were handcuffed at once.

"One of the brutes managed to slip away while I was down!" snapped Lennard irritably. "Did you see anything of him, Kemball?"

"Nothing," panted the Helmford inspector. "Good gracious me, Mr. Alvington was right! I must apologise to him——"

"Haug apologising!" snapped Len-

nard. "We don't want to lose that fellow!"

He dashed out, Nelson Lee following him.

Meanwhile Sir Montie and Tommy had listened with excitement and impatience to the sounds from within. They were at the scullery window, and they put their heads in eagerly.

"Begad! Shall we get through?" whispered Tregellis-West.

"I'm a good mind to. Look out!" hissed Watson. "Somebody's coming!"

They crouched down, one on either side of the window. And, gazing up, they saw the soiled face of Danby looking out. Finding everything quiet, he scrambled through, head first.

"This is where we come in, ain't it?" said Sir Montie calmly. "Tommy, dear boy, lend a hand. This is excitin'—whist!"

Danby was clutched fiercely as he tumbled out into the open. The next second he was on his back, with Sir Montie sitting on his chest, holding his hands, and Tommy on his feet.

"Let me go, you young scoundrels—let me go!" snarled Danby. "I will give you five pounds——"

"Begad!" gasped Montie. "He's trying to bribe us! Shockin'!"

The prisoner resorted to threats—which were obviously hollow. This failing, he commenced swearing violently. But Tregellis-West dealt with this promptly by jamming his cap over Danby's mouth. Only gurgles now sounded.

And Nelson Lee and Detective Lennard, hurrying out, found the situation unchanged. The captive was thoroughly exhausted, and he was handcuffed without the slightest difficulty. Watson and Sir Montie glowed with triumph. They felt that they had justified themselves.

Five minutes later the three prisoners were marched away in a group by the victorious Inspector Kemball and his men. There was no credit due to Kemball, but he took nearly all of it. He hadn't had a case like this for twenty years, and, naturally, he made the most of it.

Nelson Lee and the others straightened themselves in the sitting-room.

"Successful so far," remarked Lee. "But what of your uncle, Watson? A search of the house will probably enlighten us."

It did.

In an upstairs room, which was locked and shuttered, Mr. Benjamin Watson was found—quite unharmed, though pale and thin with worry. In another room was the chauffeur; and, outside, in one of the deserted barns, was Mr. Watson's motor-car.

The rescued engineer was overjoyed.

"I don't know who I have to thank for this splendid night's work," he exclaimed fervently. "But I am extremely grateful. I feared the worst, Tom. Thank Heaven everything has turned out satisfactorily."

Mr. Watson was a bluff, hearty man by nature. His rescue had bucked him up amazingly, and he lost no time in telling his story.

"The plans," he declared, "are those of a wonderful new paper-making machine—a machine which promises to revolutionise the whole industry. I needn't go into details, for they would only be technical and tedious. I may say, however, that the machine is at present unpatented, or protected in any way. It is worth, I believe, a fortune—indeed, there is no doubt about that point."

Mr. Watson went on to explain that a powerful paper-manufacturing corporation, of Chicago, had sent agents to London to purchase sole rights in the new machine before patents were taken out. Messrs. Marsden and Watson, however, had made all their arrangements, and point-blank refused the offer. They were all the more emphatic because they learned that the corporation was owned and controlled by German-Americans. By a system of spying, the agents had learned of Mr. Watson's plans.

Mr. Watson's car had been stopped on the main road while he was travelling to London. A man had shown a red light, and had told the chauffeur that a serious accident had occurred higher up, and that the road was blocked. He had given the chauffeur directions to pass through Helmford and Melhaven, and to join the main road further on.

"The scoundrel was one of the gang, of course," said Mr. Watson wrathfully. "He must have been informed as to the approximate time of my journey, and he knew the description of my car. Thus he made no mistake. My chauffeur was

not to blame in the least. How could he know that a trick was being played? In consequence, I was led directly into the trap, and, near this village, my car was stopped by the three scoundrels and I was attacked.

"Two men entered the tonneau—which is closed in—and a third dealt with Perkins, the chauffeur. He's only a little chap, but he proved a big handful. While I was being overpowered, Perkins managed to get free. My two assailants at once went to the rescue, locking me in the interior of the limousine. And it was during that short interval that I conceived a wild, hasty plan. I now believe that Providence led me to take that course, for my rescue has been brought about because of it.

"Well, I had just about one minute, and I was in total darkness. Taking the plans from my pocket, I scrawled 'Watson, St. Frank's,' upon the outer envelope—they were in two, for safety's sake. I added, 'Please Post,' in the corner. It was my intention to write the address more fully if I had had the time. But I was not allowed to do so. Perkins had been recaptured, and I was once more attacked. Before the door opened, however, I slipped the package through the little window at the back of the car, trusting that it would not be noticed upon the ground by my assailants."

"But why did you direct the letter to me, uncle?" asked Tommy.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was confused," admitted Mr. Watson. "I had been thinking of you, Tom."

"But how did the men know the plans were at St. Frank's?"

"I can only imagine that I have been talking in my sleep," said the rescued man. "It is a habit of mine to do so when extremely worried. From my mutterings the men probably gathered the truth, and—well, I think you know all the rest. I am very grateful to you all."

And so the affair was cleared up in a most satisfactory way.

And, the next day, Mr. Watson paid his nephew a visit at St. Frank's, and took possession of the plans from Nelson Lee.

So everything was all serene.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Grip of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By CLEMENT HALE.

NOTE.--As the title "In the Hands of the Huns" has already been used, we are altering the name of our Serial to the above.

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

GEORGE GRAY and his brother **JACK**, who are the English Staff of the Berlin Rovers, a football club in Germany.

OTTO BRACK is a scoundrelly German member of the team. But another German, named **CARL HOFFMAN**, is friendly, and advises the Englishmen to leave Germany, which they refuse to do. The Grays are betrayed the next night by their landlord Kutz. They manage to leave the house, but are surrounded by a hostile crowd. Luckily the American Ambassador takes them in his car to the Embassy, and gets them passports. The next morning they go to the station. When half-way to the frontier they are ordered to detain at a way-side station. Here their papers are examined, and they are detained for several hours. They are then told that they are under arrest as spies, and are marched off under a guard to prison.

(Now read on).

IN A GERMAN PRISON.

GEORGE GRAY'S feelings, when he at last found himself bolted and locked in a prison cell, can better be imagined than described.

Not till then did the real seriousness of his situation dawn upon him, and even then he could not help but think that a loophole of escape might be found through which he and his brother could pass to freedom when at last they were brought before their accusers—if there happened to be any.

His cell he found, on examining it closely, was faintly illuminated, so faintly that at first he could not make out his surroundings.

But as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he made out a wooden bed built

against the stone wall, with a seat set at right angles to it, and forming part of it, against the end wall opposite the door. The cell was narrow, deep, and lofty. It was tolerably warm, and constructed on much the same plan as the cells at our English police stations.

There was neither mattress nor pillow to the wooden bed, but George Gray didn't mind.

He was in no mood to sleep, and after the cell door had closed upon him he sat down on the edge of the bench and, burying his head in his hands, tried to think.

If only they hadn't taken Jack from him. If only they had left them together so that they could discuss the situation.

But George was alone. His youngest brother, though he occupied the adjoining cell, was as effectually removed from communication as if he had been taken to another prison.

To what fatal caprice did they owe their arrest and imprisonment?

It was an outrage. Yet for the life of him George could not see how he could obtain redress. From his knowledge of German character he was aware that the authorities would not have gone to such lengths unless they were sure of their ground.

Perhaps war between Britain and Germany had already broken out! The first shots even might have been fired. And in that case here were he and his brother Jack, to say nothing of hundreds of other Englishmen of military age, who would be only too glad to fight the Empire's enemies, cooped up in Germany with as much chance of escaping as a snared rabbit.

The thought maddened him and, rising, he paced up and down the cell, up and down, up and down, until his brain grew dizzy and his muscles tired.

And as he paced a sentry posted in the corridor snapped the shutter of the peephole open and cursed him.

"Why didn't he go to sleep? Why make that clatter? The devil of an Englishman had better be quiet, or——"

George replied to the threat with a mocking laugh.

The shutter snapped to, and he was once more alone. Then, as his hand strayed to his pocket, a glad cry leapt to his lips, for he found that he had his cigarette case upon him. Good luck! He selected and lit a weed, and as he puffed the fragrant smoke he felt better.

When he had finished the cigarette he threw himself down upon the wooden planks and tried to sleep. It was useless, for his brain was far too active. So up he got again, and in defiance of the grumbling sentry, whose curses reached him now and again, he renewed his walk up and down.

Presently he heard a faint, a very faint tapping upon the wall of his cell. He stopped and listened. It was repeated, and his heart leapt.

His brother Jack was trying to communicate with him.

He instantly replied to the tapping, and so they kept their inter-communication up, finding solace in the primitive amusement until the sentry opened the cell door and loudly ordered him to stop.

"If you do that again," he stormed, "you will be removed to another cell."

George glanced at the open door. He would have been tempted, had the fellow been alone, to have made a dash for liberty, though the guard was armed, and have chanced the consequences. But behind the sentry he saw several other uniformed and armed figures, and he knew that there was no chance.

The fellow then sniffed the air inquiringly.

"You haf bin smokin'," he cried.

George admitted that it was so.

"You can't blame me," said he.

"All tobacco must be confiscated. Prisoners are not allowed to smoke."

George, with a grim smile, produced the silver cigarette case, opened it, and held it out to the German.

"Perhaps you'd like one?" said he.

"Ach," ejaculated the uniformed bully. He thereupon selected a cigarette, handed the case round among the others, and finally snapped it together and thrust it into his pocket.

"I will take care of it," he growled.

"And mind—no rapping on se walls."

"You mean hound," cried George, glaring at him, and the fellow laughed.

He then withdrew, langed the door to, locked and bolted it as before, and George was once more alone, but without the means of steadying his nerves, which were getting more jumpy than ever.

Oh! If only he had the opportunity of meeting the thieving sentry face to face, man to man, with his hands free? What a mess he'd make of him.

But he was a prisoner. He knew that he would not have the slightest chance of doing anything that might please himself.

He'd just got to grin and bear it until he was a free man—and then he promised himself that he would make it hot for this rascal and others who had exceeded their authority.

BEFORE THE MILITARY COURT.

THAT night seemed never-ending.

And at intervals George Gray could hear gates clanging, and locks being turned, bolts being shot, and voices echoing along the stone passages and corridors of the prison.

Now and then he thought, though he could not be sure, that he heard English voices speaking, some of them raised in protest.

It was not unlikely, for he knew that he and Jack would not be the only unfortunates to suffer the indignity of arrest that night.

At last a grey light began to filter through a grating set high in the cell, and to find its way through crannies and chinks the eye could not discover.

And as the day broke George heard noises in the streets of the town whose name even was unknown to him.

Curiously enough, owing to the excitement of their broken journey, he had not noticed the name of the railway junction at which they had been stranded.

He could hear electric trams clattering along, the sizz of the metal wheel upon the overhead wire; he could hear the rumble of heavy carts and wagons, the hooting of motor horns; and with all the medley of sound came the hum of voices, which increased as the day lengthened.

Then the banging of the doors of the prison increased in violence, and he heard the tramp of heavy feet, the ring of harsh

German commands, until he knew that the bustle and excitement was altogether unusual.

Next he became conscious of a gnawing pain in his interior, a kind of sinking feeling altogether new to him, and he remembered the length of his fast.

He was dying for food. And poor Jack—it must be much worse for him.

At length the cell door was opened, and a man appeared, pushing a truck or trolley, on which were placed steaming basins of coffee and huge hunches of bread and butter.

His portion was handed in and the cell door closed.

The coffee was fragrant enough but thin, and there was plenty of the rough food. George did not care a lot for the dark German bread, but he ate it this time with a relish he had never known, swallowed the coffee, and felt better after it.

It might have been an hour later—perhaps two hours—when he heard men tramping along the corridor. They stopped outside his cell. The door was again unlocked and unbolted and opened.

Outside he saw an armed patrol in command of an officer, who curtly ordered him to "Fall in."

He rose and made towards the door.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"That is not your business——"

"Donder—fall in."

"But——"

George stepped out into the corridor. He saw armed guards at each end of it, their fixed bayonets flashing as they moved.

"What have you done with my brother? I shall not go without him."

The officer gave an order, and one of the soldiers drove his knee into George's back, impelling him forward.

"Silence."

The impulse to hurl himself at the officer and strike him down was strong within him, but George mastered himself with an effort.

He was in the hands of the Philistines. He could do nothing.

Then, to his great delight and intense relief, he saw the door of the adjoining cell thrown open, and his brother stepped into view.

How George smiled when he saw him, and how Jack smiled back.

Poor lad, his face was very white, and there were dark circles round his eyes,

and his lips drooped sadly in a way that George had never seen before.

"George—George," cried the younger brother, leaping forward, but a strong hand caught him by the shoulder and he was hurled away, to be spun round and set in position among the guards some paces in front of George.

"Oh!" exclaimed the boy, his lips trembling, the tears starting to his eyes. "You brutes——"

"Never mind, Jack," cried George stoutly. "Our turn will come some day. And, at any rate, we're not going to be cowed by a lot of German bullies."

Jack turned his head and smiled faintly.

"I'm not afraid, George," he exclaimed. "Only it's so unfair, so unjust——"

"March!" ordered the officer, and they were impelled onward at that brisk sweeping rate the German armies favour.

Whither were they being taken, and what was to come?

As they passed from one corridor to another, George gazed about him with an interest and curiosity he in no way attempted to conceal.

The prison was substantially built. Some parts of it looked to be very old.

Soldiers were everywhere.

As he peeped through an open doorway into a parade ground beyond, George saw that it was choked with soldiers, all armed to the teeth, who were being drilled by their commanding officer and his subordinates.

They were all intent on the work in hand, and they were doing it thoroughly.

From the streets came an echoing murmur, as of a sea breaking on a distant coast. It was the hum of many voices.

Presently the voices rose in a hoarse guttural cheer, a cheer which had the ring of war frenzy in it, and the Grays knew that it was here the same as in Berlin. The people were war mad.

The detested hydra head of Prussian militarism reared itself here, as in every other part of the German Empire, and it came to the sturdy English footballer then as an inspiration that there would be no peace in the world until it had been stamped upon and killed for all time.

But who was to do it? What nation was strong enough? Not Russia! Nor France; nor any of the smaller States

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

that were being involved in the terrible catastrophe that had fallen upon Europe like a blight.

What nation, then?—and he answered himself, Great Britain, with the assistance of her great Empire overseas.

The thought comforted him. He marched with head erect and shoulders squared, and the look he gave his brother braced the less-determined lad to face the ordeal in front of them.

At last they turned into a great room, in which many uniformed officials, most of them army men, were seated.

The guard closed round the door, and ranged alongside the prisoners, who were told to take their place in front of the table at which the officers were sitting.

The commander flashed a searching glance at them, pointed to the spot he wished them to occupy, and then ignored their very existence for some minutes, while he conversed with his subordinates and studied the papers which lay in front and were piled on each side of him.

At last he thundered:

"What are the prisoners' names?"

"George and John Gray, your Excellency," came the answer.

"Ach, yes, to be sure."

The commandant, or president of this military tribunal or court, leant forward, his forearms set upon the table, his square-jawed and rather striking face raised to meet the glance that George thrust at him.

"According to information we have received here," said the German officer, nodding at a paper that lay before him, "you and your brother are English spies. What have you to say?"

George coloured to the roots of his hair.

"Say! Say!" he stormed, and his voice trembled with indignation. "Why, that it's a lie. We are English footballers. We came to Berlin two years ago to carry out our duties as instructors and trainers of the Berlin Rovers. We have many German friends in Berlin. Our record is well known."

The officer tapped the papers before him.

"All that is mentioned here," he declared. "But it is stated, too, that you and your brother abused your position of trust to spy on the military preparations of the Fatherland. And we show no mercy upon spies caught in the very act, especially at a time when the Empire is at war."

ORDERED TO BE INTERNED.

THE words were spoken in a level voice, without the slightest trace of emotion. They hit home. And the stern, steely eyes of the speaker probed into George Gray's soul.

"Whoever declares that I and my brother are spies, sir," he said bitterly, "lies! I thought we had none but friends in Berlin until the other day; then I discovered that we had enemies."

"Ah, can you name them?"

If the voice betrayed an awakening interest, the impassive face betrayed no sign. It was like a mask.

"Yes. One of them is Otto Brack. He belonged to the Berlin Rovers."

"He is now a lieutenant in the Prussian Army. His word is to be believed."

"You may think so, sir—I do not. He's a coward, and a cad—I might go further and call him a blackguard—"

"You must not insult a German military officer. Your other enemies, come, come—"

"A man named Kutz. He was our landlord. We'd always treated him well. Yet on the eve of our departure from Berlin, though we trusted him, he would have betrayed us to the police had we not been sharp enough to escape him."

The words had no sooner left his lips than George Gray realised what a mistake he'd made. The steely eyes glinted, and the officers of lower rank conferred hastily together, nodding at the two prisoners in a meaning way.

"Why should Kutz betray you and your brother to the Berlin police? Surely if you had committed no offence or crime it would have been impossible?"

George coloured, but did not answer.

"Shall I tell you why? It was for striking and attempting to kill a German officer in a cafe. Can you deny it?"

Ah, that unfortunate incident! Was it to be for ever brought against him and his brother Jack?

"I admit it, sir," said George hastily. "But it was the man's own fault. Brack, in order to be revenged on us, denounced us as spies in the open cafe. The officer drew his sword, and tried to cut my brother down. What we did was in self defence."

The reply was written down at length.

"And now—with regard to other

(Continued overleaf.)

evidence—your luggage, taken from your lodgings, was found upon investigation to contain many maps, plans, and photographs collected in all parts of Germany. The photographs included many places of military importance. Some were of the great docks of Hamburg. Some were of Kiel. There was hardly one that had not some importance to a country at war with Germany."

George started, and his cheeks paled.

"Ah! You look guilty at that!"

"I am guilty of nothing, sir. The photographs were bought by my brother and myself, quite innocently, as we visited any particular town or place of interest. Just the same as you would purchase photographs of places if you visited England, or Wales, or Scotland, or Ireland. Albums containing similar photographs are to be found in every home in the world almost. There must be thousands of them available to the British authorities, if they wanted them."

The commandant smiled grimly.

"Ach!" he muttered, and then, with a pull at his moustache, added, "There were also two cameras found among the luggage, and many films, both used and unused, some of them not having been

developed. Were those bought and retained by you for the sake of harmless amusement?"

"Decidedly!"

"Ah!"

"Cameras are common enough in these days!" flashed George. "Everybody uses them."

"Maybe. They are dangerous in the hands of a spy."

"I tell you I am no spy!" thundered George, exasperated by the phlegmatic calm of the inquisitor.

A pause, a glance at the papers, and at the passports which had been taken from them overnight, and the following question was put:

"Why did you go to the American Ambassador for your passports?"

George explained the circumstances eagerly.

"It is plain enough to me," said the Prussian, thumping the table, "that you would never have got what you wanted from your British Ambassador, and as time was pressing, and you had urgent reasons for escaping the country before it was too late, therefore you acted as you did. Fortunately we, in the Fatherland, have our eyes open, and know how to act."

(To be continued.)

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

Will be Entitled:

"THE FLOODED SCHOOL."

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