

No. 142.—ENTHRALLING MYSTERY AND SCHOOL NOVEL!

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A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT;

Or, THE DOCTOR'S ORDEAL!

A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S. By the Author of
"The Secret Menace," "A Terrible Lesson," etc.

February 23rd, 1918.

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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.

IN WHICH NIPPER AND THE BO'SUN MAKE A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

"BURTON!"

Tom Burton, known in the Remove Form at St. Frank's as "the Bo'sun," looked up from his work as Mr. Crowell called his name.

"Ay, ay, sir!" he said absently. "I—I mean, did you hail me, sir?"

"Yes, Burton, I did—er—hail you," said the Form-master. "You are blessed with rather long legs, so I shall be obliged if you will reach down the big bottle of ink from the shelf at the top of the cupboard. My pot seems to have run dry."

"Right you are, sir!" said the Bo'sun cheerfully.

He rose from his seat in the front row of desks, and walked over to the cupboard. Burton was a big, ungainly junior, but, surprisingly enough, he was almost gentle in his movements.

Afternoon lessons were in progress, and the Remove was busy. Only a few idle spirits, such as Teddy Long and Ralph Leslie Fullwood, looked up to watch the Bo'sun. Reaching an ink-bottle down from a cupboard wasn't particularly exciting. The incident, indeed, was merely trivial, but it was destined to lead to something which nobody could have dreamed of at the time.

The shelf at the top of the cupboard was high, and the ink-bottle was only just within reach of the Bo'sun's strong fingers. He grunted rather loudly as he exerted himself; and that grunt was really the start of it all.

"Dear me, Burton," said Mr. Crowell, gazing over the top of his glasses. "You must not make those extraordinary sounds!"

The big junior turned red as he laid the bottle upon Mr. Crowell's desk.

"Sorry, sir," he said. "But, souse me that shelf's a bit high!"

"Upon my soul! What remarkable expressions for a boy to use!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell, smiling good-naturedly. "But, really, Burton, I am afraid you are getting fat! That shouldn't be so in war-time, surely?"

The Bo'sun grinned, and the whole Form grinned with him—as in duty bound when the Form-master deigned to make a humorous remark.

"Fat, sir?" repeated Burton. "I—I——"

"Not exactly fat, Burton," amended Mr. Crowell, with a twinkle in his eye, "but undoubtedly plump. I am afraid you have been eating too much."

The Bo'sun looked utterly dismayed.

"Swill my scoppers!" he ejaculated, in his surprise. "I—I——"

"Food hog!" came a whisper from one corner of the Form-room.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Crowell frowned, his good humour vanishing.

"The boy who made that objectionable remark will stand up!" he exclaimed curtly. "Burton knows that I was merely making fun of him, and he took my chaff in the right spirit. Who was it called out 'food hog'?"

There was an intense silence in the class, and nobody moved.

"Bust me, it doesn't matter, sir!" ex-

claimed Burton anxiously. "I don't want to get anybody into a row."

"You may return to your place, Burton," said Mr. Crowell. "I strongly object to having a mere word of chaff turned into an objectionable taunt. I have an idea that the call came from your corner, Long."

Teddy Long trembled.

"Pup—please, sir, it wasn't me!" he gasped. "I—I believe Gulliver—"

"Shurrup, you sneakin' worm!" hissed Albert Gulliver.

Mr. Crowell's eyes gleamed.

"You may sit down, Long," he exclaimed coldly. "Gulliver, stand out of the class!"

Gulliver, with a glance at Teddy Long which made the sneak of the Remove tremble, walked out in front of the Form-master's desk. He was scowling furiously.

"I didn't say a word, sir!" he declared.

"You deny uttering the taunt?"

"Of course I do, sir!"

"Unfortunately, Gulliver, I know you to be an untruthful boy, and I do not accept your statement," said Mr. Crowell, reaching for his cane. "Please do not deny your guilt again. Since there may be, perhaps, a slight doubt, I will not punish you for that particular offence."

Gulliver looked very satisfied.

"However, you referred to Long, in my hearing, as a 'sneaking worm,'" pursued Mr. Crowell icily. "I will not have such expressions used in the Form-room, Gulliver. Hold out your hand!"

Gulliver sullenly held it out.

Swish!

"Now the other hand!"

Swish!

"You may now go to your place, Gulliver," said Mr. Crowell pleasantly.

Gulliver went, scowling, and the Remove settled down to work again. Everybody thought that the incident was over and done with. Well, perhaps it was, but it led to something different.

As soon as the Form was dismissed, Tom Burton made his way out into the Triangle with a very thoughtful expression upon his rugged, good-natured faced. He paused upon the Ancient House steps, and leaned against the stonework.

Dick Bennett and Co. emerged a moment later, and grinned as they eyed the son of old Captain Burton. The Bo'sun was looking very preoccupied. Dick Bennett—or, in brief, Nipper—chuckled.

"The poor chap's thinking how he can get his weight down!" he murmured. "I believe he took old Crowsfeet's chaff to heart, the silly chump!"

Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, the faithful chums of the redoubtable Nipper, chuckled in turn.

"Dear fellow, what's the matter?" asked Sir Montie languidly. "I don't wish to be rude, but you're lookin' like a boiled owl—you are, really!"

Burton looked round with a start.

"Speaking to me?" he asked, smiling.

"I was addressin' you, certainly, dear boy," nodded Sir Montie. "Can we do any-

thin'? Were you thinkin' of cuttin' down your rations? Begad, they ain't any too big now—"

The Bo'sun turned red.

"Souse me, how did you know that I was thinking of that?" he asked.

"Deduction, my dear chap—simple deduction," grinned Nipper. "Old Crowell was only pulling your giddy leg, you ass. But I must say that you grunted to real perfection when you reached that ink-bottle down."

"I know I did," said Burton meekly. "The fact is, you chaps, Mr. Crowell was right. I ain't in good condition at all. I'm getting too much flesh on me—that's the truth of it. An' I'm going to start a regular course of physical training. Bust my tops! I ain't going to be called fat!"

There was a certain amount of indignation in the Bo'sun's tone, but he spoke with firm determination. Nipper and his chums grinned, and several other juniors who had paused upon the steps followed their example.

"If you're thinking of docking half your meals, I'm ready to oblige," said Handforth humorously. "I sit next to you, Burton, so you can pass over half your grub to me. I don't mind a little extra flesh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Burton grinned, and didn't think it a wise policy to pursue the subject. But the juniors very soon found that he was in deadly earnest. Conroy minor, who shared Study F with the Bo'sun, prepared tea in that cosy apartment. As his study mate was missing, he sallied out in search of him—and ran him to earth in the gymnasium. Burton was half stripped, and had evidently been exercising strenuously.

"You—you giddy ass!" roared Conroy minor. "Tea's ready!"

"I—I think I shall cut tea, you know," panted the Bo'sun almost apologetically. "Tea ain't really necessary, Conroy. It's a meal you can miss easily. It doesn't do a chap good to be gorging always—"

"Does that mean that I gorge?" demanded Conroy minor warmly.

"Not—not exactly," replied the Bo'sun. "But, souse me, you needn't get ratty! Why not be sensible, messmate, and do as I'm doin'? Have exercise instead of tea. You'll feel all the better, by hokey!"

Conroy minor grinned.

"I don't want to feel better, thanks—by hokey, or anything else!" he said. "My hat! You have got it bad, Bo'sun! If you think I'm going to starve myself, and do a lot of fatheaded exercises, you're jolly well off-side!"

And the Bo'sun's study chum strode out of the gym, somewhat indignantly. Burton looked after him, and a tiny doubt crept into his mind. Certain inward signs unmistakably pointed to the fact that there was an empty void which needed filling. With a set face, however, he turned back to the exercisers.

This was only the beginning of his new order of life. He had taken the Form-master's chaff seriously, and nothing the juniors could say would alter his decision.

Once the Bo'sun made up his mind, he wasn't to be shifted from his purpose. The majority of the fellows called him obstinate and pig-headed; but this was hardly just. The Bo'sun found it necessary to exercise quite a large amount of will-power to stick to his resolution.

To Conroy minor's disgust, Study F was converted into a miniature gymnasium. The Bo'sun exercised until he nearly exhausted himself. At night he would sleep like a log, and would awaken aching in every joint.

After several days, however, this effect wore off, and there was no doubt that the strenuous physical training was doing him a lot of good. Naturally he was laughed at by everybody, and chipped unmercifully.

Nipper, in a humorous moment, invited the Bo'sun to tea, and was considerably astonished when the invitation was accepted. The fellows were inclined to sneer—believing that the Bo'sun's resolution had gone to the winds.

That tea in Study C, however, was a remarkable one. There was a really splendid spread upon the table—enough to make a fellow's mouth water; but Burton positively refused to eat anything except a single round of dry toast, with a little marmalade, and he restricted himself to one small cup of tea.

His next idea was to get up early every morning—an hour before the rising bell clanged out its unwelcome call. It would be full daylight at that hour, of course, and fresh and invigorating.

As the Bo'sun said, however, there wasn't much fun in getting up alone. His plan was to go for a three-mile run every morning before breakfast, rain or fine. The loyalty of Conroy minor was tested severely—and it didn't stand the strain.

For Conroy, in no uncertain terms, positively refused to crawl out of bed an hour before it was necessary, just for the sake of going on a trot round the fields. It wasn't quite good enough.

The Bo'sun tried several other fellows, but wisely decided to cease his efforts. The work was too painful to be continued. Owen major, when approached, merely sniffed and walked away. De Valerie, the Rotter of the Remove, contented himself with a polite, but firm, refusal to make an ass of himself. De Valerie had altered a great deal lately—he had lost his sneer, and had become more obliging in every way. In fact, he was losing for himself the nickname he had earned during his first month or two at St. Frank's. But it was much harder to rid himself of the sobriquet than it had been to acquire it.

Edward Oswald Handforth, impulsive as usual, punched Burton's nose forcibly when invited to get up early by that enthusiastic junior. Handforth was quite ready to follow the punch up by several others. But the Bo'sun could use his own fists, and in his present fit condition he paid Handforth back with great interest. Handforth, in fact, was left upon the passage floor, wondering if there had been an air-raid.

Edward Oswald, however, never counted odds, and he was quite ready to issue a

deadly challenge to Burton; and he was only dissuaded from his purpose by the forcible efforts of his faithful study chums, Church and McClure, who dragged him bodily away and dumped him in Study D.

The Bo'sun met with success at last. He found Nipper and Sir Montie and Tommy Watson out in the Triangle, and he appealed earnestly to their better feelings. It was rotten to get up alone, he complained; and at last Nipper good-naturedly consented to try the experiment the next morning. Nipper had been accustomed to getting up at all hours of the night, and this wouldn't be any particular hardship.

Accordingly, the next morning, a good hour before the rising bell was destined to clang out, Nipper sat up in bed and looked round him. The early morning sunlight was streaming into the dormitory, and the birds were singing in opposition to one another in the branches of the old trees.

"H'm! Not so bad!" murmured Nipper, as he slipped out of bed. "It's a pretty good idea of the Bo'sun's, after all—although I mightn't have said so if the weather had been different."

Tom Burton was in bed—fast asleep. As a precautionary measure, he had provided himself with an alarm clock—in total disregard of the storm of protest which had arisen from the other juniors. The clock was hung over his bed-rail, and as Nipper set his feet upon the floor the hammer buzzed noisily.

Nipper watched and waited, grinning.

Every junior in the dormitory slept on peacefully, with the exception of the Bo'sun. He, being nearest the din, turned over in his sleep, but showed no signs of waking up. After an interminable period—so it seemed to Nipper—the bell ceased ringing.

"A fat lot of good that thing is!" growled Nipper, striding across the dormitory. "It's jolly lucky the guv'nor trained me to wake up at will! Our early morning trot would have looked a bit sick, anyhow!"

Nipper was drastic, and he calmly tore the bedclothes clean off the Bo'sun, and slapped an exposed part of that junior's anatomy soundly.

"Souise me!" mumbled Burton, sitting up. "We ain't in port yet! By hokey, it's you, Benny!"

"You lazy lubber!" grinned Nipper. "What the dickens did you buy that clock for? It's been ringing for about an hour, and you slept through it all!"

The Bo'sun jumped out of bed with alacrity. He was profuse in his expressions of regret, and thanked Nipper in well-chosen words for calling him up. And, ten minutes later, the pair sallied out.

They were attired in runn'ag shorts, and this airy attire didn't serve to keep them warm, once they emerged into the crisp morning air. After five minutes of brisk trotting, however, they were both glowing comfortably.

"Ripping, ain't it?" asked Burton, with shining eyes.

"Not so bad," replied Nipper. "We shall have decent appetites for brekker, anyhow."

Which way shall we go, Bo'sun? I suggest a circular course—we'll trot to the Bannington road, and then go along until we come to the bye-lane which leads to Bellton Wood. That'll make a nice little tour round."

"Any old thing!" said the Bo'sun cheerily.

They ran on, and turned into the road which led to Bannington. There were quite a number of people about in the village—mostly farm-labourers, and such like. But out upon the lonely country road the boys found that they had the lanes to themselves.

"I'll tell you what," suggested Nipper, as they went along, "we'll cut across the moor from here, and strike the other road higher up. They've been shoving a lot of flints down at this end, and they ain't exactly nice for running on."

"Right you are, messmate!"

Bannington Moor stretched away on their left. A fairly high hedge, with occasional trees, divided it from the road, and the boys made for a narrow gap which showed between two bushes.

And, with startling abruptness, they made a shocking discovery. It is curious how trivial incidents frequently lead to big issues. If the Bo'sun hadn't grunted whilst reaching that bottle of ink down from the shelf, he and Nipper would never have been upon the Bannington road at this hour of the morning—and, consequently, neither would they have taken any part in a mystery which was to tax the great skill of Nelson Lee himself.

For there, lying at the bottom of the hedge, in a shallow ditch, was the body of a man. Both the boys were extremely startled to see it as they crouched under the overhanging branches.

One touch told Nipper the dreadful truth.

The man was dead!

CHAPTER II.

(Related by Nipper.)

IN WHICH NELSON LEE INVESTIGATES—INSPECTOR JAMESON ARRIVES UPON THE SCENE AND TAKES CHARGE—IS DR. BRETT IMPLICATED?

THERE was a catch in my breath, and my cheeks had paled, when I turned to Tom Burton after making the awful discovery that the man in the hedge was dead.

The Bo'sun was looking on with a queer expression in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Benny?" he asked. "Is—is the chap hurt?"

I turned away from the body, feeling almost giddy.

"Hurt!" I echoed. "He's dead, Bo'sun—as cold as ice! He's been dead for hours!"

"Great marlinspikes!" gasped my companion, gripping my arm. "Don't—don't be an ass, Benny! You must have made a mistake!"

"He's dead, I tell you!" I repeated huskily. "Seems to be a gentleman, too, by the look of his clothing. It couldn't have been an accident either, or he would have been lying in the road."

"How did he die, then?" asked the Bo'sun shakily.

"It might have been murder!" I said, suddenly recovering my coolness. "We can't tell exactly, Bo'sun—and we'd better not touch the body. Why, if we hadn't tried to break through the hedge just here, the thing might have remained in this ditch for days!"

"But—but what shall we do?" asked Burton helplessly.

"Do? Why, we'll rush back to the school as fast as our legs will carry us," I replied. "We'll rouse up Mr. Alvington—he's tremendously keen on mysteries, as you know. Old Alvy will know exactly what to do."

We were rather glad to get out of the hedge, away from the proximity of the dead man. We hadn't seen his face, for the body was lying face downwards, and was partially covered with tangled branches.

And, without pausing, we rushed away back to St. Frank's. I couldn't be absolutely open with the Bo'sun, for he didn't know that "Mr. Alvington" was Nelson Lee, and that I, "Dick Bennett," was Nipper. Only my own two study chums, Sir Montie and Tommy, were aware of the real truth.

The Bo'sun, however, had excellent reason to know that "Old Alvy" was as keen as mustard on a mystery. Some little time before Burton himself had been kidnapped by a rascal named Captain Jelks—an old enemy of the Bo'sun's father—and the burly Removite had been rescued mainly because of Nelson Lee's activities.

Certainly, we hadn't expected to meet with any startling adventure this morning. But, as I've often found, these sort of things come when one wasn't prepared. Burton and I had been as cheerful and light-hearted as possible five minutes ago; but now we were grim, and rather startled.

I knew that I was doing the right thing in telling Nelson Lee of our discovery. The police would have to be communicated with, of course; but it would be no good informing the sleepy village constable in Bellton. It would be far better to ring up Bannington Police-station—and the gov'nor could do that from the school.

When the Bo'sun and I arrived we found the Ancient House, and St. Frank's generally, still wearing a dull, deserted aspect. The rising-bell hadn't gone yet—it wanted twenty minutes to the time—and the boys were all asleep.

Nelson Lee, however, had just got up, we found. He was emerging from his bedroom as the Bo'sun and I turned into the upper corridor.

"Dear me! You are up early, boys," he smiled, coming towards us. "Is there any particular reason for this commendable phenomenon?" The gov'nor paused suddenly, and looked at us with close attention. "But there is something wrong, Bennett," he added. "You are looking pale, and——"

"There's—there's a dead man lying on the Bannington road, sir—in the hedge!" I panted breathlessly. "Burton and I thought——"

The guv'nor looked at me very keenly.

"Come to my study, boys," he said in crisp tones.

We followed him, and when we had reached his study, in the lower passage, he closed the door, and pulled the blind up.

"Now, Bennett," he said quietly.

As quickly as possible I told him of our discovery on the Bannington road. He listened carefully, nodding occasionally.

"You are quite sure the man was dead, my boy?" he asked.

"Positive, sir."

"Why are you positive?"

"He—he was cold, sir—not cold in the ordinary way," I replied. "It's a different kind of feeling, somehow—I can't exactly describe it; but I know he's dead, sir. Besides, he was nearly stiff."

"Was there any sign as to the cause—"

"We didn't stop to examine the body, sir," I broke in. "We thought we'd better hurry back and tell you without delay. I've got an idea that the poor chap died violently—and, in any case, the police will have to be informed, won't they?"

"Most certainly, young 'un—most certainly!" said the guv'nor. "Indeed, I shall ring up Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington police, at once. At least, I shall inform one of his subordinates—for I don't suppose the worthy gentleman is out of his bed yet. This news, I have no doubt, will soon bring him to the scene. Murders and mysterious deaths are not at all frequent in this quiet country district."

Nelson Lee picked up the receiver of his 'phone while he spoke, and was soon in conversation with the sergeant at Bannington. Having given the information, the guv'nor pushed the telephone from him, and rose to his feet.

"I am rather curious to look into this matter," he said smoothly. "If you will direct me to the spot, Bennett—"

"Oh, we'll come with you, sir, if you'll let us," I cut in. "Walk straight towards the village, and we'll catch you up before you get to the bridge. We must put some different clothes on, Bo'sun."

He nodded, and we raced up to the dormitory and made an extra quick change. We couldn't very well walk with Nelson Lee attired merely in jerseys and running shorts. The rest of the Removites were all asleep still, although their peaceful slumber would soon be ruthlessly interrupted.

I thought about waking Sir Montie and Tommy, but didn't. A lot of time would have been wasted in explaining things, and they would have had to dress completely. The Bo'sun and I were off again within five minutes.

We caught up with the guv'nor just after he had passed the bridge, and we fell into pace with him, breathless.

"We shall probably have a few minutes to ourselves before the police arrive," remarked the schoolmaster-detective. "As you heard me tell the sergeant, boys, the police will be able to recognise the spot by the fact that I

shall be there. And, apart from that, I am somewhat curious."

It wasn't long before we arrived at the spot. There wasn't a soul in sight, and the body lay exactly in the same position. Nelson Lee lost no time in making an examination. The Bo'sun and I stood some few feet away.

"The man is certainly dead," remarked the guv'nor after a while. "The body is well dressed, and the man's age, I judge, was about forty-five. Without a doubt he was killed violently—brutally."

"Murdered, sir?" asked the Bo'sun, in a whisper.

"Yes—murdered, Burton," replied Lee quietly. "The poor man was struck down from behind, apparently, by a heavy spanner. The implement is lying here now, in the grass. But I shall not touch it before the police arrive."

"How was he killed, sir?" I asked. "By a smash in the face, or—"

"The blow was delivered, it appears, at the base of the skull," replied the guv'nor. "Didn't you hear me mention that the man had been struck down from behind? Death, I judge, was instantaneous, and took place six or seven hours ago."

"But he's stiff, sir," I protested. "I always thought that a body didn't go stiff until twelve or eighteen hours after death?"

"Not in ordinary cases, Bennett, certainly," agreed Nelson Lee. "But in violent deaths it is often noticeable that rigor mortis sets in practically instantaneously. As I have said, this man died as the result of a brutal attack."

Although I didn't like the job, I had a look at the body myself—closely. There was a terrible wound at the base of the skull. The spanner was a large one—one of those heavy, double-ended engineer's spanners.

Nelson Lee was extremely keen, and I could see that all his instincts were aroused by this mysterious murder.

Who was the man, and who had killed him?

What tragedy had been enacted during the hours of darkness? The well-dressed stranger must have been struck down some little time before midnight, I judged. And I felt certain that the guv'nor wouldn't rest until he had probed the matter to the very bottom.

"What do you make of it, sir?" I asked curiously.

"Really, Bennett, it is early to ask that question," said Nelson Lee. "Furthermore, it is for the police to 'make' something of the affair—not I. I have been tempted to search the body for possible data, but the inspector would undoubtedly object to my taking such a course."

"By hokey!" said the Bo'sun suddenly. "There's a car coming along, sir."

We looked down the road, and the guv'nor nodded. A few minutes later Inspector Jameson, of Bannington, stepped out of a small two-seater car, followed by a burly constable.

"Morning, Mr. Alvington," said the inspector, with a curt nod. "You 'phoned my sergeant, I believe? What's that story of a

murder. eh? Some exaggerated nonsense, I suppose?"

Nelson Lee waved his hand towards the hedge.

"I leave you to judge for yourself, Mr. Jameson," he said. "These boys, whilst on an early morning run, discovered--what you will find in this hedge. They at once reported to me, and I passed on the information."

Inspector Jameson gave his moustache a twist, and crouched in under the overhanging branches of the hedge. I didn't like him much--and the guv'nor, I know, thought him to be a bit of a duffer. He was pompous and important, but lacked common-sense and imagination. Yet, curiously enough, he had a fixed idea that he was an extremely smart officer.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed, backing out of the hedge, and knocking his hat off in the process. "Upon my soul! This is a serious affair, Mr. Alvington--a shocking business! The poor man has been brutally murdered!"

He pulled himself together after a few moments, and then he and the constable, whose name was Beckett, made a thorough examination. Nelson Lee looked on, meanwhile, without making any comment.

"Certainly a case of murder," declared the inspector at last. "Of course, it is quite useless asking your opinion, Mr. Alvington," he added indulgently. "I have no wish to be disparaging, but you are a schoolmaster, and it is hardly likely that you would be capable of forming any opinion upon such a matter as this."

I grinned to myself, and the guv'nor kept his face solemn with difficulty.

"Yet I have formed an opinion, inspector," he said calmly.

"Indeed, sir! May I ask what it is?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I would not presume to waste your valuable time by voicing any simple little deductions," he replied gently.

"The man was struck down in the road," declared Jameson. "He was killed by means of a heavy spanner."

"Really?" murmured the guv'nor, with a surprised air.

"Moreover, since the man's skull is fractured near the base, it is obvious that the fatal blow was a fierce, swinging one, tending to be slightly upwards," continued the inspector, apparently liking the sound of his own voice. "The murderer dragged his victim's body into the hedge--since it is quite impossible that the fatal blow could have been struck in such a restricted space as this shallow ditch."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I follow you exactly," he agreed. "But one thing is rather curious, surely?"

"To what are you referring?"

"The weapon."

"But it is here--in the ditch."

"Exactly," said the guv'nor smoothly. "That is the curious point I referred to."

"Really, Mr. Alvington, I cannot quite follow you," said the inspector, with an irritable note in his voice. "I shall be obliged if you will speak a trifle more explicitly."

"Well, isn't it somewhat remarkable that the murderer should have left the weapon by the side of his victim?" said the guv'nor. "Just consider the point, inspector. The criminal, having killed this poor man, dragged him into the ditch, so that the body should be concealed--that, at least, is probable, and easily understood. But why should the murderer place the spanner in the ditch also? It could scarcely have been done by accident, and might turn out to be a valuable clue. One would naturally assume that the spanner might have been carried away from the spot by the fleeing culprit."

"H'm! There's nothing much in that," said Inspector Jameson, chewing his moustache. "A mere quibble, my dear sir. And now we must attempt to establish the dead man's identity. These papers may be useful."

The inspector had been fingering a pocket-book and a bundle of papers which had been extracted from the murdered man's coat. And now he turned them over carefully, and examined them. The guv'nor, although he was greatly interested, appeared to be almost indifferent. It was rather a sly move on his part. Had he displayed any curiosity, the pompous inspector would certainly have left him unsatisfied. As it was, however, Jameson volunteered the information straight away.

"Ah, here we are!" he exclaimed. "The poor man's name appears to be Mr. Stephen Ford, of Twickenham, London. At least, that is the name and address engraved upon a number of visiting cards. But what is this?--what is this?"

He opened out a folded slip of tough paper, with a delicately engraved surface. I saw in a moment that it was a cheque.

"A cheque!" exclaimed the inspector, with the air of a man who has made a remarkable discovery. "A cheque made payable to Mr. Stephen Ford, for the sum of three pounds fifteen shillings. And--dear me!--it is dated with yesterday's date! The drawer's name is somewhat indistinct. It appears to be James--James-- Perhaps you can assist me, Mr. Alvington?"

The guv'nor leaned over the inspector's shoulder, and I suddenly saw his eyes gleam.

"Brett!" he exclaimed quickly--"James Brett. I am well acquainted with the gentleman, inspector. Possibly you are also aware of the fact that he is the medical practitioner in Bellton?"

"Ah, yes, of course--Dr. Brett," said the inspector. "The name is familiar to me, Mr. Alvington. Now, really, what connection can the doctor have with this mysterious affair?"

"Surely there is no indication that Dr. Brett is connected with it at all?" asked the guv'nor. "It is fairly obvious that Mr. Ford visited the doctor last night, receiving this

cheque. It was whilst on his way to Bannington that he met with disaster; and it would appear that robbery was not the motive for the crime."

Jameson folded the cheque, and returned it to the pocket-book.

"Nevertheless, I shall pay a visit to Dr. Brett without delay," he declared. "We require information concerning the dead man—and Dr. Brett is probably in a position to supply it. He may, indeed, be able to furnish us with a few details of Mr. Ford's movements last night."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully. The inspector was right, of course—I saw that at once. There was little doubt that Mr. Ford had visited the doctor the previous evening, and it was only natural that the police should go to Brett at once.

I wondered what Nelson Lee would do. For Dr. Brett, as it happened, was quite a big friend of the gov'nor's. He was a splendid chap in every way, and Lee often spent an evening at Brett's house.

"I will see the gentleman at once," said Jameson briskly. "Beckett, you will remain with the body until I return."

The inspector turned to the gov'nor, and the Bo'sun and I listened eagerly.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Alvington," he went on. "You will doubtless be required later on to give evidence at the inquest—as also will the boys. But it will be a mere formality, of course. If you are going in the direction of Bellton, perhaps you will permit me to offer you a lift?"

"Thank you, inspector," said Nelson Lee, moving over towards the car with Jameson. "But I would crave your indulgence further. Dr. Brett, it happens, is a personal friend of mine, and you would be doing me a great favour by permitting me to accompany you on this business. It is natural, is it not, that I should be slightly concerned?"

Inspector Jameson laughed.

"My dear sir, you may come, and welcome," he exclaimed readily. "I trust, however, that you will allow me to conduct the inquiry in my own way."

"Oh, certainly," agreed the gov'nor.

We all climbed into the car, and were soon bowling away towards Bellton, leaving Police-constable Beckett in charge of the gruesome remains in the hedge. As the Bo'sun and I hadn't been mentioned, I mentally resolved to be present at that interview with Dr. Brett, too—if it could be managed.

I kept discreetly silent, and Inspector Jameson went up a few degrees in my estimation. He wasn't such a self-important old bounder, after all. I had half expected him to refuse the gov'nor's request, and was very pleased that he hadn't.

But, as we sped along through the morning sunshine, I little guessed how that interview with Dr. Brett was to end! I had an idea that the inspector would practically draw a blank; but he didn't.

On the contrary, the whole mystery assumed a grim and terrible aspect.

CHAPTER III.

(*Nipper continues.*)

IN WHICH THE DEADLY CLOAK OF SUSPICION FALLS ON DR. BRETT'S SHOULDERS.

DR. BRETT'S house, with the adjoining surgery, was situated in the lane which led to Caistowe. Inspector Jameson brought the motor-car to a standstill beside the doctor's gateway, and we all climbed to the ground.

It was quite early in the morning, of course, and very few people were about. In all probability we should find Dr. Brett still in bed, although he was a fairly early riser, I remembered.

The inspector was just about to push open the gate, when the sound of a motor-car engine came to our ears. The buzz proceeded from a small alley, and Jameson glanced down it. A small wooden shed lay just at the bottom. The doors were open, and Dr. Brett's little two-seater car stood in view. Williams, the doctor's man, was busily engaged in cleaning the car. From the fact that he was puffing and blowing, and making a curious, hissing noise over his work, I gathered that Williams had been a groom earlier in life.

"H'm!" said the inspector hesitatingly. "We may as well question this man. It is quite possible that he can give us some items of information. Do you know the fellow at all, Mr. Alvington?"

"Not intimately," replied the gov'nor, "but I have reason to believe that Williams is a steady, truthful man."

I could see that Nelson Lee didn't quite like the idea of questioning the chauffeur—I didn't quite like it myself. The proceeding savoured of underhandedness. It would have been far better to seek out Dr. Brett without delay. But Inspector Jameson was taking this inquiry, and the gov'nor knew better than to interfere. If he had been himself, it would have been different; but he was "Mr. Alvington," a common-or-garden schoolmaster, and that made all the difference.

"Mornin', gentlemen!" exclaimed Williams, looking up from his work with a red face. "Just getting the little car into order. I think the doctor's inside——"

"Never mind the doctor just now, Williams," interrupted the inspector importantly. "That is your name, I believe, my man?"

"Yes, sir," said the surprised Williams.

"I want you to answer a few questions," went on Jameson, assuming a thoughtful air. "And answer truthfully, my good fellow. I am Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington police."

"Is—is something wrong, sir?" asked Williams, puzzled.

"Never mind that, just now," replied the inspector. "You must answer questions, Williams—not ask them. I want to know if your master received a visitor last night?"

The chauffeur was more puzzled than ever, and I could see that he didn't exactly care for this catechism. He stood scratching his

head thoughtfully, and eyeing the inspector in a wary manner.

"I should like to know what you're gettin' at, sir," he remarked at last. "Did the master receive a visitor last night? Well, I ain't supposed to know none o' them sort o' things——"

"Tut—tut!" interjected Jameson curtly. "Answer my questions, man!"

Williams looked at Nelson Lee, as though for assistance, and I saw the guv'nor nod his head slightly. Williams' face cleared, and he gave a little cough. It's a rummy thing how the guv'nor gives people a sense of confidence.

"Dr. Brett did have a visitor last night, sir," said Williams. "I thought, mebbe, you 'ad come about that little squabble——"

"Squabble!" interjected the inspector sharply. "Dear me—dear me! You must be more explicit, Williams. I gather, from your words, that Dr. Brett and his visitor quarrelled last night?"

"It wasn't exactly a quarrel, sir," said Williams uneasily. "I don't know the rights of it, properly speakin'. I reckon you'd better ask the doctor——"

"I intend to see Dr. Brett presently," put in the inspector. "Who was this visitor, my man? Where did he come from?"

"Lunnon, I think, sir."

"Do you know his name?"

"It was Ford, I believe, sir," replied Williams. "Leastways, I——"

"Exactly—the visitor's name was Ford," exclaimed Jameson, in a satisfied tone. "Can you tell me at what hour he arrived, Williams?—and when he left?"

"I dunno when he came, sir; but the house-keeper was tellin' me that Dr. Brett and the other gent had a few high words in the surgery," admitted Williams. "It wasn't much—just a bit of a disagreement, like. They made it up afterwards, and sat talkin' right till late."

"And then?" asked the inspector keenly.

"Why, Dr. Brett took the gentleman in his motor-car to Bannington, just before midnight. They was going to catch the one o'clock mail, I believe," replied the chauffeur.

"Ah! Do you know if Dr. Brett took Mr. Ford to Bannington?"

"I don't think he did, sir."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, sir, soon after they started the doctor came back alone," said Williams reluctantly. "He was in a fine old rage, and told me that he had dropped 'the brute' on the road. I was waitin' up to put the car away."

"And that is all you know?"

"That's all, sir," said Williams, wiping his hands on a piece of dirty rag. "I hope I haven't done wrong in tellin' you all this?"

"Of course not—of course not!" said the inspector heartily, darting a keen glance at Nelson Lee. "On the contrary, Williams, your information is of the utmost importance."

Jameson spoke the words in a voice which was eloquent of triumphant satisfaction. As for myself, I was a bit bewildered. The

Bo'sun wasn't attempting to follow things: he stood listening interestedly, without realising the significance of what had passed.

Nelson Lee, however, realised it to the full—and so did I. We exchanged grave, concerned glances. Williams's information, given innocently enough, was terribly damning in the light of what had happened on the Bannington road during the night. Had Williams known of the murder, I am quite sure that he would have kept as mum as an oyster. But the inspector had taken a somewhat mean advantage of him.

And while we were standing in a group, silent and thoughtful, a pair of French windows on the side of the doctor's house opened. Dr. Brett emerged, a cigarette between his lips. He waved his hand cheerily, and passed down the short garden path to a rustic gate near by. He was a youngish man, and a good sort all round. To my dismay, I noticed that he wore a haggard expression, as though he had passed a sleepless night—as though something of a worrying nature was upon his mind.

"Good-morning, Mr. Alvington!" he exclaimed warmly. "I didn't expect to find you here at this hour. And Inspector Jameson, too! I hope there is nothing the matter?"

"I am afraid a somewhat unpleasant——" began Nelson Lee.

"Permit me to question Dr. Brett, Mr. Alvington!" interrupted the inspector curtly. "I shall be obliged if you will remain quiet."

The guv'nor accepted the snub without a word, although he bit his lip with vexation. It was hardly possible for him to interfere, however, and he remained silent. Brett himself was regarding us with astonishment, and he turned a cold glance upon the inspector.

"I really don't see why you should treat my friend with such discourtesy, inspector," he said with a frown.

"No doubt you will understand in a very few moments, Dr. Brett," said Jameson. "It is my duty to inform you that Mr. Stephen Ford's dead body was found lying at the bottom of a hedge on the Bannington Road early this morning!"

Brett started back with a little cry, his face expressing absolute bewilderment. He flushed crimson, and then went deathly pale. These signs, naturally enough under the circumstances, were interpreted by the inspector, I believe, as indications of guilt. For, without a doubt, Jameson believed Dr. Brett to be closely implicated in the murder. I must admit myself that things were looking ugly.

"Ford's—dead—body!" repeated the doctor, saying each word slowly. "Good heavens above! There must be some mistake, surely?"

"There is no mistake, Dr. Brett," said Jameson. "Mr. Ford was foully murdered—he was struck down from behind; and I have come to you because I have every reason to believe that you can give me a great many details——"

"What—what do you mean?" asked Brett hoarsely.

"My words, I think, were sufficiently plain."

The doctor stood staring at Jameson like a man in a dream. Then suddenly his eyes blazed with fire.

"You—you madman!" he shouted. "You don't mean to imply that I am suspected—"

"I advise you, Dr. Brett, to say as little as possible," interjected the inspector sharply.

The doctor took a deep breath.

"On the contrary, I intend to tell the whole story at once," he declared. "This foul suspicion must be removed—and it shall be. I will make a statement, Inspector Jameson."

"I strongly advise——"

"I do not care what you advise!" interrupted Brett angrily. "Man alive! Do you think I'm going to labour under a horrible suspicion of this kind? I wish to tell you exactly what occurred—so that you may form a true opinion at once. Ford murdered! I can hardly believe it—it is too dreadful!"

As he spoke he turned towards the rustic gate, swaying slightly. Then he set his teeth, and turned.

"Will you please follow me into my study?" he asked quietly.

"Certainly," said the inspector. "Well, Mr. Alvington, I don't think you need be detained further," he added, holding out his hand with an air of dismissal. "I wish to be alone with Dr. Brett. Good-morning!"

I felt like saying something disrespectful, and only restrained myself with difficulty. So the gov'nor and I weren't to be permitted to hear Brett's yarn, after all. The doctor himself, however, came to the rescue.

"If you will pardon me, inspector," he said deliberately. "I think I have the right to say who shall enter my house. I am not under arrest yet, I presume?" he added bitterly.

"I do not think it necessary for Mr. Alvington——"

"It may not be necessary, but I desire that my friend shall be present while I relate what occurred," interjected the doctor coldly. "The boys, too—they may as well come with us. I have nothing to hide—and it is far better that they should know the complete truth at the outset. Half a story is liable to become grossly distorted in the course of continuous repetition."

The inspector shrugged his shoulders, but made no remark. And we all entered the house, and proceeded to Dr. Brett's cosy little study. I could have hugged him; he had taken the inspector down beautifully. Jameson had attempted to carry things with a high hand, and he had been put in his place. The gov'nor, I knew, was just as pleased as I was; and the Bo'sun kept nudging me uneasily. He didn't like the way things were going on more than I did.

"From what you have told me, I gather that I am suspected of being concerned in the murder of Mr. Stephen Ford?" asked Brett quietly, and in a steady voice. "I am not aware of any details, but your attitude, inspector, is unmistakable."

"I do not think there is any necessity——"

"Do you suspect me?" asked Brett doggedly.

"Since you are so persistent, I must inform you that the facts are extremely significant," replied Jameson. "As matters now stand, Dr. Brett, I fear that it is my duty to place you under arrest upon suspicion. And, furthermore, I must warn you that anything you say——"

"Oh, we need not go into those formal matters," interrupted the doctor impatiently. "I know nothing whatever about this affair, inspector—I am absolutely innocent of the charge you prefer against me. Before I tell my story I should like to have a few details concerning the murder itself. I think I have a right to make this request."

The inspector smiled with grim dryness. I could see that he believed this to be a piece of bluff on the doctor's part. If Brett had committed the crime, he must naturally know all about it; but he had merely put the question in order to bluff us into believing that he was in total ignorance of the facts. That's what the inspector thought. Personally, I was quite convinced of Brett's innocence. He was about the last man in the world to commit a brutal murder or, indeed, to commit a crime of any sort.

In a somewhat impatient voice Jameson told how the Bo'sun and I had found the dead body in the hedge; how Nelson Lee had rung up the police in Bannington; and how the body had been examined later on.

"It is a terrible thing," said the doctor huskily. "I cannot imagine how Ford met his death—unless some footpad encountered him upon the dark road. What a fool I was to act as I did!"

"Again I advise you to keep silent," said the inspector. "If you have anything to say, doctor, it would be far better to reserve it."

"Really, Brett, I endorse that view," said Nelson Lee.

But the doctor shook his head.

"I have nothing to hide," he said obstinately. "I can tell you exactly what happened, from first to last. I didn't lay a finger upon Ford, and I shall feel far more comfortable if I am permitted to tell the story straight away. In any case, the narration of it cannot harm me in the least."

"Then be as brief as possible, please," said the inspector.

There was a slight pause, and we all waited expectantly. Dr. Brett lit a cigarette, and leaned back in his chair.

"This news has shocked me, of course, but I can't pretend, with sincerity, to be deeply grieved," he began slowly. "Stephen Ford was a relation of my brother-in-law, but not a relation of my own. He was an utter cad, and he and I were never upon amicable terms. I suppose that statement will be regarded as significant? Well, it cannot be helped—I must tell the absolute truth."

"There is no need for me to go into close details. Just over a year ago I was in a big difficulty, and my brother-in-law introduced me to Ford. He was very pleasant then, and advanced me the sum of twenty—"

five pounds. A mere triviality, of course, and I loathed being under obligation to the man. But circumstances were so acute that I was practically compelled to accept the loan. Ford told me that I could pay him back just when I pleased, for he was well-to-do. Owing to a slight quarrel with my brother-in-law, however, he turned nasty, and vented his spite upon me. A week or two ago he sent me a curt letter demanding the money I had borrowed. The whole thing is a personal matter, of course, and it would not interest you if I went into closer details. I was totally unprepared for the demand, but resolved to pay the sum by hook or by crook."

"And did you pay it?" asked the inspector.

"I did. Ford came down from London yesterday, and made himself most objectionable in my house—in this very apartment," was Dr. Brett's reply. "However, I did not wish to have any bad blood between us, and we patched up matters to such an extent that, after a few hot words, we were soon laughing and joking. I didn't like the man, but had no wish to be at loggerheads with him. I paid him twenty-one pounds five in cash—all I had in the house—and the remainder by cheque."

"Indeed!" said Inspector Jameson sharply. "Twenty-one pounds in cash? Why, there was not a coin of any description upon the body."

The doctor leaned forward eagerly.

"Then, surely, that seems to point to the fact that Ford was waylaid and robbed upon the dark road?" he asked.

"Please proceed with your story, doctor," said Jameson curtly.

"There is very little more to tell," was the reply. "By the time we had squared things up, we found that the last train had already left Bellington. In a moment of generosity, therefore, I offered to take Ford into Bannington on my car—so that we would be able to catch the night mail to London."

"You didn't take him all the way, did you?"

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind how I know," said the inspector.

"Oh, I suppose Williams has been talking," said Brett, with some bitterness. "He isn't to be blamed, of course. No, inspector, I did not take Ford all the way. Soon after we had passed out of the village the cad insulted me shamefully. You don't wish to hear how, I suppose? Ford made some insinuating remarks concerning my sister, and I became so furious that I stopped the car abruptly."

"And then?" asked Jameson, leaning forward.

Dr. Brett laughed.

"No, I didn't kill the man, if that is what you are thinking," he said quietly. "I pulled the car to a standstill and bundled Ford out into the road, telling him he could walk the rest of the way to Bannington. To be quite frank, I was sick of him. He attempted to apologise, but I left him standing in the road and drove away."

"And that was the last you saw of him?" asked Nelson Lee, speaking for the first time.

"Yes, old man, that was the last I saw of him," said Dr. Brett quietly. "I didn't lay a finger upon him—I didn't harm a hair of his head. I came straight home, and handed the car over to Williams, briefly telling him what had occurred. I am shocked to learn that Ford has been killed, and—I repeat—the affair is a complete mystery to me."

There was a short silence, and Inspector Jameson rose to his feet.

"You have nothing more to say?" he asked coldly.

"Nothing. What do you intend to do?"

"Well, much as I regret it, I must request you to accompany me to Bannington, Dr. Brett," said the inspector. "If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear. You will agree, however, that I have every justification for placing you under arrest?"

Brett was silent. He sat gripping the arms of his chair, and stared straight before him. The Bo'sun and I exchanged uneasy glances. Only the gov'nor's face was absolutely immobile. It was quite impossible to tell what was passing in his mind. Inspector Jameson's face was an open book. He was smiling rather curiously. I knew that he discredited the whole story. He believed, and not without justification, that Dr. Brett and Mr. Stephen Ford had had a quarrel by the roadside—indeed, the doctor had admitted as much.

Was it not feasible to suppose that the pair had come to blows—that Brett had used a spanner in a sudden fit of fury? The very weapon itself was significant. I had seen spanners of that description in the tool-boxes of motor-cars many a time.

Having killed Ford, the doctor had been frightened, and had dragged the body into the hedge—that is how the inspector read the case, I was sure. He also believed that Brett had removed the cash from his victim's pocket.

Even the Bo'sun and I felt just a wee doubt. The whole thing, from beginning to end, was so absolutely obvious. A moment later, however, I felt ashamed of myself for having had even a tiny doubt.

Nelson Lee rose to his feet, and the doctor regarded him anxiously.

"Do—do you believe this yarn, Alvington?" he asked huskily. "Man alive, you can't think that I am guilty——"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"There's my hand, doctor," he said, thrusting his fist forward. "I frankly believe your story in every detail."

"Thanks, old man—thanks!" muttered Dr. Brett gratefully.

"And I believe it, too, sir," I exclaimed quickly.

"Souise my scuppers, so do I!" declared the Bo'sun.

Dr. Brett looked from one to another of us with shining eyes. But before he could speak the inspector intervened.

"Really, I cannot allow this," he exclaimed briskly.

"And why not?" was Dr. Brett's angry demand. "Am I not permitted to hear my friends' opinions? I am willing to accompany you to Bannington, inspector, but I will not

suffer any indignity you choose to place on me. Before long, when my innocence is positively established, you will feel sorry for having adopted this overbearing attitude."

"I advise you to keep silent," snapped the inspector sourly.

I felt like punching the rotter's nose. The guv'nor shook Brett's hand again, and smiled cheerfully.

"There is some mystery which must be cleared up," he said. "You may rest assured, Brett, that I will do the utmost in my power to bring the truth to light. Whilst you are under detention, I will use every effort to establish your innocence."

"If you will take my advice, Mr. Alvington," said the inspector curtly, "you will go back to your school and remain there. Candidly, I will allow no interference on your part. Now, Dr. Brett, I am ready, if you are."

And Inspector Jameson, fairly strutting with importance, departed with his prisoner. We left the house with them, and saw them go off in the inspector's car.

"The—the rotter!" I exclaimed hotly. "By jingo, I'd like to tell him a few things, sir! But the case is awfully black against Dr. Brett, isn't it?"

The guv'nor nodded slowly.

"Very black indeed, Bennett!" he replied. "But we need not worry ourselves unduly. Brett is a friend of mine, and I mean to ferret out the complete truth before I have done."

And there was something in Nelson Lee's tone which gave me complete confidence.

CHAPTER IV.

(Nelson Lee continues the narrative.)

IN WHICH I ESSAY A BACK-ACHING TASK,
AND MEET WITH SOME SUCCESS.

NIPPER, who is anxious to have the facts set down concerning the mysterious death of Mr. Stephen Ford, has requested me to place upon paper certain events—which I am here doing.

I was not in the least surprised at Inspector Jameson's attitude. He certainly had a very clear case, but I was quite convinced that I should find a flaw in it somewhere.

I had known Dr. Brett for some months, and I have been told that I am a judge of character. I believe I am. And I would have staked my life that Dr. James Brett was the last man in the world to commit any violent crime—or, for that matter, any crime at all.

The evidence against him was all of a circumstantial character; and, although that seemed to be conclusive, it would not take much to upset it. One flaw would send the whole structure crashing. I made up my mind to detect that flaw. To commence with, I dismissed Nipper and Burton. It was impossible for me to have Nipper with me during the morning—and, to tell the truth, I was glad to be rid of him

This does not mean to imply that Nipper is useless. On the contrary, my young assistant has proved his worth on scores of different occasions. Just at present, however, I wanted to be quite alone; I wanted to pursue this investigation quietly, and without interruption.

Naturally, Nipper did not see the thing in the same light; he badly wanted to stay with me. But his absence from the Form-room would have caused unwelcome comment. He and Burton, therefore, returned to breakfast and lessons whilst I turned my steps in the direction of the Bannington Road.

I walked slowly, for I was thinking. This disaster which had befallen Dr. Brett was terribly serious. At the best, he would be held by the police for some little time; at the worst he would be condemned for murder. I did not allow the latter possibility to enter into my calculations.

It was my desire to gain the doctor's freedom at the earliest possible moment. His practice would suffer greatly if he was absent for long. Brett was a splendid fellow, and he and I were big friends—although he knew me only as "Mr. Alvington." If I succeeded in freeing him from this trouble, I reflected, I might take him into my confidence. I knew well enough that my secret would be safe with him.

It must have been a full hour before I arrived at the spot where the body had been found. It had been removed, and not a soul was within sight with the exception of Constable Beckett. This worthy minion of the law was leaning against a gateway, smoking placidly, and against all rules. I assumed that he had been placed on duty until the police had finished their inquiry.

I had half expected to find a few gaping country folk there, for it is a curious fact that people of all classes are morbidly attracted to any spot where a dreadful crime has been committed. The absence of this usual crowd (even on a quiet road like this) told me that the story of the crime had not yet become public property.

"You still 'anging about, sir?" remarked Beckett brilliantly.

"It looks like it, constable, doesn't it?" I said, pausing and lighting a cigarette. "I am rather interested in this case, to tell you the truth. Dr. Brett is a friend of mine. You have been left in charge, I presume?"

He nodded.

"That's right, sir," he agreed: "not but what it's foolish. I can't see why I should spend my time 'ere. The body was took away twenty minutes ago. It's a bad business, sir. I never thought as how that doctor feller could be guilty of such a thing—although some people do say as doctors is generally responsible for a lot of deaths," he added, with an attempt at humour.

"The inspector took the spanner away?" I asked.

"That's right, sir—that spanner's evidence," said the constable. "My, but the inspector was real pleased with himself this mornin'! I ain't seen 'im so good-tempered for years an' years!"

I smiled, and nodded towards the hedge.

"Have you had orders that nobody is to go near the spot?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"H'm! I was thinking of examining it—"

"You, sir?" said Beckett, staring. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, I don't see as how you can find much—why, even I ain't been able to see anything—an' I'm a policeman!"

The comparison was not exactly flattering to myself, and I could scarcely restrain a smile. Before I could speak, however, Beckett resumed.

"Not as I mind you havin' a look round, sir," he said condescendingly. "I don't see 'ow it'll make much difference, one way or the t'other!"

"Possibly not—possibly not, Beckett," I said. "I am merely an anxious friend, and I don't suppose I shall be able to discover anything of note. However, accidents are always liable to occur; even a simpleton such as myself may hit upon a clue."

The man looked at me rather suspiciously; I believe he had an idea that I was indulging in a little gentle chaff.

"Why, don't you believe Dr. Brett did it?" he asked.

"Between ourselves, Beckett, I don't," I said frankly. "I am quite sure that your astute inspector has acted with undue haste. I do not think it was necessary for him to place Dr. Brett under arrest so promptly. A little careful attention may throw quite another complexion upon the case. Mr. Jameson apparently did not think it necessary to look further than his nose."

"Well, that's a fairish way, sir," said Beckett, with a grin.

I smilingly agreed, for the inspector's nose was undoubtedly prominent. Having established amicable relations with the constable, I set about my work. Believing Brett to be innocent, it stood to reason that somebody else was guilty. My task, therefore, was to find traces of the real murderer.

That he was a man of unusual strength went without saying. Only a man with exceptional muscular power could have wielded an upward blow with a short spanner resulting in a fractured skull so appallingly serious as that which killed the unfortunate Mr. Stephen Ford. Indeed, I doubted if Brett himself could have exerted the necessary strength, for the doctor was not a powerful man.

I closely examined the ground near the hollow in the ditch where the body had been lying. There were many interesting marks, but it was difficult to separate the trail of the police from that of others.

At the foot of a clump of weeds I found something which gave me great satisfaction. It was the stump of a blackened clay pipe—just the bowl, with a couple of inches of stem. There was tobacco in it, and its state clearly proved that the pipe had not been lying in the ditch longer than a few hours.

I did not let Beckett see my trophy, but stored it carefully away. Then I satisfied myself that a person of considerable bulk

had forced his way through the hedge a few yards further on. The constable assured me that none of the police had performed this manœuvre. Dr. Brett hadn't, and it left the undoubted certainty that somebody unknown was responsible.

Many of the smaller twigs were smashed off, and the exposed wood was still fresh. I became very keen, and pressed my investigations closely. I was rewarded at the end of a fifteen-minute survey of the ground near the hedge. On a moist patch of clayey soil I discovered a faint, but well-defined impression of a man's boot. A short distance from this there were other tracks of a similar character.

Foot by foot I progressed. The moor stretched out before me, bare and uneven, rising in rocky hillocks here and there, and often descending into little valleys. In my rear Constable Beckett lounged upon the gateway, eyeing me with flagging interest. He probably set me down as a crank.

I knew, however, that I was on the trail of the murderer—of the man who had fled from the road after doing Stephen Ford to death.

If there had been any possible doubt in my mind, this was dispelled by a discovery I made a few hundred yards from the road.

It had taken me well over an hour to progress this distance, for it was only by constant attention and care that I had kept to the trail. Without my years of experience to assist me I should have been utterly helpless.

The discovery I made was significant.

A small root projected from the ground. It was torn, and it was not necessary for me to guess what had happened. The man, who had been running, had caught his foot in the root in the darkness. He had crashed over full length, for definite marks in the ground proved this much.

But what attracted my attention most, however, was a dull smear upon the hard ground. It was slightly brown in colour, and I knew, at the first glance, that it was blood. Now, even if the man had grazed his hand owing to the fall, he could not have caused that smear upon the ground. I felt assured that I was gazing upon Stephen Ford's blood.

I detected the marks where the unknown had commenced running again, and for several hundred yards, where the grass was patchy, I progressed without difficulty. Then came a dry, hard track of ground, and I lost the trail completely. Time after time I fancied I had picked it up again. In this way another hour sped by, and I began to grow impatient and irritable. It was not until I was on the point of giving up that I again met with success.

I had made a detour at random, and abruptly arrived upon a shallow, sandy hollow. And here, staring me in the face, were the boldest tracks I had yet seen. The man had evidently changed his direction—unconsciously, possibly—and it was this move on his part which had upset me.

From this point, however, I progressed



Lying at the bottom of the hedge, in a shallow ditch, was the body of a man. The man was dead!—(See page 4.)

well. And at length I arrived upon the edge of the old moor quarry. At this point there was no precipitous drop—merely a steep, grassy slope. And, gazing down, I saw that the ground had been rudely disturbed.

"I'll warrant the fellow received a rare fright here," I told myself. "He must have run over the edge in the darkness, and it was lucky for him that the slope is not exceedingly steep at this point. Otherwise he would have gone to certain death."

I was about to scramble down the slope when I heard a far-away hail. Turning round with a frown, I observed Nipper and two other boys coming towards me at a run. My frown deepened for a moment, but then I chuckled. Nipper had brought Tregellis-West and Watson with him—and, as they were acquainted with our secret, their presence would not hamper me. With Burton, however, I had been obliged to act a part. Of course, I could have trusted the Bo'sun, too; but it was simply out of the question to admit everybody into my confidence. The secret would have been no secret at all.

The boys arrived breathless.

"We managed to get away, guv'nor," panted Nipper triumphantly. "By Jingo, it's ripping to be able to talk freely—not a soul can hear on the moor here. You can be Nelson Lee, and I can be Nipper. These grinning asses don't count!"

The "grinning asses," as Nipper had insultingly called his chums, did not look quite so cheerful when they observed my grim expression.

"Who told you to come here, Nipper?" I asked severely.

Nipper, the young rascal, was not to be frightened.

"Oh, come off it, guv'nor!" he grinned. "Those tricks won't work with me, you know. You ain't old Alvy now, thank goodness—and that frown doesn't suit your handsome features in the least, sir!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie, rather shocked.

"I repeat, Nipper, who told you to come here?" I said sternly.

"Oh, rats! I told myself," said Nipper. "Morning lessons are over, guv'nor, and I thought that I might be useful. Tommy and Montie are simply bursting to do something in the detective line. Have you found anything?" he rattled on, without giving me time to speak. "I thought you'd be somewhere here, sir, pottering about."

"Allow me to inform you, young 'un, that it is not my habit to potter about," I said, smiling in spite of myself. "Well, I suppose I must accept this impertinence on your part as a necessary evil. The discipline of St. Frank's apparently serves to make you more cheeky when you are free to speak openly. Has the news reached St. Frank's yet?"

"Not a sound, sir," replied Nipper.

"I'm glad of that—we may be able to secure Brett's release almost as soon as the news of his arrest gets abroad," I exclaimed crisply. "I have not been idle this morning, boys."

"What have you found out, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

I told him, and he and his chums were very eager. Tregellis-West and Watson gazed down into the old quarry expectantly, but there was nothing to be seen with the exception of rough masses of earth and rocks.

"What's the next move, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Well, I am going to continue my search——"

"Great pip!" gasped Tommy Watson suddenly. "Look—look there!"

I turned quickly, and for a second I caught a glimpse of a man's figure behind a towering formation of rock. Even as I watched, however, the man disappeared.

CHAPTER V.

(Nelson Lee continues.)

AN EXCITING CHASE AND THE CAPTURE OF SIMMONS—THE INSPECTOR IS NOT EXACTLY PLEASED WITH THE TURN OF EVENTS.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST took a deep breath.

"Begad! Did—did you see, sir?" he gasped.

"I did, Montie, I did!" I replied grimly. "The man doubtless heard our voices, and peeped round to see who we were. I hardly hoped that we should find him so handy."

"Perhaps he's only a farm-labourer——"

"A farm-labourer would have no reason for concealment, Nipper," I interjected. "This man dodged back the instant he caught sight of me. But come—we must not waste a second! Be careful, boys!"

While I was speaking I commenced scrambling down the uneven slope. Nipper and his chums followed me without hesitation, and we slithered and slid down the steep quarry-side until we reached the comparatively level ground at the bottom.

Then, racing along, we turned the pile of rocks, and came within sight of the main portion of the quarry—a bare, drab place at the best of times. At the far side of the great space, and quite a long way from us, a big figure was running rapidly.

"By James," I muttered, "he'll escape us if we're not careful!"

I ran with every ounce of speed possible. The boys attempted to keep pace with me, but were unable to do so. I forged ahead rapidly, and knew that I was gaining upon the fugitive. The very fact that he had fled proved that he had excellent reason to avoid the society of other men.

Whilst I was still tearing across the uneven ground, the man was commencing the ascent of the opposite slope. This one was more difficult than the one we had descended, and he did not make rapid progress.

With a glance back he saw that I was close upon him, and that the boys were not so very far behind me. And, with desperate energy, he forced his way higher and higher, attempting to reach the level ground beyond.

Once he succeeded in doing so, he would stand quite an excellent chance of eluding me—and he knew it. For the dark bulk of Bellton Wood was only just beyond the quarry. Within its depths the fellow could hide effectively.

Therefore I redoubled my own efforts, and reached the steep slope while he was more than half-way to the top. I realised that the man had all the advantage. There were loose boulders everywhere, and one or two of these, hurled down, would be ugly customers to dodge.

I was not wrong in my surmise, for I suddenly saw the man reach over to a heavy boulder which lay near by. I set my teeth grimly, and even felt alarmed when I remembered that the boys were climbing up in my rear. Even if the boulder missed me, it might—

But then something happened which was quite unexpected.

The brute's evil intention never materialised. His foot slipped as he exerted his strength in lifting the boulder. It was not so very heavy, to judge by the look of it, but the man had great difficulty in even dislodging it. I judged that it had been firmly wedged.

He gave a yelp as he slipped. But, although he vainly endeavoured to recover his balance, he did not succeed. The next second he toppled completely over, and came slithering down full upon me.

His bulk would have sent me flying if I had remained in my present position. I don't think I have ever moved quite so quickly before in my life. It would have been futile to make any attempt to stop the man's headlong plunge—I should merely have made matters worse.

I shouted to the boys to stand clear. The stranger rolled past, yelling with fright. His speed was considerable. But, fortunately, there were no jagged rocks on the slope. And at last the man's rush was brought to a stop. His leg caught in a deep crevice, and he fell in a heap and rolled over and over until he lay still.

"Upon my soul!" I exclaimed, taking a deep breath.

The incident had not occupied twenty seconds from start to finish, but it had been rather thrilling. The only one who suffered was the fugitive; and he, I feared, was in a very bad way.

Nipper and his chums had been climbing the slope some little distance to the left, and they had been in no peril at all. Now they went scrambling helter-skelter down to the fallen stranger.

But I reached him first, and found him groaning painfully. His eyes were open—small, beady eyes, with a hunted expression in them.

His face was coarse, and a tangled beard covered the lower part of his features.

"It wasn't me, gov'nor—s'help me, it wasn't me!" he muttered hoarsely.

I was rather astonished to find him conscious, and even more astonished when he

sat up. He gave a sharp, agonised cry as he moved his right leg.

"It's broke, sir—broke clean!" he moaned.

I bent down and examined the limb—finding that the only injury was a decidedly severe ankle sprain. The fellow was quite unharmed otherwise, except for numerous scratches and grazes.

"It's a wonder he's alive, sir!" said Nipper breathlessly.

"Begad, I thought he was done for—I did, really!" murmured Tregellis-West. "He looks like a murderer—"

"I didn't do it, boss—I didn't touch the bloke!" panted the injured man. "I'm Ben Simmons—an' I ain't never 'urt a fly!"

I regarded him grimly.

"Nevertheless, you apparently know my object in chasing you," I exclaimed. "If you will take my advice, Simmons, you will make a clean breast of it at once. There is no chance of your—"

"I didn't kill 'im, sir! I tell yer I didn't touch 'im!" panted the man desperately. "I found 'im lying there, in the 'edge—dead!"

Just for a moment a doubt crept into my mind; but then I cast it aside. There could be no mistake here—and, very shortly afterwards, my conviction became more certain. His denial did not ring true. He was simply crying with terror, and could scarcely speak fluently.

"I am not a police officer, but I should advise you to tell me the truth," I said sternly. "Now, my man, speak up!"

"I've been 'iding in that quarry all the bloomin' night!" he muttered hoarsely. "I knowed you'd be after me. But I didn't do no more than take the bloke's money—I swears that on me oath!"

"What have you done with it?" I asked.

He fumbled in his pocket, and produced a purse. Within one compartment of this I found £21 in currency notes, and five shillings—the exact sum that Stephen Ford had received from Dr. Brett. In another pocket there was a quantity of loose change, this being, without a doubt, Ford's own cash.

"Why, it's as clear as a bell!" exclaimed Nipper. "The rotter must have knocked Mr. Ford down in the darkness, and robbed him afterwards. Perhaps he didn't know that he'd killed him at the time—"

"I never touched 'im!" muttered Simmons obstinately.

"It is really unnecessary for you to say that," I exclaimed. "At all events, my man, you admit the theft—you admit that you were concerned in the tragedy. We have every reason to hand you over to the police. But, for your own sake—"

"I found the body lyin' there—I did, straight!" said Simmons, with husky desperation. "It was dark, an' I was trampin' along the road when I 'appened to see somethin' in the 'edge. I paused just there to light a fag-end, an' I see somethin' white shinin' in the 'edge."

"Well?" I asked grimly.

"I went to see what it was, gov'nor, an' found a gent lyin' on 'is face," said the

tramp. "That's the truth, sir! I thought 'e was dead drunk, an' it ain't any use denyin' that I took 'is brass. It was a good opportunity, but I ain't afraid of servin' a bit o' time for pinchin'. It won't be the first time, not by long chalks. But I didn't 'urt the man—'e was dead already."

"Rot!" said Nipper warmly.

"'E was dead when I found 'im," insisted Simmons. "I 'appened to put my 'and up to 'is 'ead, an' I felt somethin'—sticky. An' then it came 'ome to me what was the matter. The bloke was dead, an' my 'and was all covered with 'is blood. I just gave a scream, guv'nor, an' broke through the 'edge. I've never run so fast afore. An' fallin' down this 'ere quarry properly put the lid on it. I was scared so much that I couldn't move a hinch!"

I pocketed the purse, and Nipper and I then searched the rascal for further spoils. We found a gold watch and chain, a cigarette-case, and several other small valuables. The man had no excuse.

He had robbed Stephen Ford, and his story of the encounter was altogether too thin to be believed. I could easily picture the whole occurrence.

Ford, having been left on the road by Dr. Brett, had commenced the trudge into Bannington. Simmons had seen him—had, perhaps, followed him. The tramp already had the spanner in his possession—in all probability he had picked it up during his rambles—and he used it now as a weapon of offence.

I gave Simmons the benefit of the doubt with regard to the actual death-blow. I don't think he intended murder. In the darkness, however, he must have misjudged his distance, and his strength; and the spanner had crashed upon Ford's skull with such force that the man was killed instantly.

Simmons was frightened at this—he had not bargained for such a situation. And, having robbed his victim, he had dragged him into the ditch, leaving the spanner there in his sudden state of terror.

I judged that he had fled so precipitately across the moor because some vehicle was approaching along the road—the mail-van probably, which generally ran through Belton towards midnight.

The fall into the quarry had unnerved Simmons completely. And the knowledge of what he had done had kept him skulking among the rocks, mortally afraid to venture abroad. He wasn't a murderer at heart—I believed that—but he was undoubtedly responsible for Stephen Ford's death.

Simmons was a huge man, with arms like those of a navvy. He could have almost killed a man with his bare fist. And it is always possible for an exceptionally strong man to miscalculate his own muscular power.

Needless to say, I was highly elated. My investigation had borne fruit immediately. Dr. Brett, indeed, was safe now, for the police could not possibly maintain their charge against him in the light of the new evidence.

Not one murderer in a hundred confesses guilt when first discovered; it was only natu-

ral that Simmons should tell a false story. He had probably spent the whole night in concocting a plausible tale. It wasn't plausible, however—it was obviously a string of lies.

I turned to Nipper.

"Run to the road as fast as you can, my boy," I said. "Bring the constable back with you—you will find him on point duty at the spot where the murder took place. I intend to give this man in charge at once."

The prisoner suddenly scowled with fury.

"You—you interferin' 'ound!" he snarled venomously.

I took no notice of him, but nodded to Nipper. The latter went off as quickly as his legs would carry him. Sir Montie and Tommy Watson remained with me. They were both looking excited.

"Begad! And is Dr. Brett cleared now, sir?" asked Tregellis-West.

"I do not see how the police can hold him any longer, my boy," I replied. "With luck, we ought to effect the doctor's release this afternoon."

"Is—is there some other bloke collered for killin' the man?" asked Simmons sullenly.

"Yes," said Watson.

"'E did it—it wasn't me, guv'nor!" declared the tramp. "The other bloke did it! You bloomin' brute, you! If my ankle wasn't twisted so's I couldn't use it, I'd put it acrost yer— But that wouldn't be no good," he added. "I ain't got the strength in me arm to even 'urt yer."

I merely smiled at this. For Simmons to declare that he had practically no strength in his arms was rather humorous. He was almost a giant, with huge, heavy limbs, which told of exceptional strength.

It wasn't long before Nipper returned. And he brought, not only the constable, but Inspector Jameson himself. The worthy police official was looking decidedly testy and short tempered.

"I found the inspector just arriving in his car, sir," explained Nipper, as he approached in advance. "Rather lucky, wasn't it?"

"Undoubtedly, Bennett," I replied—being now compelled to use Nipper's school name. "I had been wondering how we should convey our prisoner to Bannington."

Jameson gazed at the tramp sourly, and then eyed me.

"Who's this fellow?" he asked abruptly.

"His name is Simmons," I replied, "and I have every reason to believe that he is connected with the murder of Mr. Stephen Ford."

The inspector snapped his fingers.

"Stuff and nonsense, sir!" he exclaimed irritably, while Nipper and his chums stood looking on with smiling faces. "Sheer stuff and nonsense! I advised you, Mr. Alvington, to refrain from interfering in matters which are outside your province. I am sorry to speak in this way, but you compel me to do so. You fondly imagine, I presume, that this tramp is connected with the crime?"

I shook my head.

"I do not imagine so," I replied; "I am sure of it."

Inspector Jameson laughed.

"Your efforts to assist Dr. Brett are undoubtedly praiseworthy, Mr. Alvington," he said mockingly. "But, I assure you, the doctor will receive no benefit from affairs of this nature. You are a schoolmaster, and it is not to be supposed that you can see things in the same light that I do myself. The presence of this tramp in the vicinity is of no significance whatever—I intend to let him go."

"That's right, guv'nor!" said Simmons eagerly. "Tell the old fool off! 'E don't know what 'e's a-doin' of. Schoolmaster, is 'e? Interferin' in what don't concern 'im—it's sickenin'!"

"You—you can't let the chap go free!" burst out Nipper hotly.

"Silence, boy!" snapped the inspector.

"Rot!" roared Nipper. "You old duffer

"What!" gasped Jameson, going red with fury. "How—how dare you?"

"Bennett, you must not use insulting terms," I exclaimed severely. "At the same time, I do not blame you, for the inspector has acted in a manner which stamps him as a man of little imagination——"

"Indeed, sir?" fumed the inspector, glaring at me.

"You force me to speak candidly, Mr. Jameson," I went on deliberately. "You have accused me of being an interfering busybody; you have stated that you will allow this man to go free. I regret to observe that you possess that instinct which characterises so many police officials. Having made an arrest, you intend to prove your case against Dr. Brett—regardless of the fact that other evidence proves him to be innocent. If you had your way, you would ignore the information I have to give, since it will bring about the collapse of your own case. Fortunately, Inspector Jameson, you will not be allowed to have your own way. And you must permit me to point out that you are a servant of the public, and that it is your plain duty to use all your efforts to further the ends of justice."

Inspector Jameson was simply boiling with wrath.

"Upon my soul!" he stuttered. "Upon my soul! If you are not careful, sir, I shall place you under arrest for——"

"Tut—tut!" I interrupted sharply. "You are talking nonsense, now, inspector. Your dignity, I am afraid, has received a fall. I desire to be on amiable terms with you, and regret that it has been necessary for me to speak so plainly. Although I am a schoolmaster, I am not quite the fool you set me down for. I should not request you to arrest this man without positive evidence that he is connected with the Ford murder. As to whether he actually committed the crime, I leave that for you to determine. It is your duty, and not mine."

"And why, pray, do you assume that this man is connected with the crime?" asked the inspector sourly. "I shall not interfere with him unless you can give me some very

convincing proof of his connection with the affair."

I nodded.

"To begin with, Mr. Jameson, I must inform you that I doubted the doctor's guilt at the very start," was my reply. "After you had taken my friend to Bannington, I walked to the scene of the crime. Very careful examination made it clear that somebody had broken through the hedge near the spot. I succeeded in picking up the tracks of this man, and followed them to the edge of the quarry."

"Well?" asked the inspector doubtfully.

"Whilst I was talking to these boys, Simmons revealed himself," I continued. "We immediately gave chase, and should probably have lost him but for the fact that he slipped and badly sprained his ankle."

Jameson sneered openly.

"And that is all the evidence you have to offer?" he snapped. "My dear sir, my patience is completely at an end——"

"I am sorry for that," I interjected evenly, "since I must ask you to indulge me a few moments longer. It is a fact, is it not, that the sum of £21 5s. in cash is missing from the dead man's pocket? It is also a fact that the dead man's watch and chain were not to be found. Do you suppose that Dr. Brett took——"

"If you wish to know the absolute truth, Mr. Alvington," cut in the inspector, "I was on my way to Dr. Brett's house when this impudent boy stopped my car. It is my intention to search Brett's premises thoroughly—and I have little doubt that I shall find the missing money and valuables."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "That would be surprisin'—what?"

"Oh, let him run on!" growled Nipper disgustedly.

I produced a purse from my pocket.

"Possibly this will interest you, inspector?" I said quietly. "There is a monogram, as you will observe, stamped upon the leather—'S. F.' Am I foolish in assuming that those initials stand for Stephen Ford? In one compartment you will find the exact sum of £21 5s."

Inspector Jameson started back.

"You—you mean——"

"Exactly" I nodded. "This purse was in Simmons's possession."

The inspector grabbed it hastily, and examined it with quivering fingers. When he had concluded, I produced the watch and cigarette case.

"These, too, were found in the fellow's pockets," I continued. "Both the cigarette case and the watch bear the engraved initials 'S. F.' Do you think I am so very insane in supposing that Simmons stole the articles from Stephen Ford? If you will take the trouble to look, inspector, you will find a distinct bloodstain upon the man's sleeve—a stain which could not have been caused by a mere graze or cut. You must remember, also, that I tracked him from the actual scene of the crime."

Inspector Jameson acted in a manner which surprised me.

"Mr. Alvington, I owe you an apology," he said quietly. "I thoroughly deserved your—your dressing-down, shall we call it? You have convinced me that there has been a grave error, and I trust that you will forgive me."

I thrust out my hand at once.

"My dear inspector, we need say no more about it," I exclaimed heartily. "I only hope that you will do your utmost to secure Dr. Brett's release at the earliest possible moment."

CHAPTER VI.

(Nelson Lee continues.)

I RECEIVE A SHOCK, BUT AM ONLY SPURRED ON TO GREATER EFFORTS.

NIPPER and his two chums, the young rascals, took a mean advantage over me. They kept very quiet, and when Inspector Jameson's car started for Bannington, they took their seats behind without uttering a word. Indeed, it was not until we were nearly in the town that I realised their presence.

It wasn't a half-holiday, of course, and afternoon lessons were due to commence already. Nipper was quite certain that I should not send him back to St. Frank's once he had arrived in Bannington with me.

And when I turned in my seat and regarded him with a severe eye, he merely grinned with triumph. Watson and Tregellis-West, however, were looking rather guilty. They were not so bare-faced as my incorrigible young assistant.

"What is the meaning of this, Bennett?" I asked sternly.

"We thought we'd come along, sir," he replied, with an air of innocence which almost made me smile. "Nothing wrong in that, is there, sir? We've missed our dinners—and just consider the saving of food in these hard times."

"I can well imagine how much food will be saved, you rascal," I replied. "You will fully compensate for your loss of dinner at tea time, I am well assured. I leave it to the inspector to determine whether you shall remain with us or not."

Just for a moment Nipper looked anxious.

"Oh, they can come!" said the inspector. "I oughtn't to allow it, but we'll let it pass."

The boys chuckled amongst themselves, and I turned to Jameson with some remark concerning the prisoner. This grimy individual was sitting beside me in the front seat, sullen and morose. We had no fear that he would make any dash for freedom, for his ankle was really bad.

Bannington was quiet when we passed through it, and pulled up in front of the police station. The inspector and I assisted the prisoner into the building. Here I related my story to Superintendent Dixon,

who had come to the town during the morning, in response to the inspector's appeal. A murder case was not commonplace in Bannington.

The superintendent was a genial little man, and he thanked me heartily for the efforts I had taken.

"Undoubtedly Dr. Brett is innocent," he exclaimed. "In the light of this fresh evidence we cannot very well detain him much longer. I have no doubt that we should have tracked Simmons to earth ourselves, Mr. Alvington, but this prompt capture is solely due to your shrewdness and foresight."

Simmons maintained his innocence sullenly, although he freely confessed to the robbery. Under the circumstances, he could scarcely do anything else—since the stolen property had been found upon him.

Whilst Nipper and his chums remained in the waiting-room, I was permitted to have a short chat with Brett. I found him in a private room—not in a cell, of course—looking extremely downhearted.

"So they've allowed you to see me?" he exclaimed, brightening somewhat. "Good heavens, Alvington, I scarcely know what I am doing. The police are mad—mad! I didn't touch Ford—"

"My dear fellow, I have been busy," I interposed smilingly. "With luck, you will be free before the day is out."

Dr. Brett's eye gleamed, and he started forward.

"What has happened?" he asked eagerly. I told him, and he listened with growing excitement.

"Simmons killed him, of course!" he exclaimed. "Alvington, you're a brick—you're a real friend! How did you manage to get on the track so easily? One might think you were a detective!"

"You flatter me," I smiled drily.

I mentally resolved to take Brett into my confidence before long—when a suitable opportunity occurred. We remained talking for quite a while, and then a constable came and told me that my presence was required in the superintendent's office.

I went at once, hoping that Brett was to be allowed to return to Bellton with me. As I soon found, however, I was required for quite another purpose.

Superintendent Dixon was looking very grave. There was another man with him, and I wondered what was amiss.

"I am afraid that it will be impossible to release Dr. Brett just yet, Mr. Alvington," said the superintendent. "This gentleman here is Dr. Browne, the surgeon attached to this police station. He has examined the new prisoner, Simmons, and has been forced to arrive at a very definite conclusion. Your hope that Simmons is the culprit, and not Dr. Brett, is doomed to disappointment."

"Indeed?" I said quietly.

Dr. Browne nodded.

"The man simply couldn't have done it," he declared. "He does not possess sufficient power in his arms to deliver any violent blow. I doubt if he could even wield the spanner—"

"But, man alive, Simmons has arms like a dock labourer's!" I protested.

"A few months ago the man was as strong as a horse," agreed the police doctor. "Whilst I was attending his ankle, however, he requested me—urgently—to examine his arms. I did so at once."

"And discovered?" I hinted.

"That the limbs are appallingly weakened," said the surgeon. "Only recently, he informed me, he was in a serious motor accident. Both arms were broken above the elbow. The man's story is obviously true, for I have seen the proof of it—and he has also given me the name of the hospital to which he was taken after the accident. His arms are weakened for life. Strength will return to them, but never will it be fully restored. At present his arms are as weak as a child's."

"Dear me!" I exclaimed evenly. "This is rather surprising."

"It is most unfortunate," said the superintendent. "Matters are complicated, Mr. Alvington. It would have been a physical impossibility for Simmons to have delivered the death blow. He confesses to the robbery, however, and will be therefore charged. It remains, naturally, that Dr. Brett shall be detained on suspicion of being the actual murderer. You must admit, my dear sir, that the facts are black against him. He killed Ford and left him in the hedge. Simmons came along—exactly as he himself describes—and thought the body to be that of a drunken man. In the absence of any other possible culprit, it is imperative that we should hold Dr. Brett in custody."

"I quite appreciate your point," I agreed slowly.

Although I displayed no emotion, I was considerably taken aback. My theory was wrong! I had made a grave blunder, and Inspector Jameson would naturally be triumphant. At the same time, Simmons was certainly connected with the affair, and I had not been completely at fault. Upon due consideration I realised that Jameson would have nothing particular to "crow" about.

My hopes regarding Dr. Brett's release, however, were completely knocked on the head. I had fully believed that Simmons had killed Stephen Ford. And I was just as firmly convinced that Brett was innocent.

It was necessary for me to start all over again. Brett was innocent—and Simmons could not have committed the crime. Who, then, was the culprit? It was a tough problem to tackle.

I do not profess to be perfect. My failures have not been numerous; but occasionally a case will crumble up at the most unexpected moment; a choice selection of theories will collapse like a house of cards upon the discovery of one tiny flaw.

I felt genuinely sorry for Brett, and roundly abused myself for having spoken to him so prematurely. I scarcely cared for the task of telling him this fresh development.

I was thinking deeply, trying to puzzle

things out. I could not see any starting point for a fresh investigation. While thinking I idly picked up a newspaper, and scanned the front page without reading a line. My object in doing this was to assume an air of indifference in the presence of the police officials.

And then a very curious thing occurred.

A probable solution to the mystery came into my mind. It was an idea which seemed almost wild, and I dismissed it impatiently. At the same second my eye rested upon a line of type on the front page of the newspaper. I could scarcely repress a start, for the item of information I saw actually corroborated the theory I had dismissed a second earlier.

I read the paragraph carefully now, and then laid the newspaper aside.

"If I can produce absolute proof of Dr. Brett's innocence within the space of two hours," I asked briskly, "will you release him this evening?"

The superintendent stared.

"I do not quite see how you can produce such proof, Mr. Alvington," he said.

"There is a possibility that I may be able to—"

"I must ask you to explain what you mean exactly."

"I would prefer not to," I replied. "I have formed a theory, Superintendent Dixon, and I wish to test it before making any statement. There is a car outside, I believe—may I borrow it?"

"Really, you astonish me, sir," protested Dixon.

"May I borrow the car—for an hour?" I persisted.

The other hesitated.

"I wish you would be frank with me, Mr. Alvington," he said with a touch of irritability. "However, I see no reason why I should not oblige you—"

"Thank you," I cut in crisply.

And while the superintendent was still staring at me I hastened out of the room and emerged into the street. A minute later I was in the driving seat of the motor-car speeding towards the scene of the crime.

CHAPTER VII.

(The narrative concluded by Nipper.)

THE GUV'NOR GETS BUSY, AND WE DASH ABOUT ALL OVER THE SHOW, BUT THE MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT IS SOLVED.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST sighed. "Dear fellows, this is frightfully boring," he declared, yawning. "Old Alvy's a shockin' time, ain't he? Do you think we shall take Dr. Brett back with us, Benny?"

"We might," I replied without much enthusiasm. "But I've got an idea there's something gone wrong, my sons. Didn't you notice the way Old Alvy went into that room with the superintendent and the police doctor? They were as solemn as owls. I

don't know what's wrong, but there's a feeling in my bones that we've made a bloomer."

"About that tramp?" asked Tommy Watson, staring. "Rot!"

"I'm not so jolly sure he did it," I went on. "That yarn of his, about finding the body in the hedge, struck me as being too tall; but I've been thinking about it since. It's not so tall when you come to consider all the facts."

"Begad, I'm in a shockin' muddle—I am really!" said Tregellis-West. "An' I ain't sure that we did right in comin'. Benny. Old Crowell will be down on us like a ton of coals—"

"You ass!" I interrupted. "Alvy will make things right for us. I'd like to know what's going on, though."

I looked over at the door of the superintendent's room somewhat anxiously. We were in the waiting-room. This was a kind of lobby, really, with several doors leading out of it. The walls were distempered, the seats were hard, and an icy draught cut through it. By the wildest stretch of imagination it couldn't be called comfortable.

"We shall have to wait until——"

I paused abruptly, for a door had opened, and Nelson Lee appeared. He walked towards the exit so briskly that he had passed out before we could get to our feet. He hadn't even looked at us; I don't believe he knew we were there.

"Going, sir?" I called out, starting up.

The guv'nor didn't reply, and Sir Montie and Tommy and I dashed out and descended the steps. Nelson Lee was winding up the motor-car engine, and she commenced buzzing as we reached the pavement.

The guv'nor was in the driving-seat in a tick.

"Oh, begad, he's goin'!" said Sir Montie blankly.

"Seems to have forgotten all about us," was Watson's comment.

I grinned.

"We're of no importance," I chuckled. "The guv'nor's thought of something, my sons; he's always like this when he's keen— forgets everything. Come on!"

"Dear fellow——"

"We shall be left behind, you ass!"

As the guv'nor slipped the clutch in and the car started gliding away I wrenched open the door of the tonneau and hopped in. Tommy and Sir Montie followed my example, and we sank back into the soft cushions.

"My only hat!" gasped Tommy. "This is a bit of cheek, ain't it?"

"My dear kid, he doesn't know we're here," I grinned.

"But he will know, you ass!"

"Oh, he won't mind," I said comfortably. "You don't know the guv'nor the same as I do. He's hot on the track of something, but I wouldn't dream of asking him any questions. I should only get snapped up for my pains, anyhow."

We hadn't the slightest idea of what was in the wind; but I wasn't surprised when

we pulled up at the spot where Stephen Ford had been found. The constable was not on duty now, and the place was deserted.

"Hallo! I didn't know you boys were there!" snapped Lee, as he got out of the car.

"We jumped in as you were starting, guv'nor——"

"All right," he interjected. "Keep quiet, and don't interrupt me!"

"Can't I help, sir?"

"No, young 'un, you can't!"

And Nelson Lee turned abruptly and walked towards the hedge. I looked at Tommy Watson and Sir Montie, and winked.

"It's no good arguing with him when he's in this state," I said confidentially. "It's better to let him go his own way."

"He'll hear you, Benny!" muttered Watson.

"I don't mind if he does," I grinned.

But, although the guv'nor probably heard us, he was too intent upon what he was doing to take any notice. This afternoon was quite an exceptional one, and now that we had gone so far, I didn't see any reason why we shouldn't accompany the guv'nor until he had finished.

We had started out from St. Frank's after morning lessons with the intention of getting back to dinner. The Bos'un would have come with us, only Farman and Owen had collared him just before we started. And perhaps it was just as well that he hadn't come, for things wouldn't have been so free and easy. Of course, we had intended getting back after about an hour; but afternoon lessons were over by this time.

I watched the guv'nor with interest. He was examining the branches of the hedge with minute care. Now and again he would nod with satisfaction. I was afraid to go up close to him for fear of interrupting, and he hated anybody prying about when he was busy.

For about ten minutes he continued these examinations, and then he backed into the middle of the road and gazed up into the branches of a big tree. The tree itself was a few yards away, but the branches overhung the spot where the body had lain in the ditch.

"It is possible—quite possible," said Nelson Lee absently.

"What's possible, guv'nor?" I couldn't help asking.

"Eh? Oh!" Lee looked at me and frowned. "Nothing, Nipper—nothing!"

And, having made that illuminating remark, he stepped briskly over to the tree-trunk and commenced climbing it like a monkey. He shinned up it with astonishing agility.

"Great pip!" gasped Tommy Watson.

"He's gone dotty!"

"Don't you believe it, my back," I grinned. "The guv'nor does queer things sometimes, but he's always got a good reason for doing 'em."

Sir Montie gazed up through his pince-nez.

"I'm wonderin' what will happen if some

of those branches snap, you know," he said thoughtfully. "He seems to be in frightful peril, old boys!"

"Rats! He's gone up there with some object, you bet," I said firmly.

"Well, Benny boy, I don't suppose he climbed the tree just for the fun of it," remarked Sir Montie languidly. "Begad! He doesn't look safe at all!"

Tregellis-West wasn't far wrong. Nelson Lee had edged his way out along a branch until he stood exactly over the fatal spot. I saw that he was again examining the twigs. And I became thoughtful myself. What was his game? Somewhere in the back of my mind I seemed to get a faint inkling of the truth.

"My hat! I've got it," said Tommy Watson suddenly. "That tramp chap must have been hiding in the tree! And when Ford came along he jumped down on top of him! That's the truth, I'll bet a penny!"

"Ain't you brilliant?" I said sarcastically. "People walk in ditches, don't they? And what about the tramp? Of course, he'd be able to fall through that tree on to Ford's shoulders, and walk away whole, wouldn't he? Tommy, my dear old scout, you ain't much good at deduction!"

Watson looked a bit sheepish, but made no remark, except to the effect that we should see what we should see. Not daring to deny this, I gave my attention to the gov'nor again.

He was climbing to the ground now, and when he faced us there was a curious smile of satisfaction hovering over his face.

"Found anything, gov'nor?" I asked eagerly.

"Quite a lot, Nipper."

"Was it Simmons who killed Mr. Ford?"

"No, my lad, it wasn't!"

"Begad! Who did, sir?" asked Sir Montie mildly.

"Ah, you mustn't ask questions," was Nelson Lee's exasperating reply. "Before long, I hope, we shall have established the truth definitely. Until then, I don't wish to pass any opinion. I have already made one blunder over this affair, and I am not anxious to commit myself a second time."

"A blunder, sir?" I asked. "How?"

"I assumed that Simmons was guilty of the murder, Nipper."

"Well, sir?"

"He wasn't—that's all."

And the gov'nor, to my disgust, turned away briskly and walked to the car. I knew it would have been a hopeless task to question him now. I might just as well have talked to the engine of the motor-car.

"Where are we off to, sir?" I asked, feeling safe in putting that question.

"Bannington."

"To the police station, gov'nor?"

"As a preliminary—yes!"

And that's all I could get out of him. As a preliminary! That meant that we were going somewhere else afterwards. I simply gave it up, but determined to stick to Nelson

Lee like glue. Sir Montie and Tommy, naturally, would stick with me.

It was still full daylight, for events had been brisk. We romped into Bannington at full speed, and pulled up smartly before the police station.

"No, boys, don't follow me in," said the gov'nor. "I sha'n't be more than two minutes."

He was five, to be exact, so I judged that he had had some little difference with the police officials. His left coat-pocket hung heavily as though something of considerable weight was within it. My inkling of the truth was beginning to look somewhat sick, for I couldn't follow the trend of Nelson Lee's movements at all. He, however, was looking serenely contented.

Of course, he'd hit upon the solution: I knew that look of old. And I suspected that we were now on our way to collar the real murderer.

We drove out of Bannington again, but in the opposite direction, and soon arrived at the big military camp which was situated on the outskirts of the town. The car came to a halt opposite a "hut" where the colonel's quarters were situated. The sentry at the door informed the gov'nor that the colonel was within.

Nelson Lee marched straight through the doorway, leaving us on the step. I set my teeth, and turned to Sir Montie and Tommy.

"Now we're diddled!" I said desperately. "Just when he's got to the point we can't be with him. It's rotten!"

"What's he come here for, anyhow?" asked Tommy.

"How the dickens do I know, ass?"

I was snappy, and both Watson and Tregellis-West chuckled. I was seriously thinking of trying to slip past the sentry when Nelson Lee emerged, preceded by a tall, straight military officer with grey hair. He was the colonel commanding the camp.

"I think it's Lieutenant Bransby you want to see, my dear sir," he was saying. "We shall find him over— Ah, I think I can see him now."

A private was passing, and the colonel gave him orders to bring Lieutenant Bransby to us at once.

"It was quite a successful cruise," remarked the colonel. "I am exceedingly sorry to learn that— By the way, are these boys with you?" he added, eyeing us with stern disapproval.

"Yes, I brought them," smiled Nelson Lee. "It was Bennett who discovered the body in the hedge—as I told you."

"Ah, yes, of course," said the colonel. "A shocking affair, Mr. Alvington. I am more grieved than I can say. And an innocent man is now under arrest? Gad! But for your smartness he might even have been convicted!"

"We are not quite certain yet that my theory is correct," the gov'nor said gently. "Under all the circumstances, I do not think there can be much doubt upon the matter, however."

"No doubt whatever, sir," said the colonel.

At this moment a smart young officer came striding up. He saluted briskly, and stood looking from the colonel to Nelson Lee inquiringly.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Bransby," nodded the colonel. "This gentleman is Mr. Alvington, from St. Francis College. It appears that there was a mysterious death upon the lonely Bannington Road last night, and the police have arrested a friend of Mr. Alvington's on the grave charge of murder—at least, they hold him under suspicion. From what I can understand, it was a most tragic affair."

"But what the deuce can I do, sir?" asked the lieutenant in surprise.

"I merely wish you to answer a few questions," said Nelson Lee gently. "I understand, Lieutenant Bransby, that you were in command of the airship which was cruising over Bannington and district during the hours of last night?"

"That's right."

"Did you approach Bellton?"

"We passed right over the village."

"At what time?"

"I suppose it was close upon midnight."

"And you steered your course from Bellton to Bannington?" went on the gov'nor, while I took a deep breath.

"Hang it all, I can't tell you exactly," said the lieutenant, who was becoming somewhat irritable under this examination. "My dear sir, the night was dark, and we were not looking at the ground all the time, although the vessel was only a few hundred feet up."

"I quite understand that," said the school-master-detective. "Now, there is one very important question I wish to ask. Whilst on this trip, did you, or one of the men under your command, drop anything from the car?"

Lieutenant Bransby gave a little start.

"Why—yes," he said slowly.

"Can you tell me what it was you dropped?"

"It was the mechanic who made the slip," replied Bransby. "He was reaching over, and his foot happened to slide on some grease. I didn't know anything about it until afterwards, when he casually told me that he had dropped a spanner!"

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "A spanner?"

"Then—then it wasn't murder, after all?" burst out Tommy Watson excitedly.

"Murder?" said the lieutenant. "Who's talking about murder? Why, you don't mean to say—" He paused, and looked round him with an expression of deep concern. "It wasn't possible that the spanner killed anybody, was it?" he added.

"I regret to tell you that a gentleman was killed on the instant," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "It was a most extraordinary mishap but easily understandable. I must request you to accompany me to the police station, lieutenant. Your evidence will be sufficient to secure Dr. Brett's release."

"I'll come with pleasure," said Bransby.

"It's a terrible thing—a ghastly accident. Over all that wide space it was amazingly cruel that the spanner should fall upon a human being."

"By the way, I have the tool here," said Nelson Lee.

He produced it, and Lieutenant Bransby nodded.

"That's the fellow," he said, without hesitation. "It is a special type, manufactured only by the makers of a certain engine. Perhaps I had better go and root out that infernally careless mechanic——"

"No; your evidence will be sufficient just now," put in the gov'nor. "At the inquest, no doubt, it will be necessary for him to appear."

The mystery was solved, and Dr. Brett's release was only a matter of minutes. But, even now, there were several points which puzzled me exceedingly. How had the body been conveyed into the hedge? How was it that the terrible wound was at the base of the skull, and not on the crown, as one would suppose?

My own idea was completely off-side. I had assumed that somebody had been concealed in the tree, and had hurled the spanner down upon Ford as he passed. But the stumbling-block with that little theory had been that I couldn't see how the weapon had struck the back of the dead man's head.

It was this point which seemed to preclude all possibility of something dropped from the air. If Stephen Ford had been found upon the road with the top of his skull smashed, and the spanner lying beside him, the solution would have been fairly obvious.

But even Nelson Lee hadn't dreamed of such a thing until all else had failed. Ford had been found in the ditch, under the hedge. And that's where I'd stuck; I couldn't arrive at the truth.

At the police-station the lieutenant told his story concisely and without any waste of words. Both Superintendent Dixon and Inspector Jameson listened keenly, and did their utmost to make us believe that they had guessed the truth from the start. Dixon even hinted that he had been about to release Dr. Brett in any case. But, as I confided to Montie and Tommy, this was all swank.

"In the light of these facts it is plainly obvious that the affair was a disastrous mishap," said the superintendent. "Dr. Brett will be released at once, of course. We shall detain Simmons, however, since he has confessed to the crime of theft. There is one point, however, which rather puzzles me still. I must confess that I am at a loss."

"You are referring to the position of the body?"

"Exactly, Mr. Alvington—exactly!"

"I am afraid it can never be definitely proved how the body came to be there," said the gov'nor. "But we can, at least, form a very near conjecture. So far as I can see, there is only one explanation which will accurately fit in with the facts."

"And what is that, sir?"

The superintendent didn't like asking the question at all. It was below his dignity, as a high police official, to seek the opinion of a mere schoolmaster. But "Mr. Alvington" had proved himself so astute in this particular affair that both Dixon and the inspector were beginning to respect him highly.

"We will try and place ourselves in Mr. Ford's position," said the gov'nor. "The night was dark, and he was trudging along the road to Bannington. He was a stranger in this district, and was probably unaware of the fact that a military dirigible is housed close by. He heard the hum of its engines as it approached. What would he assume?"

"That it was a Zeppelin, probably," suggested the inspector.

"Precisely. That is how I look at it," nodded Nelson Lee. "Ford was possibly of a nervous disposition, and his first instinct was to seek cover. He therefore plunged into the hedge near a big tree. In performing this manoeuvre he was compelled to bend nearly double, and it was at this moment that the spanner fell. It crashed through the tree, and the force of its fall was somewhat broken. Unfortunately, however, it struck the poor man even while he was crouching down, and, as you will readily understand, the blow was at the base of the skull. He simply died as he fell, with the spanner close beside him. He was found in exactly that position. A terribly cruel trick of Fate, but purely accidental."

The police officials could only agree with Nelson Lee. His explanation of the affair was accurate, without a doubt.

Within twenty minutes we were travelling homewards, accompanied by Dr. Brett. He

had already thanked Nelson Lee profusely, and was eager to hear the whole story.

"How did you hit upon the solution?" he asked interestedly.

"Well, I must admit that I was sorely puzzled," smiled Lee. "I take the credit, however, of having thought of the true explanation before I received a hint. I dismissed it, believing it to be too improbable. And then I caught sight of a paragraph in the 'Bannington Gazette,' telling of the airship's flight. So there had been aircraft over the moor during the night! I at once hurried to the scene of the tragedy, and examined the bushes and the branches of the tree."

"So that's why you went there, sir?" I put in.

"Exactly, my boy," said the gov'nor. "Upon many twigs and branches I found evident signs that something heavy had crashed through them to the ground. My suspicions were confirmed, and, as you know, I at once paid a visit to the military camp."

Dr. Brett's ordeal was over. It hadn't lasted long, but he suffered from the shock of it for several days.

Of course there was a rare hubbub in the Ancient House when we turned up soon after darkness—practically famished, by the way. The Remove fellows thought it a piece of terrific cheek that Montie and Tommy and I had been enjoying ourselves while they slogged away at lessons.

As I privately confided to my chums, however, we were privileged persons.

And thus the mystery of that fatal night was cleared up. Dr. Brett was a free man; but he knew well that his position would have been appalling but for the unmatched detective ability of—"Mr. Alvington."

THE END.

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NOTE.—As the title "In the Hands of the Huns" has already been used, we have altered 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 HENCK is a cowardly 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. They are arrested and sent to a camp at Oberhausen. One of the guards ill-treats Jack, and George goes to his rescue, beating out a guard named Kutz. He and his brother are then put in separate cells. Another guard is more friendly, and informs George that his brother has recovered from his ill-treatment. George is subsequently laid up before a military tribunal, and is sentenced to be flogged at daylight. They march him out into the yard and George looks about him a prey to bitter reflections. He is then fastened to the triangle, and Kutz gives him several severe lashes. Suddenly, however, Jack rushes up, and throws himself in front of his brother. "Against the next man who moves!" comes a ringing command, and the guards close in upon their prisoners.

(Now read on.)

THE EXECUTION STAYED.

WILSON, though he well knew he risked his life in doing so, rushed to the assistance of Jack.

And it was as well, for he arrived on the scene just as one of the soldiers, darting in under the outgoing "cat," prepared to drive the cold steel home.

Wilson caught the butt of the rifle, and backed weapon and man back with it.

He then rushed to the triangle, and though he knew they might slay him from behind, called upon the boy to hold his ground and keep the Huns away while he set the prisoner free.

"Thanks!" panted Jack, who was beginning to tire rapidly, though he still held the field undaunted.

Wilson was an astute and quick thinking man, whose powers of observation had often stood him in good stead.

He had noticed critically the way the soldiers had tied the prisoner up.

He bent down and released the ankles, then rose, and set the poor fellow's wrists free.

George staggered away from the shouting-heap, and turned—turned to see a brutal Hun drive the butt end of his rifle against Jack's head.

With a groan the plucky boy fell backwards, to be caught in his brother's arms.

"Jack! Jack! My poor brother!" moaned George, as he stood, his scarred back dripping, holding the convulsed form of his brother in his arms. "The villains—the villains!"

Never had he felt so desperate as then.

And as he looked he saw the soldiers preparing to strike him down too.

In a moment he had given Jack into Wilson's arms.

"Hold him, old chap!" he cried.

Wilson obeyed.

Then free, and with all his pent-up emotions surging uppermost, not caring a jot whether they killed him if he could only make some of his enemies suffer, and regardless of the bayonets, he sprang at the guards.

How he dodged the thrust he never knew, but he closed with one of the soldiers, wrenched his weapon from his hands, and, armed with rifle and bayonet, covered the commandant, who had rushed forward to quell the riot, and secure the prisoner.

"Stand back stand back the whole lot of you!" he shouted, so that his voice rang above the din. "For if you don't, I swear by the living God I'll shoot your commandant dead!"

The commandant stopped in his tracks as if he had been struck.

The soldiers paused, and stared.

Wilson, with a mocking laugh, held Jack

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to his breast, while he stroked the poor bruised head.

"And so," he murmured, "a single Englishman can hold up a whole regiment of the viper Huns! But I'm afraid the luck's too good to last, George, my boy."

For, he thought, what chance had even such bravery as this against the hundreds of armed enemies who filled the yard?

None!

Yet the Fates were not disposed to forsake the hapless prisoners in their direst need as the sequel proved.

The scene was one never to be forgotten. Long afterwards, the remembrance of it afforded the greatest satisfaction to the prisoners of war, who, during the first few months of the terrible struggle, were doomed to suffer such indignity and martyrdom at the hands of their enemies as has seldom been meted out to prisoners of war since Christianity redeemed the world.

Every Britisher there, heedless of the risk he ran of being struck down by heavy butt-end, or stabbed with pointed bayonet, burst into a frenzied cheer. Some of them attempted to rush to the assistance of the Greys. A man named Abbott, indeed, slung a hurly German aside as if he were a child.

The guard was well trained in rough usage, however, and well disciplined. Ringing commands were uttered by the officers, and swiftly obeyed. Blow followed blow. The half-mutinous prisoners were driven back, and covered by loaded rifles.

If the prisoners attempt to move forward, about them down!" came in stern, official tones, and the man Abbott knew that the grim-visaged soldiers in field grey, would obey.

"Stand fast, boys!" he said, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, while the blood surged to his head in an agony of repression. "We can do no good."

The way was barred now. And yet George Gray was master of the situation.

The German commandant writhed at the end of that rifle-barrel.

He knew in a moment that he had to deal with a mad and collected Britisher, a man who knew how to fire a rifle, and whose aim was sure.

He also realised that a maddened prisoner whose back was dripping for the unjust and cruel infliction of the lash, would not lean towards mercy.

As some of the under officers leapt to his assistance, one of them brandishing a revolver, the commandant threw up his hands.

"Stand back, or he will kill me!" he yelled, and his face was livid with shame and impotent rage.

"Keep up your hands!" cried George, his deep voice ringing clear. "Order your officers to stand away!"

It was done.

"And now swear on your honour, as a German officer, that you will inflict no further punishment on me, and will spare my brother. Promise, or even now I'll fire!"

The commandant bit his lip. He wore on

his breast the Iron Cross of the Second Class, with many other decorations and ribbons.

In his Hunnish way his code of honour was high. To have terms dictated to him in the presence of the soldiers and officers who were under his command, was intolerable. He felt that he would sooner draw his revolver and blow his brains out, and, with trembling lips, he replied firmly enough:

"I will give no promise. I will not be dictated to by a prisoner of war. Put down that rifle, and surrender yourself to me. You will have to rely upon my mercy."

"Not much!" cried Gray, as his eyes roamed about the yard, to make sure that nobody was stealing up behind him to take him at a disadvantage. "I trust no German after my experience of the race. Kutz is only a fair example. I demand your oath, commandant, and it must be one you will not break either, on your hope of salvation hereafter!"

The commandant's brows came together in a beetling frown. He dropped his arms to his side, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said calmly. "Shoot! But as I fall, you will also go to your death! And your brother and your friend will suffer death too!"

George turned pale. He did not care a rap about himself, but his brother's life was dear to him. What should he do? What could he do? To kill the commandant and end it all, to make sure that there was one hated German the less in the world, was a great temptation to him.

Just then, while the commandant awaited the issue, and George was trying to make up his mind, there was a commotion at a distant part of the yard.

Some commands were uttered in German, and to the surprise of everyone, soldiers as well as prisoners, an imposing-looking German officer of high rank came striding across the yard, followed by the members of his staff.

Some sections of the assembled soldiery brought their arms to the salute. The others were busy covering the prisoners.

The new comer frowned.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he demanded, as he took his stand beside the commandant of the prison.

While he awaited his reply his eyes strayed to George Gray, and a cynical smile curved his cruel mouth, as he noticed the blood drops on the bruised and broken skin.

The presence of the whipping-post and the disordered lash upon the ground sufficiently explained the condition of the unfortunate prisoner.

But the fact that he was free and armed, and that he held the whole force at bay, needed further elucidation.

Swiftly the officer stepped between George and the chagrined commandant. He showed no trace of fear, ignored the possible risk he ran. Pointing at the rifle George held, he cried sternly:

(Continued overleaf.)

"Put that weapon down! Put it down! Ach! I'll have you riddled, if you refuse!"

He snapped out a fierce order, and a dozen men stepped out of the ranks and covered George.

"We'll soon see," he snarled, "who is master here! We are not to be outfaced by a beggarly British prisoner! Put that rifle down!"

To his astonishment George found himself obeying. He dropped the rifle with a crash.

"Very well," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "If you have any authority here, I'll place myself in your hands. I have been treated with great injustice. And all I ask is that you will spare my brother."

He swung on his heels and stepped to where Wilson, sunk upon one knee, was supporting Jack, and trying to bring the poor boy round.

"Poor old fellow!" he muttered brokenly. "He saved me, but they may have killed him, Wilson!"

But no, Jack was not dead; far from it. For at that moment his eyelids flickered, then opened, and as he saw his brother's face bending near, a faint smile curved his lips.

"George! George, old man!" he muttered. "Have they set you free?"

Meanwhile, the high official, whose timely arrival had quelled the disturbance, had been putting a few direct questions to the commandant of the prison. In a moment he understood the situation. The prisoner who had been flogged had been sentenced for assaulting a guard. His brother had interfered, and got him free.

And the daring British had had the audacity to hold up the whole yard.

A smile of grim amusement showed itself for a moment on the stranger's face.

"Ah!" he remarked. "I have arrived in the nick of time it seems. Commandant, you have been removed from your post as governor of the prison of Oberhemmel. You are to proceed to the Western front. I have come to relieve you. I am now commandant here."

Then while the astonished and dismayed prison official started back, he said, pointing to George Gray and the others:

"Seize those men!" he cried. "Take them back to their cells! Clear the yard. Be quick about it!"

Jack was seized and dragged to his feet. Wilson was roughly pounced upon, and as roughly led away. George Gray, having picked up his clothes, was marched, by guard, towards the prison.

The old commandant frowning, angered beyond thought, looked impotently on.

The new commandant was complete master of the situation.

Then Kutz came to him.

"He—the prisoner who was being punished—assaulted me!" he stammered, his face white, his lips trembling. "I insist that the punishment be completed! I——"

A freezing look made him recoil.

"Know your place, you swinehound!" hissed the new governor of the prison. "I'll investigate this case to-morrow!"

THE NEW GOVERNOR.

GEORGE passed again into the prison like a man in a dream. His body ached with a numbing agony. He had escaped most of the terrible torture of the flogging, but gained little satisfaction from the thought, for to-morrow he guessed he would have to suffer again.

Why hadn't he fired when he had that man at his mercy? Why, at any rate, hadn't he killed the villain Kutz?

On through the never-ending corridors, and up the stone stairs he went, cruel hands biting into the muscular flesh of his arms.

He heard savage voices abusing him. If he hesitated he was flung roughly onward. And so they took him to the door of his cells which was swung wide.

Then the under officer in charge of the men gave an order, and he was struck and kicked, hit with the butt-ends of rifles, until, with tightened lips and blazing eyes he turned on his ill-users.

The indomitable spirit there was in him would not brook that. He hit out blindly, only to be attacked with the utmost ferocity.

He saw them kicking blindly at his body, felt the thud of their boots against his unprotected ribs, and then one of them struck him on the head, and he fell backwards, and the light went out.

He did not know how long unconsciousness held him, but when he awoke he shivered, for the contact of his naked body with the cold stones had frozen him.

He lay still, staring into the darkness which enveloped him, and then levered himself up on his hands.

What had he done to deserve this of any race of men?

Was there no God that pity and mercy were denied him?

As the thought flashed across his aching brain, a shaft of light suddenly filled the cell. Was it an answer?

He stumbled up and looked about him with unseeing eyes.

Then a voice spoke.

(To be continued.)