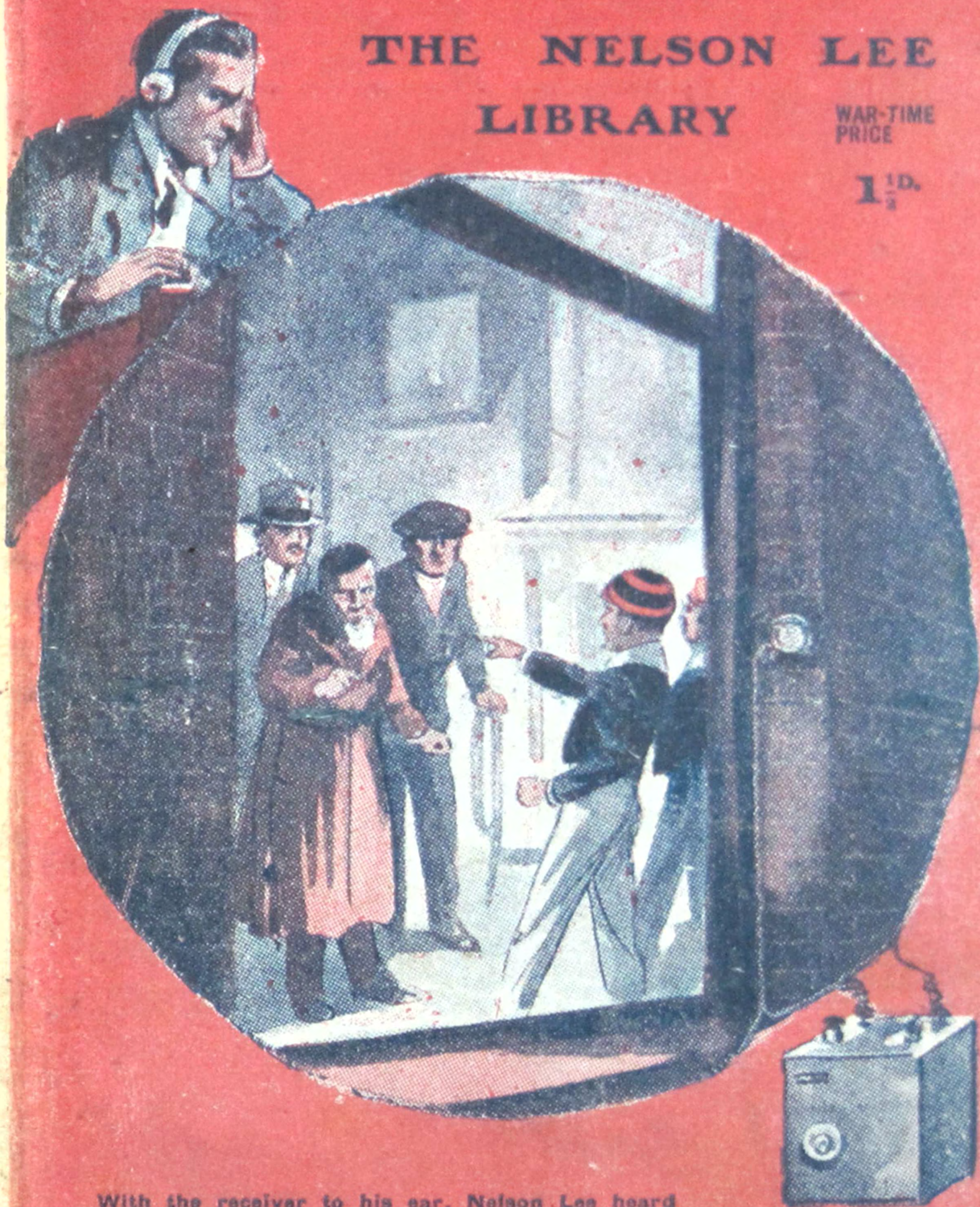


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HANDFORTH—DETECTIVE!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Moor House Mystery" and Many Other Stories.

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(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS BOX—NELSON LEE'S PLAN— HANDFORTH IS GRIM!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, strolled across the Triangle towards the gates, from the direction of the Ancient House. It is almost unnecessary to add that Church and McClure were with him.

"Anything interesting going on here?" he asked casually.

"Begad! It looks as though somebody will soon be receivin' a whackin' great box!" remarked Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "We're just watchin' the proceedin's, Handy."

Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I were helping to prop the massive gateposts up, and we were idly watching the efforts of the local carrier—quite an aged individual—as he prepared to lift a big wooden box down from his waggon.

Dinner was over, and we were waiting for afternoon lessons to commence. Not that we were particularly anxious to commence afternoon lessons; they were a necessary evil and couldn't be avoided. The day was warm and sunny, and in our opinion Little Side was worth a dozen Form-rooms at any time—particularly on an afternoon like this.

"I expect that box is for me," said Handforth. "One of my aunts generally sends a box of tuck two or three times during a term, and one's just about due. She must have felt extra generous this time."

"I shouldn't count your chickens before they're hatched, Handy," I grinned. "That box isn't for you, I'll bet."

"We'll soon see!" said Handforth grimly.

He marched forward, full of confidence, as usual. Handforth nearly always took things for granted, and nine times out of ten he was wrong. And I was fairly certain that he was wrong on this occasion.

"I'll sign for that, if you like," said

Handforth carelessly. "As it's for me, Miles, I'll take it over—"

"Eh?" said the aged carrier, looking round. "Speakin' to me, young gent? Mebbe you've seen Warren? I've been lookin' for he. This here box ain't so light as it might be—"

"That's all right," interrupted Handforth. "It's full of tuck—jam and that sort of thing, you know. Don't bother about Warren. Hand it over to me. I'll sign for it and take it into the House."

"That's very kind of ye, young gent," said Mr. Miles. "I ain't so young as I was, an' I've allus noticed that Warren ain't about when there's a heavy box to be took. Thank ye kindly, young gent."

Handforth signed the carrier's book with a flourish. And Mr. Miles climbed back into his ancient vehicle and drove away.

"This'll just come in useful," said Handforth comfortably. "As it happens, I'm a bit short of cash, and tuck's scarce nowadays. We shall be able to have a ripping feed to-night, my sons!"

"Dear fellow, don't you think it would be just as well to look at the label?" suggested Sir Montie languidly. "You know best, of course, but I thought I heard Mr. Miles say that the box was for one of the masters!"

"What!" roared Handforth.

"I don't like interferin'—"

"One of the masters!" shouted Handforth. "That's rot! I'm expecting a box, and this is bound to be it. Miles wouldn't have given it to me if it hadn't been mine."

"Miles wanted to get rid of it," I grinned. "You promised him you'd take it into the Ancient House, Handy, and we'll see that you do it. I'm afraid you've been a bit too hasty—as usual."

Handforth glared at the label, and then snorted.

"Why, it ain't for me at all!" he bellowed wrathfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of all the rotten swindles!" went on Handforth, as though somebody had done him an injury. "I'll slaughter old Miles when he comes next time! Why couldn't he have told me that this box was for Mr Lee?"

"You didn't give him a chance," grinned McClure. "Where do you want it—on your back? We'll give you a hand up—"

"You—you silly ass!" roared Handforth. "I'm not going to carry that fatheaded box! 'Tain't likely! Where's Warren? What's the good of a porter if he's never to be found?"

I winked at my chums.

"You undertook to carry that box indoors, Handy—" I began.

"I thought it was mine!"

"That doesn't make any difference," I said. "We're not going to let you back out of a promise like this. Where's your honour? A promise is a promise, and only Huns repudiate them!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "They do which?"

"Look here, if you're calling me a Hun, I'll wipe up the giddy Triangle with you!" shouted Handforth, rolling up his sleeve. "If I make a promise I stick to it."

"I believe you, Handy," I said soothingly. "Your word is your bond. But afternoon lessons will begin in a minute or two—and it'll take you quite a decent time to get that box into the House. We'll shove it on your shoulders with pleasure."

Handforth snorted, glared, and regretted his hastiness in accepting the box from Mr. Miles without looking at the label. And it wasn't likely that he was going to carry it in himself. Church and McClure were requisitioned for the purpose.

Those astute youths had carelessly strolled off, under the mistaken impression that they would be able to escape the eagle eye of their redoubtable leader. But Handforth sent out a bellow which could have been heard nearly a mile off, and Church and McClure jumped.

"Hi, you asses!" roared Handforth.

Church and McClure evidently knew their names, for they turned at once, sighed, and retraced their steps. After that the fellows in the Triangle—and there was quite a crowd—were treated to the entertaining spectacle of Handforth and Co. struggling with a large wooden box and apparently doing their best to juggle with it.

Handforth, for weird reasons of his own, was not in favour of making a bee-line for the Ancient House. He swayed to and fro in various directions, and made the journey about double the length it ought to have been. This was probably due to the fact that he was centring all his attention upon giving his chums most of the weight; and they were far too occupied to take any notice of their direction. The box was heavy, and by the time it was deposited within Nelson Lee's study, Handforth and Co. were looking somewhat the worse for wear.

Curiously enough, they couldn't see anything humorous in the situation, although everybody else was grinning. Even Nelson Lee himself, having thanked the juniors gracefully, could not refrain from smiling. The guv'nor, as everybody knows, occupied the position of Housemaster of the Ancient House at St. Frank's.

"Handforth and his friends are unusually energetic to-day, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "Why have they taken it upon themselves to act as porters? It is very kind of them, of course, but Warren—"

I broke in, and explained. Sir Montie and Tommy and I had stayed behind for a few moments—for, to tell the truth, I was rather curious about that box, and asked the guv'nor what it contained.

"Ah, you'd like to know, wouldn't you?" he said, with a chuckle.

"Of course I should, sir," I replied. "It's not tuck of course, but I'll bet—"

"You shouldn't bet, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee banteringly. "And your curiosity must remain unsatisfied for the present. You will know all about it before long. As it happens, I wish to speak to you, so you had better close the door."

"We'll be goin', Tommy boy—" began Montie.

"No, you may as well remain, boys," said Lee. "This little matter concerns you all; in fact, it concerns you more than it does Nipper. I want you to do me a favour."

"Begad! With pleasure, sir!"

"Any old thing you like, sir!"

"That is very satisfactory, at all events," smiled the guv'nor. "You are aware, I believe, that old Simon Legg generally walks into the village during the evening. Well, what I want you to do is quite simple. Get one or two of your friends to go with you to the village, and then detain Mr. Legg for, say, half an hour."

"Detain him, sir?" asked Watson, staring.

"Exactly," nodded Lee calmly. "Use no violence, and perform the manœuvre in such a way that Mr. Legg will not suspect any ulterior motive. I am afraid I am inciting you to an act which would be very wrong under ordinary circumstances. But I have a very excellent reason for making this request—and it is important. To all intents and purposes you will merely indulge in a harmless 'lark'; but much will depend upon the success of your efforts."

"And where do I come in, guv'nor?" I asked warmly.

"I shall want you with me, Nipper."

"Oh, that's good!" I said. "But what's the game, sir?"

"I do not propose to disclose the game to you at present," replied Nelson Lee. "Now, Tregellis-West and Watson, can I rely upon you to carry out your part of the programme?"

"Rather, sir!"

"You may take one or two other boys with you—boys you can trust—but go into no details," went on Lee. "All I want you to do is to keep Mr. Legg in the village as

long as you can—half an hour at the very least. I don't think I need suggest ways and means to you—eh?"

"Begad! We'll think of somethin', sir!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "It's rippin' to know that we can be of any use—it is, really."

We had no further time to discuss the matter, for the bell changed for afternoon lessons, and we marched off to the Form-room. Needless to say, we were greatly interested and curious.

What was the meaning of this unexpected move on Nelson Lee's part? Why did he want Simon Legg detained? Legg was an old miser—or supposed to be—who lived in a cottage just on Bannington Moor, within a mile of the school. He had been there for a month or two, and a ten-foot fence had been erected right round the cottage garden, shutting it off completely from the public eye. It was this desire for secrecy, no doubt, which had led the simple villagers to suppose that old Legg was a miser.

Personally, I had other ideas. 'Curious events had been happening only just recently. Nelson Lee had been approached by Mr. Howard Ridgeway, the owner of an old house known as The Mount, which stood upon high ground overlooking the moor.

Owing to that investigation Nelson Lee had definitely established the fact that some agents of the dreaded Circle of Terror were operating in the district—and that, moreover, Simon Legg was connected with them.

Even more than that, we were equally certain that Legg and the Circle men knew quite a great deal about the recent escape from prison of Sutcliffe, the forger—known to police and public as Jim the Penman.

A few days since Nelson Lee had received a forged letter, which nobody could have perpetrated except the convict-forger. It had been a decoy, and Nelson Lee had nearly fallen into the trap. Three Circle men were to have "dealt" with him—in other words, it was a deliberate attempt at murder. Largely owing to a stroke of chance I had got on the true scent, and the gov'nor had been warned just in time.

The three Circle agents were promptly arrested and since then things had been quiet. Jim the Penman was still at liberty, and the police were scouring the country in vain. All reports agreed that the astute scoundrel had completely eluded his pursuers.

Nelson Lee did not sit down and do nothing. He fully intended to follow the matter up until success rewarded his efforts. And now, apparently, events were beginning to move.

Simon Legg was connected in some way with the Circle of Terror and with Jim the Penman. Therefore a blow at Simon Legg was indirectly a blow at the main enemy. And I didn't know yet what Nelson Lee's exact plans were.

For some reason he wanted to be certain that Simon Legg would be kept out of the way for half an hour at least. And it was rather a compliment for the gov'nor to ask my chums to lend him their aid. I appar-

ently was to be employed in some other manner.

It was a cute idea of Nelson Lee's to get some juniors to detain the old man of the moor cottage. Legg would merely believe that the affair was a "rag," and he would certainly never suspect the true motive. It was most essential that he should not suspect it.

As soon as afternoon lessons were over I discussed the matter with my chums in Study C.

"I think we'd better go along to the Duke and De Valerie, in Study M," I said thoughtfully. "Four of you ought to be enough, and it doesn't do to take too many into a thing like this. You can bet your boots that it's jolly important."

So we went along the passage to Study M, and found Cecil de Valerie and the Duke of Somerton busily preparing tea. The Duke was cutting bread-and-butter in a fashion of his own—which consisted mainly of hacking odd pieces off the loaf and spreading butter on every available inch. Incidentally, he spread a good deal of butter upon the tablecloth and upon his own waistcoat. His Grace was most unconventional, considering his noble birth. It was admitted that Somerton was really the most carelessly attired fellow in the Ancient House, and his speciality appeared to be baggy trousers.

"Just in time!" he said cheerily. "Come on in and we'll give you some tea. What's the matter, Tregellis-West?" he added, as he observed that Sir Montie was gazing at him through his pince-nez with an expression of shocked astonishment in his noble eyes.

"Really, dear fellow, you haven't improved your waistcoat by spreadin' butter on it!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Begad! It ain't my place to interfere, but you're in a shockin' condition——"

"My condition's good enough for me," grinned the duke. "My only hat! If I were like you—or even De Valerie—my life would be a misery! Give me old clothes for comfort."

Sir Montie sighed.

"Dear boys, he's hopeless—quite hopeless!" he exclaimed sadly.

"Then why worry?" I grinned. "The fact is, you chaps," I went on, "I want you to join us in a little wheeze this evening—or, rather, I want you to join Tregellis-West and Watson."

"What's the idea?" asked De Valerie.

"You've seen that old miser Simon Legg?" I asked. "Well, he generally goes to the village during the evening, and he's got to be detained. Have a lark with him, you know, and prevent him from going back to his cottage."

"What on earth for?" asked the duke, staring.

"Sounds queer, doesn't it?" I said. "But you needn't look so puzzled. We can't give you any explanation, because we don't know it. On the strict Q. T., Mr. Lee wants you to do that——"

The door opened, and Handforth barged in.

"Got a spare saucer?" he asked. "McClure, like a silly ass, was trying to juggle with ours just now, and he dropped one in the fender, thinking it would bounce!"

"Why, you awful Abber!" came an indignant roar from the rear. "I was doing the trick splendidly when you butted into me! How the dickens can a chap juggle when there's a mad elephant in the room?"

"Look here——" began Handforth wrathfully.

"If you want to scrap, why can't you do it in your own quarters?" I asked tartly. "Give the silly ass a saucer, for goodness sake, and get rid of him!"

Handforth entered the study further, and Church and McClure followed him. There was an expression of determination upon the homely features of the great Edward Oswald.

"Shut that door!" he said grimly.

Church closed it, grinning.

"Now, I'm not a fellow to butt in where I'm not wanted," said Handforth, "but I'd just like to know, out of sheer curiosity, why Nipper should tell us to clear out of somebody else's study?"

"Oh, my hat!" I groaned. "He's on his giddy dignity now! This is your study, De Valerie. Kindly oblige by kicking this silly fathead into the passage!"

"Certainly," said De Valerie calmly.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Handforth, backing away hastily. "What was that you were just saying about Mr. Lee—something about the strict Q.T.? I'm not an inquisitive chap——"

"Not at all!" I agreed. "But you like to know things—eh?"

"If you don't like to tell me anything more I'll shut!" said Handforth stiffly. "I'm not going to stay where I'm not wanted! I'm rather sensitive——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's that cackle for?" roared Handforth.

"It's rather queer how you say that you're not the very things you are!" I grinned. "That's not very lucky, but I sha'n't trouble to go into details. Look here, Handy, you might be able to justify your existence if you feel inclined to join us in a little wheeze."

Handforth glared.

"Justify my existence!" he repeated.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you can make yourself useful," I explained. "It's a matter which requires a certain amount of tact and judgment, and I know I can rely upon you to exercise that. You see," I added thoughtfully, "these other chaps will be with you, so they'll keep you in order!"

Handforth wasn't quite sure whether to be flattered or indignant, and he made a compromise by demanding, in blunt language, exactly what the thunder I was getting at.

Handforth was several varieties of an ass, but he was a decent fellow right through. In the Remove he was generally set down as

a duffer of the first water. He wasn't. I had discovered unsuspected qualities in the mighty Handforth, and I knew that he could be trusted with any job which required aggressive methods. It struck me that Handforth and Co. would come in very useful this evening. It was just the kind of task which they would excel in. I didn't make the mistake of judging Handforth by his usual actions. At times he could be quite brilliant.

I explained what was required. Naturally, he wanted to know more; he wanted to know what the game was. As I wasn't aware of it myself, I couldn't very well go any further.

"You know as much as I do," I said. "Mr. Lee knows what he's up to, don't you worry. There's seven of you altogether, and it ought to be as easy as falling off a form to keep old Legg busy in the village for an hour. Only you must be careful not to let him know that he's being detained deliberately."

"How are we going to do it?" asked Tommy Watson practically.

"I'll leave that to you," I replied. "You can't very well plan out a scheme beforehand. Go about it in your own way, and do the job thoroughly."

"Good enough!" said Handforth nodding.

"I'm leader, of course——"

"I don't think!" snapped Watson.

"Look here——"

"We don't want to start scrapping now, do we?" put in the duke. "We'll settle it by having no leader at all—then there can't be any squabbles. Leave it to us, Nipper, and everything will be all serene."

And so the thing was settled.

CHAPTER II.

DETAINING MR. LEE—NOT SO EASY—TROUBLE IN THE FAMILY.

SIMON LEE came shuffling down the old village High Street of Belliton. He looked as shabby as usual, and, if anything, his straggly beard was more untidy than usual.

"There he goes," remarked Tommy Watson. "Off to the post-office, I suppose. We'll start our little games when he's on his way back. It wouldn't be the thing to make a commotion in the village."

The Duke of Somerton nodded.

"But we'd better keep him in sight," he said. "We should look a fine set of asses if we waited here, and he went off home by another route! What would Mr. Lee say then?"

"Begad! He wouldn't say much, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "Mr. Lee ain't in the habit of wastin' words. But he'd never trust us again, you know——"

"He's just gone into the post-office," put in Handforth, who was gazing up the road. "He's bound to come back this way. I vote we collar him, and tie him up—like you read about in the stories."

De Valerie chuckled.

"This ain't a story," he said. "We can't go to those lengths, Handy. We should get ourselves locked up—what? Keep your eye on the post-office. When he comes out we'll stroll along and talk to him. We'll be as nice as possible an' flatter him."

"That's the idea," agreed McClure. "With the seven of us round him he can't very well break away, and we can easily keep him busy for an hour."

The conspirators were lounging against the parapet of the old stone bridge which spanned the river Stowe. From this point of vantage they could see right up the High Street, and there was no fear of Legg getting away without their spotting him.

The evening was fine, dusk coming on gradually. Sir Montie had wisely suggested that Legg should be allowed to go past unmolested. He would probably be ten or fifteen minutes in the village, and the longer he was the less time it would be necessary to detain him. This was a sound argument, and it was acted upon.

"It's all very well to talk about jawing with him," said Handforth obstinately. "The best thing we can do is to collar him, as I said at first. I've got plenty of string in my pocket all ready for the job. Nothing like coming prepared."

And then Handforth proceeded to turn out his pockets in search of the string. Before discovering it he displayed to view a half-eaten apple, a handkerchief, which had apparently been used as a duster—particularly for wiping away spilt ink—two crumpled story papers, an awful-looking bag, which was said to contain toffee, but which the others strongly doubted, and various other articles of a similar nature. Finally Handforth produced two coils of thin string.

"Is that what you call coming prepared?" grinned Watson.

"Rather!" declared Handforth. "This string may look thin, but it's jolly strong. I've just been reading a story all about detectives and crooks, and the detective chap used lots of thin string for binding his prisoners. I don't see why I shouldn't be a detective myself!"

"I do!" murmured Sir Montie languidly. "Begad! There are heaps of reasons, Handy. You couldn't be a detective any more than I could. I don't profess to be brainy. It's too much fag thinkin' of traps and decoys, an' all that sort of rot."

"That's just where we differ," said Handforth. "Now, I'm full of ideas. For example, what's the matter with one of us going up to old Legg and telling him that he's wanted at Caistowe?"

De Valerie grinned.

"Is that a sample of your brainy ideas?" he inquired politely.

"What's the matter with it?"

"Well, there's so much the matter that I'm blessed if I know where to start," said De Valerie. "You ass! Do you think Legg would believe you? Do you think he'd go over to Caistowe?"

Handforth was obstinate.

"That's what the detective did in this story, anyhow!" he said, as though he were producing positive proof of the idea's soundness. He didn't seem to realise that he was giving the game away—admitting that his ideas were second-hand. "If we could only get the old chap packed off to Caistowe—"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Handy!" put in McClure.

"He can't help it," grinned the duke. "I've got a much better idea than his, but I'll leave it to the gathering to decide. Tregellis-West, ask me to bring Legg to you at once?"

"Eh?" said Sir Montie blankly.

"Ask me to bring Legg to you, and say that you'll wait for him on the river bank, near Willard's Island," went on Somerton. "Tell me to mention that the matter is urgent."

"Begad!" exclaimed Montie. "Are you dotty, old boy?"

"Not exactly," grinned the duke. "Go ahead!"

"Anything to oblige," said Tregellis-West with a sigh. "Somerton, old boy, you might go an' fetch Mr. Simon Legg for me, an' bring him to the river bank near the island. Tell him the matter's frightfully important, an' that he must come. Will that do?"

"Topping," declared the duke calmly.

"Have you gone off your chump?" roared Handforth, glaring.

"No; it's just a little wheeze——"

"It's a lot of rot!"

"Well, it might be," agreed Somerton. "This is my idea. When old Legg comes along I'll go up to him and say that somebody is waiting near Willard's Island, and that he wants to speak to Legg urgently."

"But there's nobody near Willard's Island!" snorted Handforth.

"There will be," said the duke calmly.

"How do you know?"

"Tregellis-West will be there——"

"Begad! Shall I, really?" asked Montie mildly.

"You're going off at once," said Somerton. "You'll wait just against the river bank—and you've asked me to bring Legg to you. I'll tell Legg that, and try to get him along. You want to see him on an important matter——"

"But I don't!" protested Sir Montie.

"Yes, you do. Isn't this affair of Mr. Lee's important?"

"Begad! I suppose it is."

"Then we sha'n't be telling any whoppers," said Somerton. "It wouldn't be right to make up a string of lies. You buzz off at once, and all you other fellows get behind the hedge——"

"I'm not going to get behind the silly hedge!" roared Handforth.

"My dear chap, it's the only way," said the duke. "Legg will suspect all sorts of things if we all crowd round him. You wait there and follow us—if I manage to decoy him. If I can't do it, we'll try some other dodge."

De Valerie nodded approvingly.

"Jolly good," he declared. "It'll work. An' if we get Legg to the island it'll mean twenty minutes' delay, anyhow. An' we might even be able to get him across to the island an' leave him stranded—what?"

"By Jove! That's better!" grinned the duke. "Two heads are better than one. Strand the old chap on the island. He'll only set it down as a lark and won't suspect anything."

The other fellows all agreed that the plan of action was good, and that there was a distinct possibility of success. Handforth, however, still had an idea that it would be better to decoy Legg to Caistowe; although he forgot to explain how that desired object could be attained. And Handforth didn't at all cotton to the idea of hiding his light under a bushel—or, rather, concealing himself behind the hedge. It was indignified, and he wouldn't be in the limelight at all.

Sir Montie went off at once without any further comment. He knew that the plan was good, and the schoolboy baronet was not in the habit of raising objections. In spite of his languid ways he was a fellow of action.

"I think I'd better do the talking," began Handforth.

"Look out!" hissed Watson. "Legg's just coming!"

They all dodged behind the hedge, the duke with them. Old Simon Legg was shuffling along the dusty road on his way back to his lonely cottage on the moor.

"Now, look here, Somerton——"

"Shut up, Handy!" muttered the duke. "Don't mess the whole thing up, for goodness' sake. I daresay you're a first-class detective in your own way, but this work is too elementary for your mighty powers. You shine in intricate cases, where there are problems to solve. You'd be wasting your abilities in a tin-pot affair like this."

Handforth nodded.

"Something in that," he agreed. "It is a bit potty, now you come to mention it. I'll leave this kid's business to you. It is rather beneath my dignity!"

The duke grinned and winked at Church and McClure. Those juniors needed no indication, however, that the great Handforth's leg was being pulled. It was a surprisingly easy matter to pull Handforth's leg. He was the most unsuspecting fellow in the world.

The effect of Somerton's remarks was apparent at once, for Handforth seemed to lose all interest in the proceedings. This condition would only last for a few minutes, of course, but the critical moment would have arrived by that time.

The bent old figure approached, and Somerton waited until he was quite near the bridge. Then he crept away, made a detour, and burst through a gap in the hedge, panting heavily, as though he had been running hard along the towing-path.

"Thank goodness!" he gasped loudly. "The very man I want! I say, Mr. Legg!" Old Simon Legg turned.

"Go away, boy!" he croaked. "Go away, drat ye!"

"But I want a word with you, sir——"

"Be off with ye!" shouted the old man, raising his stick. "I'll have no truck with a young varmint of a schoolboy. I'll lay this stick about your shoulders unless ye——"

"But it's important!" panted Somerton, eyeing Legg warily.

They stood opposite one another; and the juniors behind the hedge watched with great interest.

"It won't work," murmured Handforth. "I didn't expect it would, as a matter of fact. Potty idea, I call it. We'd better jump out——"

"Shurrup, you ass!" hissed De Valerie.

Handforth subsided, and they all watched and listened.

"Important, is it?" exclaimed Simon Legg suspiciously. "What are ye getting at, boy?"

"There's a fellow over by the island, sir," said the duke. "He asked me to take you to him at once. Said the matter was very important. He wants to see you immediately, and he's waiting."

Simon Legg lowered his stick.

"Is it the truth, boy?" he demanded, eyeing the junior narrowly.

"Of course it is!"

"Who was it asked ye this?" Legg inquired. "Who told ye to come and fetch me? Answer me, ye young varmint!"

"He didn't tell me his name," replied the duke readily. "But it's important, and we're wasting time. A good-looking chap he is, with brown hair, and well-dressed. Clean-shaven," he added.

Considering that Sir Montie Tregellis-West was just under fifteen, this latter piece of information was not exactly astonishing. But Legg did not see through Somerton's dodge. He naturally supposed that the "fellow" by the river-bank was a man.

He might have vaguely suspected something; but, on the other hand, there was the distinct possibility that somebody did want to see him, and that a meeting in a quiet spot was vitally important.

The pair walked off along the towing-path, and the other juniors watched from their cover. De Valerie was grinning, and even Handforth was forced to admit that the wheeze was a good one.

"We'll follow 'em," he said briskly.

"Not yet," put in Watson. "Wait until they've passed beyond those willows. If Legg spotted us following, he'd guess the truth in a second. You're too jolly rapid, Handy!"

Handforth grunted, and they all waited until the pair had disappeared behind the willows. The duke was delighted with the success of his plan. Simon Legg was being detained—and that was what Nelson Lee wanted.

Willard's Island—a small island in the centre of the stream—was reached very shortly, and Simon Legg looked round sus-

piciously. Meanwhile, the other juniors had crept up rapidly in the rear.

"Where's this man?" asked Legg. "Where is he, boy?"

The duke took a quick glance round, and observed that a boat was lying just near the bank. The thoughtful Sir Montie had evidently placed it there, remembering De Valerie's suggestion to strand the victim on the island. Tregellis-West himself was not in evidence.

"I expect the chap's close handy," said Somerton, looking round.

While he was speaking Sir Montie emerged from behind some trees and strolled towards them.

"Lookin' for somebody, sir?" he asked, having evidently been thinking further details out. "I saw a man on the island."

Montie failed to mention that he had seen the man in question about a week previously. It wasn't at all necessary to say anything about that. And the duke understood at once.

"We'll row you across if you like, sir," he offered politely.

"Do so, boy!" snapped the old man.

He was still somewhat suspicious, but it was quite natural that the man he was supposed to meet should choose the island. At the same time Simon Legg had an idea in the back of his mind that all was not as it should be.

He shuffled down to the boat and stepped into it. Sir Montie and the duke followed his example. It seemed as though the scheme would work without a hitch. But, just at that moment Simon Legg uttered a bellow of fury.

It was Handforth's fault. That impulsive youth had pushed forward through the trees. Legg, glancing up, caught sight of Edward Oswald for a moment, and saw him yanked back by three other juniors. That was quite sufficient. The whole affair was a schoolboy jape!

"Drat ye!" snapped Legg harshly. "Drat ye for the young varmin'ts ye are! I'll make ye smart for this——"

"Hold him!" gasped Somerton. "We don't want our little joke spoilt just at the finish. Grab him, Montie."

Tregellis-West complied promptly, and Simon Legg was grasped as he was in the act of scrambling out of the boat. But he displayed extraordinary strength for an old man, and the two juniors were quite incapable of holding him. Sir Montie acted with decision, and gently tripped Legg and sent him sprawling into the centre of the boat. Meanwhile the duke was yelling.

"Back up, Remove!" he shouted desperately.

Tommy Watson and De Valerie led the rush, and they came charging down, Handforth well to the rear. This was because of Handforth's tremendous eagerness to start off first, and because he had tripped up on a tuft of grass. Incidentally, Church and McClure stumbled over him, and some little confusion was caused.

But the party arrived on the scene just in

time to prevent Simon Legg's escape. He was held securely and the boat pushed off into the stream. It was a strenuous trip, although short. The prisoner was bundled out of the boat on to the island; and then the boys backed the boat hastily.

The trick had been done!

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

They yelled with merriment—assumed, for the most part. They remembered that Legg was to be given the impression that the whole thing was a mere pointless joke, and that he was to be given no hint that this affair had been planned deliberately.

The old man hadn't been hurt in the slightest, and he certainly held the opinion that the "dratted" boys had merely seized him for the sake of mischief.

"I'll 'ave the law on ye!" he raved, shaking his fist helplessly. "I'll make ye pay for this trick, 'confound ye! By goosh! Ye may well laugh now—ye won't laugh later on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The boat by this time had reached the river bank, and all the juniors scrambled out, Handforth seizing the painter in order to secure it to a sapling which grew near.

"Well, that wheeze of yours has worked splendidly, Somerton," remarked Watson breathlessly. "You deserve a medal——"

"What about me?" demanded Handforth warmly. "Don't I deserve anything?"

Watson grinned.

"Yes, and you'll get it if you aren't careful," he replied. "You deserve a thick ear for making such a potty suggestion at the start!"

Handforth left his task of securing the boat and faced round.

"I can see there's going to be trouble," he said grimly. "I don't believe in taking credit for something I haven't done, but it's only fair to acknowledge that this wheeze was mine——"

"Yours!" shouted De Valerie.

"Of course," said Handforth. "Didn't I suggest that we should decoy old Legg to Calstowe? Well, this is the same thing, only slightly altered. The idea, in the main, is mine!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

Handforth was evidently possessed of wonderful powers of reasoning which were entirely beyond the ken of ordinary mortals. He didn't actually want to take the credit for somebody else's idea; he firmly believed that it was mainly his.

"And I'll punch anybody's nose who doesn't agree with me!" added Handforth.

"I don't agree!" said De Valerie calmly.

"Nor I!"

"Begad! Nor I!"

All the juniors expressed the same view, and they stood round Handforth in a grinning circle—waiting to have their noses punched. Needless to say, Handforth did not attempt such a formidable task. The river was perilously near, and it was not an unheard-of event for a junior to be ducked. Even Handforth, the mighty, would not be immune.

"Great pip! Look at the boat!" yelled McClure suddenly.

Everybody turned and gazed at the river. The boat had drifted into the stream, and was making steadily and unerringly for the island, carried by the current. And Simon Legg was standing on the bank, waiting for it!

"That's done it, begad!" remarked Sir Montie. "There's no other boat, and the old fellow will be away in less than two minutes. Who fastened the boat up?"

Handforth turned red.

"That's queer!" he exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you to do it, McClure?"

"No, you jolly well didn't!" roared McClure indignantly. "You told me to clear out, and said that you'd do it yourself! Fat lot of good relying on you!"

"You silly ass!" said Watson crossly.

For once Handforth had nothing to say. He knew that he had left his task in order to take part in the argument before it had been completed, and the boat had drifted away from the bank almost at once.

"Well, it's no good making a fuss about it," remarked the duke. "Handforth deserves a ducking, of course, but we'll be merciful. Legg's been detained over half an hour, anyhow."

This was some slight consolation, but the triumph was by no means so complete as it might have been. The juniors watched with interest, and saw Legg reach out and grasp the boat as it drifted by.

"I thought it was going to miss him," said De Valeric. "But it's all up now. He'll make straight for the bridge, I expect."

They saw their late prisoner climb into the boat. He sat down clumsily, and paused for a moment to shake his fist.

"Young varmints!" he shouted wheezily. "I'll make ye pay for it!"

"Give him a laugh!" murmured Watson. "May as well keep it up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Simon Legg, quite out of reach, rowed down the river totally unconscious of the fact that this delay had been organised for a definite purpose and that other events were occurring in the meantime.

What these events were I'll now describe.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECRET TELEPHONE—FIXING THINGS UP—NO TIME TO SPARE.

THE Mount stood dark and deserted.

Nelson Lee and I strode down the well-kept gravel path briskly and mounted the steps to the front door. Mr. Ridgeway, the owner, always kept the place spick and span.

At present, however, he was away, and the house stood empty. There was an excellent reason for this. The Mount overlooked the moor, and an excellent view of Simon Legg's cottage could be obtained from the rear windows.

The Circle of Terror agents had attempted

to scare Mr. Ridgeway away from his own house, but they had only succeeded because the gov'nor had advised Mr. Ridgeway to go. Nelson Lee was anxious to hoodwink the enemy, and so have a clear field.

So, for the time being, the Mount was left deserted, and Lee had the keys. He had found the place most useful for observation purposes, and had already discovered much.

This evening he and I had carried out our programme to the letter. We had left St. Frank's very soon after tea and had watched Simon Legg's cottage from amongst the trees on the high ground near the Mount. We had seen the old man depart; and then Nelson Lee moved.

"Now, Nipper there's not a moment to waste," said the gov'nor, as soon as we had entered the house. "Everything depends, really, upon the success of your chums' little manoeuvre in the village. If Legg comes back before we have finished our work will have been for nothing."

"I'm blessed if I know what the game is," I remarked. "You've been so jolly secretive, sir. That box, for example. I suppose these bags are full of the stuff out of that box?"

"Exactly, Nipper."

Nelson Lee was brisk and cheerful, and I knew very well that the work in hand was to his liking. We had carried two large leather bags from the school, and I was very curious as to their contents.

"I'm afraid it's too bad, Nipper," went on the gov'nor. "I have tried your patience rather severely. The fact is, young 'un, I mean to take advantage of a favourable opportunity. Mr. Legg's cottage is quite empty at present, otherwise we could not perform this work this evening."

"The old man himself isn't there, sir," I replied. "But how do you know that somebody else isn't within that enclosure?"

"Merely because I have been making very close observations during the course of the last few days—and nights," replied Nelson Lee. "The Circle agents who were in this district last week have retired, Nipper. Possibly it is only a temporary retirement, but we will take advantage of the situation."

"How, sir?"

"By installing a private telephone," replied Nelson Lee calmly.

"A—a what?" I gasped.

"A telephone, my boy."

"But we can't do that," I protested.

"We're going to try, at all events," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Make yourself useful, young 'un. Help me to undo these bags without a second's waste of time. Much depends upon the quickness with which we work. It will be a fairly long job, but it doesn't matter a job about this end, so long as we get things fixed up at the other."

"How are you going to do it, sir?"

"You'll see if you have patience," replied the schoolmaster-detective. "At present, Nipper, we are sadly handicapped. Standing at the top of the rear window of this house, armed with a telescope, one can see right into the enclosure of Legg's cottage; un-

fortunately, however, a telescope is only useful to the eye. I have seen many things, but have heard nothing. And it is most essential that I should be able to listen to what goes on in that cottage. Owing to the enormously high fence it is impossible to get near the cottage, even on the darkest of dark nights. To climb over the fence while the cottage is occupied would be sheer madness. That is the reason for this telephone."

I looked at the guv'nor admiringly.

"It's a jolly cute dodge, sir," I exclaimed.

"Quite an old one, Nipper, but useful, nevertheless," replied Lee. "I am hopeful of obtaining decisive results this very night—provided we can fix this telephone—and I have made arrangements accordingly. The chief necessity at the moment is to run the wires across the moor and to fix the transmitter."

I didn't know how the guv'nor was going to do it, but I asked no questions. And with nimble fingers we unpacked the various parcels which the bag contained. The telephone was quite an ordinary affair of the type

"How the dickens are you going to get into the cottage, sir?" I asked as we neared the fenced enclosure. "It's no good sticking the transmitter outside, is it?"

"You apparently forget, Nipper, that the weather is warm," replied Lee.

"What's that got to do with it, guv'nor?"

"Think it over, young 'un," he chuckled.

I did think it over for about five seconds, but after that I was too busy to give the matter any further attention. The guv'nor had measured the wire to a nicety, and there would be just about sufficient to run right up to the cottage, with a little to spare.

While the guv'nor worked I kept a very keen look-out. At the first sign of anybody approaching we should fade away, abandoning the whole project. But there was nobody in sight; we had this part of the moor completely to ourselves.

At last we arrived at the high wooden fence. Nelson Lee had evidently done much scouting work beforehand, for he went straight to a certain portion of the fence and thrust the wires through a small hole

GOT A PAL OUT THERE?

Of course you have! Who hasn't? Going to play the game and stand by him whilst he does his bit? Suppose he gets wounded and would give anything for a good hot drink, what are you going to do about it?

What's that? You'd jolly soon let him have it if you could, even if you had to pay for it with your last sou? Well, why not pay for it in advance, so that it shall be ready for him in case he needs it? Fourpence sent to the Y.M.C.A. (Hot Drinks Fund), Tottenham Court Road, London, W.C., will provide half-a-dozen cups of cocoa for your own or somebody else's wounded pal. Worth doing—what?

which is usually installed in large business premises, quite self-contained. It was of the finest quality, and everything was there complete—coils of wire, batteries, and all the rest of it.

We didn't trouble ourselves about this end. The wires could be connected up to the receiver and the batteries at leisure. But the transmitter had to be fixed at the cottage during Simon Legg's absence. If he returned and found us at work there our efforts would fail.

I was burdened with a great coil of wire, and then we sallied out into the rear garden, the guv'nor laying the wire down as I paid it out. It was growing quite dusk now, and there was little fear of our movements being observed.

At the bottom of the garden we broke through the thick hedge and then descended the precipitous slope to the level of the moor below. We worked hard, and made rapid progress. Fortunately this part of the moor was liberally covered with heather and gorse, and it was a comparatively easy matter to conceal the wires.

near the ground and almost invisible. He had also prepared something else. For about twenty feet, between the fence and the last clump of gorse, the ground was bare, except for the rough grass.

And I found that a shallow gully had been constructed, and the wires were laid in this and the turf replaced. It was only a temporary measure, of course, for, although the wires were of extra durable quality, they wouldn't stand a spell of bad weather in that exposed position.

"Now to perform the final stroke," said Nelson Lee.

He unfastened his coat and unwound a thin silken ladder with a curiously designed hook arrangement at the top. After three tries the hook caught on the top of the fence.

Nelson Lee, without a word, ascended the fragile ladder. Reaching the top of the fence, he pulled the ladder up and let it down on the other side. I remained on guard, my eyes skinned.

The guv'nor had been making very complete preparations, and our work now was progressing rapidly and smoothly. On the

other side of the fence he took one keen glance at the cottage and satisfied himself that it was actually deserted.

Then he pulled the wires through the little hole, and proceeded to bury them beneath the soil as he progressed. The ground was rough, and it would be almost impossible to detect the marks left by this burying process. The distance, fortunately, was only short, and Nelson Lee rapidly pulled the wires up behind the masses of ivy which covered the cottage wall.

This ivy grew profusely, half smothering one side of the old-fashioned lattice window. And here, amongst the thick leaves, the gov'nor fixed the transmitter. The window was closed, and securely fastened by a new, patent catch.

"I think that'll do," murmured Lee, surveying the ivy. "I'll warrant the rascals will never suspect this little dodge. It would have been far better to have fitted up the transmitter within the room; but that was impossible. I certainly think this will prove effective."

He slipped round to the front door, taking care to leave no traces. And he found that the door, old-fashioned though it was, was fitted with no less than three patent locks! Simon Legg evidently had no intention of letting anybody enter his humble abode.

And just then I let out a hail.

"Quick, gov'nor!" I called softly. "He's coming!"

Nelson Lee moved like lightning. He shinned up the ladder with the agility of a monkey, unhooked it, and leapt clean down. The pair of us fell upon our stomachs, so that we should not be visible against the sky-line, and wriggled our way behind the cover of a thick clump of heather.

"Was I spotted, Nipper?" asked the gov'nor tensely.

"I don't think so, sir," I replied. "I caught sight of old Legg shuffling along beyond those trees in the distance. When you came over the fence he was hidden by the corner angle. So there's nothing to worry about."

"A near thing, though," whispered Lee. "Your friends apparently only just succeeded in detaining Legg for the necessary amount of time. But a mile is as good as a mile."

We wriggled further away, and then settled ourselves down to watch. Simon Legg approached, and let himself through the door in the fencing without even glancing round. It was quite obvious that he had no suspicions whatever, and was unaware that anything had happened during his absence.

We waited just five minutes, and then stole away. It was now almost dark, and by the time we reached the Mount again night had fallen. Nelson Lee was looking highly satisfied.

"We must congratulate ourselves, Nipper," he said. "I anticipated success, but hitches are always liable to occur."

"What's that you said, about the weather, sir?" I asked.

"The weather?"

"Yes—before you fixed the transmitter."

"Oh!" smiled the gov'nor. "It was impossible to fix the instrument within the cottage, and I therefore did the next best thing. I fitted it in the ivy quite near the window-frame. The weather being warm, Nipper, and the cottage private, it is only reasonable to suppose that the window will be kept open. The apartments in such a cottage are always low and stuffy, and ventilation is a sheer necessity."

"But what's the good of the transmitter there, sir?" I asked blankly. "Why, you won't be able to hear anything!"

"My dear Nipper, have you never used one of these private 'phones?" asked Lee. "It is not at all necessary to speak near the transmitter, as in the case of ordinary telephones. Provided the speaker is anywhere within a dozen yards, the voice is clearly carried along the wire. There is nothing to fear in that direction. The only defect is the possibility of the window being closed. And I think we may as well be easy on that point."

"Well, it's a thundering good idea," I declared. "And the way you've carried it out this evening is splendid. Why, we haven't been much more than an hour since we started!"

"Which is precisely as I calculated, young 'un!" replied Lee. "But our work is not finished yet, you must remember. You can either remain here and lend me a hand or get back to the school."

"Oh, I'll stay, sir," I replied promptly.

The first thing was to secure the wires properly out in the garden. This being done, we performed all the rest of the work—wiring the receiver and the batteries. The instrument itself was placed in one of the rear lower-rooms.

"Aren't you going to listen, sir?" I asked, when Nelson Lee proposed our immediate departure.

"Not now, my lad," he replied. "Legg is alone, and there would be nothing to hear, in any case. Moreover, it is necessary for us to get back to St. Frank's without delay."

And so we left at once, both of us highly elated. Our evening's work had been entirely successful, and we had every reason to hope that much good would come of the ruse.

And, as it turned out, that newly installed telephone was destined to perform very useful work before daylight came again!

CHAPTER IV.

HANDFORTH IS CURIOUS—HE BECOMES DETECTIVE—ON THE TRAIL!

"HALLO, here you are, dear boy."

It was Sir Montie Tregellis-West who uttered that remark. He and Tommy Watson were waiting at the gates in the darkness, having discovered that I had not returned.

"Yes, here I am, Montie," I replied cheerfully. "And here's the gov'nor, too. We've done our part all right, and you must

have done yours all right, too. How did you get on?"

Sir Montie and Tommy, between them, explained what had occurred. Nelson Lee and I listened with interest, and the guv'nor smiled approvingly when he had heard all.

"That was rather a cute dodge of Somerton's," he said. "It's a pity Legg succeeded in slipping away, but, as it happened, no harm was done. Our work was accomplished before the old man arrived home."

"Begad! That's good, sir."

"And you must let me thank you, boys, for having rendered me such valuable assistance," went on the guv'nor. "Without your help I should have been sorely handicapped. Legg suspects nothing, does he? He believes that you merely played a mischievous prank?"

"That's right, sir," said Watson.

Nelson Lee left us a moment later, and my chums carried me off grimly to Study C, set me in a chair, and demanded a full explanation. They had been in the dark long enough, and needed enlightenment.

I explained fully; there was no reason why they shouldn't know. And, naturally, they were very interested. Sir Montie remained quite calm, but Watson was inclined to be excited.

"And what's going to happen now?" he asked eagerly.

"That's just what I'm wondering," I replied. "The guv'nor suspects that Simon Legg knows something about Jim the Penman, and he means to strike at once. It's the only way to force a decision. Either Jim the Penman escaped completely, or he'll be collared at once."

"He'll be collared," declared Tregellis-West. "Begad, there's no escape for him, dear fellows! When Nelson Lee's after a chap there ain't much hope for him. What a frightfully lucky thing I ain't a criminal! Mr. Lee would have collared me ages ago if I had been—he would, really!"

"Well, let's go along and have a jaw with De Valerie and Somerton, in Study M," I said, jumping up. "I sha'n't tell 'em anything about that telephone, but we can give 'em a hint. The guv'nor thinks it'll be wiser to say as little as possible until the game's over."

I was just about to open the door when a crash sounded on the other side and it burst open violently. Without looking, I knew that Handforth was paying a visit. Handforth never went to the formality of opening a door in the usual manner. He generally kicked it open, regardless of paint and locks.

"Oh, here you are!" said Handforth briskly. "Run to earth at last. I want a word with you, Nipper."

"You can have a dozen if you like," I said generously. "Don't make it more, though, because I'm in a hurry. You're like the rippling brook, Handy—you run on for ever."

"I don't want any rot!" said Handforth. "What's the meaning of all this mystery? Why was it necessary for us to detain old

Legg? And what have you and Mr. Lee been doing this evening?"

"Is this a cross-examination?" I asked politely.

"Don't be an ass! I want to know the truth!"

"You're a forceful beggar, Handforth," I said gravely. "You want the truth, eh? Well, the guv'nor and I have been digging up potatoes in Warren's allotment!"

Handforth stared.

"What the dickens for?" he demanded blankly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He believes it!" yelled Watson, with a roar.

"Who believes it?" shouted Handforth, the fact that his leg was being pulled down upon his mighty intelligence. "It's all rot! You haven't been digging up any fat-headed potatoes! Besides, Warren got all his potatoes up weeks ago!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The fact is, Handy," I went on, "Mr. Lee thought that it would be a pleasure to take me somewhere miles away from your terrific presence. I must have a rescuer now and again, you know. Too much Handforth is worse than——"

"Look here!" bellowed Handforth wrathfully. "Are you going to tell me what you've been doing, or not?"

"Not!" I grinned.

"Why, you—you——"

"I shouldn't strain my face like that if I were you, Handy," I advised. "It's red enough at any time, and you don't want to burst a blood-vessel, I suppose? It doesn't do a fellow any good!"

Handforth nearly choked.

"I'll give you one more chance!" he said, breathing hard.

"Don't!" I broke in. "Why give me another chance? Why not begin the slaughter straight away? These chaps will see that your remains are properly carried away, Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Edward Oswald Handforth calmed down suddenly—a usual trick of his. I knew what was coming, and I grinned.

"And that's all the thanks I get!" said Handforth bitterly. "I think out wheezes, and work myself to the bone, and I ain't trusted! I'm treated like a giddy office-boy!"

"Well, there's nothin' surprisin' in that, is there?" asked Sir Montie. "Ain't you goin' to be your pater's office-boy when you leave St. Frank's? I've always understood that your pater keeps a grocer's shop or something?"

"You—you fathead!" bellowed Handforth. "My pater's a gentleman; he doesn't do any work at all!"

"Lazy boulder!" grinned Watson.

Handforth tried to speak, but failed.

"Before you have a fit, old chap, I think I'd better explain that there's nothing doing in the explanation line," I said calmly. "I'm sorry, Handy, but you must have patience."

You'll know all about it in good time, so be a good little boy and don't be inquisitive."

In order to save myself from bodily attack I diplomatically walked along the passage, and my chums accompanied me, chuckling hugely. I wasn't afraid of Handforth, but scrapping with him was too much of a fag. Besides, I didn't want to hurt him—he was harmless enough.

By the time Handforth fully recovered his speech and the use of his limbs we had disappeared into Study M. And Handforth, after dismissing various homicidal ideas as impracticable, stamped along to his own study and burst in. It was absolutely necessary for him to let off steam somewhere, and bitter experience had taught him that the only place to do so in safety was Study D. Church and McClure, being well accustomed to these indignant outbursts, sat through them patiently and resignedly.

"Chuck those things aside!" roared Handforth, slamming the door.

Church and McClure were busy at preparation, and they jumped. Their leader's tone was unmistakable. Church, after one glance, laid his pen down with a sigh. He knew that further work, for the time being, was a sheer impossibility.

But McClure was in the midst of an intricate algebraic problem, and he wanted nothing but peace and quietness. During Handforth's absence he had been permitted this blissful state.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "I don't want any of your rot now, Handy! Hi! Gimme that exercise book! You—you fatheaded ass!" he shrieked. "You've smudged all that page!"

"What do I care for pages?" roared Handforth, hurling his chum's exercise-book across the room. "If you ain't quiet, McClure, I'll punch your silly nose!"

"Do it, then!" shouted McClure recklessly.

Whack!

Handforth, thus invited, brought round his fist with such rapidity that even McClure was taken off his guard. He sat down on the floor with a thud, and Church grinned unfeelingly.

"Well, you asked for it, you ass!"

"And you'll get one if you ain't careful!" said Handforth, who felt like punching every nose that came within reach of his formidable fist. "There's not a more peaceable chap in the whole Ancient House, but when I'm wild I make the fur fly!"

"He's mad!" gasped McClure, remaining on the floor for the sake of safety. "Call the other chaps, Church!"

"Look here, there's no need for us to quarrel!" said Handforth grimly. "We're chums, ain't we? I'm sorry I punched your nose just now, McClure, but you shouldn't ask for it. I've been insulted—Study D's been insulted—and our honour's at stake!"

Church and McClure, who had heard all this thousands of times before, groaned and prepared to listen to the rest—which they practically knew by heart. But argument

was useless; force was useless. It was only possible to stick it out and get it over as soon as Fate would allow. Handforth's chums were plucky enough, but they knew how utterly hopeless it was to attempt reasonable speech with Handforth when he was in this mood. As a general rule Edward Oswald was easy-going, good-tempered, and wonderfully generous. So his chums were always ready to overlook these outbursts—they only wished that they were not quite so frequent. However, Handforth was Handforth, and they couldn't alter him.

"What's the trouble?" asked McClure wearily.

"Why, Nipper has refused to tell me why we detained Legg to-night," snorted Handforth. "Won't say what he and Mr. Lee have been doing, either! What do you think of that?"

"Great pip!" gasped Church. "Is that all?"

"Ain't it enough?" roared Handforth.

"Enough for you, I suppose," replied Church, with a sigh. "You're so jolly touchy, Handy—and so jolly inquisitive——" He paused uneasily as Handforth began to roll up his sleeves. "Oh, don't be an ass!" he added hastily. "Keep calm, for goodness' sake!"

"How the dickens can I keep calm when my own chums go against me?" asked Handforth bitterly. "You've got to back me up, you rotters! I'm not going to stand it!"

"Not going to stand what?"

"Being treated in that way!" snorted Handforth. "Since they won't tell me what the game is, I'll jolly well find out for myself! By George, that's what I'll do," he added, with gleaming eyes. "I'll become a giddy detective, and—and investigate! That's the word—investigate!"

"You're off your rocker!" gasped McClure.

"I'll become a second Sexton Blake!" continued Handforth, ignoring the interruption. "And you can be Tinker, Church. And you'll be Pedro——"

"Are you calling me a dog?" roared McClure.

"Well, Pedro's a jolly clever dog——"

"I don't care!" snorted McClure. "It's about time you cooled down, you ass. You're mad! What's all this rot about Sexton Blake and detectives and dogs? You've been reading some of those rotten stories again. It's a pity you don't buy decent stuff—stories about Sexton Blake himself. Those things you read are all about some awful idiot named Sebastian the Sleuth, ain't they?"

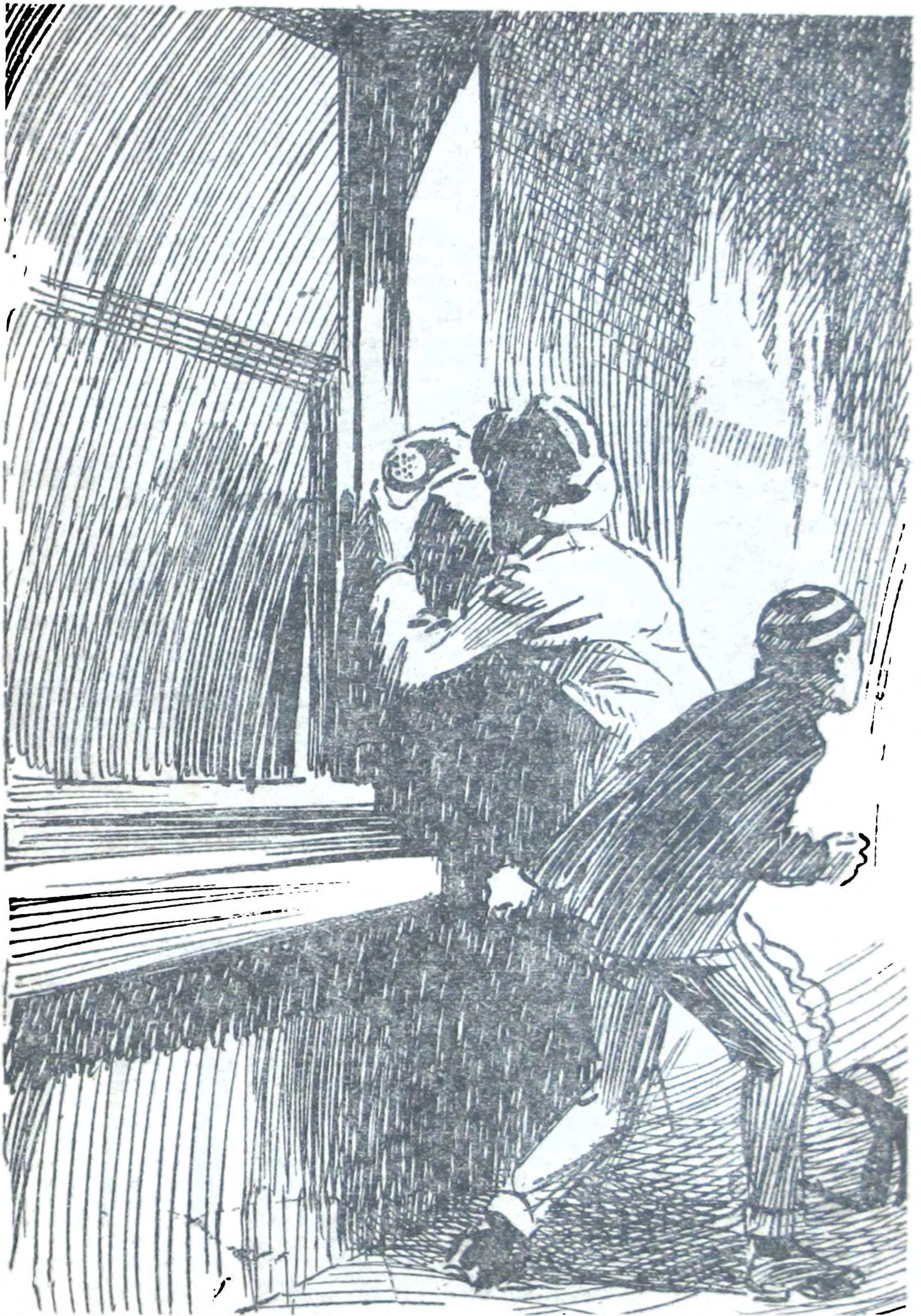
"Never you mind who they're about!" said Handforth warmly. "I know jolly well that I ain't going to stand this treatment! I'm going to investigate—after lights-out to-night. I'm going to prowl round old Legg's cottage and find out what his game is!"

Church and McClure looked alarmed.

"Break bounds?" gasped Church.

"Why not?"

"Because it would be a potty thing to do—that's why not!" said Church tartly. "You can go if you like—I sha'n't budge!"



Nelson Lee fixed the transmitter against the side of the window. The next moment Nipper let out a hail!—(See page 10.)

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Oh, you won't budge, eh?" he said grimly. "We'll see about that, Walter Church! As soon as all the fellows are asleep I'll yank you out of bed, and if you kick up a row I'll smash you. We're detectives—understand? And we're going to—to detect!"

"Mad!" muttered McClure.

"Eh?"

"Oh, nothing!" said McClure crossly.

"If you want to say something, say it!" snapped Handforth. "Don't mutter to yourself like that. I'm not standing any rot. You may as well get that into your heads straight away."

"No; we're standing the rot!" said Church tartly. "We're always standing it, and I'm just about fed-up. You're dotty, Handforth. How the dickens can you detect anything? We shall only get ourselves into a frightful mess if we break bounds—"

"Rats! You can trust me, I suppose?"

"You suppose a lot of things!" retorted Church.

"And you call yourselves my chums!" said Handforth witheringly. "You share the same study with me, eat off the same table, and bask in the sunshine of my smiles!"

"Do we?" gasped McClure faintly.

"Yes, you do!" declared Handforth, ramming his indictment home by the simple process of banging his fist upon the table. "You eat the grub I provide, and borrow money from me week in and week out. Do I grumble? Do I ask you to pay me back? No!" roared Handforth. "What do I care about money? If I've got a bob in my pocket, and you want it—it's yours! Thank goodness, I ain't stingy! And yet, when it comes to an affair which affects the honour of Study D, you sit there and sneer at me—you refuse to lend a hand. I'm disappointed. I'm ashamed of you both. You ain't chums of mine!"

Church and McClure looked at one another helplessly.

"Oh, I say, draw it mild, Handy!" muttered Church.

"Isn't it true?" roared Handforth.

As a matter of fact, it was true. Church and McClure were generally in a low state of finances, whilst Handforth was blessed with much pocket-money. He was the most generous fellow in the Ancient House, and he always seemed to consider that his cash was the property of the whole study. Church and McClure didn't even find it necessary to ask for a loan—Handforth frequently advanced them money out of sheer generosity. And his open nature seldom led him to say anything about what he did in this respect. It was only when he was driven, as on the present occasion, that he dropped a gentle reminder. It was a trump card—as Handforth was well aware.

"We—we'll come with you, of course, old chap!" said McClure weakly. "But—but it's so fatheaded—I—I mean, we shall only

get ourselves into trouble if we break bounds. You weren't cut out to be a detective, Handy—"

"That's no argument," interrupted Handforth. "This tablecloth wasn't cut out to be a tablecloth, but it is one now. It used to be a sheet, I believe. Didn't you pinch it out of the clean-clothes cupboard, Church?"

"No need to discuss that now," said Church hastily. "It was Mrs. Poulter's fault, anyhow. She lost our tablecloth, and wouldn't give us another; so we had to have something!"

"She didn't lose it!" put in McClure. "She said that an old-clothes man bought it for twopence, and that there were more holes than tablecloth—"

"Are you trying to choke me off?" roared Handforth. "Blow the tablecloth! You say I ain't cut out to be a detective, Arnold McClure? I don't suppose Nelson Lee himself was, but he became one, didn't he? It's just the job to suit me—and I'll do you the honour of saying that you chaps will make able assistants."

Church and McClure, who knew that Handforth would have his way in the end—as he always did—resigned themselves to the inevitable.

"Well, what's the programme?" asked McClure.

"I've told you once," said Handforth. "We'll wait until all the fellows are asleep, and then steal out. It'll be ripping sport, detecting all sorts of things about old Legg. Just think what Mr. Lee will say afterwards."

"We don't want to think of that!" said Church uneasily.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he might not say what you think he'll say!" replied Church, who was blessed with wonderful foresight. "Besides, what we ought to think about is what Mr. Lee will do! He's the best Housemaster we ever had, but he can use a cane all right!"

Handforth glared.

"There you go again!" he snorted. "You're speaking as though this venture is going to be a failure. You silly asses, we're going to win glory! We're going to teach Nelson Lee his own game!"

McClure badly wanted to disillusion his impetuous leader on that point, but he knew that there was only one positive method of opening Handforth's eyes. And that was bitter experience. Considering the number of times that Handforth had been disillusioned, it was rather surprising that he persisted in further efforts. But reverses only spurred him on to greater deeds.

The discussion came to an abrupt end, for Conroy minor and the Bo'sun came in just then—much to the satisfaction of Church and McClure. Handforth had completely recovered his good temper, and he was wonderfully amiable with everybody. I had expected deadly glares from Handforth when

he appeared in the common room—after my refusal to explain matters—but he was as sweet as honey. The leader of Study D, as though he was, never bore malice.

The Remove went up to bed at the usual time, and, although I noticed that Handforth and Co. were whispering together, I had no suspicion of their intentions. In my wildest moments I did not dream that Handforth would ever blossom out as a detective—or, at least, make the attempt.

Morrow, of the Sixth, came and saw lights out, and the Remove settled itself down to sleep. I dropped off within the first five minutes, and had no idea at that time that Handforth and Co. were intent upon remaining awake.

At least, Handforth was, although the "Co." treacherously fell off to sleep almost at once. Perhaps they hoped that Handforth himself would fall a victim to slumber, and the whole project would collapse.

Handforth, however, was full of determination, and when he felt himself dozing he slipped out of bed and paced up and down the floor. This was unfortunate, and he stumbled over somebody's boots and nearly succeeded in arousing the whole dormitory.

Numerous sleepy voices wanted to know what the dickens was the matter, but Handforth maintained a stony silence. And twenty minutes later everybody was sound asleep.

A strong hand grasped McClure's hair in the darkness, and its owner awoke with a gasp. This was not very surprising, for Handforth's fists were not at all gentle.

"Shut up, you ass!" he breathed fiercely.

"Ow! Leggo!" roared McClure.

There was a scuffle, several smothered gasps, and Handforth grinned in triumph as he pressed the pillow down upon his unfortunate chum's face. After about a minute he released the pressure, and McClure emerged breathless, indignant, and furious.

"You dangerous lunatic!" he hissed.

"You might have suffocated me!"

"Rot!" snapped Handforth. "Get up!"

Just for a moment McClure had a wicked idea of yelling so that the whole dormitory would be aroused. But he realised that such a course would have been rank treachery of the worst form. So he slipped out of bed and commenced dressing.

Church followed his example at once, inwardly hoping that they wouldn't receive anything more than lines. It would be rather hard luck if they got themselves booked for a public flogging on account of Handforth's rot. It was perhaps just as well that Handforth was in ignorance of his chums' forebodings.

Fully dressed, they stole out of the dormitory, and emerged into the Triangle by means of their study window. The night was clear and mild and splendidly dark for the work in hand.

Handforth and Co., detectives, were on the trail!

CHAPTER V.

AT THE MOUNT—LEE HEARS THINGS—MR. LENNARD ARRIVES.

NELSON Lee waited patiently.

He had been waiting for a full hour, and nothing had happened. And he was fully prepared to wait another hour—or three hours if necessary. A detective who does not possess the great virtue of patience is never much of a success.

It was nearly midnight, and everything was black and silent and still. Nelson Lee was seated in one of the rear lower-rooms of the Mount, and close beside him, upon a table, lay the receiver of the secret telephone.

It was not necessary for the detective to have the receiver pressed close to his ear. In such stillness the slightest sound would be audible at once. And the wire, being so short, would transmit the human voice with perfect clearness.

Lee had come upon duty, so to speak, just before eleven—after St. Frank's had gone off to bed. And although Nelson Lee had been listening very carefully, he had heard nothing except a few sounds of movements and an occasional cough.

Simon Legg was still alone evidently. But those sounds proved to the waiting detective that the telephone was in perfect order, and that the cottage window—as he had anticipated—was open.

There was no necessity for Nelson Lee to exercise any particular caution, for this telephone was a one-sided affair. There was no transmitter at the Mount end and no receiver at the cottage. Thus, although the slightest movement within the cottage came to Lee's ears, the detective himself could make any amount of noise with impunity.

Nelson Lee whiled away the time by smoking, and he had just lit his fourth cigarette when he distinctly heard the sound of a chair being pushed back suddenly. The movement was so clear that it was almost startling; it seemed impossible that the sound could have occurred right out in that lonely cottage on the moor.

There was a pause, and then voices sounded faintly. Lee picked up the receiver and placed it to his ear. At the same time he switched on a small electric-lamp, the light from which was shed downwards upon a neat writing-block. Lee already had a pencil in his fingers and he prepared to take down everything he overheard in shorthand.

The voices were rather faint, and Lee realised that the speakers were at the outer gate or just entering the cottage. A door banged, and then the voices were perfectly clear.

"I thought you'd be here sooner, Hirst," said the voice of Simon Legg. "What's the meaning of the delay?"

"That rotten car again!" came another voice. "She went wrong half-way across the moor, and Mills was messing about for ever

half an hour. Still, she's all right now."

"Running sweetly," agreed another voice—presumably Mills.

"That's a good thing," said Simon Legg. "We shall have to get away before the morning, my friends. This place is getting rather too warm. That infernal busybody, Lee, is too near for comfort. I've got half an idea that he's preparing something—and we've got to skip before he can strike."

"Well, everything's planned," said Hirst. "The High Lord has prepared a nice little retreat for you, and you'll be as safe as houses. And he wants you to get on with that work, too."

"Oh, I'll get on with it soon enough," came Legg's voice. "Have one of these cigarettes!"

There was a short silence, and Nelson Lee smiled grimly to himself. He knew that his preparations had not been made a minute too soon. Simon Legg meant to "skip" that very night—for some reason best known to himself. And Nelson Lee was greatly struck by the difference in the old man's voice. It was no longer a croak, but strong and crisp.

"If it hadn't been for Lee you would have been safe enough here," went on Hirst.

"The fact is, Sutcliffe, Lee's a thundering hard nut to crack. The High Lord doesn't care much about him over this affair—because, after all, it's only a kind of side-line. It's not worth going into any intricate schemes. You will be out of the neighbourhood by the morning."

Again Nelson Lee smiled grimly. Simon Legg had been addressed as "Sutcliffe!" In short, old Simon Legg was none other than Jim the Penman himself!

This was not much of a surprise to Nelson Lee, for he had suspected the truth for some time past. The queer old miser of the Moor Cottage was the escaped forger in disguise. Nelson Lee was very gratified to learn definitely that his suspicion was well-founded.

But how could such a thing be?

How was it possible for Jim the Penman to be Simon Legg? The forger had only escaped from prison a few days since—not more than a week, at all events. And yet Simon Legg had been in the neighbourhood of Bell-ton and St. Frank's for well over two months!

The thing seemed utterly impossible. Indeed as it stood it was impossible. It was obviously absurd to suppose that Jim the Penman could have come into the neighbourhood while he was yet in prison.

There could be only one explanation—and this was quite simple.

Of course, there were two Simon Leggs. The first man had been an agent of the Circle of Terror, carefully chosen for the particular work. He had succeeded in establishing himself in the district. Everybody knew him, and he was generally regarded as a perfectly harmless old fellow, with somewhat eccentric habits.

Upon the night of Jim the Penman's

escape the notorious forger had been brought straight to the Moor Cottage. Simon Legg had dropped his disguise from that moment, and Jim the Penman had donned it. Thus Sutcliffe became the old miser, and the man who had played the part originally went away—or possibly he was one of these two men who were now with Jim—Hirst or Mills.

The police and the prison authorities, on the lookout for Jim the Penman, were put off the trail. There was nothing which could lead them to suppose that Simon Legg was their man—for Legg had been in the neighbourhood for months.

Nelson Lee, knowing much of Jim the Penman's trickery, had arrived at the truth in a very short time. And he had taken certain measures to ensure the arrest of the escaped convict. But he could do nothing without proof; and he had fixed up the telephone for the especial purpose of obtaining concrete evidence.

That evidence was now to hand.

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch, and nodded to himself.

"About time they were here," he murmured. "It'll be a pity if they're late. I can't manage this affair single-handed—or even with Nipper's help. And Nipper, by the way, ought to be putting in an appearance in a minute or two."

The men were still talking in the cottage, but their conversation was of little importance. Suddenly, however, one of the new arrivals uttered an exclamation.

"Did you hear something?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes!" snapped Jim the Penman.

There was nothing more said, but the door was opened, and then Lee waited for fully five minutes. During this time there was utter silence, proving that all three men had passed out into the night.

What could be the reason for this sudden alarm?

Nelson Lee was soon to learn the truth. Voices sounded again, and one or two yelps in boyish accents. Lee suddenly became very alert, and pressed the receiver to his ear, frowning in a puzzled fashion.

"... infernal young hounds!" came Jim the Penman's snarling voice. "I caught you nicely, didn't I? Drat ye! You young varmints! Can't a pore old man—"

"Rats!" came the unmistakable bellow of Edward Oswald Handforth. "You're a fraud—that's what you are! An old man couldn't have run after me as you did! I don't believe they're your real whiskers, even."

"You young puppy—"

"Well, I ain't afraid of you!" roared Handforth. "I meant to find things out to-night, and I've jolly well done it! I'm a detective, and these silly fatheads here are my assistants. You silly chumps!" he went on. "Why couldn't you have nipped off?"

"Why didn't you nip off yourself?" snorted the voice of McClure.

"Enough of this!" snapped Jim the Penman—who had resumed the croaking tones of Simon Legg. "You've got yourselves into a pretty pickle, you young fools!"

"Not such a pickle as you're in, I'll bet!" retorted Handforth defiantly. "I'll go and tell the police about this in the morning! Like your cheek, forcing us in here——"

"Pah! Keep silent, boy!" snarled Jim the Penman. "You are within my property, and your companions were hanging about outside. You will find that your position is serious."

Nelson Lee by this time was very angry. Handforth and Co., of course, had broken bounds, and had been discovered hanging about the cottage. Lee readily understood that Handforth's motives were good ones, but this did not alter the serious nature of the situation.

The detective's carefully-laid plans were in jeopardy, and the boys themselves were in a tight corner. Jim the Penman was not the man to deal lightly with people who interfered. The three boys were in far greater peril than they imagined.

Very fortunately for them Nelson Lee was on the watch—or, rather, on the listen—and he knew all about it. But for this fact, Handforth and Co. might have fared very badly.

"It was all your fault, you silly ass!" Nelson Lee heard McClure exclaim in a tense voice. "We told you not to climb over the fence. You've got us into a fine hole now."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth.

The detective realised that the three boys were standing over by the window, and they were holding a whispered conversation, little realising that every word they uttered could be distinctly heard by their own house-master!

"Rot!" repeated Handforth. "How could we find anything out by sticking out there? Detectives always have these ups and downs. We shall score yet. You needn't think I'm beaten, my sons. There's something queer about this place—and about old Legg, too. You can't diddle me!"

Nelson Lee could hardly help smiling, and he certainly admired Handforth's bold spirit. Church and McClure, although not exactly frightened, were not quite so daring as their leader.

"It's all very well to talk like that!" said McClure uneasily. "You seem to forget, Handy, that we're in the wrong. It's against the law for a chap to break into somebody else's garden, and we might be handed over to the police in the morning! We shall look fine detectives then, sha'n't we?"

"And what's Mr. Lee going to say?" put in Church. "I know what'll happen—we shall be publicly flogged—perhaps sacked! All because of your rot!"

"Oh, I knew you'd turn on me!" said Handforth bitterly. "Thank goodness Mr. Lee has got more sense than you have! He'll understand that I was acting for the best, and he can't give us much punishment. In fact," added Handforth thoughtfully, "he

ought to thank us for doing our best to help him!"

"Oh, ought he?" murmured Nelson Lee grimly. "I'm afraid. Handforth, that your hopes will not be fulfilled. However, I don't suppose your offence is very serious."

The chief cause for worry was that Handforth's intervention might cause the upsetting of Nelson Lee's own plans. In that event Handforth would receive far more punishment than if everything went right. This was, perhaps, rather hard on Handforth and Co., but Nelson Lee possessed as much human nature as anybody else.

A moment later other voices sounded.

"Yes, rope them up!" said Jim the Penman curtly. "We can't afford to take any chances, Hirst. It doesn't matter if these interfering brats are not found for days. Let them starve!"

"If you think I'm going to starve, you're jolly well mistaken. Hi! Legg—— Keep your beastly paws off me——"

The sounds of much scuffling and gasping then came over the wire. Nelson Lee laid the receiver down and rose to his feet. His expression was set and firm. He would have to sacrifice his own plans in order to rescue these impetuous juniors.

It was a galling position, but there was no help for it. For Nelson Lee to act now would be to show his hand prematurely, and quite possibly Jim the Penman would succeed in making his escape.

But there was nothing else for it.

It was quite impossible to quietly sit there, knowing that Handforth and Co. were being subjected to harsh treatment by such a ruthless scoundrel as Douglas James Sutcliffe. The Removites had intervened and had got themselves into trouble. It was therefore necessary to go to their rescue without delay.

"If only Lennard had been here to time it would have been all right," muttered Nelson Lee impatiently. "As it is I shall have to sacrifice my whole scheme. By James! Those boys will smart for this!"

The detective did not seem to take into consideration the fact that in order to rescue Handforth and Co. it would be necessary for him to tackle three desperate men single-handed.

It was his intention to leave the house by the rear door, cross the garden, and descend the steep slope on to the moor below. He arrived outside, and was just about to hasten forward when he heard the unmistakable sound of stealthy footsteps on the gravel.

He paused, listening.

There were two or three men, without a doubt, and Nelson Lee gave a little sigh of satisfaction as he distinctly heard the bell within the house give five curiously timed rings.

The next moment Lee was hurrying round to the front door. Several dim figures stood upon the wide steps, and a sharp, low inquiry came to his ears.

"Who's that?"

"You couldn't have arrived at a more

opportune time, Lennard," said Nelson Lee calmly.

A moment later he was shaking hands with Detective Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard. The inspector was looking very keen, and he had half a dozen plain-clothes men with him.

"We left the car up the road, as you suggested," said the inspector. "What's the trouble? You spoke just now as though something demands prompt attention!"

"Exactly!" agreed Nelson Lee. "If you'll follow me, my dear fellows, we'll get down the steep slope to the moor, and I'll explain the position as we walk along."

"Good enough!"

The party started off without a moment's delay. But even now Nelson Lee was rather doubtful as to whether they would arrive in time to rescue Handforth and Co. and to prevent the escape of Jim the Penman.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE REMOVE DORMITORY—BOX ON THE TRACK—THE BIRDS FLOWN!

TWELVE!

The last stroke of midnight sounded out solemnly from the old clock tower and the echo vibrated through the Remove dormitory.

I was out of bed in a twinkling, as fresh as a daisy, although I had been sound asleep a minute before. Owing to Nelson Lee's effective method of training I possessed the happy knack of being able to awaken fresh and alert on the instant.

I commenced dressing with more thought for speed than for care. The gov'nor had instructed me to turn up at the Mount at twelve fifteen exactly, and I meant to be there on time.

There was no real reason why I should take part in the coup. But Nelson Lee had told me that he had communicated with Detective Inspector Lennard, and that the latter gentleman would arrive shortly after midnight. Originally, I wasn't to have been there at all.

But I didn't see the fun of sticking in bed while this affair of Jim the Penman was brought to a head. I naturally wanted to take part in the game, and persisted so strenuously that the gov'nor told me to get up at midnight and to arrive at twelve-fifteen.

I didn't tell Sir Montie Tregellis-West or Tommy Watson anything about it. Too many of us would create confusion, and so my chums were allowed to slumber on peacefully. In the morning, of course, I should receive two tremendously severe lectures. It was even probable that my chums would display a warlike attitude. They would be thundering wild when they found out that I had gone off, leaving them in bed. But it couldn't be helped.

I dressed rapidly, keeping my eyes upon the other beds in case somebody should in-

conveniently wake up. There seemed something queer about Handforth's bed; the sheets appeared to be all thrown back, and out of sheer curiosity I moved slightly nearer in order to discover the reason. As I did so I saw that the two adjoining beds—those belonging to Church and McClure—were in a similar condition.

One glance at close quarters told me the truth.

Handforth and Co. were not in the dormitory. I thought that they had perhaps merely gone out of the room for some small reason—such as a feed in their own study, or something of that sort. Handforth had been known to do madder things than that.

But their clothes were missing, which proved that they had fully dressed themselves before taking their departure. In short, they had gone out—they had broken bounds.

Why?

The problem was not a difficult one to solve. I guessed the truth almost at once, and felt alarmed and worried. I remembered Handforth's keen anxiety to know what was in the wind. He was particularly set upon discovering the mystery concerning Simon Legg, and had even gone to the length of hinting that he wasn't to be diddled. I had thought nothing of it at the time; but now I knew that Handforth had already planned this expedition. He and his chums had been whispering together while they undressed.

"The silly asses!" I muttered impatiently. "Oh, the fatheads!"

The idea, obviously, was to make investigations—or what Handforth called investigations—round Legg's cottage. And to-night the gov'nor had planned his coup!

The enemy would be on the alert, and it was quite on the cards that the blundering Handforth would properly upset the whole apple-cart.

He meant well, of course. And it was almost impossible to be really wild with him; but I felt exasperated and alarmed. Why the dickens had he interfered? Church and McClure, of course, had been compelled to accompany their enthusiastic leader.

It was a time for prompt action.

I rapidly crossed over and aroused Sir Montie and Tommy. In the light of this new discovery I felt that it would be better to have them with me. For, to tell the truth, I meant to rush straight to the cottage before going to the Mount. With luck we should be in time to prevent Handforth acting drastically. I didn't know that the famous trio of Study D were already in the enemy's hands!

Sir Montie and Tommy, somewhat dazed at first, rapidly understood the situation as I explained it, and they lost no time in slipping into their clothes.

"There's just one thing I want to ask, old boy," said Tregellis-West. "If you hadn't found out that Handforth had gone, would you have cleared off without wakin' us up?"

"Yes; I didn't want to disturb you."

"Then, dear old fellow, I'm frightfully pained," said Sir Montie sadly. "I think it's shockin'ly mean of you, an' I'm glad that Handforth stepped in. Fancy goin' off an' desertin' your old pals——"

"I'm not going to desert you," I grinned. "We're all going together. And, anyhow, we'll resume this argument when we've got more time."

"Buck up, then!" said Tommy Watson softly. "I'm ready!"

Sir Montie, for a wonder, did not keep us waiting longer than half a minute, and then we all slipped down to the side door and let ourselves out.

"Rather a pity we haven't got a bloodhound," remarked Sir Montie thoughtfully. "A bloodhound would come in frightfully handy, you know. It would lead us on the track——"

"Handforth's gone to the cottage, that's certain," I interrupted. "Still, your talk about a bloodhound has put another idea into my head. Why shouldn't we take old Boz? It would give him a run, and he'll come in handy if there's a scrap or anything like that."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Watson eagerly.

"Begad! Rather!"

Fetching Boz delayed us just about a minute, and then we started off at the double. Boz was my little spaniel—about the cleverest dog I'd ever come across. I had purchased him from a sailor during the summer holidays, and he had given us ample proof that he was as keen a man-tracker as any bloodhound.

While I had been fetching Boz Watson had slipped back into the Ancient House and had secured one of Handforth's caps. We allowed Boz to sniff this, and he understood at once.

After a certain amount of nosing around he set off eagerly, hot on the trail. It was really unnecessary, under the circumstances, but Boz was to come in very useful indeed, as it happened, before the night was out.

We progressed fairly rapidly, and having made our way along the road for some little distance, cut off along the footpath which led straight down on to the moor. It was now obvious that we were on the right track, and I set my teeth grimly.

"Handforth deserves to be slaughtered for this!" I growled. "There's no telling what harm he's done—you know what a blundering fathead he is. The guv'nor will be fearfully wild."

"Well, it's no good grumblin', old boy," remarked Sir Montie philosophically. "Let's hope we collar Handforth before he has time to do anything rash. By the way, what are your guv'nor's plans, Nipper? You keep on referrin' to 'em, but——"

"Why, he's going to bring off a coup to-night—or try to," I interjected. "Detective-Inspector Lennard is coming down especially. The whole affair's jolly important, I can tell you."

We rapidly descended the long slope to the moor, Boz leading the way. The little spaniel possessed one quality I have never

seen in a bloodhound, and which was decidedly in his favour. When on the trail it was not necessary to hold him in leash. He trotted on ahead of us, never once attempting to lead by more than seven or eight yards. And he would halt instantly if given the word, no matter how eager he was to continue the scent.

This was a decided advantage, and both the guv'nor and I knew that Boz was an extremely valuable little animal. Strictly speaking, he was a mongrel, and any dog breeder would declare that he wasn't worth looking at. Nelson Lee, however, would not have sold Boz for a hundred pounds, for the little dog was, of course, as much the guv'nor's as mine.

We hurried across the moor, keeping our eyes fixed upon the dull blur in front which marked Simon Legg's cottage and the surrounding fence. Then suddenly I gave a jump.

Travelling almost parallel with us towards the cottage, but quite a long distance to the right, were some dim figures. Tommy Watson saw them at the same moment.

"The asses are over there!" he ejaculated, halting.

"That's not Handforth and Co.," I replied. "Hold on a minute."

I gave a peculiar soft whistle and listened. Almost at once the whistle was repeated.

"It's the guv'nor!" I said quickly. "That's our secret signal. Come on, my sons!"

We raced across the rough ground as fast as possible—and that was not very rapid. For clumps of gorse and heather grew thickly, and it was impossible to run with any degree of speed. Boz helped us a good deal, for he picked out the path. The little dog had left the trail reluctantly, but, once having done so, was quite content to trot ahead of us.

As I had suspected, Detective-Inspector Lennard and several other Scotland Yard men were with the guv'nor. They waited for us to come up, and I explained the situation in a few words.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Exactly, Nipper," he said quietly. "I know all about it."

"You know?" I gasped.

"I know even more," was the guv'nor's reply. "Your fears, young 'un, were fully justified. Those three reckless boys have managed to get themselves captured——"

"Oh, begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

"You may well be dismayed, Tregellis-West," said Nelson Lee. "But come, we must not waste a moment."

This fresh news somewhat startled me. Mr. Lennard was looking rather grim, and he confidentially informed me that he would personally give Handforth and Co. three decidedly thick ears when the affair was over.

"They deserve more than that!" I growled. "Handforth's a good chap—one of the best—but he wasn't cut out to be a detective. I'll give him a piece of my mind to-morrow!"

"Fat lot of notice he'll take of it!" said

Watson. "Handforth ought to be boiled in oil!"

"That's a bit drastic, isn't it?" remarked the inspector drily. "Personally, I don't care what happens to these youngsters, so long as we nab Jim the Penman."

Lennard meant, of course, that he didn't care what punishment Handforth and Co. received. His one anxiety, as he frankly admitted, was to capture the escaped forger. Jim the Penman at liberty was a menace to the whole country. And he was about the most slippery criminal who had ever seen the interior of a prison.

We moved across the moor quickly, Boz keeping obediently at my heels. I had given him that order, and he did not object. Some little distance from the fenced enclosure Nelson Lee called a halt.

"We must make some sort of plan," he murmured. "It will be wise, I think, to post your men round the enclosure, Lennard. There may be a secret exit, and we don't want the rascals to slip away. Once upon the open moor they would stand a good chance of getting away in this darkness."

"We must spread out, then," said the inspector.

He gave his men precise orders, and they crept forward in different directions, his idea being to surround the cottage. Nelson Lee and Lennard and we boys remained facing the fence doorway.

There had been no sign of activity from the cottage, and the occupants evidently had no idea that capture was so near at hand. The news that Simon Legg was Jim the Penman had startled my chums, but the gov'nor had already told me of his suspicions.

I knew that Sutcliffe was ruthless, but I hardly expected him to display any particular violence against Handforth and Co. He probably meant to leave them in the cottage, bound and helpless, where they would be doomed to remain until rescued. And Jim and his confederates were now making preparations for departure. That's how I reasoned things out.

Nelson Lee and the inspector intended making a direct frontal attack, and Sir Montie and I were warned to keep well in the background. There would be some shooting, possibly, and the gov'nor did not want us to be involved.

"There is only one method to employ," murmured Nelson Lee. "We must creep forward, and I will scale the fence. If I can do so without attracting attention all the better. Once on the other side I will unfasten the door and let you in, Lennard."

"Go ahead!" said the inspector briskly.

They moved forward, and I grunted. I didn't like being left out in the cold; but I didn't presume to disobey the gov'nor's orders. Much depended upon the success of these operations.

Suddenly the inspector made several wild signs, and Nelson Lee, who had approached the fence, and was about to sling his silken ladder, paused, and went to Lennard's side.

The inspector was near the door in the

fence. We saw him go forward, and then both he and the gov'nor passed through!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I ejaculated. "The door's open!"

"Begad! That's rather surprisin', ain't it?" murmured Montie.

It was so surprising that I ran lightly towards the fence, and the others followed me. There was not the slightest sign of Lennard's men now. They had all dropped into cover behind patches of gorse and were quite invisible.

The door in the fence stood open, and my chum and I halted there, gazing towards the cottage. The little front door was open, and Nelson Lee and Detective-Inspector Lennard were evidently within. A lamp was burning, but only dimly.

A moment later I heard Lennard's voice.

"Extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "Not a soul here! They've skipped. Lee, the birds have flown. We've too late!"

"Oh, my hat!" I said blankly.

The knowledge that nobody was within the cottage was as good as permission for us to join the gov'nor. And we hurried in, and found Nelson Lee standing in the centre of the little room, thoughtfully stroking his chin. The inspector was muttering words, which were obviously not intended for our ears, under his breath.

"Where's Handforth, sir?" I asked breathlessly.

"Handforth and his chums have been taken away, Nipper," replied the gov'nor. "They cannot have been gone long, that's very certain. But I don't think we're too late, Lennard."

"How do you make that out?" growled the inspector.

"Well, I'm almost certain that Jim the Penman will return," said Lee tensely. "Look at this portmanteau here. And the rug, and these papers. Jim will come back. He has only left the place temporarily—and in a great hurry, too. Otherwise the door would not have been left open in that careless fashion. It points to something else, too."

"That Jim has no suspicion of our movements?"

"Exactly," nodded Nelson Lee. "So far as I can judge, Jim and the men with him—Hirst and Mills—have left the cottage in order to rid themselves of the three boys. They will probably return almost at once, and we must be prepared for them."

"But what of Handforth?" I began.

"Really, Nipper, I cannot be bothered with Handforth just now!" snapped Nelson Lee. "I don't suppose for a minute that he and his chums will come to any harm. In any case, we must wait here until the men return. Lennard, you had better see that the outer door is nearly closed, as we found it."

The inspector went off at once, and was back in about ten seconds.

"Somebody coming now!" he breathed tensely. "There's not a moment, Lee. Hide, for goodness' sake! Keep that dog quiet. Nipper, or I'll never speak to you again!"

"Into this rear room!" whispered Nelson Lee sharply.

We all passed through, leaving the front apartment exactly as we had found it. Acting upon Lee's advice, Lennard crept round to the side of the house and concealed himself there.

I had no difficulty with Boz. One word was sufficient to make him remain quiet. But the little bouncer knew jolly well that something exciting was afoot. He remained just at my feet, his ears cocked up on the alert, his back bristling.

Nelson Lee was standing just by the door. We had hardly expected such a prompt return as this. Upon the whole the affair seemed to be progressing well, although the fate of Handforth and Co. was still obscure.

Somebody entered the cottage. We could hear him breathing hard, as though he had just been running. I had been expecting more than one man, but it was soon obvious that this fellow was alone. And Lee, who half feared that Boz would make some movement, acted without delay.

He flung open the door and passed through.

"Hands up, please!" he said crisply. "Why, it's Jim! Sorry to upset your little plan, Sutcliffe——"

Jim the Penman started back violently.

"Nelson Lee!" he snapped. "By George! I thought I'd beat you this trip, you infernally clever brute! But you haven't got me yet——"

"I shouldn't advise you to try any tricks, Jim!" cut in Lee curtly. "My revolver is not for show, let me remind you. And it happens that another weapon of very similar pattern is just behind you!"

Sutcliffe laughed harshly.

"Those tricks won't work with me, Lee!" he exclaimed. "You're alone, and you won't——"

"Not quite alone!" said Detective-Inspector Lennard pleasantly. "How does this feel, my friend? Convincing, eh?"

It ought to have been, for Lennard had crept up behind Jim, and was now engaged in the genial task of pressing the rim of his revolver-barrel into the nape of Jim the Penman's neck.

The forger raised his hands and laughed.

"I know when I'm done!" he said calmly.

"Well, I've had a bit of excitement, so I mustn't grumble. Upon my soul, Lee, I admire your methods. I'm a cute beggar, but I was off my guard this trip!"

Lennard reached up and snapped a pair of handcuffs over Jim the Penman's wrists. He offered no resistance, for Sutcliffe was one of the coolest rascals under the sun. If there had been the slightest chance of escape he would have seized it—and he would have fought like a demon. But he knew well enough the odds were overwhelming.

And so Jim the Penman's brief spell of liberty was at an end. He had been captured very neatly, but there was still a good deal to be done.

Most important of all, what had happened to Handforth and Co.?

CHAPTER VII.

BOZ ON THE TRACK AGAIN—HANDFORTH IS SUBDUED—A NEW BOY COMING!

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD was hugely pleased with himself. He was also pleased with Nelson Lee, for he was quite ready to acknowledge that this important capture would have been impossible but for the efforts of the celebrated private criminologist.

Jim the Penman stood before us—himself. His "Simon Legg" disguise had been stripped off, and he was revealed clean-shaven, neat, and spruce. The only indication of his recent sojourn in one of His Majesty's prisons was the close-cropped nature of his head.

"The fact is, Lee, I might as well have given up the whole game as soon as I knew you were in this neighbourhood," he said candidly, as though talking to a friend. "It's an infernal pity. I was going to do all sorts of things in the near future. Breaking stones doesn't agree with my constitution."

"I don't think you'll do any of that for some little time, Sutcliffe," said Nelson Lee drily. "You will have ample time to ponder over this present failure during your inevitable period of solitary confinement."

"That's the worst of it," said Jim the Penman. "I have been used to good living, Lee, and solitary confinement disagrees with me even worse than stone-breaking. However, I shall be able to think out some choice scheme of revenge, and I can assure you I shan't forget this little attention on your part."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "He's a cool beggar, ain't he?"

"Cool!" I echoed. "My dear chap, the guv'nor and I have had many encounters with Jim the Penman, and he's always been like this. As calm and collected as the guv'nor himself. He looks like a gentleman, and talks like one, but he's tried to murder us more times than I can think of!"

"Thank goodness he's caught!" murmured Watson.

"I must trouble you to accompany me, Sutcliffe," said the inspector. "I have quite a comfortable car waiting, and I daresay your valet at the prison has prepared your apartment in readiness for your reception!" he added drily. "But there are one or two questions I wish you to answer——"

"Wishes are not always granted," said Sutcliffe calmly.

"Well, there's no reason why you should be obstinate just now," said Lennard. "First of all, where are those two friends of yours, Hirst and Mills?"

"Well, I hope they won't be so foolish as I was, and that they have skipped while they're safe," replied Jim the Penman. "If you want to know where I left them I'm afraid I shall have to decline to say. I don't give my friends away, inspector."

"At least you will tell us what you have done with those three boys?" put in Nelson Lee quietly.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Sutcliffe. "So you know all about that, do you? I've

been half asleep, and I deserve this awakening. As for the boys, I'm afraid I can't oblige. The moor is open to you, Lee, so you can spend the rest of the night in hunting about. I don't think you'll find them," he added in a hard voice. "At least, I hope not. The confounded young puppies deserve more than they've received."

"Don't be a fool, Jim—" began the gov'nor.

"I'm not!" interjected the forger. "And you needn't ask me any further questions. I shan't say another word."

"But, look here, you rotter!" I shouted. "You've got to tell us—"

"It's no good, Nipper," put in Nelson Lee. "I think I know Jim the Penman well enough to be able to accept his word. To question him further would be a mere waste of time. You had better take him away, Lennard. And I should advise you to have three of your men with you. Jim is as cunning as a fox, and you can't be too careful. You can lend me your three other men, if you don't mind."

Detective-Inspector Lennard nodded.

"The very thing I was about to suggest," he agreed. "Now, Jim, if you don't mind!"

And Jim the Penman took his leave, quietly and calmly, escorted by the Inspector and three plain-clothes men. It was very satisfactory to know that the forger had been captured. But what of the two Circle of Terror agents, Hirst and Mills? And what had happened to Handforth and Church and McVure?

Nelson Lee was looking quite collected, and he turned to me as soon as the prisoner had been taken away. The other three Scotland Yard men were just on the other side of the enclosure, on the look-out for the missing crooks.

"Now, Nipper, we've got to see about Handforth and his two chums," said the gov'nor sharply. "My anger has somewhat subsided now that Jim is caught. If we find those three boys I shall be inclined to give them a severe lecture, and let it go at that. This experience, in my opinion, has been quite sufficient punishment."

"But how are we going to find 'em, sir?" asked Sir Montie mildly.

"Bos!" I cut in.

"Exactly, Nipper—Bos!" nodded Nelson Lee. "I think you told me that you were on Handforth's trail? You have the lad's cap in your pocket? Good! We'll see what can be done."

Sir Montie gazed at me through his pince-nez.

"Begad!" he remarked. "Dear old boy, I never thought of that, you know. It's queer, ain't it? I'm so confused, I suppose, with all this excitement an' bustle. Bos is the fellow for the job."

Two minutes later I was holding Handforth's cap to Bos's nose. The clever little bouncer was as keen as mustard once more, and he very soon picked up the trail and truttled off eagerly.

"Splendid!" said Nelson Lee. "We must not let the little fellow lead us off on Handforth's old trail, however, for at that rate

we should merely find ourselves back at the school."

After a few minutes it became quite evident that Bos had not made such a blunder. He led the way across the moor in precisely the opposite direction to St. Frank's, and we knew well enough that Handforth and Co. had not willingly taken that course.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I followed Nelson Lee closely, and the three plain-clothes men brought up the rear. The success of this experiment raised our hopes considerably, and I was extremely pleased that I had brought Bos along.

"He'll lead us to those three fatheads, sir," I said confidently. "There's nothing to worry over now. But I hope Handforth and the others haven't come to any harm. They're asses, of course, but they're three jolly decent fellows, all the same."

Bos showed no sign of flagging, and before long we became fairly certain as to our approximate destination. Without a doubt Jim the Penman had taken his three youthful victims to the old moor quarry, which was comparatively close at hand.

We reached the steep, precipitous edge of it very shortly afterwards, and Bos picked his way along the cliff-top for some little distance. The quarry had been disused for years, and was one of the loneliest spots in the whole neighbourhood. In the dark the place was extremely treacherous, for the cliff-edge was practically invisible, and a tumble down would mean severe injury. Indeed, there were stories told in Bellton of unfortunate tramps who had been found dead in the quarry, having evidently lost their way in the dark hours of the night.

Bos arrived at one of the comparatively safe descending-points within a minute, and scampered down eagerly. The trail was hot, and we knew that we were getting to our destination.

As we descended we paused now and again, listening. But everything was as silent as the grave. It was the gov'nor who was the first to notice anything unusual. Then abruptly he thrust out his arm, pointing steadily.

"Do you see?" he asked tensely.

We looked in vain.

"See what, sir?" I asked, after a moment.

"I do not think my eyes are keener than yours, Nipper," replied the gov'nor. "A little more to the left, young 'un. There are two forms mounting the quarry by another pathway. This is most satisfactory. We shall have to desert Handforth and his chums for a few minutes."

"Begad! Mr. Lee's right," breathed Sir Montie.

Having had the exact spot pointed out to us, we could see two dim shapes laboriously climbing a steep pathway about three hundred yards distant. We had only descended a third of the way to the wide bed of the quarry, and we silently mounted to the top again. The three Scotland Yard men were very eager to obey Nelson Lee's orders.

The plan was simple.

They crept along at a fast trot, following the edge of the quarry. And then, at a given signal from Lee, they all dropped flat. Sir Montie and Tommy and I did the same, some little distance away.

The climax came at once. Lee and the plain-clothes men were only just in time, for hardly had they laid themselves in the grass when the two figures reached the top of the steep path and then paused for breath. Obviously they had no idea that other human beings were near. It was a sheer piece of luck for us that Nelson Lee had spotted them. He had eyes like a hawk.

While Hirst and Mills were still taking breath Lee gave the word, and he and his companions rose as though from out of the earth itself and fell upon the two startled men.

Already breathless, they had little fight in them. There was a quick, fierce struggle, and then they both went down. Exactly one minute later they were handcuffed securely.

"My word! Mr. Lennard will be pleased, sir!" said one of the Yard men. "This makes our capture complete, doesn't it? What shall we do, sir?"

"Take your prisoners away without delay," replied the guv'nor, in a satisfied voice. "You can leave us to discover the missing boys. They cannot be far off now."

The disconsolate Circle men were questioned; but they, like Jim the Penman, refused to say a word. No time was wasted over them, and they were taken off promptly.

Box did the rest.

He led the way into a low, wide opening. The next second he gave a yelp of triumph—and three lusty shouts rang out, echoing curiously in the confined cavern.

"That you, Handy?" I shouted.

"Oh, my hat!" came a yell. "It's Nipper! Thank goodness! Here we are, right up here in the darkness."

"Keep your hair on!" I exclaimed. "We're coming!"

At the same moment both the guv'nor and I switched on our electric torches. The brilliant beams of light revealed three huddled forms at the far end of the cavern.

We rushed up, and found Handforth and Co., perfectly sound and whole, roped up in the most effective manner. They were all looking rather pale, but tremendously relieved.

"Begad! I'm frightfully glad to see you safe an' sound, dear boys!" exclaimed Tregellis-West. "Of course you're fatheads—you are, really. But, then, we've known that for a long time!"

"Oh, corks!" gasped Handforth suddenly. "Mr. Lee's here!"

Nelson Lee said nothing, but stood back whilst we slashed through the ropes and released the unfortunate trio. Handforth was strangely subdued for once, but Church and McClure displayed some spirit.

"It was all Handy's fault!" said McClure warmly. "The silly ass wanted to be a detective, and practically forced us to come along with him. We told him that——"

"Oh, dry up!" growled Handforth uncomfortably.

"Rats!" put in Church. "This'll mean a flogging, I expect, and it'll serve you jolly well right! But it's hard lines on us!"

"What happened, anyhow?" I asked curiously.

McClure snorted.

"Why, Handy, like the rash fathead he is, climbed over the fence," he explained. "He made us hoist him up, and then kicked up a frightful row when he jumped down the other side. After that we were all collared by old Legg and two other chaps. They brought us here, and told us that we should have to stay here for days—perhaps over a week. They reckoned that we shouldn't be found so quickly if we were brought here."

"And if matters had gone as they wanted, you would probably have suffered that fate, boys," said Nelson Lee. "I hope this will be a lesson to you. It was very wrong of you to break bounds."

"Please, sir, it wasn't their fault," said Handforth humbly. "Church and McClure ain't to blame at all. I led them into it, and it's only fair that I should receive all the punishment. I—I don't mind taking three floggings, sir!" he added, with a little gulp.

Nelson Lee repressed a smile.

"I admire your spirit, Handforth," he said gently. "As it happens, there will be no flogging. I do not think it will be necessary to report your part in this affair to the Headmaster. I hope you will be warned by this experience."

As for the rest, the case was over. Jim the Penman was once more in the hands of the authorities, and two more agents of the Circle of Terror were put away in a safe place.

On the trip home in the darkness, by the way, Nelson Lee mentioned an item of news which interested me. A new fellow was due to arrive for the Remove within a few days—a fellow named Reginald Pitt. I wondered what sort of a fellow he would be like.

But, no matter how much I wondered, it was quite impossible for me to even guess at the character of the new arrival. For Pitt, of the Remove, was destined to give St. Frank's quite a number of surprises and not a few shocks!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIAL!

The Chums of Littleminster School.

A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**The First Chapters.**BASIL HOOD** is a new boy at Littleminster School. On his arrival he makes a friend of**JOHN CHALLIS**, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGIN** are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Ponsonby puts down Challis's name to play in a practice match. Challis has to tell Ponsonby, however, that he is unable to play in the practice match, having arranged a little fishing trip with Basil. The two are secretly followed on this jaunt by Myers, who, whilst they are occupied in fishing from a moored punt, releases the rope, and they are whirled towards the weir. With great bravery Challis saves Hood from drowning. He carries him back to the School. Hood is very ill, and Challis fears he will die. Tormented by his thoughts, he forces his way into the sick-room. His relief is unbounded when he finds Hood is making a recovery, and is already out of danger. The next day Challis settles down to hard work, thinking the affair has blown over. In the evening Mr. Evans tells him to come at once as the Head wishes to see him.

(Now read on.)

CHALLIS SEES THE HEAD.

JOHN CHALLIS accompanied Mr. Evans through corridors and passages, down stairs, and past the exit door into the open, and then crossed towards the Head Master's house, silent and thoughtful, dreading the interview that was to come, and yet conscious of no wrong-doing.

Ever since he had first come to Littleminster he had dreaded some such interview as this with Dr. Mason. It was but seldom, save when they first arrived at the big school, that the Head concerned himself with the doings of any individual boy. If ever he did send for one of them it was to either praise or condemn. Perhaps a boy had happily executed some unusually meritorious feat, or had committed some crime for which he deserved censure or expulsion. Rarely was a boy sent for for any other reason.

Strangely enough, Challis did not think of himself; he was wondering what the effect on his father would be if he were sent down.

His lips quivered as he thought of his father, and the hopes Mr. Challis had built upon his son's going to Littleminster.

Mr. Challis, who'd not been blessed with a proper education, had made up his mind that his son should be educated like a gentleman. Not that the boy cared. John had often contrasted his father's friends, and their sons, with the masters and boys at Littleminster, and he knew that the comparison did not always redound to the credit of the masters and boys of the school.

At the same time the boy was forced to admit that when one did meet a good example of the Littleminster class, there was nothing else as good.

John Challis was little given to hero worship, and yet he had his heroes. Grainger, the captain of the school, clear-headed, generous, graceful in manner, easy of deportment, modest, and yet so efficient in study and athletic field, was one of them; and there were others besides.

No. For his father's sake, and partly for his own—for he dreamed that the day might come when the boys would like him better—he wished to remain at Littleminster, and he dreaded lest the unhappy incident of the day's fishing should end in his being expelled.

"Don't be afraid, Challis," said Mr. Evans, with an encouraging smile as they reached the door of the Doctor's study.

So saying, he pushed the door open and entered, and a moment later Challis stood before Dr. Mason.

The study, with its oak-panelled walls, bookcases filled with books, some of them in choice bindings, its sumptuous carpet and fine furniture, with trophies, certificates and illuminated addresses, all won and earned by the Head in his younger days, always struck a note of awe into the heart of any boy who entered it.

Challis stood still, with his hands clasped behind him, waiting for the Doctor to speak.

"Challis," and the words came as from a distance, "I have sent for you because I want to get to the bottom of this unfortunate escapade of yours on the river Awle."

The voice was hard, deep, judicial. Challis moistened his lips and struggled to reply.

"I—I—shall be very pleased to—to—give you any information—you might require—sir," he faltered.

"I demand the information. I want the whole story. I may as well tell you that I

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

have had a very serious complaint addressed to me by Mr. Laws, here, of the Magpie Inn."

Challis started. He had forgotten all about the presence of the landlord of the Magpie Inn. Turning his head, he saw the man sitting precariously on the edge of a chair and holding his hat in his hands.

The landlord's eyes were directed at him, and the gleam in them was anything but reassuring. Challis flushed hotly to the roots of his hair.

"Mr. Laws tells me," the Head went on, "that you hired a punt of him, and were so criminally careless as to let it drift over the weir. The punt is damaged beyond repair, and he claims fifteen pounds for its loss."

The boy made no reply. Pale-faced, he hung his head.

"Of course, the money must be paid. What do you suggest shall be done about it?"

The Head tapped his fingers upon the arm of the chair in which he sat and frowned at the unlucky boy.

"I—I can't say, sir," stammered Challis. "I haven't got the money, not even a little of it. I—had better write to my father about it, but —"

Here the landlord rose to his feet.

"I must have the money, Mr. Mason," he cried. "Trade is bad this season, and I have heavy demands to meet. I bought the punt only three weeks ago and had it done up for hire. I let Mr. Challis have it because he's always professed to be so careful. If I'd have known he'd have served me this dirty trick, I —"

"Yes, yes; just so," said the Head, interrupting impatiently. "You shall have your money. I'll see to that. Now, Challis, tell me how it happened."

John, after a moment's hesitation, told his simple story. He had taken the punt up stream, it had broken away while he and Basil Hood were trying to land a big trout, and he had not been able to stay its onward career.

"And so," said Dr. Mason harshly, "all this trouble arises out of your neglect to properly tether the punt to the piles or bank. Really I hardly know how to express my opinion of your carelessness."

He turned away, sat down at a bureau, and rapidly wrote out a cheque, which he handed to the landlord of the Magpie Inn.

"There is my cheque for fifteen pounds," said he. "That will satisfy your claim on Challis. I'm sorry this should have happened, but I will see to it that none of my boys shall place himself in such an invidious position again."

"Thank you, sir," said the landlord, eagerly pocketing the cheque after signing an acknowledgment. "I'm much obliged." Then he turned to Challis.

"And don't you ever come to the Magpie asking me to do you any more favours," said he. "For, if you do, you'll be fired out quick."

And so he took his leave.

"Challis," said Dr. Mason, "go to your room. I hardly know what to say to you. I am thoroughly disgusted with you. You're

the most unpopular boy in the school. You neglect your games, and are continually getting Littleminster into trouble. I intend to write an account of what has happened to your father, who will, of course, have to repay me the fifteen pounds I have just given to Laws. Meanwhile, I shall have to seriously consider what punishment will best suit the case. You can go."

Challis, with a sigh, swung round and made for the door.

His hand was on the door-knob, and he'd drawn the door slightly open, when, to his surprise, he heard his name called.

"Wait, Challis. Sir, before the boy leaves this room I should like to have a word to say."

It was Mr. Evans speaking, and John paused in surprise.

"Come back here, Challis," said the master, and the boy obeyed.

MR. EVANS INTERVENES.

"WELL, Mr. Evans, and what is the matter now?" The Head asked the question in a tone of exasperation.

"Only this, sir—that Challis, in his account of the accident, implied that it was all his fault. I have reason to believe that such was not the case."

"Indeed? You amaze me. What then?"

"Challis omitted to inform you that Basil Hood was with him at the time, and that the punt was as securely fastened to bank and piles as it is possible to fasten any boat. He did not tell you that he has used the same fishing place a dozen times or more, and when the river has been more swollen and a swifter stream running than the other day. He did not tell you that but for his cool judgment and prompt action both he and young Hood would have been drowned. From what I can see, the loss of the punt was not due to accident, but to foul play."

Dr. Mason uttered a cry of amazement.

"Are you serious, Evans?"

"Yes."

"Bring young Hood to me."

The master vanished, and while waiting for his return with the junior boy the Head plied Challis with many questions which began to throw a different light upon the subject.

When Basil Hood returned with the master it was to glance apprehensively at Challis and with awe at the Doctor.

"Come here, Hood. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to eat you," said the Master of Littleminster.

The lad stood dutifully before the great man.

"Now, I want you to tell me just how the accident to the punt happened. Take your own time and choose your own words."

Pressing his finger-tips together, Dr. Mason leant back in his chair, and with half-closed eyes listened to the quivering voice of the eager and nervous boy as he, with

(Continued overleaf.)

Many wanderings from the straight path of direct narration, gave his version of the accident on the river Awle.

The Head's face lengthened in gravity as he listened.

"Hood, do you seriously declare that someone cast the punt adrift?" he asked, when the boy had finished.

"Yes, sir."

"You saw the man or boy who did it?"

"I saw someone, sir. I couldn't say who it was. I saw the hands and the face between the leaves. The punt never could have got adrift of its own accord. Challis set it hard against the piles, and it was tied tightly to a tree."

"This is getting serious," declared Dr. Mason. "And so you say that Challis was not to blame?"

"Of course he wasn't, sir," cried the small boy, gaining in confidence. "John Challis couldn't be. I've never known anyone more careful. It's a awful shame. We were enjoying the fishing so—and if it hadn't been for him, sir, I'd have been drowned. He saved me. He's the best and bravest chum that ever lived."

"I say, stop it, young 'un," protested Challis, flushing hotly.

"Tell me about that," said the Doctor kindly. "How did you get into the river?"

Challis made a sign to Basil, but the minor ignored it. In simple words he told the story, told how he had gone under, and how Challis had pulled him out of the water, and got him on to the bank, in spite of the swiftly-flowing stream, and had been almost exhausted in doing it.

"Hm! What have you to say to that, Challis?"

"Oh, I got Hood out of it, sir," answered John carelessly. "But it was nothing—"

Mr. Evans then told how the boys came back to the school.

"That will do," said the Head, dismissing the two chums. "You can go. I am glad to say, Challis, that I do not think as badly of your escapade as at first blush. Still, you ought to have attended the cricket-match. Had you done so you'd have saved us both

a lot of trouble. I will consider what shall be done about it. You can go."

Challis thanked him, and, turning, left the study with Hood.

When they were outside he paused and, laying his hand on Basil's shoulders, said quietly: "Basil, I shan't forget what you've done for me in a hurry. I shall never forget it. Some day, if I can repay you, I will."

The fag blushed furiously.

"Here, I say, I did nothing. You've done everything for me," he replied. "Please don't say any more about it. Challis."

Meanwhile, the Head had asked Mr. Evans for his unbiased opinion of the whole incident.

"I believe, sir," said Evans, "that Challis and Hood are speaking the truth. I myself have visited the scene of the accident, and have seen the smashed punt. I don't see how the punt could have got adrift if it had been properly secured as Challis and Hood say it was, unless someone had cast it off from the bank. I consider that it was an uncommonly plucky feat of Challis in saving Hood. No ordinary boy, or man, for the matter of that, could have done it."

The Head looked grave.

"Who could have set the punt adrift?" he asked. "Surely no Littleminster boy would do such a thing as that? Yet Challis's unpopularity cannot be denied. Might it not have been a town boy, Evans?"

"Well, I hope so," answered Mr. Evans.

The Head paced up and down the study, his hands clasped behind his back. Suddenly swinging round, he faced Mr. Evans.

"Tell me, you have a lot to do with Challis," he said. "Does he deserve his unpopularity?"

Mr. Evans considered a moment, then replied:

"Frankly, he is too reserved, too diffident, too modest. If he would only mix with the boys a bit more, defy some of them, prove his merit in the playing-fields, as he ought and could, he would soon live down the prejudice that exists against him. There is a great deal of good in John Challis."

(To be continued.)

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