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THE MYSTERIOUS X

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 Colonel's Secret," "The Schoolboy Sleuth," "Who Killed the Colonel?" etc.
March 1st, 1919

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The Mysterious



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By the Author of "The Colonel's Secret," "The Schoolboy Stealth," "Who Killed the Colonel?" etc.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

FOSSILS VERSUS MONKS.

"**C**OLONEL CLINTON," remarked Bob Christine, "is a memory."
"A horrid memory," added Talmadge.

"And the best thing we can do is to forget him," said Yorke. "Memories like that ain't worth having. Stockdale's back, and good luck to him. He's not exactly my ideal of a Housemaster, but he's a jolly decent old stick."

Bob Christine and Co., of the College House at St. Frank's, were lounging in the doorway of the gymnasium. It was Wednesday morning, and the frosty February day was bright and clear.

"And, with Stockdale in control again," said Christine, "we're allowed to take up footer, like ordinary mortals. We've had enough rotten discipline to last us for twenty years. And what's the good of discipline, anyhow? Anybody might have thought that a new war was going to start this month."

"Didn't I say that we'd better forget all that?" asked Yorke. "We've been hard at practice for a week or two now, and when the House match comes off this afternoon we ought to win."

The skipper of the College House Junior Eleven shook his head.

"What we ought to do and what we shall do are two different things," he observed sagely. "Mind you, I'm not running down my own side, but Nipper's got his men almost to a state of perfection. I wish we had a forward in our House with the qualities of Jack Grey. He's better than Nipper himself in some ways, and he's as tricky as a bagful of monkeys."

"I don't want to boast, but I'll bet I can do as good as Grey," said Talmadge. "Not this week, perhaps, because I haven't had enough practice. But later on in the season—"

"Rats!" said Christine. "Isn't it nearly March already? There's a fat lot of the season left, isn't there? If we're going to

show up well this term, we've got to put our backs into it."

Christine was very keen upon football, and he was enormously anxious to prove that the College House juniors were as good as the Ancient House juniors. Naturally, it would take him a fearful time to do that—simply because the Monks were not up to the form of the Fossils. Christine knew this better than anybody, and he had been working like a nigger just recently to improve his eleven.

He had certainly succeeded. And if there's any truth in the old saying that practice makes perfect, Christine's men ought to have been fairly perfect by that time. And it mustn't be supposed that I had been idly looking on. I hadn't. My own team had been kept on Little Side for longer than they liked.

It was something like a race—but the Ancient House was leading all the time. Only a fortnight since Christine and Co. had gained a victory; but only because three of my best men had been laid up in the Sanny with influenza.

This afternoon it would be a different matter. My eleven was at full strength, and I looked forward to a certain win. But it wouldn't be easy. We should have to fight hard for our revenge. For the Monks were grimly determined to add to their laurels and continue their advantage.

"We shall have a pretty stiff fight this afternoon," remarked Tommy Watson, as I strolled out of the Ancient House with him, accompanied by Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "In fact, we might go down."

"Don't you believe it, my son," I replied. "It'll be a hot game, but that's all to the good. There's no fun in playing a side that's hopelessly below our own form. There's nothing like a hard-fought game to give an eleven satisfaction. If we win we know that we've won by hard work; and if we lose we know that we've acquitted ourselves honourably."

"You do put things neatly, Nipper, dear fellow—you do, really," observed Sir Montie, gazing at me through his pince-nez. "I

should never have thought of sayin' that, you know. But it's true. There's no credit in winnin' if we're playin' a weak side."

"Pitt's playing, isn't he?" asked Watson.

"Yes."

"Do you think he'll show up well?"

"He ought to," I replied. "Not long ago he was inclined to sneer at footer, but Pitt's been a different chap this term, and he's as hot as mustard. Judging by his form at practice, I should think he'll do splendidly in the half-back line."

This match was really providing Reginald Pitt, of the Remove, with his big chance. He had played before, but not in an important match. This was only to be a House match, I know, but it had gained a certain importance because Christine had got his own eleven into such fine trim.

For the Ancient House to lose for a second time—and with a full-strength team in the field—would be something like a disgrace. And I was determined not to give Christine an opportunity of crowing.

Stevens of the Fifth—a strong man of the First Eleven—had consented to referee the match for us, and there was much satisfaction. For Stevens was impartial. And a good referee makes a lot of difference—particularly in junior football, where arguments are inclined to be frequent.

Just recently we had been passing through some strenuous times at St. Frank's. Mr. Nelson Lee, my guv'nor, had had his hands full, dealing with a mysterious murder case. At all events, we thought it was a murder case at the time, but it turned out to be different.

And now, for a week or two, there had been a quiet spell, and the Ancient House had got back to its old state of serenity; although this applies more, I think, to the College House. With no detective work on hand, I had given my sole attention to sports, particularly football.

But, as it happened, another mystery was brewing even at that moment, and this was to be something quite out of the ordinary. But this is hardly the place to refer to that. I shall deal with it when the time comes.

There was quite a good attendance round the ropes when we took the field that afternoon. The fine day had something to do with it, but there was also an unusual amount of interest centred on this match. The College House juniors were there almost to a man, ready to cheer to the echo—if they got the chance.

"This is where you get whacked, my sons," said Handforth cheerily.

"Oh, is it?" retorted Christine. "We didn't get whacked last time, did we?"

"Why, you silly ass, I wasn't playing then!" said Handforth. "You know jolly well that I was laid up with 'flu!"

I grinned.

"And how could we expect to win without Handforth?" I asked. "It's a wonder the whole team didn't fall to pieces and collapse altogether."

"Well, I don't know about that," said

Handforth, who never knew when his leg was being pulled. "You didn't do so badly without me, I'll admit. But everybody knows that a goalie is the most important chap on the field. Now, I never let a ball go past me unless something extraordinary happens."

"Well, I hope something extraordinary won't happen this afternoon," I said. "You've got to work like the dickens, Handy—I can see that. The Monks are going to make the pace jolly fast."

And I wasn't far wrong. For, when Stevens blew his whistle and the game started, Christine's men attacked vigorously. It was their obvious intention to carry on the game on the enemy's territory, and to leave their own goalkeeper with nothing to do but stamp about to keep himself warm.

But this programme was not so easily kept to. After a very hot tussle near the Ancient House citadel, during the first two minutes of play, the ball somehow got clear, and before the Monks were aware of it Jack Grey was streaking down the field beautifully.

Not that he had everything his own way. Yorke came rushing at him, determined to do or die—and he died. That is to say, he didn't "do." For Grey put the ball neatly to Tregellis-West at the last moment.

Montie kicked it across to me at once, and I went off at full speed, running round Clapson, who looked very business-like. It was too hot, however, and I was forced to pass to Pitt—who evidently thought that he was a forward. But he was the handiest man, and I let him have it.

Pitt didn't have much chance, for he was immediately confronted by Freeman. But Pitt wasn't finished; he back-heeled with extreme neatness to Grey. And Grey, without losing a second, kicked for goal.

The leather sped through the air, and there was a yell.

"Oh, well saved!"

It was more like a gasp of relief from the College House onlookers. Nation, between the sticks, saved remarkably well. But he didn't send the ball out far, and it was headed in promptly by Tommy Watson.

The goal didn't materialise, however, for Watson headed a trifle too high, and the leather went over the bar. After that the game kept in mid-field for quite a considerable time, and the play, although fast and furious, resulted in no gain for either side.

And then, in a certain break, Christine got away, and slammed the ball into our net before Handforth knew where he was.

"Goal!"

It was a roar of delight from the Monks. They had drawn first blood, and they were more than ever determined to win. Handforth looked rather blank.

"Do you call that something extraordinary?" roared Watson indignantly. "Why, you dummy, a giddy Third-Form fag could have saved that!"

Handforth was speechless. In any other place he would have punched Watson's nose—or attempted to—on the spot. But a

scrap in front of goal, in the middle of a game, wasn't quite the thing.

"Never mind," I said cheerfully. "Handforth's not a wizard; he can't keep the ball out every time. And we'll win yet, my buxks."

But when the game restarted, Christine and Co. redoubled their efforts, hoping against hope that they would be able to score a second goal before half-time—while we had nothing to our credit.

But if this early success had instilled enthusiasm into the Monks, it made the Fossils grim. We determined to equalise before the whistle blew. And the way the eleven pulled itself together was remarkable.

I managed to get away with the ball, on the right. I went fully fifteen yards before I found it necessary to pass, and then Grey had it. We went down the field like clock-work, defeating all the efforts of the opposing half-backs and backs to stop us.

Grey handed the leather over to Tregellis-West just in time, and Sir Montie whizzed it across to the other wing, this being the only opening. Somerton trapped it, and got away almost to the corner flag.

"Shoot!" yelled the crowd.

"You'll be late, you ass!"

"Let it go!"

But Somerton was quite cool. He turned round in his own time, and kicked deliberately and with precision. He knew what his game was, and when the ball sailed across the mouth of the College House goal a good many heads were ready—to say nothing of feet.

Nation was all fists, and he didn't lose his head. The ball came out and sailed over Montie's head, but Grey jumped up at exactly the right moment and sent the leather in again. It met my chest, bounced down, and then got lost.

There was a regular mix-up, and Stevens hovered near, ready to blow his whistle at the slightest provocation. If only we could seize this opportunity, a goal was an absolute certainty. It all depended upon the next few seconds.

Pitt seemed to find the ball first. It came out between Christine's legs, and before the enemy could do anything with it, I kicked hard.

Bang!

The ball hit the side-post, bounced back, and while Nation was rushing one way, Grey headed in splendidly.

"Goal!"

We had equalised, but not without paying for it. There wasn't a man on the field who didn't look half exhausted. This game, in fact, was about the most strenuous we had played during the whole term. Everybody was mightily pleased when Stevens's whistle went for half-time.

"Well, we haven't lost yet," said Christine breathlessly.

"But we shall have to buck up if we're going to win," remarked Talmadge. "They're better than we are, Christy, and there's no sense in denying it. Our best policy will be to defend our goal in the

second half and make the game a draw. That's better than being whacked, anyhow."

"I'm skipper, don't forget," said Christine grimly.

And during the brief rest he talked to his men like an uncle. I gave my own side a few words of advice, too, for I had noticed several little bits of ragged play during the first half, and I impressed upon my men the fact that we should have to work as hard as ever if we were going to leave the field victors.

And when the game restarted the value of my advice was felt. For the Monks attacked with all their strength—in spite of Talmadge's advice to stick to defence only. Christine's men were full of vim and vigour.

Yorke managed to get away quite unexpectedly, and practically got through in fact he did get through—with a clear goal in front of him. But Handforth turned up trumps.

He rushed out after the backs had been beaten and whisked the ball away right from Yorke's foot. But for that, a save would have been impossible. There were several determined shots in quick succession, but Handforth was there every time.

And after that one spurt the Monks seemed to have exhausted themselves. Having failed to score, they gave their attention to protecting their own goal. For we pressed hard and had nearly all the play.

I will say, though, that Christine and Co. put up a magnificent defence. Nation, in goal, was worked tremendously. He saved again and again. He, at least, had made up his mind that the score should remain as it stood.

And there was still no change when the game was within ten minutes of the finish. It certainly looked as though it would turn out to be a draw, after all. Christine and Co., fired with sudden enthusiasm, once more attacked. It was a kind of final spurt, a sudden burst of activity.

It was a near thing. A corner kick sent the leather right in front of goal, and Talmadge shot with great strength. Handforth only just managed to flat out in time. Again the ball went in, and this time Handforth used his foot. Three fellows went down, but the leather was lost in the confusion.

Pitt managed to get it, and cleared neatly. Sir Montie, some way down the field, got it in his possession, and tore away with only the backs and the goalkeeper to beat. It was one of those chances which seldom come—and it had come in this case because the Monks had been rather too daring. They had pressed their attack, and had neglected their own goal.

Tregellis-West tricked the backs splendidly—and rather unexpectedly, I believe. He had been about to pass to me, but I wasn't quite near enough. And so Montie took the risk himself—and got the better of the opposing backs.

Tregellis-West had a splendid chance, and he took advantage of it. He kicked gently, and with perfect coolness. Nation ran out to

meet the ball, but miscalculated, and it sped between his upraised hands.

"Hurrah!"

"Goal!"

But it wasn't. The ball hadn't enough speed on it, and rolled leisurely along the ground, right in front of the posts, without anybody being near. Nation was round in a second, but Montie was there, too. It was a race. And just when everybody thought that the goalie had won, Montie's foot touched the ball, and bounced it over the line, into the net.

"That's the finish!" I said delightedly.

And it was. The game, during the last few minutes, was quite tame. The Monks knew well enough that they couldn't equalise—there wasn't time. And when the whistle blew Ancient House was the winner.

"Well, it was a jolly near thing, anyhow," said Christine stoutly.

"There's no need for you to feel bad about it, old son," I said, slapping him on the back. "You nearly won—and you would have done if Montie hadn't played so rippingly. There's not much to choose between the two clevens."

"And we'll whack you next time," said Christine grimly.

This was quite possible, for nothing is more uncertain than football. But we had had a fine game, and everybody was in a good temper. The Monks, although they had lost, were quite pleased with themselves. They had certainly played better this afternoon than ever before.

Just outside the pavilion Handforth and Co. were having an argument. Not that there was anything unusual in this. Church and McClure always had difficulty with their redoubtable leader.

"What's the trouble now?" I asked, strolling up. "You've done wonders, Handy; and you've saved us from defeat two or three times."

"I don't like the look of him!" said Handforth firmly.

"Eh?"

"I wouldn't mind betting he's a wrong 'un!"

"What's that?" I asked. "Who's a wrong 'un?"

Handforth glared at me.

"These silly asses say that the fellow is harmless, but I don't believe it," he said determinedly. "You're a keen chap, Nipper. What do you think? Is that face sinister or not?"

"It looks all right to me," I said, inspecting McClure's face intently.

"Not mine, you silly ass!" roared McClure. "We're talking about that chap over there. It's just like Handforth's rot to start an argument about nothing. The fellow's only a spectator, anyhow—and anybody can come in and look at the footer."

I gazed across at the spot indicated by McClure. It was a corner of the field, practically empty. But now I noticed for the first time that a stranger was standing close against the hedge. He was staring towards the school, and seemed very preoccupied.

"Who is he?" I asked curiously.

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "He looks like an undertaker, old boy."

The man was certainly not a cheerful-looking specimen of humanity. Tall, lean, and with stooping shoulders. He was attired in a long, dark overcoat and a slouch hat. He wore spectacles, and carried a curious-looking bag, covered with black canvas. And he hugged this bag as though he loved it.

His face was as lean as his figure, clean-shaven and sallow. Handforth was certainly not far wrong in declaring that the man wore a somewhat sinister aspect. He did. I didn't like the look of him at all.

"We'd better go and ask him what his business is," I remarked. "He can't be watching the match, because the match is over. He seems to be making a minute inspection of the Ancient House—"

"You haven't answered my question, you ass," interrupted Handforth. "Is the man a wrong 'un or not?"

"I wouldn't like to say," I replied. "But, to judge by his face, I certainly think that he's a queer customer. I shouldn't like to trust him far with any property of mine, and I don't quite like his being on Little Side."

Handforth nodded.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "Nipper agrees with me, you see. And Nipper ought to know what he's talking about—he's used to seeing the faces of murderers and forgers and burglars and anarchists."

I grinned, and walked forward towards the stranger, the other fellows following me. But the man must have seen our approach out of the corner of his eye. For abruptly, and without even turning his face in our direction, he set off with long strides towards a gap in the hedge. A moment later he disappeared from our view, and I came to a halt.

"Well, I'm blessed if I'm going to chase the fellow," I said.

"He avoided us deliberately," declared Handforth grimly. "Why? Why should he avoid us like that? Because he's up to no good—that's why. And if I see him about here again, I'll ask him what the dickens he wants."

And Edward Oswald Handforth shook his head solemnly and went off with his two chums. On this occasion at least Handforth's judgment didn't seem to be far wrong. Who was that mysterious stranger, and what had he been up to?

We were to be reminded of him before many days had passed.

CHAPTER II.

SOMETHING FOR STAKE!

BETTER, dear old boys, is a most necessary item when you are preparin' tea," remarked Sir Montie Tregellie-West, as he and I and Watson trudged down towards the village of Bell-ton in the fading afternoon light. "It's really impossible to have a comfortable tea without bread an' butter."

"We could have got some margarine from Mrs. Hake's shop," grumbled Watson.

Montie looked horrified.

"Pray don't mention the stuff to me, Tommy boy," he protested. "Margarine is a substitute. You might just as well crush some dried chestnut leaves an' call them tea. Durin' the war it was necessary to partake of margarine occasionally, when butter disappeared from the market. But not now. Begad! I never want to see the frightful concoction again."

"There's no harm in seeing it," I remarked. "It's tasting it that I object to. But let's talk about something less greasy."

We had decided to take a walk to the village before tea, owing to the fact that Mrs. Hake had run out of butter—an inexcusable oversight on her part. But there was plenty of it to be obtained in the village, and the walk would do us no harm. We were as hungry as hunters, too, after the match.

"There seems to be some excitement along there," remarked Watson, after we had crossed the bridge over the river. "Hogs, by the look of them."

This term was not a disparaging one. The boys of the River House School, owing to the unfortunate name of their Headmaster, were locally known as "Hogs." But Dr. Molyneux Hogge, M.A., was about the most unhoglike person I've ever met—a mild, inoffensive old gentleman, with kindly ways.

"It's Brewster and his lot," I said, as we drew nearer. "To judge by their yells, they seem to be highly amused over something. We may as well stop to have a look at the entertainment."

"Rats!" said Watson. "I want my tea!"

But he halted when we did, and we looked on with interest. Hal Brewster was the leader of that section of the River House juniors known as the commoners, and he was a thoroughly decent fellow. He had nine or ten of his chums with him, and they appeared to be doing their best to drive somebody's face into a pool of mud. At all events, their victim was held down by strong hands, and his splutters and roars were vigorous.

"Need any help?" I asked politely.

Brewster looked up, grinned, and nodded.

"No, thanks," he replied. "We can manage the cad all right."

"Wellborne?" asked Sir Montie casually.

"No, not Wellborne this time," said Brewster. "This chap here is one of your seniors—an Ancient House fellow, too."

"Oh, is he?" roared Watson. "Then you'd better clear off, you rotters! What the dickens do you mean by treating— Oh, my only hat!"

For at that moment the victim had raised his head and was gazing at us wildly. His face was a picture, streaked with mud, and a large cake of it rested upon his nose, giving him a weird appearance.

"You wait until I get out of your hands!" gasped the unfortunate. "By George, I'll halt kill you for this! And if you stand there

grinning, Nipper, I'll give you five hundred lines!"

"Starke, begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

I grinned all the more, and any sympathy which I might have felt vanished on the spot. Starke, of the Sixth, was a prefect, and it was our duty to respect him. But Starke didn't get much respect from anybody in the Ancient House. He was a cad and a bully. To see him suffering was no hardship.

At the same time he was a St. Frank's fellow, and if this was merely an ordinary "rag" it was up to us to rescue him, no matter how heavy the odds. The St. Frank's code of honour demanded that.

"I say, this is a bit steep, isn't it?" I asked, turning to Brewster.

"Don't stand talking there!" yelled Starke. "Go and fetch some of the other fellows and rescue me. I'll— Yaroooooh!"

Starke's face was once more pressed into the mud, and I decided that such drastic treatment was unwarranted. It was not like Brewster and Co. to treat a fellow in this scandalous fashion. Bully or no, he had to be rescued.

"Look here, Brewster, you'd better ease up," I said sharply. "Dash it all, you don't usually behave—"

"You wait until you hear how Starke behaved," interrupted Brewster grimly. "Don't let him get away, you chaps. It's not in our line to pile on one fellow and rag him, but this case is altogether different. We are justified."

"Oh, are you!" snorted Watson. "If you don't let Starke go—"

"Hold on!" said Brewster. "Starke ought to be shoved in prison! Not twenty minutes ago he came stalking down the street here, and a little girl happened to rush out of a cottage door. Starke saw her easily enough, but he gave her a violent shove, and walked on without even looking round. It was about the most brutal thing I've ever seen. He knew he had hurt the kid, too."

"Much?" I asked.

"They had to fetch the doctor, anyway," said Glynn.

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "Not—not really?"

"Yes, really," replied Brewster. "The little girl was cut frightfully on a sharp flint, and the doctor's in the cottage even now, stitching up the wound. I saw the whole thing, and Starke ought to be horse-whipped. He knocked the little kid down quite deliberately—you know what a cad he is!"

"Yes, I do!" I replied. "Well, go ahead—we won't interfere."

"Rather not!" declared Watson. "You'd better pitch him in the duckpond while you're at it. If he doesn't get sacked, it'll be a wonder!"

Tommy and Sir Montie and I were boiling with indignation at Brewster's explanation. We knew Walter Starke of old. He was an absolute brute, but this episode was surely the limit. For a Sixth-Former of St. Frank's to knock over a little girl, and then walk callously on, was the act of a Prussian.

Starke himself managed to get his face up again.

"If you don't go and fetch help I'll get you gated for the rest of the term!" he shouted violently. "Do you hear, you young rotters?"

"It's no good yelling like that, Starke," I replied. "These fellows here aren't connected with St. Frank's, and if they choose to give you some light punishment I'm perfectly willing to stand by as a spectator."

"Begad, rather!"

"I'll lend a hand if you like," said Watson fiercely. "You ought to be boiled in oil, Starke! I hope the Head kicks you out." Starke almost choked.

"I'll—I'll—Lemme go, you young cads!" he shrieked, struggling violently. "Oh, I'll make you pay for this! You wait until I see your rotten Headmaster—Ow! Yaroooooh!"

Starke was lifted into the air and dropped like a sack of coke. This was repeated two or three times. He raved and threatened in vain. It was none of our business to interfere, for Starke thoroughly deserved all he was getting.

And he certainly got a lot.

He was finally carried bodily by the incensed River House juniors and pitched into a ditch. There was a great deal of slime at the bottom of it, and Starke's appearance was in no way improved. He floundered in the mud helplessly.

"Pelt him!" yelled Brewster.

"Hear, hear!"

"Let him have it!"

Tufts of grass, cakes of mud, and even liquid mud were hurled at Starke in a continuous succession. Twice he staggered to his feet, only to go down again. He was being taught a sharp lesson.

"Go it, ye cripples!"

"Plaster him all over!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The River House boys yelled as Starke floundered over once more. They hadn't an ounce of pity for him—and neither had we! But the punishment was over at last, and the prefect was allowed to get to his feet and slip away. Twenty yards up the road he paused and turned.

"Just wait!" he snarled. "Oh, you little demons! I'll get every one of you flogged and—"

He didn't wait to say any more, for about half a dozen fellows grabbed at something to throw. Starke vanished into the gloom of the evening, and just then I spotted the well-known figure of Dr. Brett, the village medico. He was a strong friend of Nelson Lee's, and a splendid sort.

He saw me running towards him, and paused. I noticed that his face was grave, and I felt uneasy.

"Is it serious, Dr. Brett?" I asked.

"Oh, no—not serious," he replied, to my relief. "But the whole incident is shameful, Nipper. The child's arm struck a flint, and the gash is no light one. However, I put in a few stitches, and I don't think she will

come to much harm. I understand that rough justice has overtaken the culprit?"

"Yes," I replied. "These fellows gave him a pretty severe lesson."

"But that won't do, Nipper; it's not the kind of punishment that Starke requires," said the doctor, shaking his head. "Starke, I believe, is the prefect's name? I shall take it upon myself to see Dr. Stafford. Indeed, I have already promised the child's mother to do so."

"The rotter ought to be sacked, sir," said Watson indignantly.

"I am inclined to agree with you, my lad," said Dr. Brett. "One could understand such behaviour from a common hooligan, but not from a prefect at St. Frank's. I will be up at the school this evening."

And, after another word or two, the doctor left us. Brewster and Co. were very pleased with themselves. They knew that no harm could overtake them; Starke's threats were idle.

By the time we got back to the Ancient House the story was half over St. Frank's, having been carried there by a couple of fags who had witnessed the commencement of the affair. There was very real joy amongst the juniors, for any misfortune of Starke's was a signal for jubilation.

"Serve him right!" was the general verdict.

"There's bound to be a row about it," remarked Owen major, shaking his head, as he stood with a group in the Ancient House lobby. "Starke can't act like that without getting it in the neck."

"I fancy he's got it in the neck already, old boy," observed Sir Montie, smiling.

"The swab ought to be keel-hauled!" said Burton grimly. "Souise my maindeck! If the skipper doesn't shove him in irons I'll be surprised."

I grinned.

"We're not on board ship now, bo'sun," I said. "Starke hasn't finished with the affair yet, I'll warrant. He'll have to answer for it—and give a good explanation. It was a rotten action—"

"Bosh!" interrupted Fullwood sneeringly.

"Talking to me?" I asked.

"Yes, I am talkin' to you," said Fullwood. "I think it's a lot of silly rot, if you ask me—"

"Nobody's asked you," said Handforth tartly. "Dry up, you cad!"

"I think it's a lot of silly rot," repeated Fullwood. "I suppose the silly idiot of a kid walked right into Starke—an' he couldn't help that, could he? If anybody deserves punishment, it's those beastly Hogs!"

"By Jove, rather!" said Gulliver and Bell. Handforth rolled up his sleeves.

"You might just stand back a little, Bo'sun," he said deliberately. "And you're in the way, Farman. Clear out, you fags! Now, Fullwood, I'll trouble you to repeat what you just said. Two words will be enough!"

Ralph Beattie Fullwood laughed uncomfortably.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" he snapped.

"You're always ready to use your fists, like a rotten hooligan——"

"A—a hooligan?" roared Handforth.

"I—I mean——"

Smack!

Fullwood fell back with a howl, and the next moment he would have been hammered more forcibly, but Handforth was grabbed by many hands and held back. He struggled furiously.

"Leggo, you fatheads!" he bellowed.

"Don't act the goat, Handy," I said. "You can't have a scrap in the lobby—and Fullwood's got a right to his opinion, after all. It's just the kind of opinion Fullwood would have. You can afford to ignore such a cad, can't you?"

Handforth calmed down.

"Well, I gave him a decent punch, anyhow!" he said. "But he's a rotter to suggest that the youngster might have run into Starke——"

"Well, that's quite likely," I interrupted.

"Eh?"

"I think it's been proved that the little girl ran slap into Starke," I went on. "But that's not the point at all. Kids have run into me before now, and they've been bowled over, too. But Starke walked straight on, without even looking round, and didn't care a fig. He acted in the most callous, brutal manner—although that's not surprising. Starke couldn't act in any other way."

There was a great deal of speculation as to what Starke's fate would be, but I wasn't of the opinion that the prefect would be expelled. He would probably be relieved of his prefectship—and that alone would be a signal for great rejoicing in the Remove.

But we overlooked the fact that Walter Starke was a highly accomplished liar—and that made a great deal of difference.

CHAPTER III.

A MATTER OF DUTY.

DR. BRETT was looking unusually serious as Tubbs, the page-boy, ushered him into Nelson Lee's study. It was rather late, for the doctor had been delayed in the village.

"This is unexpected, Brett," said Nelson Lee smilingly, as he shook hands. "Sit down, and make yourself at home. You'll find those cigars fairly decent, I think. But I can see that this is not merely a friendly call."

The doctor laughed.

"I hope it is friendly," he said. "At the same time, Lee, I must admit that I have another motive. I really came to see Dr. Stafford, but I thought I'd just pop in here first. The question really concerns one of the senior boys of this House, so perhaps you can deal with it best."

"Quite possibly," agreed Lee.

"And I also want to have a chat with the Head about a subscription to that hospital fund—the Bannington affair, I mean," went on the doctor. "I'm in charge of things in this little corner, you know, and I'm relying on Dr. Stafford."

"You can rely on me, too," said Nelson Lee. "You can take my cheque for ten pounds away with you, if you like."

Dr. Brett was delighted.

"That's very decent of you, Lee," he said heartily. "I hope you don't think I came here on purpose——"

"Nonsense!" laughed the schoolmaster detective. "What's the other matter?"

"Oh, it concerns a boy named Starke," replied Brett. "He is a senior, I think a prefect, isn't he?"

"Yes. Has he offended anybody?" asked Lee. "Starke is not exactly an admirable youth, Brett, although quite capable in most ways. His tendencies towards bullying, however, are often in evidence."

The doctor lost no time in explaining to his host what had occurred in the village. Lee was very serious as he listened, and there was a grim expression on his face when Dr. Brett had finished his account of the drastic punishment meted out by Brewster and Co.

"I'm not supposed to know that, of course," said Nelson Lee. "What the River House boys did does not concern me at all, although I will remark that they were quite justified. Starke, however, must be brought before me at once. I hope this little girl is not in any danger?"

"Good gracious, no!" replied the doctor. "When I say that the gash is serious, I mean serious in the sense that it is rather an ugly flesh wound. But it is small, and I have no doubt that the child will be as well as ever within a week or two. In fact she's well enough now."

"I'll ring for Starke at once, if you have no objection."

"None whatever."

Nelson Lee pressed the button, and Tubbs soon appeared. He was given his instructions, and a few minutes later Starke, of the Sixth, put in his appearance. He was looking sullen and rather nervous.

"Do you want me, sir?" he asked needlessly.

"Yes, Starke, I do," replied Nelson Lee, rising to his feet. "Dr. Brett has informed me of a certain incident—— Look at me, Starke!" added Lee sharply. "If you glare at the doctor in that fashion again I will punish you on the spot—quite apart from this other matter."

"Oh, I don't mind his glares," said Brett drily.

"But I do," said Lee. "You must realise, Starke, that Dr. Brett was compelled to give me this information. What have you to say? You knocked a child of six into the gutter, and——"

"I didn't, sir," interrupted Starke quickly. "The silly little kid came rushing out of a doorway and knocked herself over."

"And what did you do?"

"I walked on, sir."

"Without even looking round?"

"No, sir; I looked round, and the kid didn't seem to be hurt, so I went on," replied Starke. "She was on her feet at once, and I believed that she wasn't even

learned. How was I to know that she was hurt?"

"You would have known, Starke, if you had acted like a gentleman," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "Instead of that, you behaved in a manner unworthy of St. Frank's. I intend to punish you——"

"But it's not fair, sir!" burst out Starke. "I was in a terrific hurry, and I didn't know the child was hurt. But I meant to inquire about her as I came back—I swear I did!"

"And why didn't you?"

"How could I, sir?" asked Starke fiercely. "Those confounded kids from the River House pounced on me and rolled me in the mud. I intend to lay a complaint before Dr. Hoggo——"

"You will do nothing of the sort, Starke," interjected Lee. "If any complaint is necessary—and I don't think so—I will attend to it. This little child is badly cut, and her parents are very bitter against you——"

"I—I'm awfully sorry, sir," said Starke, breathing hard. "But it was an accident—a pure accident. I didn't know the kid was hurt at all. And if her parents are upset, I'll go down and apologise. I'll go at once, with Dr. Brett, if you like."

"It will do in the morning, Starke."

"And I'll give the people some compensation, too, sir," added Starke eagerly. "I suppose a sovereign will be enough, won't it?"

"Oh, quite," said Dr. Brett. "My fee won't be a quarter of that—if anything at all. Perhaps you ought to deal lightly with Starke, Mr. Lee. He seems to be sorry for the affair."

"I am, sir—awfully sorry," said Starke, with a gulp.

It cost him a good bit to say that—to stand there, eating humble pie, as it were, while he was boiling with rage inwardly.

"Very well, Starke," said Nelson Lee. "Since you are acting fairly, I will say no more. But you must go down to the village in the morning, apologise to the child's parents, and pay them the sovereign. You may go."

"Thank you, sir."

Starke went—hurriedly. And Dr. Brett nodded with approval.

"The boy has acted honourably," he remarked. "I must add, Lee, that he seemed to be truly penitent."

"He seemed to be, certainly," agreed Nelson Lee. "But I suspect otherwise, Brett. I was obliged to give him the benefit of the doubt, for it seems that there are no actual witnesses. Knowing Starke as I do, however, I fear that he has not strictly adhered to the truth. The very fact that he offered compensation indicates that his conscience is somewhat uneasy—and that would not have been the case had he been entirely blameless."

Brett rose to his feet.

"Well, I'm glad the thing's settled, old man," he said. "I'd better not bother you any longer——"

"You are not bothering me, Brett."

"I'm rather anxious to see the Head and

be off, if I must tell the truth," went on the doctor. "An old fellow in the village is infernally queer, and it's just possible that he may need attention to-night. I took the liberty of instructing my man, Williams, to ring up the school if I was wanted in a hurry."

"There's no liberty in that," smiled Nelson Lee. "It'll just be right, as it happens, for I think the phone is connected through to Dr. Stafford's study at the present moment. You'll find him there, I'm sure."

They shook hands, and Brett bustled away. By a lucky chance he met the Head just emerging from his study, with a sheaf of papers in his hand. He paused as the doctor appeared.

"I hope I'm not bothering you, Dr. Stafford," said Brett. "I should just like to have a few words——"

"You won't mind, I'm sure," interrupted the Head, "but I really must leave you alone for a few minutes, my dear sir. I want to catch Mr. Crowell before he puts a certain letter into the box. If you don't mind going into my study and waiting, I'll be with you as soon as possible."

The Head was certainly in a hurry, and he strode away down the passage with a smile and a nod. Brett couldn't leave after that, although he only wanted to see Dr. Stafford for a few minutes. He entered the study, switched on the light, and took a seat before the fire. He had the room to himself.

"I don't suppose it matters," he told himself smilingly. "In any case, it's deucedly cheerful here."

He lit a cigarette and stretched his feet out towards the fender. Five minutes passed, and the Head had not put in an appearance. So Brett took out his fountain-pen, sat at the desk, and made some notes in his pocket-book for the morrow. There was no reason why he shouldn't fill in the vacant time.

He glanced at the clock after another ten minutes had elapsed.

"I seem to have been forgotten," he thought ruefully.

He was about to make another note, when the telephone-bell rang loudly. It seemed even louder than it was, in the still, silent apartment. Just for a moment Brett hesitated, then he lifted the receiver from the instrument. Even if the call wasn't for him, it wouldn't matter.

"Hallo!" he said.

"Oh, is that you, sir?" came a voice.

"Yes, Williams. What is it?"

"Mrs. Hart has just been, sir, and she wants you to go at once," said Dr. Brett's man over the wire. "The old chap's been taken bad suddenly, I think, and Mrs. Hart is in a regular stew——"

"All right—I'll come at once," said the doctor crisply. "Is she in the surgery now, Williams?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then tell her that I'll be at the cottage almost as soon as she gets home."

And Dr. Brett hung up the receiver, grabbed his fountain-pen from the desk,

jammed on his hat, and left the study—after switching off the lights.

He didn't like leaving in this abrupt way, and hoped that he would meet the Head out in the corridor, so that he could make his excuses. Go he must, for his patients came before anybody.

But he only met Tubbs, the page-boy.

"Oh, Tubbs, tell Dr. Stafford that I have been called away by telephone," said Brett crisply. "I will call to-morrow and make my apologies; but I am sure he will quite understand."

"That's all right, sir," said Tubbs brightly.

And Dr. Brett hastened away. He was not to know that fate, or chance—I don't mind what you call it—was playing him a particularly sourvy trick.

Five minutes later the Head himself came out of Mr. Crowell's study. Tubbs was in the lobby at the moment, and he hurried forward, giving Brett's message. Dr. Stafford understood perfectly.

"As it happens, Crowell, Brett has gone," he said, turning back to the Form-master's doorway. "We might as well go over to Mr. Stockdale together. I'll just see if Brett has switched the lights off, and then I'll join you."

The Head didn't waste a minute in his own study. He opened the door, looked in, saw that everything was all right, and came out again. He locked the door after him, for it was his intention to remain with Mr. Stockdale until bedtime. He would not enter his study again till the morning.

Thus it was a most unfortunate fact that Dr. Brett was the last man to occupy the Headmaster's study that night.

Quite a few complications would result because of that.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UGLY SUSPICION.

THERE'S something the matter," said Handforth firmly.

He was standing in the lobby, and had only been downstairs a few minutes. McClure was with him, but Church had not yet appeared. There had been some slight trouble in the bathroom, and Church was getting the flavour of soap out of his mouth—a somewhat difficult process.

"Of course there is," said McClure. "You can't expect a chap to have soap rammed on his teeth without—"

"I'm not talking about Church, you ass," interrupted Handforth. "That was his own fault, anyhow. He shouldn't start arguing with a chap who has a cake of soap in his hand. It's simply asking for trouble."

"Then what's the matter otherwise?" asked McClure.

"The Head!" said Handforth solemnly.

"Something wrong with the Head?"

"Didn't you notice how jolly grave he looked when he went along the passage just now?" said Handforth. "He hasn't looked like that since old Clinton left, weeks ago. I tell you there's something the matter!"

McClure shook his head.

"I don't see how he could look jolly and grave at the same time," he remarked.

"You—you fathead!"

Handforth turned away in disgust. But he wasn't far wrong in his belief that all was not as it should be. As a matter of fact, something was very seriously wrong, and Dr. Stafford was seeking Nelson Lee.

He found the famous detective in his study, preparing his papers for the day. Lee knew at once that the Head was unusually agitated.

"Can you come to my study, Mr. Lee?" asked Dr. Stafford quickly. "Forgive me for not bidding you good-morning, but I am very upset. My house has been burgled during the night——"

"Burgled!"

"There is not the slightest doubt about the matter," said the Head. "As you know, Mr. Lee, I am an early riser, and I always unlock my own study before the servants enter. Thus I am the first to go into the apartment in the morning. Ten minutes ago I entered—and found every indication of a burglary."

Nelson Lee was rather astonished.

"I hope that you have made a mistake, Dr. Stafford," he said. "I will come at once. By the way, I should advise you to inform the police——"

"I have already communicated by telephone with the Bannington Police-station," said the Headmaster. "Inspector Jameson, I understand, is coming over at once. It is a most unsettling affair."

"The safe? Has that been tampered with?"

"Fortunately—no," replied Dr. Stafford. "The thief was beaten by the safe, for it has not been touched. It contains quite a large sum in cash; but the loss is sufficient in any case. But please come with me, Mr. Lee."

Nelson Lee was rather inclined to believe that the Head was magnifying—quite unintentionally—a trivial incident into something of importance. And it must be confessed that Lee hoped otherwise. Anything in the nature of detection was vastly welcome to him.

And he soon discovered that an element of mystery was connected with this unexpected affair.

The Head and Nelson Lee entered the former's study together. At the first glance Lee knew that something was really wrong. The study appeared to be untouched, and even a keen observer would have noticed nothing.

But Lee was more than a keen observer. He was a trained investigator, and there were several small indications which were apparent on the second. For instance, he noticed that two small picture-frames, one on either side of the fireplace, were empty. The canvases had vanished. Two solid gold ornaments were also missing from the mantelpiece—antique specimens which the Head prized dearly.

The blind was raised, and Lee saw that the window-catch was bent and twisted. All this impressed itself upon his mind during the

first glance. He did not advance into the room at once, but paused just inside the door.

"Has anybody been in here this morning?" he asked.

"Yes, myself."

"Anybody else?"

"No—at least, not that I am aware of," replied the Head. "I came in, raised the blind, and at once noticed that the window-catch was broken. My suspicions aroused, I looked round immediately, and saw that several things were missing."

Lee nodded, and looked at the carpet closely. But after a few moments he shook his head and advanced into the room.

"I am afraid there are no footprints," he said. "The weather has been dry and frosty just recently, and the thief's boots were quite clean. At the same time, Dr. Stafford, it is better to make quite sure. Can you tell me exactly what is missing?"

"Four gold ornaments—two large and two small," replied the Head. "A good many silver articles, those two delightful miniatures, and— Good gracious! My gold watch, Mr. Lee. The infernal rogue has taken that!"

The Head spoke with feeling, and his eyes blazed.

"I left it on the desk last night," he went on. "I've been regulating the clock by it, and forgot to put it in my pocket. That watch cost sixty pounds, and was a present from my father, fifteen years ago. And those miniatures, Mr. Lee. They were wonderful—wonderful! Do you know that one of the governors once offered me a hundred pounds for the pair?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"They were hardly worth that," he remarked. "They were valuable to you, no doubt, but they would not fetch that price in the market. I am rather surprised that the thief took such risky loot—for oil-paintings are by no means easy to dispose of, particularly if they are well known, as those were."

The other missing articles were trivial—a few odds-and-ends from the desk, and from the mantelpiece and sideboard. The total loss, approximately, at net value, was about two hundred pounds—although the Head prized them far more dearly.

Nelson Lee crossed to the window, opened it, and looked outside.

"We must take nothing for granted," he remarked, "but I should say that the thief entered and left by this window. There is no indication that the evidence has been faked up here."

"My dear sir, he could have entered by no other means," declared the Head. "The door was locked all night, and it has not been tampered with in any way."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"An expert burglar would find no difficulty in conquering that lock, Dr. Stafford," he observed. "A cunningly bent section of piano-wire would suffice, indeed."

"Dear me, you really surprise me!"

"Door-locks are the simplest things in the world to unfasten—provided you know how,"

said Lee. "But, strictly speaking, I ought not to touch anything here until the police arrive. Jameson, I am sure, will be quite incensed if he learns that I have been tampering with anything."

And Nelson Lee chuckled as he pictured to himself the somewhat pompous, narrow-minded Inspector Jameson. That worthy individual was fully capable of dealing with the usual routine work, but when anything special came along he was something like a fish out of water.

"Is this yours, Dr. Stafford?" asked Lee suddenly.

"Which?"

"This card," said Lee, indicating a slip of pasteboard which lay face upwards upon the desk, in a clear space. The Head picked it up, looked at it, and then regarded his companion with a somewhat startled expression.

"Good gracious, no!" he said. "This is not mine, Mr. Lee. I've never seen it before. What in the world can it mean?"

There was excellent reason for the Head's surprise, for the card looked exactly like this:

THE MYSTERIOUS X.

"Evidently the visitor was kind enough to leave his visiting-card behind," remarked Nelson Lee calmly. "Rather thoughtful of him, although I'm afraid it tells us nothing. It is probably bluff. Just a little item to puzzle the police. The fellow, however, is evidently an artist in his work."

"The Mysterious X!" murmured the Head, gazing at the card again. "I—I suppose you have never heard of any criminal who calls himself by this singular title?"

"Never," replied Nelson Lee. "It is obvious, of course, why he chose the letter 'X'—for, as you know, it means the first of the unknown quantities in algebra. This thief is certainly an unknown quantity at present. And he does not appear to be an ignoramus."

Nelson Lee walked over to the window again and closely examined the window-sill, the stonework outside, and the paintwork within. Then he went along to the fender, and even dropped upon his knees and examined the brasswork at close quarters.

"H'm!" he murmured. "Quite interesting!"

"You have discovered something?"

"Nothing much—merely that our night visitor wore stockings over his boots—stockings or socks, at all events."

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed the Head. "How extraordinary!"

"It is quite a common thing, I assure you. Such a precaution not only deadens the thief's footfalls, but no definite footprints are left behind. It is a favourite trick with some cracksmen."

"But how on earth can you know this?"

"Well, Dr. Stafford, when I find some woolly hairs of a heather-mixture colour cling-

ing to the stonework of the window-sill, and when I find some more hairs on the paint-work, and still more on the fender, the inference is fairly obvious," replied Nelson Lee with a smile. "I will admit that the hairs are minute and almost invisible. But they are there, all the same."

"Remarkable—remarkable!"

There was a short silence, during which Nelson Lee used his eyes to full advantage. He roamed round the room, and finally came to a halt against the desk. Here he looked closely into a bronze ash-tray.

"You don't smoke cigarettes, do you?" he asked.

"Only occasionally, Mr. Lee. I have smoked none during this present week," said the Head. "Dear me! There are no less than four ends in that tray."

"Two of them were left, I have no doubt, by Dr. Brett," said Lee. "He waited for you last night, you may remember? These two ends are samples of the cigarette Brett fancies. But the other two were apparently left by the thief."

"The infernal impudence of the man—smoking in my study while he carried on his plundering work!" ejaculated the Head indignantly. "Do you think they will be of any value as a clue, Mr. Lee?"

The detective shook his head.

"I fancy they were left here for the same purpose as the card," he replied. "Merely a little bluff, Dr. Stafford. The thief was rather clumsy here, at all events. This stamp was once a Woodbine, and this other one is evidently the remains of a State Express—two widely different varieties. One is highly expensive, and the other the cheapest of all cigarettes."

"And what does that imply?"

"Well, a man who smokes State Express one minute would scarcely light a Woodbine the next," smiled Lee. "I should imagine that the fellow picked up these two ends from the road at random—for the express purpose of planting them upon the scene of his crime. But I fancy I hear a car out in the Triangle. Yes," he added, turning to the window. "Inspector Jameson has arrived in all his glory."

The Head left the study. He was not vastly worried, although the whole affair upset him. The actual loss was serious enough, but by no means grave. Dr. Stafford could stand it. But he strongly disliked the police investigating at the school. Such a thing excited the boys, and St. Frank's was brought into-unwelcome prominence.

Inspector Jameson stalked into the study a moment later.

"Morning, Mr. Lee," he said, with a nod. "I hope you haven't been disturbing anything in this room? I can't possibly hope to achieve any result if the evidence has been interfered with."

"You need have no fear, inspector," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "There has been no interference on my part, and I shall be most interested to watch your professional investigations. Please take no notice of me at all."

"I was thinking, perhaps," said the Head,

"that you might be glad of Mr. Lee's co-operation, Inspector Jameson."

The inspector smiled.

"Really, I think I am capable of dealing with this affair," he said. "I understand, Dr. Stafford, that this is the apartment which was burgled? Very well. I don't think it will be long before I can tell you the identity of the thief."

"The gentleman left his visiting card behind," remarked Lee casually.

"Oh, indeed!" ejaculated Jameson. "Indeed! Then you already know who the man is? May I see that card at once?"

It was handed to him by the Head.

"Why, what—" The inspector paused, and looked at Nelson Lee sourly. "Is this a joke, sir?" he asked, in cold tones.

"Quite possibly," agreed Nelson Lee. "But that is for you to decide, inspector. That card was left here as a memento by the man who took a fancy to Dr. Stafford's property. Perhaps you will be able to deduce from the card who the owner of it may happen to be?"

The inspector studied the slip of pasteboard searchingly.

"The Mysterious X!" he muttered. "Now what can that mean, I wonder? 'X,' of course, is a short way of putting cross—such as in Charing Cross. Can it be possible that the thief's name is Cross?"

"A wonderfully astute deduction," remarked Nelson Lee solemnly.

Jameson looked at him sharply, but made no comment. Lee's face was as grave as that of an image, and the inspector didn't know whether his leg was being pulled or not. He felt, however, that it would be wise to change the subject. He pulled out his note-book and tested the flavour of his pencil.

"Can you give me a list of the stolen articles, Dr. Stafford?" he asked.

"Certainly."

And the Head gave a list of every article missing from the room. Jameson jotted them down, and stowed his note-book away.

"I presume that everything is missing from this room alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Nothing has been taken from any other apartment?"

"Not that I am aware of."

The inspector walked across to the window, and examined it with close attention for a full minute. He paid special attention to the twisted catch, and when he turned round there was a gleam of intelligence in his eye.

"Could this damage have been done from within?" he asked.

"Such a suggestion is by no means inadmissible," replied Lee. "We cannot say for certain whether the burglar caused the damage before he entered or after. But a man who breaks into a house usually smashes a window-catch from outside."

The inspector smiled.

"Unless he smashes it in order to beguile the police," he observed. "You apparently overlooked that point, Mr. Lee."

"Dear me!" murmured Nelson Lee. "I am dull this morning."

"The result of this school life, no doubt"

said Jameson indulgently. "It seems to me that the thief might have entered by the door——"

"It was locked all night," put in the Head.

"Oh!" said Jameson. "It was locked? Who locked it, sir?"

"I did."

"At what hour?"

"Is this really necessary?" asked the Head, who was getting rather impatient with the self-important inspector.

"I must gather all the facts," said Jameson.

"Very well," replied Dr. Stafford. "Last night, inspector, I spent the last two hours before retiring with Mr. Stockdale, in the College House. I locked up this room quite early, after Dr. Brett had taken his departure——"

"You had been entertaining Dr. Brett?"

"No, certainly not," said the Head sharply.

"Dr. Brett doesn't enter into this affair at all. I wish you would stick to the matter in hand, inspector. Dr. Brett came to see me, but I was compelled to leave him alone for some little time. When I returned I found that he had been called away by telephone. Is there anything else you would like to know?"

Jameson nodded, his eyes gleaming curiously.

"Yes, sir, there is," he said grimly. "Do I understand that Dr. Brett was left alone in this room for an appreciable time last night?"

"Only for about twenty minutes."

"And he had gone when you came back?"

"I have just told you so," said the Head testily.

"Can you tell me what you did when you found that Dr. Brett had gone?" asked the inspector. "Please give me all the details, Dr. Stafford. Did you come into the room and switch on the lights?"

"No, I did not!" retorted the Head curtly. "Brett had gone, and I merely looked into the study in order to see if the lights were switched off. I found that everything was all right, and I locked the door."

"And did not enter the room again?"

"Not until this morning."

"Then," said the inspector triumphantly, "Dr. Brett was the last man in this room yesterday. Furthermore, he had been alone for fully twenty minutes. He left hurriedly, without seeing you——"

"Good heavens!" gasped the Head. "You—you are making the preposterous suggestion that Dr. Brett stole the articles?"

The inspector nodded.

"The whole thing is obvious," he replied.

"Obvious!" thundered Dr. Stafford. "Obvious! Upon my soul, Inspector Jameson, you do not know what you are saying! Dr. Brett is a man of honour, and I positively refuse to listen to this—this senseless twaddle!"

Jameson turned red.

"You forget yourself, sir!" he said stiffly.

"Nonsense!" snapped the Head. "Fiddlesticks! Rubbish! You must be mad to suspect Dr. Brett. What is your opinion,

Lee? Do you think that Dr. Brett could have been connected with this robbery?"

"Brett is not a thief," replied Nelson Lee, with a smile. "Neither is he a fool. And he would certainly have been a fool had he stolen those articles. The inspector apparently forgets that Brett had no knowledge that you would not enter the room again last night. That was a mere coincidence."

Jameson smiled sourly.

"Coincidence or not," he said, "I have every reason to suspect that Dr. Brett is the culprit. He had evidently made his plans beforehand, and fled at once. He is now on the other side of England, no doubt."

"Nonsense!" snapped the Head again.

"I happen to know that Dr. Brett has been short of money," went on the inspector, ignoring the interruption. "This little haul——"

"And how do you know that Dr. Brett has been short of money?" demanded the Head tartly. "Has he been taking you into his confidence on personal matters, inspector? Or are you a clairvoyant?"

"Your sarcasm, Dr. Stafford, has no effect upon me," was Jameson's cold reply. "I have my duty to do—and I shall do it. It is not usually my habit to explain how I know things, but on this occasion I will do so—so that you may be convinced. Less than a week ago I saw Dr. Brett taking his departure from a pawnbroker's shop in Bannington. And why does a man visit such a shop?"

The Head was rather taken aback at this sample of the inspector's rare genius. But Nelson Lee turned rather hastily to the window. Usually he could control his face without difficulty, but this was rather trying. And Nelson Lee smiled out into the Triangle and chuckled inwardly.

"I have put two and two together," went on the inspector. "Dr. Brett was evidently short of money, and he found himself alone in your study, and yielded to sudden temptation."

"Really?" said Nelson Lee, turning. "I thought you mentioned a few moments ago that Dr. Brett's plans were made beforehand?"

"That point is of no importance!" snapped the inspector. "Do you not agree with me that Brett's visit to a pawnshop is highly significant?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"It is significant, certainly," he agreed. "Significant of one thing—that Brett visited the shop. Why he went there, or what his business could have been, is a totally different matter. I can assure you that I have been in a pawnbroker's establishment on many occasions—but not to pledge my watch or other valuables. People who enter pawnshops are not always hard up, Jameson."

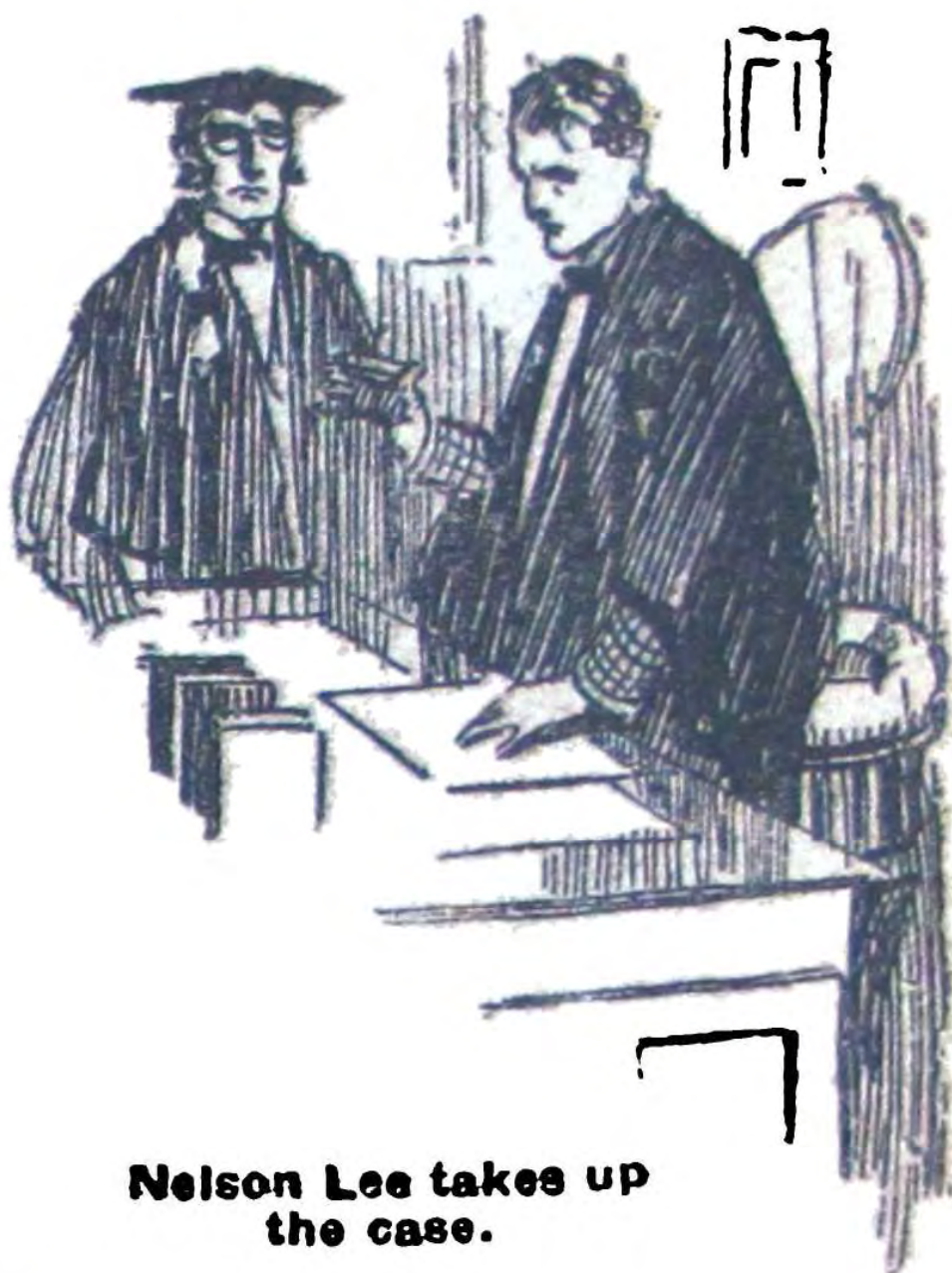
"Hear, hear!" said the Head heartily. "You are quite right, Lee. The inspector's deduction—or alleged deduction—is childish. I really gave Jameson credit for having more intelligence."

"How—how dare you, sir?" snorted the inspector.

"If I appear to be rude, Jameson, you



Starke gets it in the neck.



Nelson Lee takes up the case.



Handforth and Co. on the trail.



The Mysterious X.

must forgive me," said Dr. Stafford. "But you are trying my patience rather severely. I think it would be just as well to leave Dr. Brett out of this matter altogether. I am quite confident that he is innocent."

The inspector shook his head.

"I regret that I cannot share your confidence," he said. "At all events, Dr. Stafford, I will visit the village at once—in order to establish the fact that Dr. Brett is not connected with this matter. Then we shall know exactly where we are."

And Jameson, without another word, picked up his hat and took his departure. As he strode down to the village he was troubled with a few doubts. Was there sufficient ground for him to suspect Dr. Brett? Or should he have made more thorough investigations at the school?

At all events, a visit to Brett's house would do no harm. And Jameson, having got that one idea fixed in his mind, did not like to abandon it. If he discovered that the doctor had left the village during the night—well, then things would look black indeed.

The doctor's house and surgery stood a little back from the road in the lane which led to Caistowe. Inspector Jameson pushed open the gate upon arrival and marched up to the private door. His ring was answered by a maidservant.

"Is Dr. Brett at home?" asked the inspector.

"Yes, sir," she replied. "He's in the surgery."

"Oh, indeed!" said Jameson, with a little qualm. "I wish to see him."

He was ushered in, beginning to feel somewhat nervous. So Dr. Brett had not fled! Jameson found himself in the doctor's sitting-room, and here he took a seat while the maidservant went to inform her master of the visitor's arrival.

For about one minute Jameson sat still. Then he suddenly stiffened, quivering with excitement. His gaze rested upon the desk in the centre of the room. And there, in full sight, lay Dr. Stafford's fountain-pen!

It was one of the stolen articles!

CHAPTER V.

JAMESON IS PUT OUT!

INSPECTOR JAMESON gave a little cry of triumph as he jumped to his feet and bent over the desk. Yes, he was right.

The pen was silver-mounted, and the Head's initials were engraved upon the metal.

"I knew it—I knew it!" Jameson told himself grimly.

He heard footsteps out in the hall, and turned just in time to meet Dr. Brett, who came in smiling, with outstretched hand. The inspector studiously ignored it, and his cold attitude was unmistakable.

"Why, what's wrong, inspector?" asked Brett curiously.

"I think you ought to know, Dr. Brett," replied the inspector. "I have been to the school, and I should advise you to be per-

fectly frank and confess everything. I can assure you that such a course——"

"What on earth are you talking about?" interrupted Brett.

"Come, come!" said Jameson roughly. "This won't do. If you had not been quite so careless, you might have escaped detection for some few days; but I have positive proof of your guilt, and I shall arrest you on my own respons——"

"Arrest me!" shouted the doctor. "Look here, Jameson, I don't mind a joke, but there's such a thing as carrying it too far! You are in my house, and you must give me an explanation without a moment's delay."

The inspector laughed unpleasantly.

"This attitude is silly, doctor," he said. "Last night you took property to the value of about two hundred pounds out of Dr. Stafford's study——"

"You must be mad!" interrupted Brett angrily.

He could see that the inspector was in deadly earnest, and his own temper was rising rather rapidly. For it was altogether too unbearable to have this idiot of a policeman invading his house and accusing him of theft.

"I advise you to moderate your language!" snapped Jameson. "This defiance on your part, Dr. Brett, will do you no good whatever. I have here a list of the articles which were stolen from Dr. Stafford's study. That fountain-pen on the table is included in this list!" he added dramatically. "How did it come into your possession?"

Dr. Brett started, and then laughed.

"Is that your proof?" he asked grimly.

"How did it come into your possession?" repeated the inspector.

"I suppose I should be justified in pitching you out of my house, neck and crop," said the doctor. "But I won't act so drastically, Jameson. You don't know any better—that's all. To avoid trouble, I'll explain."

"You will find that difficult, no doubt," sneered Jameson.

"On the contrary, it will be quite simple. I happened to be alone in the Headmaster's study last night, and I was making a few notes with my fountain-pen," explained the doctor. "While doing so the telephone interrupted me, and I was called away in a hurry. My own fountain-pen is also a silver-mounted one, and in my haste I suppose I must have picked up the wrong pen."

Brett picked up the Head's pen from the table.

"Mine is almost exactly like this," he went on. "I didn't notice it until this morning, when I wanted to jot something down. It was my intention to call upon Dr. Stafford this evening and apologise for making such a foolish blunder."

"And is that all you have to say?"

"Don't you believe me?" asked Brett, his eyes blazing. "If there has been a burglary at the school, the thief took my pen; but Dr. Stafford naturally thought that it was his, because he evidently didn't notice——"

"Come, come, I can't accept this story," interrupted Jameson sourly. "You are in a very queer position, Dr. Brett, and I will tell

you frankly that your explanation does not satisfy me. I strongly advise you to give up the rest of the stolen property at once. If Dr. Stafford is lenient he may not prosecute, and then the whole affair will be hushed up."

"If you are not outside my house within one minute, Inspector Jameson, I will pitch you out—and that won't be hushed up. I can promise you!" said Brett furiously. "I have put up with as much of your nonsense as my temper will stand."

The inspector backed a trifle, rather nervous.

"I was speaking for your own good," he said hastily. "You will not be allowed another chance, Dr. Brett. And there is one question I should like answered—what were you doing in a pawnbroker's shop in Bannington last Tuesday?"

The doctor turned red with anger.

"What was I doing?" he shouted. "I will tell you—I was minding my own business. And you'd better mind yours, you interfering busybody. Do you see that door? Get outside!"

"You will pay for this——"

"Get outside!" roared Brett. "If you think I'm frightened by a blue uniform you're mistaken! I've never been so insulted in my own house in all my life. You accuse me of theft upon the flimsiest evidence—and I resent it. An innocent man hardly likes to be called a thief."

"I don't want to be hard on you——"

The inspector got no further. For, to his consternation and dismay, Dr. Brett seized him by the shoulder, propelled him through the doorway into the hall, and positively hustled him out on to the front path. Inspector Jameson had never suffered such an indignity in his whole career.

"You—you infernal scoundrel!" he gasped.

"Get off my premises!" ordered the doctor angrily.

"Dear me! Not a quarrel, surely?" came a quiet voice from the gateway. "You mustn't get into such tempers, gentlemen."

Brett looked up, and saw Nelson Lee smiling at him. The schoolmaster-detective had just arrived, and was rather astonished to see the pair engaged in what looked suspiciously like a fight in the front garden.

"I will trouble you to remain silent, Mr. Lee," snapped the inspector, with as much dignity as he could muster at the moment.

"Dr. Brett has obstructed me in the execution of my duty; but he has done himself no good."

Brett faced Nelson Lee with blazing eyes.

"Do you think I could stand the man's nonsense?" he asked fiercely. "He came here and accused me of burgling Dr. Stafford's study—just because I took the Head's fountain-pen last night, in mistake for my own!"

And Brett briefly explained the circumstances to Nelson Lee. Jameson stood listening grimly, but said nothing.

"Of course I believe you," said Lee, as soon as the doctor had done. "You mustn't think that I share the inspector's belief, Brett. He has made a mistake, and I am sure that he will apologise in due course."

The inspector laughed.

"An apology from me will not be necessary," he exclaimed. "It is you who will tender an apology, Mr. Lee."

And Jameson, without another word, turned on his heel and strode away. Both Lee and Brett watched him in silence until he turned a bend in the lane. By this time the doctor's anger had subsided.

"I couldn't help being angry," he exclaimed. "Hang it all, the man was altogether too confident—he accused me just because of that pen—and then had the impudence to ask me why I entered a pawnshop in Bannington."

"He thinks you were hard up," chuckled Nelson Lee.

"What rot!" snorted the doctor. "I simply went into the shop to buy a pair of gold cuff-links I had seen in the window——"

"My dear fellow, you needn't explain to me," laughed the detective. "Jameson, you see, is not half so clever as he thinks he is, and he suffers very severely from swelled head. He fondly believes that he has a strong case here; but in the end he will look foolish. Don't take any notice of the matter at all."

"Do you think he'll act in any way?"

"He might—particularly as you handled him," replied Nelson Lee. "Not that I blame you, Brett. You were justly enraged. But it is always wise to deal cautiously with the police. Jameson will probably realise that he has made a fool of himself, and will let everything drop."

"I hope so," growled the doctor. "I don't want any confounded fuss. But come indoors, old man."

Meanwhile, the news had found its way to the junior quarters of St. Frank's. The lower school was talking of nothing else when morning lessons were over. How it leaked out I don't know—but things like that always will leak out.

It was generally known that the Head's study had been burgled, that a lot of things were missing, and that Dr. Brett was suspected. And, needless to say, there was a great deal of excited discussion on the subject.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it's true," remarked Gulliver, of the Remove. "I never did believe much in Brett. And it must be true—the police wouldn't accuse him if it wasn't."

Tommy Watson snorted.

"Everybody knows that Inspector Jameson is a double-barrelled ass," he said, with contempt. "Just because Dr. Brett came here last night, he's accused of being the thief! Why, there's no evidence at all."

"Rather not."

"That's all very well," said Fullwood sneeringly. "You don't suppose the police would make public all the evidence they've got, do you? We only know half the story—and I believe that Brett's guilty."

"Bravo, Fullwood!" I exclaimed, with a nod. "That's just what I was expecting you to say, so I'm not disappointed. I should have had a fit if you'd said the opposite."

"Go an' eat coke!" growled Fullwood.

He moved away with his chums.

"I say, do you think there's anything in it?" asked Jack Grey, looking at me. "Is it only a yarn, or—"

"Oh, it's more than a yarn," I replied. "The Head's study has been burgled all right, and there are a lot of things missing. But Dr. Brett had nothing to do with it. I'd stand by him any day."

"Begad! An' so would I, old boy," said Sir Montie loyally. "Dr. Brett is a rippin' sort, and he ain't quite a fool. He's got rather a decent practice down here, an' it's his livin'. It's utterly ridiculous to think that he'd sacrifice it all for practically nothin'."

"But if Brett didn't do it, who did?" asked Grey.

"You leave it to my guv'nor," I said. "He'll soon—"

"Heard the latest?" yelled Christine, bursting through the crowd.

"Have they got the thief?" asked a dozen voices.

"No; but it's more mysterious than ever," panted Christine. "I've just heard from Bryant, of the Fifth, that a burglar left a card behind him. He calls himself 'The Mysterious X.'"

"My hat!"

"And he left his card behind?"

"Yes."

"The impudent bounder!"

There was a fresh discussion at once, and some further excitement. All sorts of conjectures were made—most of them wild. And in the middle of it all Handforth drew his chums aside and gazed at them solemnly. Church and McClure were rather impatient, because they had been in the midst of a discussion.

"Look here, I was talking to Farman——" began Church.

"Never mind Farman," said Handforth. "Listen to me."

"And I want to finish what I was saying to young Yakama——"

"Blow Yakama!" snorted Handforth. "If you can't attend to me, Arnold McClure, I'll punch your silly nose! I'm your leader, ain't I? Well, just listen."

Handforth looked round mysteriously, and drew his chums still further aside. It was quite evident that the brainy Edward Oswald had some marvellous ideas of his own.

CHAPTER VI.

SLEUTHS ON THE TRAIL!

McCLURE sighed. He knew very well that he and Church had to go through it now. There was no escape.

Handforth had an idea, and Handforth had to air it. Church and McClure always wished that their leader would air his weird notions to somebody else.

"Well," said Church, "what is it?"

"If you talk to me in that tone, Walter Church, I sha'n't tell you anything," said Handforth severely. "Wouldn't you like to see Nipper done in the eye? Wouldn't you like to see Nelson Lee done in the eye?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Church.

"Rather not," added McClure. "We've got nothing against Nipper, and I think it's a bit thick to talk about doing Mr. Lee in the eye——"

"You—you fatheads!" said Handforth, glaring. "I mean over this burglary business. It's Nipper who generally has all the kudos——"

"The which?"

"The kudos—the fame and glory," explained Handforth. "He and his guv'nor have been in the limelight a bit too much, if you ask me—and I've been left out of it. Why shouldn't Study D have a look in?"

"Why not?" asked McClure.

"And this time we're going to have a look in," said Handforth triumphantly. "To be exact, we're going to track the burglar, nab him, and hand him over to the police. What do you think of that?"

"Couldn't we try him, and send him to penal servitude while we were about it?" asked Church thoughtfully. "Might as well do it thoroughly, Handy."

Handforth glared again.

"I don't want any rot!" he said grimly. "This isn't a time for being funny, you ass. I happen to know who the mysterious X is——"

"Eh?"

"You—you know?"

"Exactly," said Handforth indulgently. "Of course, I didn't suppose that you fellows would be keen enough to spot him. But I'm different—I see things. And I saw the burglar less than ten minutes ago."

"Oh, rot!" said Church bluntly.

"You must be mistaken, Handy," put in McClure. "Do you think the burglar would still be hanging about here—the day after he broke into the school? Dash it all, it ain't reasonable."

Handforth smiled in a superior kind of way.

"Just come over towards the playing-fields," he said. "These other chaps are kicking up such a din that we can't hear ourselves think—and I want to talk to you in private. This is going to be our coup."

Church and McClure, knowing Handforth as they did, were quite sure that the adventure would be a frost. But there was no hope of getting out of it. At least, they couldn't get out of it painlessly.

Handforth led the way across the Triangle towards the playing-fields. Little Side was practically deserted, for most of the fellows were in the Triangle or in the school buildings.

"Look here, how long is this job going to take?" asked Church. "The dinner-bell will be ringing——"

"Dinner!" roared Handforth. "What the thunder do you want dinner for?"

"Don't we usually have dinner?" demanded Church tartly.

"Not when we're catching burglars, you greedy ass!" said Handforth. "We can miss grub for once, I suppose. Now, we don't want to waste any time, so I'll get to the point."

"Good."

"I'm a chap of few words——"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped McClure faintly.

"I'm a chap of few words!" repeated Handforth, in deliberate tones. "My motto is action, and I don't believe in beating about the bush. Do you remember that chap we saw skulking near the school after the football match?"

"That fellow with a queer box under his arm?"

"Yes."

"He wasn't skulking," said Church. "I'll admit he looked a seedy kind of chap, but he was probably respectable enough. And what's he got to do with this burglary business, anyhow?"

"He's the thief, you fathead!"

"What?" roared Church and McClure.

"He's the Mysterious X!" declared Handforth. "Now do you understand?"

"No, I'm blessed if I do," said Church. "How the dickens can you know that that fellow is the Mysterious X? Just because he was hanging about the school, that's no proof——"

"I don't want to hear any of your rotten objections," interrupted Handforth fiercely. "I'll admit I haven't got much concrete evidence, but I'm really a detective by instinct, and I know things. I can't tell you why I know them, but I do. And that chap is the Mysterious X!"

McClure gave Church a hopeless glance.

"Well, of course, you may be right, old chap," he said carelessly. "I hope you are. But wouldn't it be better if you got all this glory yourself? You found the chap, so it's only right that you should get the credit. Church and I haven't done anything."

"Of course we haven't," said Church.

"So the best thing we can do," added McClure, "is to have our dinner while you're collaring the thief. It wouldn't be fair for us to rob you of your—your kudos, old chap. We shouldn't be comfortable."

"Rather not," said Church. "Come on, Clurey."

And Handforth's faithful chums carelessly strolled off. At all events, that's what they meant to do. They actually got about two yards, when Handforth grabbed their shoulders and spun them round violently. Church staggered back, and McClure sat down abruptly in the damp grass.

"You—you silly lunatic!" he roared.

"My only hat!" gasped Handforth. "And you chaps call yourselves my pals! Do you think I can't see through your beastly game? You're thinking of dinner—you'd rather desert me than go without your dinner for once. You'd rather leave me to collar the burglar alone!"

Neither Church nor McClure thought it necessary to point out that their chief object had been to avoid making asses of themselves. If Handforth chose to do so, that was his fault—not that he could make himself a much bigger ass than he already was.

"Look here," snorted Church impatiently. "We don't mind going without grub, Handy, if the game's worth it. But we don't want to make an awful bloomer, do we? We'll back

you up to the last inch if you can tell us where the Mysterious X is. But he may be miles away by now."

"He can't be," said Handforth. "He was looking over the hedge of the Head's garden about ten minutes ago."

"The chap with the box, you mean?"

"Yes—the burglar."

"Of course," agreed Church. "But what was he doing there? He's not thinking of breaking in a second time, is he?"

"It's my belief that he buried the loot somewhere in the Head's garden," said Handforth wisely. "Don't you see? He was scared, perhaps, and didn't like to take it away with him. So he hid it, and now he's on the watch. But I don't mean to be rash; we won't inform the police until we have proof."

"Where the dickens can we find proof?"

"Well, to start with, we're going to find the chap and then shadow him," said Handforth. "We'll follow him to his lair, and act afterwards. The main thing is to get on his trail. Just think of the way the other chaps will envy us after we've collared the beast."

"Oh, rather," said Church weakly. "We shall be the talk of the school. All the chaps will be laughing——"

"Laughing!" roared Handforth.

"Laughing at Nipper, I mean!" said Church hastily. "He's supposed to be the detective, isn't he? It'll be ripping if we take the wind out of his sails. Your name will be in every mouth, Handy."

Handforth nodded, and glanced at his watch.

"Heaps of time," he said briskly. "Let's get busy."

He marched across the playing-fields, and his chums followed him. They hadn't the slightest idea as to where the start was to be made—and neither had Handforth, for that matter. But Handforth didn't worry over trifles like that.

By a piece of wonderfully good luck the juniors sighted their quarry almost at once. This was fortunate in more ways than one, for Church and McClure would undoubtedly have slipped off if there had been nothing doing.

Handforth saw the man first, and he came to an abrupt halt.

"Hist!" he whispered tensely. "He's—— What the thunder——"

McClure had bumped into Handforth with some violence, being unprepared for his leader's sudden halt.

"You clumsy rotter!" gasped Handforth. "You nearly pitched me over. The burglar's right in front of us—I knew he was about here somewhere. Don't speak loudly, or he'll hear. You chaps have got such terrific voices."

The others didn't argue the point. Handforth's voice was about three times as loud as theirs, but he never seemed to notice it. And his whisper at the present moment was like a stage aside.

But the quarry was some little distance off, and he evidently heard nothing. Peering round the hedge, Church and McClure eyed

him with interest. The man's appearance was certainly suspicious, to say nothing of his actions.

He was perched on an overhanging bough of a tree—long, lanky, and of a somewhat sinister aspect. He was staring towards the school, studying the various buildings with an interest which could not have been merely casual.

And on the ground, just below his feet, stood the mysterious travelling-case or box. It was square, and covered with some water-proof material, with a leather handle. Who was the man, and what could his business be?

"Dash it all," whispered McClure, "there may be something in Handy's idea, after all. Why should this fellow hang about like this? He's up to no good, anyhow. Hallo! He's jumping down!"

"We'll track him!" breathed Handforth. "It's no good us all going in a clump, you know. I'll lead the way, you keep me in sight, Church, and McClure will keep you in sight."

"Good!" said McClure, with incautious haste.

"And you'd better not slip off, either," added Handforth threateningly. "If you desert me, my sons, I'll punch the pair of you until you can't see for a week. But it's a bit off-side when a chap has to threaten his chums to make them stick to him!"

Church and McClure felt rather guilty.

"We won't desert you, Handy," said Church loyally.

To tell the truth, Handforth's chums were beginning to think that there might be something in the affair. There was just a chance that Handforth was right for once. Wonders, as Church whispered, never ceased.

And so the famous inhabitants of Study D strung themselves out in a line and followed the mysterious stranger. And it was an undoubted fact that the man's movements were rather suspicious.

He broke through a gap in the hedge, got into the road, and then worked his way round until he was in a position to view the school from the south angle. And here he stood for some time motionless, evidently watching something.

At last, after glancing at his watch, he turned and walked steadily away. Handforth at that moment was shadowing him like a born detective. Handforth thought so, at all events.

It was rather unfortunate that a root should have got in the way of Handforth's foot and the shadower should have blundered over. The stranger glanced round, smiled, and went on his way.

"He's seen you, you ass!" hissed Church from the rear.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "He didn't look at me, did he? How the dickens was I to know that— Oh, my hat!"

The stranger had glanced round again, but he continued straight on his way—and now his footsteps were more hurried. He went straight down the lane towards the village, and saw no more of Handforth and Co.

This was because the juniors followed in the meadows, on the other side of the hedge. And in the village itself the man did not once glance round. He went straight on until he arrived at the George Tavern.

He wiped his feet on the big wire mat, and entered.

"There you are—we've tracked him to his den," said Handforth triumphantly.

"The George Tavern isn't a den!" said Church, with a sniff.

"The chap's got a room there, I expect," went on Handforth. "It's bluff, my sons. He's pretending to be an ordinary visitor, down here for his health. And if it hadn't been for our efforts he'd never have been caught. But we're going to see that he's put under lock and key."

McClure lifted his cap and scratched his head.

"Hain't we better get a bit more proof first?" he suggested thoughtfully. "Why not go boldly in and ask the landlord who the man is, and what his name is, and all the rest of it?"

"You duffer!" said Handforth, with a sneer. "Do you think he's put his real name in the hotel book? Not likely! It'll be John Smith, or Richard Brown, or something like that. No, my idea is to investigate."

"Isn't that what we've been doing?" asked Church.

"Of course we haven't. We've only started the preliminaries. My scheme is to get the chap out on some pretext and then search his room. We shall find all the stolen stuff there."

"How can we, if it's buried in the Head's garden?"

"Oh, well, if we don't find it, we shall get some other proof," said Handforth.

"It's easy enough to talk about getting the chap out on some pretext," said McClure; "but how are we going to do it? And who's going to search his room? The landlord wouldn't let you in, Handy."

"I could walk in, couldn't I?"

"And be chucked out again?"

"Well, that is a difficulty, I'll admit," said Handforth slowly. "But difficulties can be overcome. You two chaps must go boldly into the inn, ask for the man, and take him up the road. As soon as you're out of sight I'll go into the place, ask to see the chap, and say that I'll wait in his room. While I'm waiting I can have a squint round. How's that?"

"Rotten!" said Church bluntly.

"Eh?"

"Be reasonable, for goodness' sake! How the dickens do you think we're going to get the man to come up the road with us?" asked Church. "We can't tell a lot of whoppers, and he wouldn't come with us just because we asked him. Besides, you'd never get into his room—he'd be sure to lock it."

"If you chaps are going to raise objections—"

"My hat!" ejaculated McClure, staring down the road. "Mr. Lee's just coming, and Nipper and some other fellows are with him."

Look here, Handy, hadn't we better tell Mr. Lee all about it?"

"And let him get all the credit?"

"Of course not. When the thief is caught everybody will know that we gave the information; Mr. Lee's not the sort of man to steal other people's glory," said McClure. "Besides, he can give us some advice."

Handforth wavered.

"Oh, all right," he said, after a moment. "Perhaps it'll be best."

They walked down the road towards Nelson Lee and the others. I was one of the others, and my companions were Tregellis-West and Watson. We were on our way to Dr. Brett's place. Nelson Lee was rather afraid that Inspector Jameson would take some unpleasant action, and he wished to give the doctor some hints.

Dinner was already over. Handforth and Co. had almost lost count of time in their investigations. And as I watched them approaching I wondered what was in the wind. It wasn't often that the heroes of Study D were absentees from the dinner-table.

"Dear fellows, Handforth is lookin' frightfully serious," murmured Sir Montie. "I shouldn't be surprised if he's been makin' discoveries. He looks like it—he does, really! He's excited, too."

Handforth and Co. hurried up, breathless.

"What is the meaning of this, boys?" asked Nelson Lee, coming to a halt. "Why were you not at dinner?"

"Have—have you had dinner already?" asked McClure blankly, addressing me.

"Of course we have, you chump," I replied cheerfully.

"We've been thinking of more important things than dinner, sir," said Handforth. "As a matter of fact, we've found out who the Mysterious X is, and we can tell you exactly where to lay your fingers on him!"

"Begad!"

"Really, Handforth?" said Nelson Lee, as Watson and I exchanged grins. "I hope your statement will turn out to be correct. For I must confess that I have not been successful in my own inquiries. If you have beaten me——"

"The skies will fall in!" I murmured.

"You see, sir," said Handforth, "I had a suspicion even yesterday, and——"

"Begad!" interrupted Sir Montie. "Here's the inspector."

Handforth was forgotten. We all turned and looked down the road. And there, coming towards us on a bicycle, was the leading light of the Bannington police. He jumped from his machine rather breathlessly, but looked thoroughly pleased with himself.

"Well, Mr. Lee, I think you will admit that I have not lost much time over this job," he said. "I am rather glad that you are here, for I intend to take action against Dr. Brett at once."

"Indeed!" said the gov'nor. "What kind of action?"

"I mean to arrest him on a charge of breaking into Dr. Stafford's house last night," said Jameson, with relish. "It is not my

plan to dally about. Within an hour Brett will be in the cells at Bannington."

Nelson Lee was frankly astonished.

"But you must have a warrant——" he began.

"Precisely," interrupted the inspector smoothly. "I have it here, in my pocket!"

CHAPTER VII.

WHO IS THE MYSTERIOUS X?

WE all looked dismayed—even the gov'nor.

"You have the warrant!" he ejaculated. "But, my dear Jameson, you are quite on the wrong track! Brett is entirely innocent, and I cannot imagine how any man could have signed that warrant."

"Some silly old fogey of a J.P., I suppose, sir," I grunted.

"I should advise you to hold your tongue," snapped the inspector curtly. "The evidence I was in a position to set forth amply justified a warrant being issued and signed. Brett is the thief, and he must not remain at liberty a minute longer."

"I am sorry, Jameson," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I am afraid you will find it necessary to apologise even more profusely than I first intimated."

The gov'nor turned to Handforth and Co., who were looking rather blank. The very fact that Jameson had a warrant in his pocket for Dr. Brett's arrest seemed to clinch matters. But Handforth had no great opinion of the inspector; and he, too, seemed to think that there had been a serious bloomer.

"The inspector's mistaken, sir," he whispered. "Dr. Brett isn't the thief——"

"I am of the same opinion, Handforth," interrupted Nelson Lee, scribbling something on a visiting card. "But we have no time to discuss matters now. I want one of you boys to run up to the school with this card."

"I'll go, sir," said Church promptly.

"Thank you, Church." The gov'nor turned to the inspector. "Dr. Brett is at home at the present moment, Jameson," he went on. "You need not fear that he has run off—he has far too much sense. Do you intend to make the arrest now?"

"Yes, at once."

Nelson Lee turned back to Church, and handed him the card.

"Take this straight to Dr. Stafford, my boy," he said. "Give it straight into the Head's hands, and don't lose a moment."

"What have you written on that card, Mr. Lee?" demanded the inspector, as Church rushed off.

"A few words in pencil," replied the gov'nor suavely.

Jameson snorted and stalked away, wheeling his bicycle.

"Nosey honnder!" said Tommy Watson bluntly. "He wants to interfere with everybody's business. But I say, you chaps, this is awful for the doctor. If Jameson has got a warrant he can arrest poor old Brett."

"It's appallin', old boys—simply appallin'."

agreed Sir Montie sadly. "I ain't really worryin', because I know the doctor's innocent. But just think of the frightful commotion there'll be. An' a certain number of people will be idiots enough to believe the worst."

"It's a pity Jameson didn't get a warrant for his own arrest while he was about it," I grunted. "He deserves to be shoved in prison for being such a hopeless idiot! But hadn't we better follow, sir?" I added.

"Yes," said Nelson Lee grimly. "We might as well be on the scene."

As we turned into the Caistowe Lane we noticed that Inspector Jameson had been joined by two constables—or, rather, he had joined them, for they had evidently been waiting. One of the men took charge of the inspector's bicycle, and the other accompanied his superior towards Brett's house.

"Afraid of a scrap, I suppose?" said Watson, with disgust. "Look here, sir, are we going to allow this to happen?"

"Which, my boy?" asked Nelson Lee.

"The arrest, sir."

"We cannot very well prevent it."

"Why not make a rush, sir?" asked Watson. "As soon as the inspector comes out with Dr. Brett, why not dash forward and release—"

"You must remember, Watson, that this is not a schoolboy affair," interrupted Nelson Lee smilingly. "We can't interfere with Jameson at all—unless we like to get ourselves into serious trouble. He has the law on his side. But you needn't be alarmed; I don't think Dr. Brett will be arrested."

"But Jameson's got the warrant, sir," I put in quickly.

The guv'nor nodded.

"Quite so, Nipper," he agreed. "But Jameson overlooked one thing—he omitted to consult Dr. Stafford. And that was a most ridiculous oversight."

By this time we had arrived at the doctor's gateway, and we saw that the front door was just being opened by the maidservant, who looked thoroughly scared. Inspector Jameson pushed past her roughly, and was followed by the policeman.

"Oh, sir, whatever is the matter?" asked the girl, appealing to Nelson Lee.

"You needn't be alarmed," replied the guv'nor. "Inspector Jameson is rather an arrogant individual, and he is anxious to see your master. Everything will be all right before long—and you need not discuss this affair with anybody else."

"Indeed, I sha'n't, sir," said the girl. "The people are talking enough already in the village—the gossiping hussies!"

We all passed indoors, and were just in time to see Dr. Brett facing the inspector in the sitting-room. Nelson Lee entered first, and I hovered in the rear with Montie and Tommy.

"You are intruding, Mr. Lee," snapped the inspector, turning. "I'll trouble you to attend to your own—"

"I have an idea that this is my house," interrupted Dr. Brett deliberately. "I don't think it has passed completely into your possession, Jameson—although you appear to

own the place. Come in, Mr. Lee—come in, boys. You might as well see the fun, now you're here."

Jameson shrugged his shoulders.

"If you will treat this matter so lightly, I cannot help it," he said. "But I warn you, Dr. Brett, to say as little as possible. I have here a warrant for your arrest, and I intend to execute it without delay."

"Why can't you be sensible, inspector?" asked Nelson Lee quietly. "You know very well that you have been hasty over this affair—you have jumped to conclusions without any real—"

The telephone bell rang sharply, interrupting the guv'nor.

"I will answer it!" said the inspector sharply.

"You haven't executed the warrant yet!" retorted Brett, elbowing the inspector out of the way, and seizing the instrument. "Hallo! Who's that? Oh, Dr. Stafford. Yes, I'm Brett."

"I have just received a brief note on a card from Mr. Lee," came the Head's voice over the wires. "I can scarcely believe what he tells me, doctor. Is it actually true that that fool of a Jameson has obtained a warrant for your arrest?"

"Quite true; he is just about to execute it."

"The man is a bigger duffer than I took him to be," exclaimed the Head angrily. "My dear Brett, I hope to heaven you don't think that I had any hand in it? I am quite sure that you are innocent—I never thought otherwise."

"Thank you, Dr. Stafford," said Brett quietly. "But I'm afraid your faith in me will not do much to ease the position—"

"My dear Brett, Jameson can't touch you," broke in Dr. Stafford. "Just tell him to come to the telephone, will you? I shall refuse to prosecute—I shall refuse to act in any way whatever. He can't arrest you. Even if I thought you guilty of having stolen my property—which I certainly do not—I should still refuse to prosecute. But you are merely a victim of circumstance, Brett, and this nonsense will soon be at an end."

Brett, after a moment, turned to the inspector.

"Dr. Stafford wants a word with you," he remarked shortly.

Jameson seized the instrument, and stood listening for some seconds. His face grew longer, and flushed angrily.

"But this is preposterous, sir!" he shouted. "I have the warrant! If you refuse to prosecute the rascal will go free; we can't hold him in our hands if you won't appear against him—"

He broke off in order to listen to Dr. Stafford again. And he finally jammed the receiver on its hook and gave a snort of complete disgust.

"Really, Jameson, you have only yourself to blame," remarked Nelson Lee smoothly. "You ought to have consulted Dr. Stafford before taking any action. It was only the right thing to do. This isn't a murder case;

you can't arrest a man unless the injured party agrees to a prosecution."

"At the same time, Dr. Brett is guilty, and you may be sure that the whole countryside will know it," snapped Jameson. "I will have nothing further to do with the business—I am finished."

And Jameson marched towards the door.

"One moment, inspector," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I shouldn't advise you to be in any hurry. You seem to forget that your actions are fairly well known in the village, and you have set many ugly rumours afloat concerning Dr. Brett."

"Rumours!" repeated the inspector. "Nonsense!"

"You still believe that the doctor is guilty, and I am sorry for that," went on Lee. "One day, perhaps, you will regret your haste. For the present we must do our best to smooth everything over—"

"You needn't think that I care a jot about rumours," put in Brett. "If people like to talk against me and believe ill of me, I can afford to ignore them."

"Can you?" asked the gov'nor. "I don't think so, old man. Your position is not like that of an ordinary private gentleman. But I propose a visit to the school—you, Jameson, and I. We will discuss matters with the Head and come to a clear understanding."

"Just as you like," growled the inspector.

And a few minutes later we took our departure. Handforth and McClure were waiting outside—I had practically forgotten them. Handforth was looking excited and impatient, and he seemed surprised to see Dr. Brett still at liberty.

"Why, hasn't he been arrested?" he whispered.

"No, dear old boy," replied Montie. "The Head's a rippin' sort, you know—he's refused to prosecute."

"Then Dr. Brett's innocent—I knew he was," said Handforth. "What's more, I happen to know who the real thief is. I can tell the inspector where to lay his fingers on the Mysterious X!"

"Oh, don't rot now, Handy," I put in.

"It's true, you ass," snorted Handforth.

And, without further delay, the leader of Study D told his story—how he and his chums had watched the sinister movements of the lanky stranger, and how they had tracked him to the George Tavern.

"I have seen the man myself," commented Nelson Lee. "I agree with you, Handforth, that he had a habit of hanging about the school in a most unaccountable fashion. But there is no evidence to show that he is in any way connected with the robbery."

"No evidence, sir?" gasped Handforth. "But it's obvious!"

"Obvious to your mind, perhaps," smiled the gov'nor. "But you are rather inclined to get an idea fixed in your head, Handforth, and build upon it. You take a certain thing for granted, and before long you are really convincing yourself that such and such is positively true—whereas, in reality, it is merely a suspicion."

"Begud!" breathed Sir Montie. "You're

found out, Handy, old boy. Mr. Lee's revealin' your character amazin'ly."

"But—but he must be the Mysterious X, sir," said Handforth weakly. "There's nobody else to suspect!"

Nelson Lee laughed heartily.

"So that is how you arrive at your conclusions?" he chuckled. "Simply because there is only one man to suspect, you immediately pounce upon him. I'm afraid, Handforth, that your theory— Ah! But we shall be able to test it even now, for I observe the gentleman in question striding towards us."

The mysterious stranger was, indeed, approaching. We watched him with interest. He certainly looked a queer specimen. Inspector Jameson was walking along in front, with the constables, loftily aloof. Dr. Brett was outwardly indifferent, but I knew that he was worried. His position was not exactly ideal.

"Pardon me, sir," said Nelson Lee politely, as the stranger was about to pass.

"Now for it!" breathed Handforth. "Get ready! He'll fight, I expect!"

The man came to a halt, and looked at the gov'nor inquiringly.

"Did you address me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nelson Lee. "I am a master from St. Frank's, and I have seen you in the vicinity of the school several times recently. If you are anxious to inspect the various buildings, I shall be pleased to conduct you round."

The stranger smiled with pleasure.

"Thank you, sir—thank you very much," he said eagerly. "You—you see, I was half afraid to approach the Headmaster, because my business is quite an independent one, and I know that a Bannington firm is under contract to supply all the picture-postcards of St. Frank's."

"Picture-postcards!" murmured Handforth weakly.

"So, really, sir, I have no right to take any views at all," went on the stranger. "I thought I might be able to do a little business in my own small way, though. I'm a photographer, sir."

"A—a photographer!" gasped Handforth, in a faint voice.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

McClure yelled, and all the rest of us grinned.

"There is no reason why you shouldn't take photographs of the school, if you wish to," said Nelson Lee. "But this is hardly the time of the year for that work, surely? The contract you referred to is, I believe, expired."

"My idea was to take winter scenes, sir," said the photographer. "My name is Wells, and I come from Caistowe. I have just been viewing the school buildings from various aspects, in order to obtain the best views. Then I meant to wait until some more snow came, and take the photos."

"You are painstaking, at all events, Mr. Wells," smiled Nelson Lee. "But I am afraid the chance of more snow this winter is a small one. We are almost into March

However, if you will write to the Headmaster, I have no doubt that he will be quite willing to make some arrangement with you."

"Thank you, sir," said Mr. Wells eagerly.

We walked on, but Handforth and McClure remained behind. Probably Handforth was feeling rather too small to bear the gaze of Nelson Lee. His wonderful discovery was—as usual—a mare's nest. And he would be chipped unmercifully when he showed his face in the Ancient House.

"Well, thank goodness, it's all over," remarked Watson, as we walked towards the school. Dr. Brett's safe enough now. The Head's a brick—although, of course, he knows that the doctor's innocent."

I shook my head.

"It's not all over, Tommy," I said. "There is still a beastly suspicion against Dr. Brett. We believe in him, I know—but that's because we know him. But there are heaps of people who will think the worst. And you know what these country gossips are. Poor old Brett will have a rotten time until he's proved innocent. And who's the real culprit? Who's the Mysterious X?"

"Begad! Don't ask me, old boy!" said Sir Montie.

"And where is the stolen property?" I went on. "You see, my sons, the position is still bad. Until the police collar the actual thief Dr. Brett will be in an uncomfortable position."

"Then I'm afraid he'll be uncomfortable for a frightful time," observed Tregellis-West. "Jameson will never do anythin', dear fellow. In fact, I don't quite know how things are goin' on."

"Don't you worry, Montie," I said. "Leave it to the guv'nor."

But a surprise was awaiting us at St. Frank's. Had we only known it. Sir Montie and Tommy and I were not made aware of it until afterwards—because we weren't allowed to march straight into the Head's study with the guv'nor and Dr. Brett and Inspector Jameson.

Naturally, we wanted to go in, but as Nelson Lee promised to tell me all about it afterwards I didn't mind so much. Handforth and Co.—Church had joined his chums at the gate—made a bee-line for Mrs. Hake's tuck-shop. Having had no dinner, they suddenly remembered that they were hungry and there wasn't much time. Besides, there wasn't so much likelihood of being chipped in the tuck-shop. Handforth's two chief objects were to find some grub and to make himself scarce.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee led the way to the Head's private door, and a few moments later he was in Dr. Stafford's study, accompanied by the doctor and Inspector Jameson. The inspector was looking supercilious and rather disgusted.

"I have news for you—most astonishing news," said the Head almost excitedly. "Ah, Brett. I am glad that warrant was not executed—more particularly now. Your innocence is finally established!"

"Oh?" said the Inspector coldly.

"And you, Jameson, will find it necessary

to offer a most profuse apology," went on the Head, with equal coldness. "I have been shocked by your ram-headed action—for there was really never any actual evidence against Dr. Brett."

Jameson grunted and turned away.

"I suspect that a fresh development has taken place since you rang up, Dr. Stafford," remarked Nelson Lee calmly. "I observe that a fresh card is lying on your desk, and I think I see Dr. Brett's fountain-pen, too."

"Eh?" exclaimed the doctor quickly.

"Why, yes, so it is!"

"Good gracious!" muttered Jameson.

They stared at the Head's desk. The presence of Dr. Brett's fountain-pen was almost convincing proof that he had taken the Head's by mistake—as he had stated. The inspector had scoffed at the idea, and his feelings were now somewhat mixed.

"I will just tell you what happened," went on the Headmaster. "After 'phoning you up, Brett, I had occasion to leave the study. I was absent, perhaps, for about ten minutes. Meanwhile, this apartment was empty, so far as I know. But when I returned I was astounded to find this parcel on the table."

And the Head rather dramatically produced a brown paper parcel, which had already been unfastened. He laid it on the desk, and pulled the paper aside. And there, in full view, lay a miscellaneous assortment of articles, gold ornaments, a gold watch, two neatly rolled up canvases—and, in fact, everything that had been stolen.

"Is—is this some trickery, sir?" asked the inspector gruffly.

"Obviously; but I am not responsible," replied the Head. "These goods were placed in my study during my absence, and how they got here is more than I can imagine. It is a most singular affair altogether."

"But who is responsible?" asked Brett eagerly.

"Nobody but the thief, surely," replied the Headmaster. "But see! This card was included in the parcel. It seems that the thief is not without some sense of decency, after all."

They all examined the card with interest. It was exactly similar to the one which had been first left, except that it contained more printed words. And these were sufficiently surprising, for they ran: "With the compliments of the Mysterious X, who does not allow the innocent to suffer for the guilty."

"Well, this is really handsome of the fellow," said Brett, with a sigh of relief. "I wonder who on earth he can be?"

"Somebody, at all events, in close touch with what has been going on," remarked Nelson Lee grimly. "He knew that you were in danger, Brett, and his conscience would not allow him to see you placed under arrest. There is now not the slightest shadow on your name—as Jameson himself will admit."

The inspector, in fact, was looking very red.

"No," he said huskily. "Of—of course not."

"I'm afraid this parcel will not tell us

much," said Lee. "The brown paper is new, and the string is new—a wise precaution on the part of the thief. By the way, Dr. Stafford, was your window open while you were absent from the room?"

"Yes, several inches," replied the Head. "And, what is more, it was open even wider when I returned. There are also some traces of dirt on the window-sill. However, my property has been returned, and I shall certainly take no further action."

"And the mystery will remain a mystery," smiled Nelson Lee. "Well, Brett, there is nothing further to detain you, and I am quite sure that your work has been interrupted enough—"

"I should like to interrupt it for a few moments longer," put in Inspector Jameson. "Hang it all, sir, I've been deucedly foolish over this business—I admit it. I apologise sincerely, and hope that you will forgive me."

"Why, of course!" said Brett heartily. "Let's say no more about it."

Nothing more was said. But Nelson Lee and Dr. Stafford were very pleased with Jameson's action. After all, he wasn't such a bad sort. His chief fault was his inclination to arrogance and his inflated ideas of his own importance.

And that seemed to be the end of the matter. But it wasn't. Jameson saw to it that the whole district knew that Dr. Brett's innocence had been proved, and he was to be highly commended for that.

But who was the Mysterious X?

The whole of St. Frank's was asking that question. The affair had excited everybody's interest, and before long the Mysterious X was to appear again. But in quite a different way!

THE END.

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READ THIS FIRST.

ALAN CARNE is a young Britisher captured by the Germans during the fighting in German East Africa. He is kept a prisoner in a little camp far in the north-west when the news of Germany's defeat comes to his captors. Full of rage, they pretend to give him his freedom, and cast him out alone, without food, in the African jungle, knowing that he must either starve or be killed by some wild beast. Bravely the lad sets out. Before he has gone far he is surprised to hear footsteps coming along the trail behind him. It is

JAN SWART, a Hottentot servant of the Germans. He has brought food, and Alan is glad of his company. They set out again, when suddenly a lion crosses the path ahead of them.

(Now read on.)

A NIGHT IN THE JUNGLE.

JAN uttered a cry of alarm, and Alan unslung his rifle. The lion was neither hungry nor savage, however. It had probably had a full meal. Having hesitated for a few seconds, it yawned, switched its tail, and leisurely disappeared into the bush. Its rustling strides faded in the distance.

"That was a bit of luck," said Alan, with a sigh of relief. "I don't believe I could have killed the brute if it had charged us. We're not likely to be molested by lions in daylight, but we will be in danger from them to-night."

"We can climb into a tree," the Hottentot confidently replied.

"I don't suppose there will be any, Jan."

"Then we will build a fire, baas, and I will keep it burning while you sleep."

They pressed on for hours, bravely enduring the scorching heat, and at the close of the day they were still in the arid scrub. But it was not of such vast extent as they had judged it to be, for a little later, as the sun was low, they descended a volcanic hill, and came beyond it into a lush, green jungle that was in striking contrast to the waste of thorn bush.

Beneath the trees, which were of great height and festooned with creepers, was a maze of dwarf vegetation interlaced with vines. From the foliage above chattering monkeys peered curiously, and birds of gorgeous plumage flitted from bough to bough.

A python reared its ugly head and slid into leaped from the thickets and vanished like a streak.

"This is better," declared Alan. "I am glad to be out of the scrub."

"And I am weary and hungry," Jan answered. "We will soon rest, baas."

There was no longer the trail by which they had come. For a quarter of a mile they followed a wandering path that had been made by animals, and they were in perplexity, wondering where they were to find a shelter, when they stumbled on a large pool of brackish water that was fringed with reeds.

A stretch of open ground leading to it had been trampled and churned by thousands of hoofs, and to the left of it, thirty or forty yards from the pool, was a big acacia tree, with spreading limbs. The sun was dipping below the horizon, and it would have been imprudent for the lads to go any further.

"I have matches, baas," said the Hottentot, "and there is wood in plenty. Shall I build a fire?"

"No, we can't sleep on the ground," Alan replied. "A fire wouldn't keep lions away from us. We'll have to camp in that tree. We ought to be safe there."

It was the only suitable place of refuge in the vicinity, so they climbed up the slanting trunk of the acacia and settled themselves as comfortably as they could in crotches of the boughs. Alan securing himself with his belt and Jan with his waistclout. They were not in dread of pursuit now. They felt that

(Continued on p. iii of Cover.)

the Germans, being in a hurry to return to the coast, would not have wasted time in giving chase to them.

They ate a frugal meal of the mouldy biscuits while the sunset glow faded, and presently, when darkness had fallen, they beheld such sights as could not have been witnessed anywhere except in the wildest parts of Africa.

It was what they had been expecting. The dark, tropical night awoke to the padding of countless feet, and for an hour and more there was a procession of the harmless animals of the forest passing and repassing the tree, going to and from the pool. They came in droves, jostling and squeezing—bush-buck and gazelle, elands and antelope, and zebras. And when they had drunk and dispersed there came singly and in groups the more formidable beasts.

A tawny leopard slunk by, dim in the gloom, and slunk back again. A pair of giraffes drank, and were followed by three buffaloes. A great elephant lumbered past, shaking the earth with its tread; and when it had slaked its thirst and doused itself copiously with its trunk, it went off with shrill trumpeting.

Then appeared two clumsy rhinoceroses, and for some minutes they snorted and splashed in the pool and wallowed amongst the reeds. They, too, departed, and after an interval of silence a booming, thunderous noise vibrated on the air. It was the king of beasts. His majesty the lion was approaching.

"It will smell us, baas," the Hottentot said nervously. "It may jump up here."

"I don't think so," Alan replied. "We are quite safe. I'll be ready, though," he added, taking his rifle from the limbs on which it rested.

There was silence again. For fully half an hour it remained unbroken, and the lads finally concluded that either the beast had not come near, or that it had been to the water and gone quietly away. They relaxed their alert attitudes, and both were dropping off to sleep when they were roused by a thumping, scraping sound. A blood-curdling roar rang in their ears, and, looking below them, they saw two blazing eyes and a huge, dusky object. The lion had bounded upon the sloping trunk of the tree and was crouching there.

"Shoot, baas, shoot!" Jan cried in terror. "Be quick!"

The rifle was within easy reach of Alan, who snatched it as quickly as he could and threw it to his shoulder. It was the Hottentot who was frightened. The English lad had been in as perilous situations before, and it was with cool nerves and steady hands that he took aim. He tried to draw a bead on a vital part of the big brute, though he expected each instant to feel its teeth and claws sinking into him.

"Oh, baas, why don't you shoot?" gibbered Jan. "It will leap again! It is going to—"

The weapon cracked, and the lion, hit as it was in the act of springing higher, reeled backward, and fell to the ground with a heavy thud. But it was not dead, nor, appa-

rently, had it been mortally wounded. It thrashed about in the grass, uttering snarls and growls.

And now the jungle creatures that were in the vicinity, aware that the king of beasts was in distress, broke into sound. Hyenas yapped ironically. A rhinoceros grunted, and a bird of some kind gave a hoarse, ironical croak. The snarling and growling ceased, and the wounded lion could dimly be seen moving towards the black cover of the thickets.

"It is going away, baas," said the Hottentot. "The bullet did not kill."

"No; I aimed for the heart and missed," Alan answered. "I should have tried to hit it between the eyes."

There was nothing more to be feared from that beast. It would not return. But after the daring attempt that had been made to reach them the lads felt that they had better stay awake, and it was well that they did so, for during the night they saw other lions, and leopards too, prowling around the tree in which they were perched.

They had a long vigil, remaining on guard until the first flush of the dawn. They then went off to sleep, and when they awoke the sun was above the horizon. Descending from the tree, they stretched their cramped limbs and ate what was left of the biscuits. And when they had drunk at the pool they resumed their journey, still holding to a westward course.

"The Germans did not come after us," said Jan, "and we need not worry about food. When we are hungry again, baas, you will shoot game, and we will cook it at a fire."

The little native was in cheerful spirits, but Alan was despondent. His hopes had faded. He had only a dozen cartridges in his belt, and for hundreds of miles around him stretched the African wilderness, haunted by savage beasts and savage men. There wasn't a chance in a thousand, he told himself, that he and his companion would be able to survive the perils that threatened them. And his mother would never know what his fate had been. As he thought of that his heart ached and his eyes grew dim.

IN DEADLY PERIL!

IN the middle of the morning the forest ended abruptly, and the young travellers, slipping down a low bank, paused at the edge of a river that was fifty yards in width. It ran swift and shallow, and was split by sand bars and islets of papyrus.

"What are we to do?" asked Alan. "Which way shall we go?"

"Let us go over," the Hottentot replied. "We don't want to go north, where we would never come to the kraals of white men. And if we were to go south, baas, we might meet the Germans."

"Well, Jan, I don't suppose it matters. But what of hippopotami and crocodiles?"

"If there are any, baas, they are deep in their holes, and will not molest us."

(Continued overleaf.)

It was an easy passage for the lads. The water reached only to their waists, and they had a firm footing on sand and pebbles. When they were nearly across, however, Alan had a misfortune. His cartridge-belt, which had been insecurely fastened, dropped from him into the stream, and was carried off by the current. He made a futile clutch at it, and would have pitched headlong into the water had not Jan grasped his arm. With dismay they watched the belt as it was swept to a black pool, where it sank from sight.

The loss of the cartridges increased Alan's despondency and cast a gloom on the Hottentot. Having gained the farther bank of the river, they plunged again into a dense forest; and when they had pressed on for an hour, in moody spirits, they reached open, arid country that was clothed with low scrub and dotted with volcanic stones.

Over this they trudged for a couple of miles, and it brought them to a region that was not unlike an English park. It was a fertile stretch of greensward, and clumps of trees, and copses of bushes. And on the horizon, many miles distant, a range of purple mountains was indistinctly visible.

It was here, when the lads had gone a little farther, that they had a thrilling adventure. It was Jan who observed a moving object that was behind a large thicket fifty yards away, and as he drew attention to it a pair of big rhinoceroses appeared. One of them at once wheeled round and vanished, and the other, after stamping and pawing the earth for a few seconds, came charging forward at a swift, lumbering rush.

"It will kill us!" exclaimed the Hottentot. "You can't shoot it!"

"No, the rifle is useless!" Alan cried bitterly. "And there is no tree near which we can climb!"

They were helpless, numbed with terror. They stood rooted to the spot while the huge, snorting beast, its wicked eyes gleaming with fury, thundered straight towards them. And of a sudden, when it was within half a dozen yards, they leapt to one side. That saved their lives. They had fully expected to be trampled or gored to death, but the rhinoceros—it is a short-sighted animal—dashed blindly by them. It did not swerve or turn. It held to its course, grunting viciously, until it had got to a considerable distance, when it stopped to nip the grass.

And the lads, seeing that the brute had no intention of returning, continued their march. They were thankful for their narrow escape. It was all they thought of at first. But soon a sense of their position weighed heavily on their spirits again.

They had no cartridges for the rifle, and not a scrap of food. The sun's rays beat down on them with scorching intensity, and they were suffering from hunger and thirst. Alan's stout courage was failing him. He

was weary and heartsick, in the grip of despair.

"What's the use of going any further, Jan?" he said, after a long interval of silence. "There's no hope for us. Not an atom. We may as well throw ourselves to the ground and wait for death in some shape or other."

"It shall be as the baas wishes," replied the Hottentot. "It may be so that we will soon die. Without food we must starve, and without cartridges we cannot shoot the wild beasts that will attack us. Yet perhaps if we go on we will meet with friendly natives, who will—" He broke off abruptly, with a sharp exclamation. "Look!" he bade eagerly. "Do you see, baas?"

He had just emerged from cover, and had paused within a yard or so of a small, slimy pool. Immediately in front of him, where the earth was soft and damp, was a vague trail of footprints. He dropped to his knees and examined them closely. That Jan was amazingly skilled in the art of woodcraft, and that he could read signs almost as cleverly as a black Australian tracker, his companion was aware.

"What is it?" said Alan, keenly interested. "A safari?"

"Yes, a safari," declared the Hottentot. "It has gone north, and there was a white man with it."

"A white man? Surely not!"

"It is true, baas. I can see the marks of his boots. There was one, inant of your race, and he had with him a score of natives."

"He must be a hunter of big game," Alan replied. "How long is it, since the party passed here?"

"It may be an hour, or two hours," said Jan. "No more than that."

"We are in luck. How fortunate that you should have made this discovery, Jan! We must go after the safari and overtake it."

"Yes, baas, that we must do. They will give us food and guns and cartridges to shoot with. We shall not die."

"But there are bad men in Africa of my race and of other European races. This may be one of them."

"I think not, baas. No, I feel that he will be a friend to us."

The spectre of death had been banished, and he was in cheerful spirits again, hopeful of obtaining such assistance as would enable him and the Hottentot to reach civilisation.

There was a chance that the white leader of the safari was one of the few remaining Portuguese who trafficked in slaves with the Arabs. Or it was barely possible that he was a German officer who was trekking to remoter wilds with a column of Askari soldiers. It was much more likely, however, that he was an English sportsman or trader.

(Another fine instalment of this splendid story next week.)