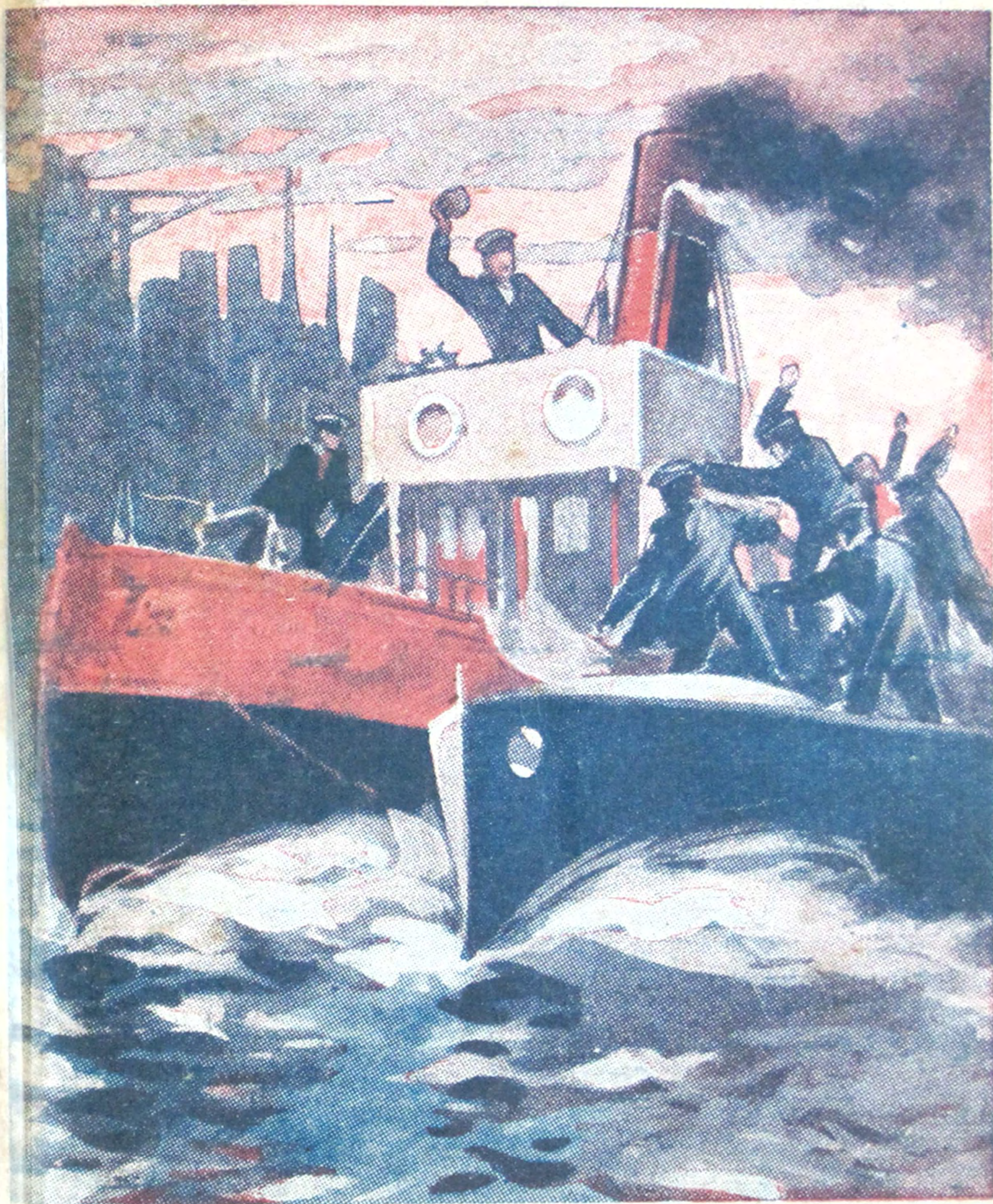


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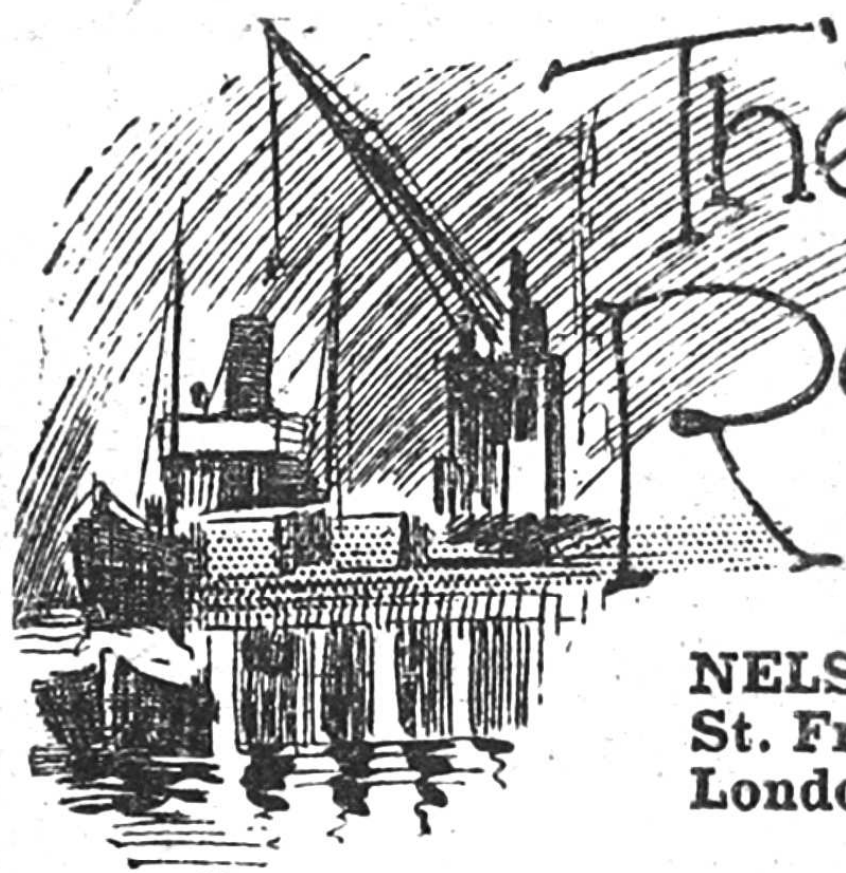
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

KIDNAPPED!

BANG! Crash!
"Ow! Yow! Yaroooh!"
It was only McClure of the Remove alighting in the passage on his neck, after having been hurled out of Study D. He sat up, blinked around dazedly, and removed a portion of jam-tart from his left eye.

"Yow!" he groaned. "Oh, my goodness!"
"And if you come in here again," said Handforth grimly, "I'll rub your silly face in the fender!"

I had been coming along the passage, as it happened, and I witnessed the whole performance. Tommy Watson was with me, for we were bound for Study C, in order to partake of tea.

"Trouble?" I inquired politely.

Edward Oswald Handforth glared at me.

"I didn't ask you to butt in," he said tartly. "Of course, there's not any trouble, you ass!"

"Sorry," I said; "I thought McClure looked rather mangled!"

McClure struggled to his feet.

"You—you burbling lunatic!" he gasped. "You dangerous idiot! What the dickens do you mean by chucking me out like that? You collared me before I knew what your fatheaded game was——"

"That's enough," interrupted Handforth. "I'm fed-up with you, Arnold McClure! You can go and eat coke!"

"I haven't had tea yet!" roared McClure.

"Well, you're not going to have tea in this study——"

"Hold on," I said. "What has the unfortunate youth done? How has he earned the displeasure of the mighty Handy?"

"Oh, don't rot!" snapped Handforth. "If you think I'm going to stand by and hear my face described as a gargoyle, you're jolly well mistaken!"

"And is that why you chucked McClure out?"

"Yes!"

"For telling the truth about you?" I asked mildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By George!" roared Handforth. "I'll wipe you up——"

"My dear chap, your weakness is a tendency to become excited over nothing," I said gently. "Have you ever looked at your face in the mirror? Have you ever considered how closely it resembles the carvings on the fire insurance building——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Nature is nature," I went on. "You can't be blamed for it, Handy. It wouldn't be fair to blame you, anyway. It's a sheer misfortune to have a face like yours, but you ought to make the best of it. It's silly to get wild when a fellow happens to tell the truth—— Look out, you ass!"

Handforth charged at me, but I dodged with ease, and walked into Study C, next door. Watson followed me, chuckling.

And from next door came the sounds of strife. McClure, apparently, had forced his way back into Study D, and Handforth was still arguing—with his fists. However, the disturbance was only temporary.

"They seem to be quiet now," remarked Watson, after a few minutes. "The row'll break out again in about two ticks. How those chaps stand Handforth is more than I can understand!"

"Oh, Handy's all right in the main," I said. "He's not half such an ass as he makes people believe he is. It's a bit rotten here without Montie, isn't it? Let's hope he'll grace the study to-morrow."

Tommy Watson looked serious.

"Do you think he'll be back by then?" he asked.

"He ought to be," I said. "If the guv'nor doesn't rescue him to-night, Lord Westbrook is going to pay the five thousand."

Watson continued his task of making the tea, and he was thoughtful for a while. We were not at St. Frank's, but in the heart of

London. Outside the traffic of Holborn was faintly rumbling.

I gazed absently out of the window, and Tommy's gaze was fixed on the fireplace. We were too thoughtful to speak at the moment. The door opened, and somebody looked in; but we didn't glance round.

"When does the funeral take place?" inquired a familiar voice.

I jerked my head round—and gasped.

"Tinker!" I shouted, jumping towards him.

"Great pip!" said Watson, nearly dropping the tea-pot.

"How goes it?" asked the visitor genially. "I thought you were just going to view the body, or something! Is anybody dead? Why this thushness? Why the gloom and misery?"

I dragged Tinker into the study, and closed the door. He was an extremely welcome visitor. I hadn't seen him for weeks. Tinker, the assistant of Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous Baker Street detective, was my eldest pal.

"This is great!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. "I went round to Baker Street last week, but you and your guv'nor were in the country somewhere. I'm delighted to see you, old son. When did you get back?"

"Yesterday," said Tinker. "The case was rather involved, but the guv'nor wasn't whacked. He dug out the truth, after investigating— But I didn't come here to talk 'shop.' I've dropped in to tea."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "As it happens we've got a good spread."

"A little bird must have whispered to you that I was coming," said Tinker, sitting down at the table. "But isn't there something missing?"

"Missing?" I repeated.

"Something with elegant clothes and eye-glasses?" explained Tinker.

"Oh, you mean Montie," said Watson, looking serious.

"To be exact. Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West," said Tinker. "I suppose the chap is out at present?"

I looked grim.

"The first word you used was the right one," I said. "Montie is missing!"

"Missing!" repeated Tinker. "What's the joke——"

"There's no joke about it, my son," I broke in. "Tregellis-West was kidnapped by a gang of crooks, and he's a prisoner somewhere. His uncle, Lord Westbrooke, has received a demand for five thousand pounds!"

Tinker stared at me curiously.

"Are you trying to kid me?" he asked.

"No, you ass! It's true."

"And isn't anything being done?"

"The guv'nor is busy on the case——"

"Well, that's good enough," said Tinker. "If Nelson Lee is giving his attention to the affair, Montie will soon be back. I've got heaps of faith in your guv'nor, Nipper. He's nearly as keen as mine!"

"Nearly!" I exclaimed. "Look here——"

"We won't argue," grinned Tinker. "We'll effect a compromise by saying that Mr.

Nelson Lee and Mr. Sexton Blake are twin brothers when it comes to astuteness and detective ability. How does that go?"

"Perhaps it's better not to discuss the subject," I said, chuckling. "I'm glad you're back in London, Tinker. We might be able to see one another a good bit within the next few weeks."

"When do you go back to St. Frank's?"

"Oh, not for nearly a month," I replied.

"The College House was burnt down, you know. The builders have been working like steam——"

"Really?" said Tinker. "I thought hard work was a thing of the past?"

"Well, they've got a swarm of workmen on the job," I said. "I suppose they're all doing their bit. Anyhow, the school will be ready before long. Meanwhile, we're carrying on here."

"And I'll bet you do carry on, too!" remarked Tinker, grinning. "It's a wonder Holborn can keep calm, with all you chaps buzzing about the district. I must say that this is a decent show, though. You seem as comfortable as bees in a hive. This tea for me? Thanks muchly!"

Tinker sipped his tea, and then looked up.

"When was Montie kidnapped?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Only last night," I replied. "Lord Westbrooke got the note by special messenger this morning. The rotters demand that their agent shall be met in Piccadilly Circus to-morrow morning."

"And isn't there any clue?" inquired Tinker.

"Yes," I replied grimly, "and the guv'nor means to act to-night!"

Watson looked up.

"How do you know?" he asked, staring. "You haven't told me——"

"I saw Mr. Lee less than an hour ago," I said. "I meant to tell you everything at tea-time, Tommy, but Tinker blew in. So I'll kill two birds with one stone, and trot out the yarn now."

"Good!" said Tinker.

I helped myself to some bread-and-butter before beginning, and took several sips of tea. I was very glad that Tinker had come, for it struck me that he might be able to make himself useful.

"Montie was missing this morning," I said. "When the rising bell went, it was found that Tregellis-West was not in his bed. And before the morning was over Lord Westbrooke arrived, in a fine state of excitement, bringing the letter which he had received."

"Then Montie was taken out of the dormitory?" asked Tinker. "Somebody must have got in and taken him away——"

"That's what I thought," put in Watson.

"And you were there?" asked Tinker.

"I thought you were a light sleeper? Surely you ought to have awakened if some rotters were yanking Tregellis-West out of bed and carting him away?"

I placed my cup down, and sighed.

"Who's telling this story?" I inquired patiently.

"Sorry," said Tinker. "Go ahead!"

"It was a bit of a mystery to me all along," I exclaimed. "Was Montie taken out of the dormitory by force, or did he walk out of his own accord? It seemed to me that the latter was the only possible explanation, because I should certainly have heard any scuffling. I slept rather soundly last night, but not like a log: Montie went out quietly, and now I know how."

"I don't see how you can know," put in Watson. "You were asleep, and you can only guess——"

"The guv'nor told me," I put in.

"Well, it was only a guess on his part——"

"It wasn't!" I said warmly. "Can't you let me do the jawing? Nelson Lee knows practically everything, because the fellow who helped to kidnap Montie has confessed. That fellow, I may as well explain, is Fullwood."

"Fullwood!" yelled Watson, in amazement.

"Yes!"

"Great Scott!" said Tommy dazedly.

Tinker selected a bun from the dish.

"I don't want to be inquisitive," he said politely, "but may I inquire who the interesting gentleman named Fullwood happens to be?"

"Gentleman!"—I grinned. "He's a rank outsider, my son, and he belongs to the Remove. He's only an Ancient House junior. I've mentioned him before to you."

"Yes, I do seem to remember the name," admitted Tinker. "He's started out in a new line, then? Kidnapping isn't usual; a boy's game——"

"Look here, I can't believe it, you know," said Watson. "Fullwood may be several kinds of a rotter, but he's not bad enough for that! Dash it all, he wouldn't go in for robbery, and that sort of thing!"

"It is practically certain that Fullwood was spoofed," I said. "He got acquainted with a flash sort of fellow last week, by what I can understand. This chap's name is Palmer, and he introduced Fullwood to a gambling place. I've got a pretty keen idea that Gulliver and Bell were in the thing, too, although their names haven't been mentioned."

"Silly fools!" said Watson contemptuously.

"They are," I agreed. "But Fullwood and Co. have always considered themselves to be sporty boys and goers. I expect they thought they'd have a bit of a fling this time. Well, Fullwood was bowled out by the guv'nor this morning, and the cad was compelled to trot out the whole yarn."

"It'll mean the sack for him," said Tommy with satisfaction.

"I don't think so," I said. "He deserves the sack, but his information is pretty valuable, and that may be taken into consideration. I expect he'll get off with a jolly good licking. Well, it seems that Fullwood was at this gambling place last night, and Palmer got to know about Tregellis-West. I suppose Fullwood told the scoundrel that Montie is a giddy millionaire. Anyhow, he persuaded Fully to come here and fetch

Tregellis-West. He spoofed Fullwood into believing that it was only a kind of joke."

"Fullwood seems to be a brainy person," remarked Tinker.

"When he's got the gambling spirit in him, he hardly knows what he's doing," I said. "One of these days he'll come to a messy finish. But we're talking about the present. Montie was persuaded to go with Fullwood. I suppose the cad told Montie some faked-up yarn. In any case, Montie went, and it's quite clear that he was collared and taken into some other part of the house. And it's a ten-to-one chance that he's there now."

"Then all Mr. Lee has to do is to rescue him?" asked Watson. "That's rather rotten, you know. I was hoping for a bit of excitement."

"Where is this place situated?" asked Tinker—"the gambling house, I mean?"

"That's just what we didn't know—to begin with," I replied. "Fullwood could only say that there was a brass plate on the door, with a name on it. He happened to spot that by chance. It only took the guv'nor half an hour to establish the fact that Palmer's place is a flat on the third floor of a block of offices. The address is No. 59a, Whitlock Street. It's a quiet sort of road somewhere behind Tottenham Court Road."

"Then there's nothing simpler," said Tinker. "Mr. Lee has only to go to this place, and there you are. Why hasn't he acted already?"

"Because there's no certainty that Montie is there now," I replied. "It's only a possibility. The guv'nor means to set out after dark, later on. He's going to watch the place, and act as he thinks best. I asked him to let me go, too, but there was nothing doing. He gave me the frozen refusal."

"Hard lines," said Tinker. "Well, it doesn't seem to be much of a problem, and there's no need to worry. When you get up in the morning you'll find that Montie is sleeping peacefully in his little baby cot next to you."

I shook my head, looking rather grim.

"If you think I'm going to be put off like that, you've made a bloomer," I said. "I mean to be in this affair——"

"But Mr. Lee has banned it," said Tinker.

"I can't help that! I'm going without permission."

"Naughty boy!" said Tinker, shaking his finger at me severely. "Do you think I ever disobey Mr. Blake's orders? Never! Never, until I think it's necessary to assert myself."

I grinned.

"I'm asserting myself this time," I said.

"By jingo! I'll tell you what!" I went on eagerly. "What are you doing to-night?"

"Sleeping, I hope," said Tinker.

"Not likely!" I declared. "You'll meet me at eleven o'clock at the top of Tottenham Court Road, just outside the Oxford Theatre. Then we'll go along and keep our eyes glued to this gambling place. If the guv'nor gets into any trouble, we can fish him out of it. Are you on?"

"With both legs!" said Tinker heartily. "Good! I was just wondering what I could do with myself this evening, and now you've solved the problem. But if there's no excitement, my son, you'll hear lots from me!"

Tommy Watson looked at me across the table.

"And where do I come in?" he asked.

"Nowhere!"

"You silly ass!" said Tommy. "I'm not going to be left out——"

"Be reasonable, old chap," I broke in. "We'd love to have you with us in any ordinary affair. But this is a tricky business, and Tinker and I know a lot more about London than you do. I don't want to offend you, but——"

"Oh, you won't offend me," interrupted Watson. "And I suppose you're right. I should probably go and give the game away or something. It'll be better for you and Tinker to do the job alone."

It was jolly decent of Tommy to take it like that. But he was always sensible, and had no inflated idea regarding his own importance. If three of us went on the mission we should probably make a mess of it.

And we were dealing with experienced criminals. Sir Montie was in danger, and we could not afford to take chances. Nelson Lee had the case in hand, but I didn't see any reason why we shouldn't play a part.

And, as events turned out, it was fortunate that we took the decision!

CHAPTER II.

RATHER UNEXPECTED.

NELSON LEE nodded.

"Exactly, my dear Lennard," he said. "For the present we will do nothing. The time for action will arrive at eleven-thirty. You will then stand a good chance of roping in your prisoners."

Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, looked rather grim.

"At eleven-thirty we'll make the raid," he said. "As a matter of fact, this fellow Palmer has been through our hands before now. We're glad of the tip, Lee. I hope we shall nab the whole bunch."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You're quite aware, Lennard, that it won't interest me if you nab nobody," he said. "My object in getting you to raid the flat is to effect the release of young Tregellis-West."

"Selfish beggar!" said Lennard. "You only think about your own end, and you don't care a toss about me. Well, I hope we shall rescue the lad, and collar the rascals at the same time. I'll be here with my men at twenty past eleven."

After a few minutes' more conversation the pair parted. They had been chatting at the corner of Whitlock Street, and the hour was just after ten-thirty. Nelson Lee, apparently, was not leaving much to chance.

He had decided that it would be better to

have the co-operation of the police. The gambling-den was to be raided and Tregellis-West rescued in one swoop. The shoolmaster-detective considered that it would be unwise for him to act alone in an affair of this character.

After Lennard had gone, he walked slowly down Whitlock Street in the direction of the high building where Sir Montie was probably a prisoner. No. 59a was a big, old-fashioned house, with numerous offices on the ground, first, and second floors.

The third floor was a private dwelling—ostensibly. As a matter of fact, it was the gambling-den, run by Palmer and his partner, Rogan. There was a third man—the croupier of the roulette-table—but he was really an employee.

Judging by all the evidence which had come into his possession, Nelson Lee was convinced that Sir Montie Tregellis-West was a prisoner in that flat. But it would have been foolish for Lee to investigate alone.

Had he had only himself to think about, he would not have hesitated a moment. But there was Montie—and Lee wanted to be certain. It would not be fair to Tregellis-West to take unnecessary risks.

Nelson Lee had made his preparations carefully, and he did not see how there could be any hitch.

He walked along the street until he came to No. 59a. Then he turned down a little alley, and made his way round into some mews. Presently he found himself at the rear of the place which was to be raided.

All was dark; not a light showed from any window.

"Shutters, I suppose," murmured Lee. "Either those or heavy curtains. It wouldn't do for them to show lights, night after night. Well, the little game will be finished very shortly. Mr. Palmer has over-reached himself on this occasion, I imagine. He has played for a high stake, but his hand will be beaten."

Nelson Lee stood watching the old house casually, without any particular interest. He had nothing to do but wait for the police to arrive. The raid, he felt certain, would be a complete surprise.

For Palmer and Rogan considered themselves to be safe; they had no inkling that their game had been spotted. And, from observations which Lee had taken earlier, he was convinced that gambling was going on as usual.

And then as Lee watched, he became aware of a change.

At the topmost window—an attic—the curtain had been pulled aside. The window was flung open at the bottom, and the head and shoulders of somebody appeared. The figure remained there for a moment or two.

"I wonder what——"

Nelson Lee paused, catching his breath in slightly. For, to his astonishment, the figure climbed out upon the window-ledge and stood upright. And there was a sheer drop in front of him.

Certain death lay below!

The first thought which sprang into Nelson Lee's mind was an obvious one. He believed that the figure was that of a gambler. Ruined, he had decided to throw himself to death. Cases of that sort are by no means uncommon.

But Nelson Lee was wrong—as he saw after a moment.

The figure, instead of flinging itself down, edged its way along the face of the building. To Nelson Lee it seemed impossible that any human being could cling there. The figure seemed like a fly on the wall.

Obviously, there was a ledge running right along.

In the gloom Lee could not see this, but it was there. And as he watched the figure his thoughts were busy. The walk was a terribly perilous one, and no living being would attempt it unless the circumstances were desperate.

Who could this figure be?

Who would take such a chance?

"Upon my soul!" muttered Nelson Lee, really startled. "That must be Tregellis-West! He has got free from the attic, and he is making a bid for liberty. The reckless young idiot! He will kill himself!"

The detective watched with terrible anxiety. He no longer thought it possible that the figure belonged to Tregellis-West; he was positive of the fact. And his first impulse was to shout out a warning—to order Montie to return.

But that course, he knew, would be the worst he could adopt. The junior would look down, his attention would be diverted from his perilous task, and he would probably lose his balance.

So Nelson Lee remained perfectly still, watching.

"By James!" he muttered. "What a nerve the lad must possess. I didn't think he was capable of it. I admire him—I can't help admiring him for his wonderful pluck in braving such odds in order to escape. Splendid fellow! It will be magnificent if he gets away unassisted."

And then, as Lee watched, another thought came to him. Montie was nearing the end of the building by this time, where the ledge ended abruptly. And Nelson Lee's thoughts had taken a turn which caused him some little concern.

"What a pity!" he murmured. "I can't blame Tregellis-West, for he is only acting right. But this move on his part is unfortunate—it will mean the ruin of my plans. If only the lad had waited!"

Lee, in fact, was rather upset.

If Montie succeeded in escaping, it would mean an uproar. Palmer and Rogan would probably venture out in search of their missing prisoner; and then, when the raid took place, the chief culprits would not be there.

Nelson Lee had not been prepared for such an event as this—it was impossible that he could be prepared. He had never considered the prospect of Montie taking things into his own hand and making a bid for freedom

But the situation had arisen, and it had to be coped with.

Lee was almost certain that Montie's attempt would be futile. By the look of things the junior would be compelled to return along the ledge, for there was no other window handy, and it was impossible to slide down the face of the building.

But something happened which almost gave Lee a turn.

Sir Montie, without any warning, leapt into the air! Nelson Lee turned sick for a second; he thought that the lad had plunged down to certain death. But then he saw what had actually happened.

The next building in the street stood only about six feet away. It was a smaller building, and the roof at the rear was practically flat. Sir Montie had leapt from the ledge on to the roof—a distance of five feet, at least.

"Thank Heaven!"

Nelson Lee saw Sir Montie safe and sound upon the other roof, and the detective was inwardly amazed at the schoolboy baronet's nerve. That jump was a terrifying experience in itself.

And yet Tregellis-West had taken it without hesitation.

And now he was running across the roof as though with a definite object. Lee saw what the object was—a builder's ladder!

The place was being redecorated, and the ladder had been left in position—as the majority of such ladders are. It was Montie's salvation, for he descended the ladder two rungs at a time.

Nelson Lee made a move at once. He was in a tiny alley, and by moving along he could easily reach the yard of the building. He would be able to get to Montie's side almost as soon as the junior alighted on the ground.

The detective jumped at the wall, and hauled himself up.

He was just in time to see Tregellis-West fall the last five feet. He had overlooked the fact that a plank was roped to the bottom of the ladder. In consequence Montie landed on the ground in a somewhat dazed heap.

But he picked himself up quickly enough. Free!

He had got away from his captors!

And then a dim figure loomed up out of the gloom. Tregellis-West caught his breath in pantingly, and turned to flee.

"It's all right, Montie," came a voice. "Don't run!"

"Mr. Lee!" gasped Sir Montie. "Oh, begad! How rippin'! How really frightfully toppin'!"

Nelson Lee grasped Montie by the shoulder. "Are you in any way harmed, my lad?" he asked kindly.

"Nothin' to speak of, sir," said Sir Montie. "Just a little graze on the left hand, and a shockin' bruise on my knee. Some shockingly absurd person has been playin' tricks with this ladder!"

Nelson Lee gazed at Tregellis-West in real

wonder. The lad was just as urbane and calm as ever. His terrifying experience had not affected him in the slightest, it appeared.

He stood there, untidy and dishevelled, but just the same old Montie—cool and collected.

"Upon my soul, young 'un, I don't know what to say to you!" exclaimed Lee admiringly.

"That's all right, sir—there's no need to say anythin'," said Tregellis-West. "But I hope you won't give me lines or a canin' for breakin' bounds. It wasn't my fault—it wasn't, really! I have been kept a prisoner by two rascally bounders who run a gamblin'-den—"

"And if you had only waited another half-hour, Montie, you would have been rescued by the police," said Lee. "A raid is to occur very shortly."

"Begad! That's a piece of frightful luck, sir," said Montie, with a sigh. "All that trouble for nothin'! An' I was kiddin' myself that I was beating the whole gang, you know! I needn't have thrown that blanc-mange into Palmer's face!"

"Dear me!" said Nelson Lee mildly.

"You see, sir, we had a bit of a scrap up there," said Montie. "Before I got out of the window I threw part of my supper at Palmer, and then he stumbled through the doorway right on the top of Rogan, who was just comin' up. I slammed the door, an' locked the pair of them outside."

Nelson Lee started.

"Good gracious! You should have told me this at first, Montie!" he exclaimed rapidly. "I thought you had escaped on the quiet! Your captors know that you got away, then?"

"Yes, sir!"

"We must leave this place instantly," said Nelson Lee briskly.

He led the way to the wall, and hoisted himself to the top. Sir Montie was helped up, and Nelson Lee grasped him by the arm as he was about to jump down into the dark alley.

"Let me go first, my lad," said Lee softly.

"That's all right, sir."

And Tregellis-West, who was already half-over, jumped lightly to the ground.

Thud!

Something struck Sir Montie on the head, and he fell to the ground in a heap. Nelson Lee, with a growl of fury, hurled himself down. Without being sure, he had half-suspected that danger was near.

As he jumped down a stick whizzed past his head with a deadly swish. He turned like lightning, noticing that poor Montie was motionless on the ground. Two other figures were there—both armed with sticks.

"Got him, you fool!" snapped a harsh voice.

But Nelson Lee was not so easy to get as Montie. He grasped the hand which wielded the stick, and his left smashed into the man's face with considerable force. At the same second Lee dodged.

He was only just in time, for Palmer had aimed a blow at him with deadly intent. It was Rogan who had gone down. But he was on his feet again almost at once, and a moment later he and Palmer were attacking Lee with all their strength.

The fight was unequal.

Both men still retained their sticks, and Lee himself was unarmed, except for his revolver. He had no opportunity of using that weapon. In any case, he would not have resorted to firearms.

He delivered a good few blows, but the end was inevitable. Dodging this way and that, he avoided most of the slashes. But the stick wielded by Palmer caught him a glancing blow on the right arm.

He swayed slightly, and then something struck him over the head with terrible force.

It was Rogan's stick, and the force behind it was such that Nelson Lee swayed still further, staggered, and then sank to the ground. He was beaten—and the appalling truth was that both he and Montie were now prisoners!

And, strangely enough, Montie himself was the chief cause of the new situation. But Montie was not to be blamed. He had made a bid for freedom, knowing nothing of the preparations which were afoot for his release. Had he waited another hour, all would have been well. His rescue would have been effected, and his rascally captors would have fallen into the hands of the police.

But, solely owing to Montie's effort to escape, he had got himself recaptured, and Nelson Lee was captured with him. The great detective had done his best at a moment's notice, and it was no fault of his that he had fallen a victim to the scoundrels.

His own plans had been cut and dried to the last detail, and all would have been well if they had been allowed to materialise. But other events had occurred, and Nelson Lee had been compelled to act.

And now he lay half-stunned and helpless. Before he could recover, his feet were bound, and a handkerchief was secured over his mouth. Montie was treated in the same way.

"By thunder, we have done it now, Rogan!" exclaimed Palmer huskily.

"What else could we do?" said Rogan. "The brat was escaping, and we had to get hold of him again. Who is this chap, anyhow?"

"How should I know?" asked Palmer. "Some passer-by, I suppose—you saw the kid jump from that ledge. We've got to do something with the pair now—we can't let the fellow escape."

The two men stood still for a moment, breathing heavily.

"We'll have to take them both away," said Palmer, at last. "Somebody else might have seen, and there may be inquiries later on. We're right in this affair now, Rogan, and we can't afford to drop it. If I'd known this trouble was coming, I wouldn't have

touched the brat. But now we've started, we've got to go on."

Rogan nodded.

"You're right there," he admitted. "It'll mean the bust-up of our little place, anyhow, and if we drop the affair now we shall get nothing. But if we keep these two until the morning, we shall get that five thou.—and that'll make it worth while. I sha'n't care a toss then!"

"Well, lend me a hand, and don't jaw!" snapped Palmer.

The pair set to work, and Nelson Lee and Tregellis-West were dragged along the dark alley to a little doorway, which led into the enclosed yard of No. 59. This yard was empty and deserted, and the rascals were rather shrewd in selecting it. Their own yard—59a—was not so private.

And, then and there, they made hasty plans.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE JOB.

"MARVELLOUS!"

Tinker made that remark as he strolled up at eleven o'clock. I was just outside the Oxford Theatre, at the corner of New Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. Tinker grinned as he came up.

"Eh?" I said. "What's marvellous?"

"You're here on time," he explained.

"I don't want any of your rot, as Handforth would say," I remarked. "I've been here five minutes, as a matter of fact. Feeling fit?"

"Fit for anything," said Tinker. "I mentioned to the guv'nor that I was up to some game with you, but he didn't seem interested. He's busy with some smelly experiment in the laboratory, and I've left him to stew in his own niffs!"

I grinned.

"Well, let's get a move on," I said.

"Whitlock Street is down this way."

Tottenham Court Road was by no means deserted. The hour was comparatively early for the West End, and motor-omnibuses and taxis were still lumbering and shooting about in all directions. At St. Frank's, down in Sussex, the whole countryside would be dead asleep at that time. But in the West End things are only just beginning to wake up at eleven o'clock.

"So you left Sexton Blake in the laboratory at Baker Street," I remarked, as we strode along. "Well, my guv'nor went off a couple of hours ago, and there's no telling what he's done by this time. He's a bit thick, but he wouldn't explain anything to me."

Tinker grunted.

"Just like my guv'nor," he said. "If Sexton Blake gets an idea into his head, I have to drag it out of him by force very often. At other times he'll jaw at me for hours when I'm trying to go to sleep.

Guv'nors are queer people to get on with, but I suppose we must make the best of 'em. How did you manage to get out?"

"I've broken bounds," I said.

"Wicked youth!" exclaimed Tinker. "You'll get swiped for that!"

"Rats!" I said. "Nobody will know anything about it, except the guv'nor. And he wouldn't swipe me. I slipped away after lights-out, and got out through the corridor window. To-night, my son, we're going to make things hum!"

"Perhaps," said Tinker. "We shall probably mooch about for a couple of hours, and then give it up as a bad job. In our line of business you've got to be ready for any old thing. When you expect success you generally meet with failure, and when you're positive that there'll be nothing doing, you're half slaughtered!"

We walked along the streets, chatting as we went. At length we arrived in Whitlock Street. It was dark and narrow, and quite deserted. It was situated away from the main thoroughfare, and was probably quiet and still every evening after nine o'clock.

We walked right past the front of No. 59a. The door was closed, and there was nothing doing at all. I saw at a glance that it would be hopeless for us to attempt any investigation in that quarter.

"We shall have to get to the back somehow," I murmured.

Tinker nodded, and we continued our way onwards until we came to a little alley, which ultimately led us into a kind of mews. All unknowingly, we were following the same course that Nelson Lee had followed, barely half an hour earlier. And we soon came within sight of the dark rear of No. 59a.

The high, old house looked gloomy and deserted, and Tinker and I stood for some little time wondering how we should act. We knew that it would be no good getting into the yard, for the only door leading into the house belonged to the ground-floor. And we wanted the top of the building.

"Look here," whispered Tinker. "Isn't there a fire-escape along there, three or four doors away? Can't you see something?"

"It looks like one of those iron ladder affairs," I said.

"It leads right up to the roof," went on Tinker. "What price we go in that direction, get on to the roof, and see if we can find a skylight? I don't know what we're going to do, but there's no sense in coming here for nothing."

"Let's go along and see," I agreed.

We made our way back along the alley, and then scaled a fairly high wall. Picking our way through a lumber of boxes and other rubbish, we eventually arrived at the foot of a permanent fire-escape—one of those spidery iron ladders affixed to the wall from ground to roof.

We mounted from platform to platform, and at length arrived upon the topmost rung of all. It was possible to reach the roof without any difficulty, and we both scrambled up and made ourselves comfortable on the tiles.

Then, after a breath, we edged our way along until we were on the roof of 59a. But now that we were there, we hardly knew what to do. There was no skylight, and no trapdoor.

"It seems to me that we shall have to get down again," I remarked. "A fat lot we can do up here—like a couple of old tom-cats! It seems to me, Tinker, my son, that we're decidedly off-side."

"Hold on," said Tinker briefly.

He climbed up the roof, and clung to the chimney-stack. He was about to move forward again when he started, and leaned right over the chimney. Then he looked down, and beckoned to me.

"What's the matter?" I whispered.

"Voices!" hissed Tinker.

And then I understood. There were some people in one of the rooms of the house—probably the attic—and their voices floated clearly up the chimney. The occupants of the room were not likely to guess that people were on the roof.

I didn't suppose for a moment that we should learn anything. The chimney was an old-fashioned brick one, square, and solid. And as Tinker and I leaned over we could hear voices floating up into the outer air.

"The fellow is coming up the stairs now," said somebody.

"Good!" came another voice. "He's been quick."

It sounded very queer, hearing those voices apparently from nowhere. Tinker and I, alone on the roof, seemed isolated from everything and everybody. Yet these sounds came up with startling distinctness.

"You're here in good time, Greggs," said the first voice. "You've got your van with you?"

"Yes; it's outside," came a gruff bass.

"All right. You'll find two big packing-cases in the yard of number fifty-nine—next door," said the voice. "They're just inside the door. I'll come down with you to lend a hand. Be careful with the stuff, because it's breakable. You've got to take the cases to Reed's Wharf."

"Where's that?"

"I'll give you directions," said the other. "It's below London Bridge, on the north side of the river. But you'd better come down with me right away. The sooner the cases are taken away the better."

The voices ceased, and there was nothing further.

"Drawn blank," whispered Tinker.

"Seems like it," I replied. "Those people are innocent enough, it seems. I don't suppose they're connected with Palmer's crowd at all."

"They sound like ordinary business people," remarked Tinker, "although it's rather a queer hour to transact business. It seems that some goods are to be sent down to the riverside."

I thought for a moment.

"You can't get over the fact that those men were talking in Palmer's house," I said. "This upper part of the building is all tenanted by Palmer, I believe. The section

is, was Palmer speaking just now, or Rogan?"

"That's a point we can't decide," said Tinker. "We've never seen either of the bounders, and we can't recognise their voices. But it's quite on the cards that they do a bit of business in addition to the gambling. Anyhow, we don't want to worry over what we heard; it's not worth the trouble. Everything seems quiet down in the room now."

We listened for a moment or two, but heard nothing. I pulled out my electric-torch, thrust my arm down the chimney, and pressed the switch.

"Great Scott!" muttered Tinker. "You ass! I didn't know——"

"Sorry!" I grinned. "But I say! Look at this chimney. It seems to me that the grate in that room has never had a fire in it. The chimney is smooth and clean; there's not a sign of soot."

We inspected the chimney with interest.

"It's a good size, too," remarked Tinker. "Old-fashioned shafts of this kind are generally miles too big. No wonder those old fireplaces won't draw properly—My goodness!" he added abruptly.

"What's the matter?"

"An idea!" breathed Tinker. "A brain-wave, my son!"

"Well, trot it out; don't keep me in suspense," I said.

"This chimney is big enough for a full-grown man to squeeze down," murmured Tinker. "You and I could slip down with ease! See the little notches in the brick-work here and there? It'll be dead easy, and we can get into the house—just at the right place!"

I gazed at Tinker admiringly.

"You've hit it, my son," I said approvingly. "That's the very wheeze we wanted. My only hat! We might be able to——"

"Better not raise any hopes," advised Tinker. "The thing is to get down, and see how the land lies. Who's going first? I think we'd better toss up for it," he added. "That'll save all dispute."

"I'm game," I said briefly.

We tossed, and I won.

"If you find somebody in the room when you get down there you'll probably have a packet of trouble," said Tinker. "If so, shove your head up the chimney, and yell. I'll buzz down like lightning."

It was rather a novel proceeding. To squirm down a chimney was not quite a customary method of entering a house. It would have been impossible in any modern dwelling.

But this square shaft was old-fashioned, and for some reason it had never been used. So we should not become grimy during the descent. Having decided matters, we lost no time.

I entered the shaft first, and gradually edged my way down. It was rather a ticklish job, but it was not the first time I had descended a chimney-shaft. After I had lowered myself about six feet, Tinker commenced the descent. I looked up rather anxiously.

"You'd better be careful!" I hissed. "If

you slip, you'll half kill me, and it doesn't take long to slip in a place like this!"

"Carry on!" said Tinker. "I shan't slip!"

I hurried my movements somewhat, and at length I found myself nearing the bottom of the shaft. When I was practically standing in the grate I came to a halt, and listened.

Everything was perfectly silent, and, what was more, the room was in darkness. This indicated that it was empty, and I felt that we were meeting with some measure of success, after all.

It struck me that the room might be sublet to some business man. Even if this proved to be the case, Tinker and I would get into Palmer's flat, and that was the main thing.

It was not an easy job, squeezing through the fireplace into the room. In fact, I thought it couldn't be done at first, for the grate was not so old-fashioned as the chimney. I don't quite know how we managed to squash through, but we did it somehow.

Tinker arrived a few moments after me. He found me examining the room by the light of my electric-torch.

"Well, it's not a business office," I whispered. "I can't quite make out what's been happening here. It seems to be a bedroom, and yet everything is in a mighty queer state."

The room was practically bare. There was no covering on the floorboards, and the bed itself was a temporary affair of meagre dimensions. A small deal table and a kitchen chair comprised the other furniture. On the table stood the remains of a meal.

"Although I did not know it at the time, that apartment was the room where Sir Montie had been held a prisoner. If Tinker and I had stayed in it for long undisturbed we should probably have seen some indications which would have told us the identity of the late occupant.

But we had no time to investigate.

While we were standing there we both became aware of a tremendous commotion in the house below. Shouts rang out, whistles blew, and doors slammed. Tinker and I stared at one another in astonishment.

"Sounds like a concert," remarked Tinker, "or jazz music!"

I strode to the door, and opened it.

The sounds were now greatly increased in volume. There was evidently a row of some kind proceeding. And just at that moment a figure came dashing up the stairs at break-neck speed.

It bolted into the attic, and I saw that the figure was that of a young man, attired in evening-dress. He was scared out of his wits, and his face, in spite of his exertions, was as pale as chalk.

"Is there any escape this way?" he gasped hoarsely.

"What the dickens——" I began.

"You young idiots!" snapped the other. "If you don't move yourselves you'll be arrested! Isn't there a window here? The

place is raided, and the police are swarming

"My hat!" I exclaimed. "So that was the gov'nor's wheeze! He's having the place raided by the police! That ought to wake the bounders up and I expect Montie will be found, too."

The young man had been to the window, but he turned now.

"There's no escape this way!" he gasped frenziedly. "Why didn't you tell me, you young fools?"

"We can't help your troubles," said Tinker. "If you've been mad enough to frequent a gambling den, you deserve to be collared. A few weeks in prison would do you a lot of good; but I expect you'll get off with a fine."

"I shall be ruined—ruined!"

Tinker and I did not wait to hear any more. We hurried to the door, and made our way along the landing. But just then three police-constables came hurrying up, and our path was barred.

"Now then, young fellers!" said one of the constables. "You'd best not try any monkey-tricks. Give in quiet, and you won't be hurt."

I couldn't help grinning.

"We're mistaken for habitués of the wicked gambling-den, Tinker," I said. "It's all right, constable. This young gentleman here is Tinker, the assistant of Mr Sexton Blake, and I am——"

"Now then—now then!" said the policeman gruffly. "I don't want any yarns of that kind. Are you going to give in quietly, or not?"

"But——"

"Collar him, Jenkins!" said the other constable. "Don't stand there arguing."

"You silly chumps!" I shouted. "We're friends of Mr. Lennard, who's in charge of this raid——"

"You can tell that to the chief himself," interrupted Jenkins. "It's my duty to place you under arrest, seeing as you were found on these premises. Are you coming quiet, or do you want a taste of this?"

He showed us his truncheon, and we knew that he and his fellow-officer were in no mood for argument. It was quicker to give in, and submit to arrest. In any case, we could do practically nothing now.

"I expect Montie is rescued by this time," I remarked. "We'd better go down like good little prisoners, Tinker. Being arrested is a new experience for us."

Tinker grinned, and we were marched down the stairs with the man in evening-dress between. He was scared out of his life, but he received no pity from us. He thoroughly deserved to be punished.

On the lower landing, by great good fortune, we ran into Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of the C.I.D. He stared at us in amazement for a moment, and then the corners of his mouth twitched suspiciously.

"Three more of 'em, eh?" he said grimly.

"Yes, sir," said P.C. Jenkins. "They were hid in the top room."

"March them away with the others," said the chief inspector curtly.

"What the dickens——"

"Look here, Mr. Lennard——"

"Now then, no more of your bluff!" said the constable darkly. "Pretended to be friends of Mr. Lennard, didn't you? If I have any of your nonsense, I'll soon show you——"

"But we're not going to be arrested!" roared Tinker, struggling.

Lennard burst into a laugh.

"It's all right, constable," he said. "You can release those two youngsters."

"Release them, sir," gasped Jenkins.

"They happen to be the assistants of Mr. Sexton Blake and Mr. Nelson Lee," explained Lennard. "It was only my fun, boys."

"Well, I'm blowed!" said the constable blankly.

He took his remaining prisoner downstairs in a kind of trance. He had been positive that we had lied to him.

"I don't know how in the name of wonder you got upstairs," said Lennard, "but I should like to know what you're doing here, you young rascals? What's the idea? How did you get in?"

"We'll explain that later," I said quickly.

"Where's the guv'nor?"

"That's what's puzzling me," said Lennard. "Lee promised to be here with us but he's failed to turn up—as far as I know."

"Have you found Tregellis-West?"

"No."

"But he's here—he must be here——"

"He isn't here," interrupted the chief inspector. "The place has been searched throughout, and the boy isn't on the premises. An explanation has occurred to me, and I think it must be the correct one, because Palmer and Rogan have slipped through our fingers."

"An explanation?" repeated Tinker.

"It strikes me that the rascals knew something about this raid," said Lennard. "They got the wind up, as the soldiers used to say. And it's quite possible they took Tregellis-West away with them. In fact, it's about the only thing they could do. And Lee is on the track."

"By jingo!" I exclaimed. "That's about the size of it. The guv'nor must have smelt a rat. Perhaps he saw something suspicious and followed. In that case, it's not much good remaining here."

"No good at all," said Lennard. "The best thing you can do is to go back to bed, as soon as possible."

We bade the chief-inspector good-night five or ten minutes later, after satisfying ourselves that there was no sign of Montie on the premises. Tinker grinned at me rather curiously as we walked out.

"We came for nothing, after all," he remarked.

"Looks like it," I agreed. "But we've had a bit of excitement."

Although we didn't know it at the moment, our visit to No. 59a, Whitlock Street, was not to prove quite valueless, after all.

CHAPTER IV.

NO NEWS.

"ANY news of Mr. Lee, sir?"

It was the morning following the raid upon Palmer's gambling den, and I asked that question as I met Mr. Crowell in the hall. I had hurried over my dressing, and was down before anybody else.

"No, Nipper, I regret to say that there is no news whatever," said Mr. Crowell gravely. "It is really most alarming. I understand that Mr. Lee went on a rather dangerous mission last night."

"I don't think it was exactly dangerous, sir," I said. "The idea was to rescue Tregellis-West; but the police raided the place, and didn't find a sign of Montie. And Mr. Lee had gone, too!"

"How do you know all this, Nipper?" asked the Form-master.

"I was there, sir."

"You—you were there?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I went out last night especially, and got back just after midnight."

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Crowell.

"I don't think Mr. Lee will punish me, sir, when he finds out," I said easily. "It was a special case, you know. I'm awfully worried, and I hope we shall get some news before long. The guv'nor ought to be here by now—Tregellis-West as well. It's a mystery."

Mr. Crowell hardly knew what to say, and he decided the matter by saying nothing. He walked off, and I went out into the courtyard.

The guv'nor had gone to Whitlock Street, and nothing had been seen of him since. It was my firm opinion that he was on the track of Montie. But I didn't know. And the uncertainty was disquieting.

I could trust Nelson Lee, of course. He could take care of himself all right. I knew that; but a fellow can't help worrying. Everything had gone wrong. I wondered what Lord Westbrooke had done.

Would he pay the five thousand pounds?

Somehow I felt sure that he wouldn't. Under the circumstances, he would wait until he heard something further.

Tommy Watson came down soon after I had emerged into the courtyard, and he looked at me inquiringly. I shook my head.

"It's no good, Tommy," I said. "There's nothing doing. Yesterday Montie had vanished, and was missing. This morning the guv'nor's missing, too. There's not a word known of either of them."

Watson looked alarmed.

"But what's happened, Nipper?" he asked. "And what about last night? Did you go over to that gambling place——"

I explained to Watson what had occurred, for he had been fast asleep at the time of my return. He listened with great interest, and was inclined to agree with my view when I had finished.

"That's what it is—of course!" he

declared. "Mr. Lee went off on the track of those two crooks. You might not hear anything until this evening, or even later. Anyhow, I shouldn't worry."

"I'm not exactly worrying," I said. "But—"

"You can't bluff me—you are worrying," interrupted Watson. "I've never seen you so upset before. Here come all the fellows, so you'd better look more cheerful, or they'll be pestering you with questions."

The juniors pestered me, in any case.

"Any news of Tregellis-West?"

"What's the latest?"

"Did Mr. Lee find him?"

"Has his uncle paid the giddy ransom?"

"When shall we see him again?"

"It's no good asking me questions like that," I said, looking round. "I can't answer one of 'em. I don't know where Mr. Lee is, and I don't know where Montie is. Things seem to be a bit mixed, but I expect they'll sort themselves out. Anyhow, it's no good worrying me."

"It's rather hard lines for you, Nipper," said Pitt. "Study C will be in a sad way if Montie doesn't come back—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" I growled. "Montie will come back; you seem to forget that the gov'nor is on his track. If you'll only have a little patience, everything will be all serene."

That was really rather rich. I was advising the juniors to be patient, and I was bubbling over with impatience on my account. But I felt that I couldn't stand being questioned continuously by the fellows.

Breakfast time came, and I went into the dining hall with the others. I managed to eat my food all right, but I had to force most of it down. I was not in the mood for eating.

At last it was over, and I sought the open air again. By a piece of luck, the first person I saw in the courtyard was Detective-inspector Lennard. He waved to me cheerily.

"Morning, young 'un," he said, as I approached him. "Mr. Lee turned up yet?"

"No," I replied. "Neither has Tregellis-West."

"H'm! That's rather queer," said the chief inspector, stroking his chin. "I was almost certain that we should learn something further this morning. I was talking to Lord Westbrooke over the 'phone ten minutes ago."

"Has he paid that money?" I asked quickly.

"No. He's chancing it."

"That's the most sensible thing he can do," I said. "What's the good of his paying the five thousand, and getting Montie back within an hour or two. Besides, the position is different now. Palmer and Rogan are in flight, and I don't suppose anybody kept the appointment at all."

"Lord Westbrooke thinks it will be better to wait for the next development—whatever that might be. And I agree with him—be-

cause I've got a pretty keen idea that Lee is making the most of his time. Our men are doing their best to get on the track; but so far they have met with scanty success—in fact, no success at all. I might as well be frank."

"Haven't you discovered anything at that place in Whitlock Street?"

Lennard smiled.

"My dear lad, the place was simply a miniature Monte Carlo," he declared. "It's a good thing we seized the place. The only pity is that the chief culprits have slipped through our fingers. But they'll turn up—and Lee will turn up—and Tregellis-West will turn up."

Lennard was very confident, and he bucked me up quite a lot. When the time for morning lessons arrived I was feeling practically myself again. I went into the Remove class-room with the other fellows, and thrust all thoughts of Sir Montie aside during the work hours.

But I'll confess that I was very relieved when the bell clanged, announcing that lessons were over. Tommy and I at once rushed away, and sought information from everybody we met.

But there was still the same reply—no news.

"This is rotten!" I said grimly. "I was sure that something would have happened before this time, Tommy. I'm getting really anxious, and I've a dashed good mind to ring up Mr. Sexton Blake and ask his advice."

"Good idea!" said Watson. "There's a 'phone in Mr. Crowell's room."

We went along the passage, and tapped at the door of Mr. Crowell's study. Receiving no reply, I opened the door, and saw that the room was empty. The telephone instrument was standing on a side table.

"I'm going to use it!" I said grimly.

But we had hardly reached the table before a footstep sounded out in the passage, and the swish of a gown announced the fact that Mr. Crowell was approaching. He regarded us in astonishment over his glasses.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "Are you waiting for me, boys?"

"We—that is, Nipper—" began Watson.

"I was just going to use your telephone, sir," I explained.

Mr. Crowell frowned.

"Indeed!" he said. "This is very interesting, Nipper. May I inquire who gave you permission?"

"Nobody, sir—"

"Then you will kindly leave my study at once," said the Form-master. "If you want to use my telephone, Nipper, you must go about it in a different manner. I don't like people who take liberties—so you will do fifty lines each."

"But, sir—"

"That is sufficient—you may go!"

"I say, sir, I'm awfully sorry if I've offended you," I said earnestly. "But I'm so

jolly anxious about Tregellis-West and Mr. Lee. I was going to ring up Mr. Sexton Blake, of Baker Street, and ask him for his advice. But I shall have to go outside now—to a public call office."

Mr. Crowell looked less stern.

"That puts a different complexion on the matter, Nipper," he said. "Why did you not tell me your object straight away? I thought you wished to use the telephone for some mere commonplace purpose. I withdrew the imposition, and you are at perfect liberty to use the telephone."

"Oh, thank you, sir," I said eagerly.

Mr. Crowell smiled and withdrew. It was very decent of him to take it in that way, and I was soon talking to the Exchange. I got through to Sexton Blake's number quickly, and Tinker's cheerful voice was soon audible.

"Who's that?" it demanded.

"That you, old son?" I asked. "I'm Nipper."

"Oh, good!" said Tinker. "What's the latest?"

"You know it," I replied. "Nothing further has occurred since we parted last night. I haven't anything to tell you—except that Lord Westbrooke hasn't paid the five thousand. I'm so jolly worried that I don't know what the dickens I'm doing."

"Poor old josser!" said Tinker sympathetically. "It is a bit of a worry for you, I know. I say, why don't you run over here? It's a half-holiday to-day, isn't it? You told me——"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "I wanted to have a word with your guv'nor."

"He's out."

"Out?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's rotten," I exclaimed. "I wanted to ask his advice——"

"Then the best thing you can do is to come over—to lunch," said Tinker briskly.

"You can cut dinner for once, and feed with us. I'm expecting the guv'nor to blow in at any minute. See if you can get here within a quarter of an hour. I'll time you."

"Good!" I said. "I'll do it!"

A moment later I hung up the receiver, and turned to Watson.

"He's asked me over to lunch," I said.

"Don't you worry, Tommy. I shall be back during the afternoon, and I advise you to carry on as usual. Oh, by the way! Isn't Somerton getting up a party of some kind?"

"Yes, I think so," said Tommy.

"Well, if you're invited—go," I said.

"Don't hang about for me. Go and enjoy yourself——"

"But it doesn't seem right, with Montie missing!"

"Nonsense!" I said. "You can't do any good by sitting in the study and moping, can you?" I asked. "I'd come along, too, but I've accepted this invitation to Baker Street."

And it was arranged like that. Tommy Watson didn't quite like it, but there was no sense in objecting. And less than two

minutes later I had received permission to dine out, and I was hurrying into Holborn.

I managed to get a taxi at once, and was soon howling along towards Baker Street. I arrived in good time, and found Tinker waiting on the step. He grinned cheerfully as I paid off the taxi.

"It's O.K.," he said. "The guv'nor's here!"

"That's first-rate!" I exclaimed. "By jingo! It's jolly good to see you again, in your own quarters, Tinker."

He led the way upstairs, and I passed through the superbly furnished consulting-room into the dining-room. Sexton Blake, the celebrated criminologist, was reclining in an easy-chair, smoking and reading. He rose to his feet as I entered, and shook my hand warmly.

"I am very pleased to see you, Nipper," he said. "You are rather worried at present, but you mustn't concern yourself too much. Surely you can trust Mr. Lee to take care of himself?"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"There are no 'buts,'" interrupted Blake smilingly. "Tinker has frequently worried himself thin—although I'll confess his appearance doesn't give one that impression—because I have been absent on a case longer than he expected. There's no necessity for you to grow grey hairs yet awhile!"

I felt more comfortable, and patted Pedro's head. The faithful old bloodhound knew me at once, and he was now asking for pats and compliments.

"I wanted to ask your advice, sir," I said.

"When I rang up you were out——"

"Eh?" said Sexton Blake. "Who told you that?"

"Tinker did."

"Then Tinker, I regret to say, is guilty of a deliberate falsehood," said Blake. "I was in this very room when you were on the telephone——"

"Dash it all, you needn't have given me away like that, guv'nor!" protested Tinker.

"I was in the consulting-room when I answered the 'phone, and I told Nipper that you were out. And so you were out—of the consulting-room!"

"That is merely twisting the truth," said Blake severely.

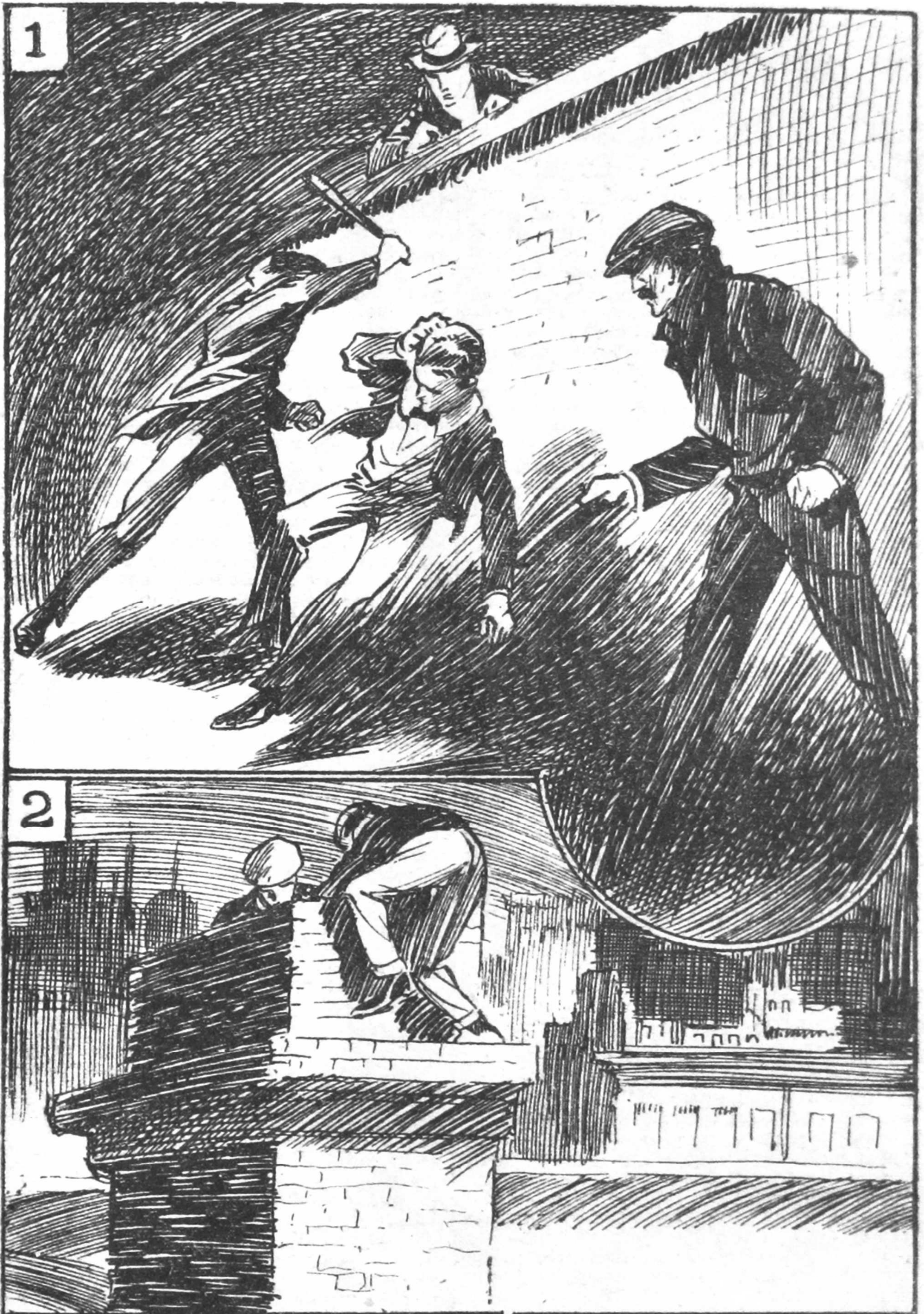
"And what was the idea of spoofing me, anyway?" I asked.

"My dear old ass, I wanted you to come over to lunch," explained Tinker. "If you had collared hold of the guv'nor over the 'phone you might not have come at all. These sort of things have to be worked!"

We all chuckled, and shortly afterwards we were sitting down to a very appetising luncheon.

"No news, to quote an old adage, is good news," remarked Sexton Blake, as he tackled his food. "And you must never worry, Nipper, until there is sufficient cause. Tinker has given me the main facts of this case, and it seems to me that you both made one little mistake."

"And what was that, sir?"



1. Thud! Something struck Sir Montie on the head, and he fell to the ground in a heap.

2. I entered the shaft first and gradually edged my way down.

"You did not give sufficient attention to the men who were discussing the removal of some merchandise," said Sexton Blake. "There were some packing-cases, I believe, bound for some wharf by the river? If I had been on the spot I should have sent one of you down to follow that vehicle with the packing-cases."

"But why, sir?" I asked wonderingly.

"Because it is always better to take every precaution," replied Blake. "One never knows where a clue will lead to. However, I am quite content to leave this business in Lee's hands. I have no fear for his safety."

Sexton Blake cheered me up a great deal, and before luncheon was over I felt quite high-spirited. I had an idea that fresh developments would occur very shortly—and I was not far wrong.

"If you require help at any time," Sexton Blake told me, "you had better ring up this number. If I am available, Nipper, I will come to you without a moment's delay. Don't forget to ring up if you want me."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I'll remember that."

CHAPTER V.

THE DUKE'S TREAT.

"RIPPING!"

"First class!"

"A jolly fine wheeze!"

"Good for you, Somerton!"

"You're a brick!"

The Duke of Somerton smiled round him amiably. Dinner was over at the school, and Somerton, of the Remove, was talking with a crowd of fellows in the junior common-room. The juniors were all talking at once.

"A giddy trip down the river!" said Handforth. "I've often wanted to go, but I haven't got tons of money like Sommy has. He's a brick, and I accept his invitation for Study D with many thanks!"

Somerton raised his eyebrows.

"That's awfully interesting," he said mildly. "But I don't exactly remember inviting Study D!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth waved his hand.

"Don't mention it," he said casually. "I knew you were going to invite us, of course, and that's why I spoke. It'll be ripping to be your guests for the afternoon, old son."

"Pushing bounder!" growled Fullwood. "I'm blessed if I'd have the sauce to invite myself like that!"

The Duke smiled.

"Even if you did invite yourself, Fullwood, I'm afraid you wouldn't come," he observed calmly. "But Handforth and Church and McClure are at perfect liberty to come along if they please."

"Good!" said Church and McClure. "Thanks awfully!"

"Of course, we don't want to come if

you think we're imposing on you," said Handforth. "I wouldn't dream of letting Church and McClure go——"

"Eh?" said Church warmly. "You look after yourself!"

"I don't want any of your cheek——"

"Peace, children," said Somerton, holding up his hand. "There is to be no quarrelling. We start out in half an hour's time, and we shall all be back in time for tea. The trip will be short, but there's no reason why it shouldn't be interesting."

Somerton's idea was an excellent one—in the view of the juniors. He had hired a small river launch for two or three hours. He thought it would be an excellent way of spending the half-holiday—to cruise down the river for some distance, and to cruise back again.

There was no football on for the juniors, because a first eleven match was in progress, and Somerton could have taken sufficient guests with him to sink the launch.

However, he only favoured the decent fellows—those he was on friendly terms with. The party, when it started out, numbered sixteen. They were very cheerful and light-hearted; they meant to enjoy the afternoon.

Tommy Watson was there. He had made up his mind to be cheerful, and it was certainly easy to be cheerful in that sunny atmosphere. The fellows walked to the Embankment, and found the steam-launch ready against one of the little piers.

The captain was a young fellow of about twenty-five, and he grinned cheerily as the juniors trooped on board.

Handforth and Co. managed to find a position for themselves right in the bows. This was considered by some of the juniors to be the best place. And it might as well be mentioned that Handforth only obtained that place by force.

Owen major and Griffith and Clinton had ensconced themselves in the bows, just before Handforth and Co. had arrived. There followed a brief argument, one or two howls, and then Handforth and Co. had possession.

"Cheek!" said Handforth warmly. "It's likely we're going astern, ain't it? Those asses were nearly ready to fight!"

The three juniors in question would have fought valiantly had they been within the school grounds. But they didn't like to cause a disturbance on such an occasion as this. Handforth had no such scruples.

"This is ripping!" exclaimed McClure, as they gathered speed and glided down the river. "Oh, good! Somerton deserves well of his country for being so sporting. Good old duke!"

"Hear, hear!" said Church.

The party enjoyed themselves greatly. They slid down the river, under Blackfriar's Bridge, and then along to London Bridge. Handforth seemed to imagine that he was the chief guide of the party, and he pointed out places of interest as they proceeded. In most instances he was totally wrong.

"There, on the left, you see the Tower of

London," he exclaimed. "It doesn't seem quite the same as usual——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That place is a warehouse, Handy," said Pitt, with a grin.

"Rot!" declared Handforth. "The Tower is just against the north side of London Bridge, and nobody has shifted it that I know of. That place is the only building on the spot, so it must be the Tower of London. I expect they've been disguising it, or something."

"The Tower of London is next to the Tower Bridge, you ass," said Hart.

"By George," said Handforth. "I suppose it is."

They all grinned, and the launch slid beneath London Bridge, and then the real Tower of London was within sight, the low, old buildings looking sombre and imposing from the level of the river.

The launch slipped along beneath the great structure of the Tower Bridge, and then the scenery was not quite so picturesque. On either side lay wharves and warehouses—grimy and dirty.

The launch was to proceed as far as Greenwich, and then turn back and go right up to Richmond before returning to Blackfriars. The majority of the juniors were not very interested in the lower part of the river. It was too dirty and ugly to warrant much enthusiasm.

But an incident occurred which was destined to mean a great deal.

The launch was moving down the river smoothly and steadily. On the north bank there were wharves and warehouses in profusion. One of these, Handforth noticed, had the name painted on the building at the rear, facing the river. The place was old and dilapidated, and the words were just distinguishable out of the grime.

"Reed's Wharf," said Handforth, reading the words. "That looks a pretty rotten show, I must say. Just have a look at that old crane. It's rusty and ramshackle, and it looks as if it hadn't been used for years."

"It's being used now, anyhow," said McClure.

The juniors watched the operations as they slipped by. A barge lay in the river immediately under the warehouse. And the crane was lowering a large packing-case into the hold of the barge.

There was another packing-case in the warehouse, ready to be lowered when the crane was free.

"Somebody would get hurt if that chain broke," remarked Handforth, as he watched. "It doesn't seem to be very strong, either. Why, that warehouse is practically a ruin! The windows are smashed and the walls are cracking. I wonder why it's being used in that condition?"

"You'll have to wonder, too," said McClure. "We can't tell you."

"I'll bet those cases contain stolen property or something," went on Handforth, who was always ready to make wild guesses.

"Well, I expect they contain something—so you must be right," said Church. "Look at this tug coming along here. We shall roll a bit when we get into its wash. Mind you don't fall overboard, Handy."

Handforth was still watching the big packing-case as it was being lowered. Then, suddenly, he gave a start, and watched even more intently.

"I—I say!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Eh?" said Church. "What's the matter?"

"That's jolly queer," said Handforth, staring. "I can swear I saw one of the boards of that big box bulge outwards just now!"

"You saw it do what?"

"Bulge outwards—just as if something inside was trying to break it open," said Handforth. "There you are! There it goes again. Didn't you see it, you asses? Didn't you see a big crack appear?"

Church and McClure gazed at the packing-case, but it descended into the hold of the barge just then, and disappeared from view. Handforth's face was flushed, but Church and McClure were grinning.

"You ass!" said Church. "It was only your fancy."

"Fancy!" roared Handforth. "Why, you——"

"Don't make a row, for goodness' sake," snapped Church.

"I tell you I saw that packing-case bulge open," declared Handforth. "You can say what you like, but you won't make me alter my opinion."

McClure sighed.

"We don't want to make you alter it," he said. "We simply want you to drop the subject, Handy. I expect the case warped a bit because the chain wasn't fixed round it properly. Anyhow, there's nothing to get excited about."

"I'm not excited," snapped Handforth. "If you say——"

"Look out!" put in Church. "That tug's gone past, and we shall get the wash in two ticks. Better hang on tight. This launch is only a little cockleshell, and it would be a pity if you dropped overboard, Handy."

The tug had been going at full speed up the river, and the wash it caused was considerable. The launch dipped as she struck the disturbed water. She heeled over, rolled, and dug her bows into the river.

A great mass of spray came inboard.

"Hi! Look out!" yelled Church, with a gasp.

"Ow!"

"Grooch!"

Handforth and Co. were swamped.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Owen major. "How do you like the bows, Handy? It's a good thing you got there—instead of me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was certainly paid for his high-handed action. After that he wasn't particularly anxious about remaining in the

bows. And the incident drove the matter of the bulging packing-case out of his mind for the time being.

But, later on, when the river trip was nearing its end, Handforth thought of Reed's Wharf on several occasions. He tried to get one or two fellows interested, but they were not having any.

"I don't care what you say," declared Handy. "I'm pretty certain that there was something fishy about that wharf."

"Oh, give it a rest!" said Church.

"If I always took your advice, Walter Church, I don't know where I should be," said Handforth sourly. "Just consider the facts. That wharf is filthy and rusty with disuse. The warehouse itself is nearly falling to pieces with decay. Why, therefore, were those two new packing-cases being lowered into an old barge?"

"The answer," said McClure, "is a lemon!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you silly ass——"

"Ain't you asking conundrums?" inquired McClure mildly.

"No, I'm not!" snapped Handforth. "I'm telling you that it's jolly queer—and I believe there's something fishy about Reed's Wharf. Those cases wouldn't bulge for nothing."

"It's got to the plural now," said Church. "I thought you only saw one case bulge?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

Handforth felt decidedly aggrieved. He had made up his mind that he had got on the track of a mystery, and it was rather annoying to find that his chums ridiculed him, and laughed at his suggestions.

The redoubtable leader of Study D was always ready to make a romance out of any unusual incident he happened to witness. In nine cases out of ten he was hopelessly at sea.

In this instance his observations were of enormous value, and his ideas concerning the packing-cases were shrewd and smart. But he couldn't get anybody to support him. The juniors thought he was dotty—as usual.

But when Handforth got a thing firmly fixed in his mind it required a good deal of knocking out. When the river trip came to an end he was still looking rather thoughtful, and he forgot to thank Somerton for the afternoon's pleasure.

"Jolly rotten, I call it!" said Church, as they walked back to the school. "I think a fellow ought to have enough decency to express his thanks. But, of course, some chaps don't think of those things. They've got their heads full of packing-cases and barges, and ——"

"Eh?"

Handforth looked at his chums sharply.

"Oh, so you're beginning to agree with me at last?" he asked. "When I get to the school, I'm going to tell Nipper. He won't sneer at me like you do, you rotters! That incident was significant."

"What?"

"It was more than significant," said Handforth, warming to his work. "It was sinister! The whole affair struck me as being out of place—and yet you all saw it, and thought nothing. It simply proves that my brain is more acutely developed when it comes to detective work."

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Church. "Of—of course!"

"But we were talking about something else, Handy," remarked McClure mildly. "We were saying that it was rather rotten of you to forget to thank Somerton for the afternoon's enjoyment!"

"Don't talk twaddle!" said Handforth pityingly. "Is Somerton going to drop through the ground? Sha'n't I have plenty of chances of thanking him this evening? The most important things of the moment always occupy my mind at the—er—moment. And the most important thing now is that wharf incident. I tell you straight away that it was sinister—— Hi! I'm talking to you, you asses!"

But Church and McClure had walked away, and Handforth was left to stride along alone. After a wrathful snort, he quickened his pace, and caught up with Tommy Watson, who was also walking alone.

"I say, Watson, did you see that rummy business——"

"About the packing-case?" asked Tommy. "Don't trot that out now, there's a good chap. Everybody has been grinning at you, and I must say that you're a bit potty. How can there be anything fishy about a packing-case?"

"It might have been full of herrings!" remarked Pitt, who was near by. "Herrings are fishy enough."

"I suppose that's meant to be funny?" sneered Handforth. "Well, I'm not in the mood for humour just now. Did you watch that packing-case as it was being lowered into the barge?"

"I hardly glanced at it," admitted Watson.

"Then you're not capable of giving any opinion," said Handforth. "Nipper's worth the whole lot of you. He'll tell me what he thinks, and he won't scoff and sneer, either."

And Handforth stalked ahead with his nose in the air.

The party arrived at the school just in time for tea, and with healthy appetites. The river air had freshened them up wonderfully, and they were all feeling fit and well.

As it chanced, I arrived from Baker Street just a few minutes before. I had had my tea with Tinker, and I had hurried back to the school to seek the latest news. I heard nothing!

Not a word had arrived from Nelson Lee, and nothing was known of Sir Montie. I walked out into the courtyard, depressed and gloomy. I wanted to do something. I was anxious to help.

But how? What could I do? Where should I start? There was nothing for me to do, to tell the truth.

I frowned somewhat as the fellows came

crowding into the courtyard. Tommy Watson spotted me at once, and he ran up. But he knew by the expression on my face that there was nothing to report.

"It's a mystery, Tommy," I said slowly. "I can't imagine—"

"Ah, here you are!" ejaculated Handforth, coming up briskly. "Just the chap I wanted to see!"

"Well, you can see me," I said. "Take a good look, and then buzz off!"

"Don't rot!" exclaimed Handforth. "I want your opinion. It's rather an important matter, and you must give me your full attention."

I regarded Handy curiously.

"Well, you seem to be more serious than usual," I said. "What's the trouble? My opinion is yours, old man. There is no charge, and I'll give you my views on any given subject for nixes."

"I dare say you know that we've been down the river?"

"Yes. I know that."

"Well, we were down below the Tower Bridge somewhere—opposite Rotherhithe, or Wapping, or Whitechapel," said Handforth vaguely. "I happened to notice a big packing-case being lowered by a crane into a barge. There was another packing-case waiting to be lowered."

"I've got all that," I said. "Well?"

"As the box was being lowered," went on Handforth impressively, "I distinctly saw one of the side-boards bulge outwards!"

I stared.

"It bulged outwards?" I repeated.

"Yes. What was the explanation?"

"Is this a riddle?" I asked mildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors who had collected round chuckled joyfully.

"No, it's not a riddle!" snapped Handforth. "You seem to be as silly as the rest of the crowd—"

"Hold on," I said. "The boards bulged outwards as the packing-case was being lowered. Why, there might have been something inside—something alive!"

"There you are!" roared Handforth. "That was my idea, but these chaps yelled at me when I suggested it! This wharf was dirty and disused, and all the windows of the warehouse were smashed. The whole thing looked fishy—just like you read about —"

"Do you read about Reed's Wharf?" grinned Pitt.

"Oh, dry up!" growled Handforth.

I started, and became intent.

"Reed's Wharf!" I echoed. "Is that what the place was called?"

"Yes."

"And two packing-cases were being lowered into a barge?"

"Yes."

"And you saw one of the cases bulge—"

I paused, breathing hard.

"What's the matter?" asked Watson.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "Oh, my hat! Ye gods and little fishes!"

A startling thought had come to me—a thought which ought to have found a place in my mind hours and hours earlier. But Handforth's talk had suggested something to me which fairly made me stagger.

I forgot everything in that tense moment. I forgot that I was facing a crowd of juniors, and that Handforth was waiting for me to speak. I simply turned round, and rushed into the "Ancient House" for all I was worth.

"He's mad!" gasped Handforth.

"Clean dotty!" agreed Pitt. "What's come over the chap? Did you see the wild look in his eyes?"

"Let's rush after him!"

They came pelting indoors; but I was in Mr. Crowell's study, busy at the telephone. I had not troubled to ask for permission, and I didn't care. I don't think I realised that permission was required.

I got through to the number I wanted quickly, but it seemed ages to me before Tinker's voice made itself heard at the other end of the wire.

"Tinker!" I panted. "Is Mr. Blake there?"

"Yes," said Tinker. "What's the matter? You're speaking in a queer tone, Nipper."

"I want you and Mr. Blake to meet me within a quarter of an hour from now!" I said rapidly. "Can you do it? Anywhere you like—say at the corner of Oxford Circus, near the Tube Station?"

"But I don't understand—"

"I can't explain over the wire—but it's important!" I exclaimed tensely. "It's vitally important. I think I've got right on the track—and the whole situation is terribly urgent."

"Hang on for a second," said Tinker briskly.

I heard him talking to Sexton Blake for a moment, and then he addressed me again.

"You there?" he asked.

"Yes!" I panted. "Well—well?"

"The gov'nor and I will be at the Tube Station at Oxford Circus in exactly ten minutes from now," said Tinker. "See if you can be there beforehand."

"Right!" I said. "Good enough!"

And I slammed the receiver back on its hook.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHASE.

I ARRIVED at the meeting-place two minutes before Sexton Blake and Tinker put in an appearance. They jumped out of a taxi, and regarded me very curiously. Sexton Blake took my arm.

"I am convinced, Nipper, that you have something of importance to tell me," he said. "We will walk down Regent Street, and you can talk as we go. Well, young 'un, what is it that has made you so excited?"

"Do you remember what you told us about those packing-cases, sir?"

"That you ought to have given them more attention—yes," said Blake.

"Well, sir, we overheard that those cases were to be taken to Reed's Wharf, but we didn't think anything of it at the time," I went on. "This afternoon some of the fellows went for a trip down the river on a launch. And Handforth, as they were passing a certain place, saw a big packing-case being lowered into a barge. And that place was Reed's Wharf."

"Well, what about it?" asked Tinker.

"Handforth positively swears that he saw one of the boards of the packing-case bulge outwards as it was being lowered," I said tensely. "Handforth's suggestion was that somebody was inside—"

"Great guns!" ejaculated Tinker. "You—you mean—"

"I mean that we were a couple of blithering idiots last night," I said grimly. "I wouldn't mind betting all I possess that the guv'nor and poor old Montie fell into the hands of Rogan and Palmer somehow. They were bunged into those packing-cases, and taken to the wharf!"

Sexton Blake was quite unmoved.

"Your suggestion seems wild on the face of it, Nipper," he said. "But, taking all the facts into consideration, I'm inclined to believe that you have hit the nail on the head."

"It must be the truth, sir," I declared.

"Those men were desperate," went on Blake. "Lee apparently fell into a trap—as we are all liable to—and he was made a prisoner, in addition to the lad. Palmer feared to keep the pair of them in London, so he made plans for their removal. And it is easy enough to have an unconscious man taken from one part of London to another in a packing-case. There have been many instances of such trickery. You know that those cases left the house in Whitlock Street last night. And, by pure chance, Handforth saw them to-day being lowered into a barge. That fact, in itself, is significant. I think we shall be justified in taking action."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's why I rang you up, sir," I said. "Oh, I'm jolly glad you're here, Mr. Blake. I've got a kind of idea that we shall rescue the pair of them almost at once. That barge can't have got far by this time!"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"It would have been rather good if Leonard could have come with us," he said. "But we have no time to waste. We must get to the river at once, and speed downstream as fast as we can go."

"How, sir?" I asked. "What shall we go in?"

"A River Police boat!" said Sexton Blake grimly.

Less than fifteen minutes later we were on board one of those tireless little launches which are constantly running up and down the Thames. There was an inspector on

board, and he was well known to Sexton Blake. The facts were briefly described to him.

"We'll go down the river at once, Mr. Blake," he said. "It oughtn't to be difficult to pick out the barge. Reed's Wharf is not very far down. It's an old place that hasn't been used for a good many years now."

We were soon slipping down the Thames, and Tinker and I stood together, watching the murky waters ahead.

"It seems to me that we are going to do something this trip, old son," said Tinker. "I hope to goodness we succeed in getting hold of your guv'nor."

"We shall succeed," I declared. "I know it; I can feel it in my giddy bones."

"Well, I hope your bones are right," said Tinker.

We continued on our way down the river, and we were feeling too anxious and eager to talk much. Sexton Blake stood with the River Police inspector, watching everything closely, and quite at his ease.

"Perhaps we ought to have had Handforth with us," I remarked. "He would have been able to spot the barge at once. But I think I heard Watson saying that it was a black barge with a red line running round the deck. It ought to be easy enough to pick up. There aren't many barges on the river just now."

"Oh, we'll spot it all right," said Tinker. He was right.

When we reached that part of the river where Reed's Wharf was situated, we found that the place was deserted and bare. There was not a sign of any barge, and the whole warehouse was dilapidated and in a state of decay.

"The birds have flown," said Blake. "But they happen to be ducks in this case, and ducks don't travel fast on the water."

"We continued slipping down the river, and before we had reached Greenwich we beheld several barges. We had passed them all, for they were full of coal, and other merchandise. Moreover, the inspector knew that they were thoroughly respectable."

Just opposite Greenwich, however, we came upon a stranger.

He was a tug, running down the river with the tide, with a single barge in tow. The barge was a small one, and a man and a youth were walking about the deck. Everything was innocent-looking. I scanned the pair through my glasses, and then looked at the barge.

"That's got a red line round it," I said. "I wonder—"

"Yes, that's the one," exclaimed Tinker. "We shall soon get at the truth now."

The police boat shot forward, and signalled to the tug to come to a stop. And then I gave a little yell, for on the tug were two men in civilian clothing. They were well dressed, and it was not mere guesswork on my part to assume that they were Palmer and Rogan.

The scoundrels had no intention of giving in tamely.

Without warning, the hawser which towed the barge was cast adrift, and the tug shot ahead, whirling round, and making straight for the muddy bank at the side. The rascals were attempting to escape!

But the police launch was not to be beaten. It spun round, and immediately gave chase. If we had been uncertain before we were not uncertain now. The very fact that the tug had acted in this way was proof positive that something was radically wrong.

The police launch slipped alongside the tug. "You'd better stop those games!" shouted the inspector angrily. "Slow down at once, or it will be all the worse for you!"

Whizz!

A heavy block of wood nearly struck the inspector, and he snapped his teeth angrily. He turned and gave some rapid orders.

The next few minutes were exciting.

The launch went right close in to the tug, and half a dozen river policemen, at considerable risk, leapt from one vessel to the other. They swarmed over the tug, and the next moment a fierce battle was in progress.

"My hat!" I exclaimed. "We weren't far wrong!"

The fight was short and sharp. It could not last long, in any case. Palmer and Rogan had scuttled below to the cabin, where they were found a few minutes later, cowering with fear. The skipper was also arrested, and the tug was taken in charge by the police.

But we, on the launch, were otherwise engaged.

Seeing that all was going well on the tug, we turned back, and chased after the drifting barge. The longshoreman in charge was doing his utmost to keep the barge in the middle of the river.

The launch slid alongside, and four or five of us boarded her. Tinker and I were among the first to get across, and Sexton Blake followed with the inspector. The latter regarded the bargee sternly.

"Any nonsense, my man, and you'll be handcuffed!" he said sharply.

"I won't cause no trouble, guv'nor," said the man beerily. "I know when I'm beat, I do. Not as I've done anything that I can be pinched for. I'm only in charge of this old tug, with Jim there as my mate."

"We ain't done nothin', sir!" whined the barge-boy.

"You've got two packing-cases on board," said Sexton Blake. "Where are they?"

"Well, they ain't in the cabin?" said the bargee sarcastically. "Two packing-cases? You'll find 'em down in the 'old—if they ain't fallen through the bottom!"

"Well, make yourselves useful," said the inspector. "Get those hatches off!"

The man sullenly obeyed, helped by the boy. And when the hatches were off we saw two huge packing-cases reposing in the hold, on the top of some gravel ballast. Both cases were securely screwed down.

"Spot the air-holes?" muttered Tinker.

"By jingo—yes," I exclaimed.

Round the tops of the cases were numbers of small holes, bored through the wood. It was quite obvious, now we knew the truth, that these holes had been placed there in order to provide the prisoners with air.

I was relieved to find that the cases were so large. The inmates would not even be cramped. But I was quite sure that they were sick to death of their adventure by this time.

Sexton Blake and Tinker and I dropped down into the hold, and a screw-driver was produced by the bargee. Then, without delay, Blake commenced unfastening the massive lids. The screws looked big, but they came out easily enough.

And at last the lid was loose.

"Up with it!" I exclaimed huskily.

The lid was raised, and we all stared eagerly into the interior. The case contained either Nelson Lee or Sir Montie, we were sure of that. But then we received a sudden shock.

A man was in the box, certainly—but he was a stranger!

He was a coarse, beery-faced man, with a scrubby beard. He was bound hand and foot, and gagged. He looked at us fiercely. And we looked at him with absolute consternation.

"What—what the dickens does it mean?" I panted.

"I really don't know, Nipper," said Sexton Blake. "But it is an extraordinary state of affairs. We will open the other case."

This was soon done. We had hopes of finding both Nelson Lee and Montie in that case, for it was the larger of the two. But when it was opened we saw that this, too, contained a bound and gagged stranger! He was a youth of about eighteen, and he looked really frightened.

"It's more than I can make out," said Tinker, scratching his head. "Who the dickens are these chaps, and where can Nelson Lee and Tregellis-West be?"

A wild thought struck me that the rough-looking pair in the cases were actually the guv'nor and Montie, disguised. But a moment's close inspection told me that such a thing was impossible.

The whole thing was staggering.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL SERENE!

THERE was a heavy lump in my throat as I turned to Sexton Blake.

"It seems that we've drawn blank after all, sir," I said dully. "We've captured the crooks, but we haven't seen any trace of Mr. Lee or Montie. What shall we do? What can we—"

"There's no call for you to be so upset, young 'un," said the bargee, taking hold of my shoulder. "Ain't you got your wits about you?"

I shook the hand off.

"Keep your paws off me," I snapped. "I didn't ask for your opinion——"

"And yet, my dear Nipper, you sometimes value my opinion quite highly," said the bargee coolly. "Don't look so startled, young 'un!"

"Begad!" exclaimed the barge-boy with a chuckle.

I thought I was going dotty for a moment, and Tinker was staring at the pair with startled eyes. Then, abruptly, Sexton Blake burst into a roar of hearty laughter. I dashed forward.

"Guv'nor!" I gasped. "You—you awful swindler!"

"I'm sorry, Nipper——"

"You spoofing fraud!" I yelled.

"That is no way to talk to your master," said the bargee sternly.

"And Montie, too!" I roared. "By jingo! What the dickens do you mean by it, you bouncer?"

And I seized the barge-boy and waltzed him along the narrow deck. Incidentally, I nearly waltzed him into the river.

"Good gracious!" he gasped. "Pray be careful, old boy. I shall be frightfully pleased to get these shockin' things off. Begad! How I've worn them is more than I can say."

The truth, startling enough, was that the bargee and his boy were none other than Nelson Lee and Sir Montie Tregellis-West. We could be pardoned for not recognizing them at first. They were wearing dirty old clothes, and their faces were grimy and unrecognizable. Sir Montie was not even disguised—except by his clothing and by the dirt.

Nelson Lee, however, had altered his facial expression for our benefit. It was an easy matter for him to do that for a short period, although such a method of disguise could not be continued for long.

"You deceived us nicely, Lee," said Sexton Blake.

"And I must ask you to forgive me," exclaimed the guv'nor. "It was merely a joke. I saw that you were about to search the barge, and I told Tregellis-West that we would keep up the deception until you had opened the cases."

"But what does it mean?" I asked. "How did you manage it?"

"The story is quite simple," replied Nelson Lee. "I was unfortunate enough to fall a victim to Palmer and Rogan. They stunned me, and when I awoke I found myself in a packing-case. Food and water were handy, and there was plenty of air. Upon the whole, I did not suffer much discomfort. I guessed that Tregellis-West was stowed away in a similar case, and I discovered this to be the truth later on.

"We were placed in an old warehouse, and left in charge of this bargee and his boy. There's no need for me to go into details," said Nelson Lee. "The bargee was curious, and he thought he'd like to have a look at me. He did look, and I overpowered him. The rest was quite simple."

"You changed places with your captors?" asked Blake.

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "We bundled them into the cases, screwed them down, and calmly waited for events."

"Why didn't you escape while you had the chance?" I asked.

"Because I was anxious to get hold of the rascals," said Nelson Lee. "I didn't know where they were, or when they would be coming. By staying in the warehouse, I knew everything. Montie and I kept to ourselves as much as possible, and we succeeded in maintaining the deception. My plan was to go down the river with the tug, and to give the whole crowd in charge at the first stop."

"So our part in the game was really unnecessary?" smiled Blake.

"Not at all," the guv'nor said quickly. "You have rendered the utmost assistance, my dear fellow, and I thank you heartily. I am very glad, however, that Montie and I were not in the helpless position you expected to find us in."

"Didn't I tell you that your guv'nor could be trusted to make good?" asked Tinker, with a nod. "Still, it's been a bit of excitement, and I'm jolly pleased. We haven't worked together for months."

The explanations were soon completed.

We found it necessary to tell our side of the story, and Nelson Lee was pleased when he heard that the raid had been successful. The whole game was now wrecked. Rogan and Palmer were in the hands of the police, and their villainous scheme had fallen to the ground.

Sir Montie positively refused to return to the school until he had had a complete change of clothing. So, upon the whole, it was considered the best for us all to go to Baker Street.

The delay was not a long one.

And when Sir Montie was arrayed in a brand new outfit—which fitted him atrociously, according to his own ideas—we set out for the school. Nelson Lee was himself again, too.

We parted with Sexton Blake and Tinker, laughing and cheerful, and the three of us went off in a taxi in the direction of Holborn. A wire had been sent to Lord Westbrooke, and he would reach the school almost as quickly as ourselves.

It was still daylight when we arrived, and the courtyard was thronged with fellows when we strolled in. Handforth was the first junior to spot us. He stood stock still for a moment, and then let out a yell which might have been heard in Holborn.

"Hurrah!" bellowed Handforth.

"Mr. Lee!"

"And Tregellis-West!"

"They've come back!"

"My only hat!"

There was a tremendous rush, and we were surrounded.

"Good old Montie!" roared Pitt. "Glad to see you back!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hurrah!"

The ovation we received was tumultuous. Seniors came out in scores, and joined in the uproar. The courtyard was simply packed to suffocation with excited fellows. Lee had the greatest difficulty in fighting his way indoors.

Handforth was in his element. He grabbed hold of me, and danced me round as though he had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

"What did I say?" he shouted. "Wasn't that information correct?"

"It was!" I said. "Handy, you're a marvel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You needn't laugh!" I went on, turning to the crowd. "It's your turn to look silly now. You laughed at Handforth when he was on the right track."

"Exactly!" said Handforth, nodding. "I knew what I was doing all right, and I knew that there was something fishy about that beastly wharf. And yet these duffers wouldn't take any notice of me. Huh! It seems to me that the Remove only contains two brainy chaps. Nipper's one of 'em!"

"Thanks!" I said. "And modesty, I presume, prevents you from naming the other brainy one?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Handforth was victorious for once. He had every reason to crow—and he certainly did it. He had been scoffed at and ridiculed. And yet it was his keen eyesight which had detected the truth.

Before supper-time things were almost normal. Of course, Montie had to tell his story again and again, and there certainly would be no peace for him that evening. He was ordered to go before the Head, and the Head congratulated him.

After that his uncle arrived, excited and overjoyed. And, on the strength of his freedom, Montie was presented with a nice little fifty-pound cheque. He caused numerous cheers by announcing that he would provide a glorious spread on the morrow.

And, meanwhile, the end of the little drama was taking place—in Nelson Lee's study. There was only one other person present. And that person was Ralph Leslie Fullwood.

He stood before the Housemaster, quaking in his shoes. He was terribly afraid that he would be expelled. Nelson Lee looked stern and grim as he sat back in his chair and eyed the guilty Removeite.

"Now, Fullwood, I have to deal with you," he said quietly.

"Ye-es, sir!" faltered Fullwood.

"It was solely owing to your conspiracy with Palmer that Tregellis-West was captured," continued Nelson Lee. "The trouble was caused by you, and it is only right that you should receive a very severe punishment—"

"But—but I didn't know, sir!" said Fullwood meekly. "I've been a fool, sir—I know. But I did come forward and give the information, didn't I, sir?"

"In a way, you did, and in consideration of that, I am prepared to treat you with rather absurd leniency," said Nelson Lee. "I hope this will be a lasting lesson to you, Fullwood. You got into the hands of these men, and they made a tool of you. You will be flogged severely—now."

"Thank you, sir!" muttered Fullwood.

"Further, you will be confined to gates for a period of two weeks," continued the Housemaster. "Your half-holidays will be stopped, and I shall keep my eye on you, Fullwood."

"Yes, sir," said the culprit. "It's—it's awfully good of you not to take me to the Head. I—I suppose I deserve to be expelled."

"You certainly do!"

"And I want to thank you, sir, for being so generous," said Fullwood—for once in his life sincere. "I don't mind what punishment you give me so long as I can remain in the school. The sack would mean disgrace for life!"

"I can assure you, Fullwood, that if you are caught with such companions again there will be no mercy for you," said Nelson Lee. "I am only dealing with you lightly now because I am convinced that you were led away."

Fullwood hung his head.

A moment or two later the punishment commenced. Ralph Leslie went through it with a vengeance. By the time the flogging was over he was so sore that his face was screwed up with pain. He yelped once or twice, but, on the whole, he took his punishment pluckily. Fullwood was not a coward.

When he went, he made straight to Study A in the Remove passage. Gulliver and Bell were there, shivering. They were not cold, but they were in mortal fear that Fullwood would sneak, and drag them into trouble as well.

"Did—did you give us away?" asked Bell huskily.

Fullwood's lips curled.

"You needn't squirm!" he said. "I didn't give you away, and it's all over now. I've often said a lot of rotten things about Lee, but he's not such a bad sort, after all."

"Haven't you got the sack?" asked Gulliver, staring.

"No."

"You've been flogged?"

"Can't you see it?" snarled Fullwood.

"I'm racked with pain, and you ask me if I've been flogged! Lee laid it on with all his strength."

"Beast!" said Bell.

"I'm jolly lucky to get off so lightly," said Fullwood. "I'm gated, but that's nothin'. If you chaps had had a spark of decency, you'd have come forward and stood by me—instead of skulking here."

"Rot!" said Gulliver. "Where would be the sense of that? You wouldn't have been let off more lightly—"

"Oh, yes, I should," said Fullwood sourly. "It would have made all the difference to me. The punishment would have been

divided up. But, on the whole, we haven't done so jolly badly out of the business. We got a good few quids from Palmer, an' we haven't spent it yet."

"Yes, there's that," agreed Gulliver. "By George, you won't find me messin' about with any of these gamblin' dens again. We thought they were safe in London, but we've had our eyes opened."

"We have!" said Fullwood grimly.

The next day everything was going on as usual. Sir Montie Tregellis-West seemed none the worse for his alarming adventure. I was startled when I heard how he had escaped from the attic.

"You reckless dummy!" I exclaimed warmly. "You might have been killed!"

Sir Montie smiled.

"Dear fellow, I wasn't killed, and everythin' is all serene," he said languidly. "So what's the good of draggin' up the past? I saw a way of escape, an' I took it. That's all."

"And, incidentally, you proved that you're as plucky as——"

"Pray talk sense, old boy," interrupted Montie hastily.

He was very modest, and he considered that his action had been quite ordinary. And he was so tired of being praised up by the fellows that he threatened to cancel the spread if they didn't dry up.

And after that not a word was spoken on the subject.

That feed was a record one.

It was held in the common-room, since there was no other apartment large enough to accommodate the crowd. The common-room wasn't, if it came to that. The guests overflowed into the passages, and the uproar was considerable.

But the masters took no notice. It was a free and easy evening, and prep. was not even thought about.

But if we imagined that our adventures in London were over we were mistaken. For we were destined to have some more excitement before we left London to return to the renovated St. Frank's.

I had not forgotten the Chinese opium smugglers, and I had an idea that we should encounter them again before long.

That idea was very near the mark!

THE END.

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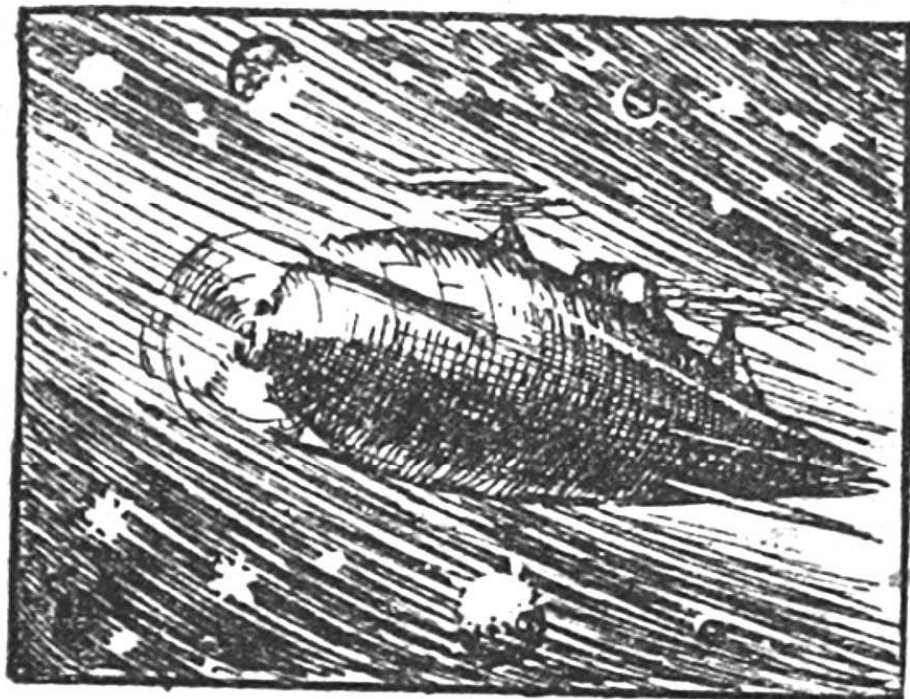
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INTRODUCTION.

ROBERT GRESHAM, an inventor, is rescued from cannibals in Central Africa by an exploration party consisting of

FRANK HILLSWORTH, his chum MACDONALD GUTHRIE, both sons of millionaires, their old college friend, PROFESSOR MONTAGUE PALGRAVE, a renowned scientist, and ABBIE, a burly negro. Gresham tells his benefactors of his wonderful invention—a flying machine that will travel through space, and in recognition of their services invites them one and all to accompany him on a voyage to the solar planets. Since none of the party have any home ties, and are ready for any adventure, they willingly accept the invitation. They all return to England, where for some months the flying machine, christened the "Solar Monarch," is secretly constructed. At last everything is in readiness for starting. The adventurers are aboard, and as Gresham pulls a lever, the Solar Monarch shoots up into space, heading for the moon, which is reached in a week, the aeronef attaining a speed of 2,000 miles an hour. The surface of the moon appears destitute of life, but the explorers learn, at their peril, that the dark fissures and caves are inhabited by strange monsters.

(Now read on)

Attacked by Lunarian Rats.

IT was good to be in the saloon again eating and chatting together once more. Luncheon passed off merrily, and it was while they were smoking that Abbie announced that he had got something to tell them. Gresham had decided to fix the propeller and suspensory-screws that very afternoon. The professor had been rather against it, saying that they had seen all on the moon they wanted to. He was for hastening on to Venus. But Gresham talked him over at length, saying that it would never do to leave the moon without examining the other side—the side which human eyes had never looked upon.

"Well, Abbie," the inventor smiled, as the negro stood, napkin in hand by the door. "What is it you wish to say?"

"It ain't much, sah," returned Abbie. "But I guess it'll kinder ease my mind. After you was all gone I come on deck for to have a look at de moon—which, sah, I tink ain't worth boderin' about—an' while I was standin' dere, I saw someting."

"You did?" the scientist queried. "What was it you saw—an animal?"

"Dat I dunno, sah," replied the negro. "all I see was a kinder long black ting a-gwine alone de groun'."

"I am afraid you are not very lucid," Gresham remarked. "Cannot you say what this long black thing was—what it was like and how high it stood?"

"No, sah, dat I can't. I on'y catches sight ob it fo' half a second, den it disappear down de valley, away to de left. In dat moment it look like a big, black cloth bein' drawed along de groun'. It warent more dan fower inches high, sah."

"Strange," said Frank. "You make me curious to ascertain what this unknown object might be. What do you say, professor, if we go to the spot Abbie talks about and see if we can discover any signs of this large black creature?"

"I have no objection," the scientist said. "Gresham, I presume you will accompany us?"

"Most certainly," the inventor answered. "I am as curious to get to the bottom of the affair as Frank is. It won't take us more than an hour at the least."

So it was decided. With Abbie accompanying them this time the four explorers once more sallied forth. The spot to which the nigger led them was in the opposite direction to that where their captors of the morning dwelt. Abbie went straight to a high cliff which here rose from the ground, and pointed down into a low aperture.

"Dat's where de ting went, sah," he announced. "I neber see where it come from, but it went down here fo' suah."

"There is no sign of life there, anyhow," said Frank.

"Suppose we gang inside," suggested the Scot. "We could take your lamp, Frank, in case of emergencies."

"Where are your wits, old man?" laughed

Frank. "If this animal—or whatever it calls itself—can emerge into the open air what would be the use of the torch?"

"Mon, I was forgettin' that fact," Mac replied, grinning. "However, I'm willin' tae venture a few yards inside the cave—that is, of course, if one of ye'll accompany me."

"No boys, I forbid you to take any such risk," put in Gresham decidedly. "It would be madness to enter—we are quite in the dark as to what this cavern contains."

"The best thing is merely to examine the entrance," exclaimed the professor. "The interior may be too small to allow you to effect an entrance, anyhow."

Accordingly Frank and Mac produced their torches and flashed them inside the cavity. As Palgrave had surmised the place was too small to enter. It was a much smaller edition of the cave they had already been in. There was not the least sign of life, except for a peculiar faint smell. It was impossible to tell what this was caused by, but Mac declared that it reminded one of rats and goats amalgamated together. Frank was still laughing at him when the Scot held up his hand for silence.

They had crawled inside as far as possible, their feet just visible to their companions, and were on the point of retreating when a strange whining noise reached their ears. They both listened, and the sounds grew more audible. They were most peculiar—a constant succession of twitterings and squeaks. Frank turned to Mac.

"I'm off," he said. "The thing that's causing all that noise is approaching rapidly. If I'm not mistaken, and I've no wish to exchange compliments in this cramped position."

It was good advice, and Mac followed his example. They backed out hurriedly, startled and wondering. The weird whining noises had become almost deafening.

The professor and Gresham were looking at them with surprised eyes, and had their revolvers ready. And they were needed, too, for immediately after the two had emerged from the cave a swarm of little animals scurried out—Abbie, earlier in the day, had evidently seen a number of these and had taken them for one animal. He was staring about him now with wide-open eyes and grasping his own pistol tightly. The adventurers scarcely had any time to see what appearance their assailants had, but had to fight for their lives without a moment's notice. The little creatures poured out of the cave-mouth in hundreds and clung about the five men like limpets.

They were no bigger than rats—indeed, they were very similar to rats, with the exception that they had only one eye, and that their legs were six in number, and in a line. Their heads were perfectly round, and of tail there was no sign. But out of the upper part of the body a miniature horn protruded, and these they rammed into their opponents' calves and shins with pain-

ful results. There was no stopping them, and to have stood their ground would have been madness. Frank let out a shout.

"Run for it!" he cried. "We shall never shake 'em off without! Good heavens, what are the little spitfires? I'm bitten in a score of different places."

All five of them turned and fled. But the Lunar animals were not to be denied. They joined in the chase enthusiastically and proved themselves to be no mean runners. And, indeed, the danger was now getting considerable. Unless the five men could rid themselves of the pests very soon they would be borne to the ground. So far the battle had been all one-sided. Then Frank, free of the things for a moment, loosed off his revolver and poured a rain of shot into their midst.

He killed four of them instantly, and the effect was immediate. The hundreds of others stopped their attack and pounced on their unfortunate brethren. This gave the explorers their looked-for chance, and the five revolvers spat out their venom almost simultaneously. Hardly a shot missed, and close on two dozen of the fiery little animals fell dead, to be instantly smothered by their luckier companions.

Finding themselves no longer the centre of attraction, the crew of the Solar Monarch hurried away from the spot, and had the extreme satisfaction of seeing, some five minutes later, the whole army disappear into the cave entrance—evidently satisfied.

"Well," Gresham said, "if you care to have my opinion, I should say that we've had quite enough adventure for one day."

"By Jove, I should say so," returned Frank, ruefully rubbing his calves, "and enough of the moon into the bargain. I vote we leave this one-horse place and start on the journey to Venus."

"I second that," said Mac eagerly. "What do you say, professor—Hullo, where is the mon?" The Scot looked round. "There he gangs towards the ship—perhaps he's got damaged."

"Merely a few rather deep scratches, similar to those we are all suffering from," Gresham said. "But regarding the other matter, as I see there are three of you against me, I suppose I shall have to give in, and start on the real journey—the journey to one of the Solar planets. So far, we have been practically on earth. Nevertheless, I mean to explore the moon's other side, if not now, when we return. Look, there's old Mother, as large as life."

He pointed skywards. There, looking a huge size, hung the earth. The continents were plainly visible even to the naked eye. The four—the professor already being aboard—walked slowly towards the aeroplane. When they were getting close to it the figure of Professor Palgrave could be seen standing outside the conning-tower door. They thought nothing of it for the moment, and

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

Frank was just about to leap upwards, when the professor's voice reached him, and he paused, amazed and bewildered. For what the scientist had called out was this:

"Don't attempt to board this vessel! The first man who tries any tricks on I'll shoot down like a dog!"

And in either hand Professor Palgrave held a loaded revolver, and his face looked hard and set!

The Professor's Madness—Weidhoff's Comet.

PROFESSOR PALGRAVE, standing there, covering his four fellow companions with revolvers, looked a grim figure. Yet surely he could not be in earnest? Surely it was a joke on his part? Gresham was the first to recover his voice.

"Come, come, professor," he said smilingly, "don't you think you've carried this joke just about far enough?"

"Joke?" echoed Palgrave. "I assure you, Gresham, that this matter is far from being a joke—I repeat what I said previously. The first man who attempts to board will regret it."

The inventor threw a bewildered glance at Frank and Mac, and moved a step or two towards the Solar Monarch.

"You heard what I said!" came Palgrave's voice from above. Gresham stopped.

"Why are you doing this, professor?" he inquired.

He was amazed at this unexpected turn of events. Frank and Mac were muttering excitedly to one another, while Abbie's eyes appeared to be starting from their sockets.

"Why am I doing it?" said the scientist coolly. "Because I want to gain all the credit for this invention. When I get back to earth I shall be the richest man in the world. Everybody will be speaking about 'Professor Palgrave's daring journey into Outer Space!' Ha, ha, my friends, I intend to leave you here, and continue alone!"

"What do you mean?" cried Frank, convinced that they had a madman to deal with. "You don't seriously mean to leave us stranded on the moon?"

"That is exactly what I intend to do," the professor returned with blazing eyes. "Yes, I'll leave you here to the mercy of the little rats. I hope you'll find them pleasant company."

"Look here, Mr. Palgrave," Frank said quietly. "Don't you realise that you couldn't manage the ship by yourself? You'd never even get back to earth! On the other hand, if you act sensibly, when we do return you'll still be rich and greatly talked of."

"But not to the extent of the inventor of the Solar Monarch," replied Palgrave cunningly. "And I intend to tell the world that I am he. No, no, it is no use your trying to talk me over, young man."

The explorers were indeed in a predicament. The professor had but to close the conning-tower door and they were quite shut out and helpless. And if they ventured to board the vessel and endeavour to open the door, there was every likelihood of Palgrave starting the ship and carrying them all into eternity.

They decided, in the end, to all spring forward at the same moment. The professor would no doubt forget, for the moment, that they were on the moon, and would not look for that method of attack. Anyhow, it was the only thing they could do. It was a desperate bid for deliverance, and they did not hesitate. Even if they got wounded, it would be better than being left to die on the moon, with no hope of succour.

"Palgrave!" called Gresham.

"Well?"

"We're going to have a palavar. Will you wait a moment?"

"Certainly," replied the scientist, instantly relaxing his vigilance.

It was what Gresham had wanted—what he had counted upon. For a moment he pretended to be in close conversation with his younger companions. Then he whispered "now!" Almost simultaneously the four hurled themselves upwards. Then, Crack! Crack!

A bullet clipped a piece of skin from Mac's right ear as he sailed through space, and Frank heard a droning noise beside him. The next second, before Palgrave could again draw trigger, they were all four standing upon the tiny platform outside the conning-tower. Seeing that he was likely to be frustrated, the professor dashed through the open doorway, and had almost shut it before Gresham recovered his balance.

"Quick, Frank!" he cried in anguish. And he hurled himself against the massive door. His action probably saved all their lives, for it held the door open a couple of inches while Frank and Mac came to his assistance. Then, with Abbie's great strength to help them, the opening of the door was a simple matter.

They all crowded into the conning-tower, knowing not what to expect, and beheld the professor's small figure lying prone on the floor, breathing stertorously. His two revolvers lay close beside him; he was as pale as death. Gresham wiped his brow.

"Well," he said, "that five minutes was quite as exciting as I should wish for. I wonder what possessed the professor to act in that manner?"

"It lukes tae me," Mac exclaimed, "as if the mon had taken leave of his senses for a short time. He wouldna' ha' done that otherwise—in his right mind he's the straightest mon as ever lived."

"I think you're right, Mac," the inventor said. "And now, Abbie, help to carry him to his room, while I make up a draught from the medicine-chest."

(Continued on page iv of cover.)

"Right, sah!"

Half an hour later Professor Montague Palgrave opened his eyes and stared about him in amazement. He declared that he had no recollection of anything that had happened since they started walking towards the Solar Monarch after escaping from the rat-like animals. It was quite plain he was telling the truth, and his relief when assured that he had done no damage to Mac's ear was genuine. He was greatly distressed and perturbed at having made such an exhibition of himself.

But the others told him not to worry. After the medicine given him by Gresham he felt perfectly right again, and was able to join them in the saloon at tea. He could not understand his sudden lapse from sanity into madness. Mac suggested that it might be the moon's atmosphere, and they all laughed. It was presumed that the scientist's brain had got so excited when holding the ship, that when it came to the flight he could not stand it; therefore he swooned off.

After tea, having seen that everything was in order, Gresham started the Solar Monarch once more, and they shook the dust of the moon from their feet. Gresham had endeavoured to direct the projectile towards Venus, the nearest planet, and, having been flying through space for a matter of three hours he noted, with satisfaction, that he had succeeded. The professor was particularly pleased with the change of plans.

"It will take us some little time to reach Venus," the inventor said. "But, of course, we will travel at a much, much faster rate than two thousand miles an hour."

"How far is Venus, then?" Mac, who was lolling in an easy chair, asked lazily.

"As near as I can judge, some twenty-five millions of miles," returned Gresham. "and it is, as you know, an 'inferior' planet. That is to say, it travels on its orbit round the sun within the orbit of the earth."

"Then the sun'll seem to be larger from Venus?"

"Most decidedly. And that leads me to believe that it will be almost unbearably hot on Venus—I don't say that we shall be unable to land. It is an acknowledged fact that a dense atmosphere envelopes the planet's globe, and if we discover that to be the case, the Solar Monarch will find no difficulty in flying."

"I wonder what it will be like," the professor said thoughtfully. "Will there be trees, and grass, as on the earth?"

"My dear professor," smiled Gresham, "you won't have so very long to wait before you see for yourself."

"Hello," he added, glancing out of one of the saloon windows, "it's getting dark, if I'm not mistaken."

"By Jove, so it is," exclaimed Frank, jumping up and crossing the room. "Look, the sun's disappeared behind the earth. How long will it be dark for, do you think, Mr. Gresham?"

"I couldn't tell you, my lad," said the inventor, laying his hand affectionately on Frank's shoulder. "It certainly cannot be for very long."

Half an hour later it was practically dark, and the adventurers, Abbie included, were in the conning-tower, lost in admiration and awe at the magnificence of the spectacle before them. Never had they seen the sky so clear. The stars all seemed like miniature moons and shone steadily and brightly. Over to the left could be seen Mars. It was huge in size and shone redly. Looking at all these things in silence brought home to the crew of the Solar Monarch what puny little things they were—what a puny little thing the earth was—in comparison to the thousands and thousands of worlds and suns all around them. They were as nothing—an infinitesimal scrap of the universe.

The sky was literally full of stars—an ordinary inhabitant of the earth could not conceive of the spectacle Gresham and his companions looked upon that night. It was magnificent—superb! Every star and planet looked as if it was hanging there—hanging on nothing. Suddenly Mac broke the stillness—a stillness that could be felt, for in outer space there was nothing to hear; the very ship itself never giving a creak or groan.

"Luke there!" cried the Scot, pointing out of the window. "What d'ye call that?"

"By George," ejaculated the professor, "it's a comet of some description—and a large one at that. Do you recognise it Gresham?"

"Not for the moment," said the inventor, gazing at the object of their remarks. "No, I cannot place it."

They all looked earnestly at the gigantic comet which had come into view. Its tail was half-curved, and underneath it another comet—doubtless at one time part and parcel of itself—travelled. An hour or two later the sun appeared again and most of the stars dwindled and were extinguished. Not so the planets, however. Every one of them was clearly visible from Mercury to Neptune; and Venus, ahead, was for all the world looking like the moon itself. Suddenly an exclamation came from Frank and he laughed.

(To be continued.)