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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

"**B**UCK up, my sons!" I said briskly.

"Dear old boy, we are already waitin'," observed Sir Montie Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez. "It is a glorious day, an' I have an idea that we shall spend a really rippin' Bank Holiday!"

"Yes, rather!" said Tommy Watson. "We're going out on the giddy spree! We're going to hob-nob with 'Arry and 'Arriet on 'Ampstead 'Eath——"

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie severely. "I am surprised at you, Tommy, boy! I am really! You are droppin' your aitches in the most shockin' manner——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, dear fellows——"

"Tommy was doing it on purpose," I grinned. "On Easter Monday a chap gets into the habit of referring to Hampstead as 'Ampstead. Well, if you fellows are ready, I am. We don't want to be late for our appointment."

The day was perfect. The sun shone brilliantly in through the windows of Nelson Lee's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road, and there was an air of gaiety and good cheer about London which was infectious.

For London was on holiday. It was Easter Monday, and all work was being put aside. The weather, contrary to general expectation, had turned out to be beautiful. The day was like summer.

Sir Montie and Tommy had arrived at Gray's Inn Road the evening before, in readiness for the day's plans. St. Frank's, of course, was closed for the holidays, and all the fellows were scattered throughout the country, at their respective homes.

But a certain number of Remove juniors had decided upon a scheme for Easter Monday. That scheme was to spend a royal time on Hampstead Heath—just for the fun of it. The experience would be new to most of the juniors, and they were all looking forward to it. Some of them had thought that it would be too common—too undignified; but I soon knocked that idea out of their heads.

There would be a round dozen of us—Tregellis-West, Watson and myself; Handforth and Church and McClure; Pitt and Grey and Tucker; De Valerie, Fatty Little, and the Hon. Douglas Singleton. The latter nine had agreed to meet us on the Heath itself.

"Well, boys, getting ready to go?" asked Nelson Lee genially, strolling into the consulting-room. "You've got lovely weather, at all events! I hope you will thoroughly enjoy yourselves."

"Not much doubt about that, guv'nor!" I said cheerfully. "We're going out on the spree, and we can't help enjoying ourselves on a day like this. But what about you? Where do you come in?"

"Well, I'm afraid I should be rather in the way," smiled Nelson Lee. "You boys won't want a master with you—"

"Rats!" I interrupted. "At St. Frank's you may be the Housemaster of the Ancient House, sir; but it's holiday time now, and you're just yourself. So if you come along we shall all be merry together!"

"Begad! That's quite right, sir!"

"We'd love you to come, sir!"

"It's very nice of you to say so, boys; and I quite believe that you really mean it," said Nelson Lee, lighting a cigarette. But you are to meet a number of other juniors, and I have an idea that they will have a different view. You see, they will be restrained in my presence, and I should be a good deal in the way—"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Not at all, sir!"

"It's all right, you chaps!" I said. "The guv'nor doesn't want to come—that's the truth of it. I expect he's going to hobnob at the club—laze about in big chairs, smoking and gossiping. Personally, I think it's a rotten way to spend a bank holiday; but we shall have to let him have his own way."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Your powers of imagination, my dear Nipper, are quite remarkable," he said. "As a matter of fact, I was not thinking of going to the club, and would rather welcome a little change on Hampstead Heath. There is nothing which delights me more than to see crowds of merry people enjoying themselves, and I may as well inform you at once that I shall go to Hampstead."

"Good!"

"At the same time, I shall leave you boys to yourselves—until the afternoon, at least," proceeded the guv'nor. "We will meet, say, at three o'clock, and spend an hour together before I carry you off to tea."

"Fine, sir!" I exclaimed. "I didn't know you were going to do the honours like that. It'll be topping!"

"Yes, rather, begad!"

"Jolly decent of you, sir!"

"Don't be in such a hurry, my lads," smiled Nelson Lee. "I intend

to take you all to tea in the West End, and after that we will visit a theatre. I intend to book all the seats well in advance. And I shall have to hurry myself, too, or everything will be booked up. However, I dare say I can manage to work it somehow."

This was a complete surprise, and we were delighted. It would be splendid to finish up the day with a theatre, and it was just like Nelson Lee to abandon his own pleasure for the sake of us.

Very shortly afterwards we departed, having arranged with the guv'nor to meet him at a certain spot on the Heath at three o'clock. We should have heaps of time, before then, to have a regular orgy of swinging and cocoanut-shying, and all manner of other pastimes.

We walked down Gray's Inn Road, reached Holborn, and then turned to the right, our destination being the Chancery Lane Tube Station.

Here we booked for Hampstead, and, after one or two changes, finally got into the underground train, which romped us along to Hampstead Station. The train was pretty full with other people, who were bent on similar intent.

I knew my way about pretty well, for there was hardly a corner of London with which I was not acquainted. And, once in the open air, I was able to lead my chums straight on to the Heath.

But before doing this we had our appointment to keep.

The other nine juniors had arranged to meet us at Hampstead Tube Station, and when we arrived we found that we were first in the field. There was no sign of any of the others.

"Lazy hounders!" exclaimed Watson, as we stood out in the bright sunshine. "It's past the time for the appointment now. I thought we should be the last of anybody. I suppose they know the exact place?"

"They can't mistake it," I replied. "There's only one Hampstead Tube Station, and it's not likely that they'd clear off without us. It's only five minutes past the time, so we must—Hullo! Do I observe a familiar figure, or do I not? Gaze upon it, my sons!"

It was looking in the direction of a confectioner's shop, and Sir Montie and Tommy looked that way, too. A fat figure had just emerged—a fat figure in white flannel trousers, a grey sports coat, and a straw hat.

"Fatty!" grinned Watson. "I'm

blessed if he isn't feeding himself, and to be late! I vote we go off without I expect he only had breakfast a couple of hours ago!"

We waved our hands, and Fatty Little, of the St. Frank's Remove, saw us at once. He came over, hastily stuffing a bag into his pocket.

"Hallo, you chaps!" he said cheerfully. "I've been here for twenty minutes, and I thought you were never coming——"

"And I suppose you got so hungry that you had to console yourself with pastry?" I broke in. "You won't be able to get anything on the Heath, you know. There's no grub to be bought there!" I added, winking at my chums.

The fat boy looked dismayed.

"No—no grub!" he echoed. "Great doughnuts! A fellow can't enjoy himself unless he can get plenty to eat. I didn't have much for breakfast this morning—only eggs and bacon and fish and a piece of steak and rolls and two or three scones, and some toast and marmalade, and bread and cheese to finish with——"

"Poor chap!" I said sympathetically. "No wonder you look half-starved!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's all very well to laugh," said Fatty, shaking his head. "But when a fellow's got a big capacity, he's got to feed it. I sha'n't be really satisfied until I've had a good feed. A chap can't start the day properly with only a snack!"

"Begad!" ejaculated Montie. "Do you mean that the eggs an' the fish an' the steak an' the other things amounted to nothin' more than a snack?"

"That's all," said Fatty.

"Dear old boy, what do you call a good meal, then?" asked Montie. "I shall be frightfully interested to know, I shall, really."

Fatty was about to make a reply when three lusty yells drew our attention. Turning round, we beheld Handforth and Church and McClure, of Study D. Almost immediately afterwards, Pitt and Co. appeared—that is to say, Reginald Pitt, Jack Grey, and Timothy Tucker. They all joined us.

"All here?" asked Handforth briskly.

"I can't see Singleton, and there doesn't seem to be any sign of De Valerie——"

"They haven't turned up yet," I explained.

"Of all the nerve!" said Handforth indignantly. "Like their giddy cheek

'em."

"Oh, don't be an ass, Handy," said Church. "We're late ourselves, if it comes to that."

"Rats!" said Handforth, pulling out his watch. "We've fixed the time for ten-thirty, and it's exactly twenty-nine minutes past ten now. Look! I'll punch your nose if you say we're late."

Half-a-dozen watches were pulled out with great promptitude, and half-a-dozen watches agreed that the time was eighteen minutes to eleven.

"I told you your blessed turnip was slow," said McClure. "You nearly caused a scene in the train because I——"

"I don't care what you say—and I don't care what these other watches say," roared Handforth obstinately. "I put my watch right by Big Ben yesterday—so it must be right! You're not going to tell me Big Ben is wrong, I suppose?"

"No, but your ticker has had plenty of time to get slow between now and yesterday," said Pitt. "But we won't argue. We don't want to shock the inhabitants of Hampstead by presenting them with the spectacle of nine fellows bumping a tenth in the dust."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared.

"If anybody tries to bump me, I'll ——"

What he meant to say was lost, for just then the Hon. Douglas Singleton and De Valerie joined the party, and we were complete. Handforth was not allowed to talk much longer—or, at least, nobody took any notice of him.

Neither did anybody take any notice of Fatty Little, who insisted upon visiting the confectioners once more. He was so insistent, in fact, that he finally left us, and we were not aware of his absence until a moment or two had passed.

Then Grey called a halt, and we looked round.

Fatty had vanished.

"The greedy bounder!" I said grimly. "There's only one possible place where he can be—and that's in the tuck shop over there. This way, my children."

We marched into the confectioners, seized Fatty, and hauled him out by force. It was the only way to make sure of him.

"You—you silly asses," roared the fat boy. "I'd only just started——"

"Can't be helped!"

"And I'd paid for a great pile of stuff

"Good!"

"It's mine, I tell you——"

"Not now," I said grimly. "You've made a present of it to the shopkeeper, my son. We'll keep our eyes on you in future."

Fatty groaned, and he was compelled to walk in the centre of us—something like a prisoner with a bodyguard. He had no opportunity of slipping off unawares. One might have supposed that he had starved for a week, to judge from his moans and lamentations.

At last we arrived on the Heath—right in the centre of the festivities, so to speak. The day being so fine, the Heath was crowded with all manner of people. Children were like flies, shouting, shrieking, laughing.

People from Peckham, people from Putney, people from Tooting, people from Woolwich, people from Islington, in fact, people from every quarter of London. It was a vast, cosmopolitan gathering of laughing, happy men, women, and children.

The noise, of course, was deafening.

The shouts of the sideshowmen, the blare of roundabout mechanical orchestras, the yells of laughter round the cocoanut shies—all blended to make a huge, unmusical din.

But nobody cared. Noise was to be expected—noise was wanted. Without it, the whole place would have been dead and unnatural.

For some time we wandered about, interested in all we saw—interested in the happy crowds. Costers were there in plenty, with their gaudy costumes, their pearl buttons, and their gay feathers. 'Arry and 'Arriet had come to Hampstead in full force.

Needless to say, there were thousands of other people, too. Honest, working folk, out for the day with the kiddies; middle-class families, enjoying the novelty of the scene; and quite a number of well-dressed, moneyed people mingled with the crowds, as happy as anybody.

"By Jove! This is ripping, you know," remarked Pitt. "I can see we're going to enjoy ourselves to-day."

"Rather!"

"We ought to make a kind of programme," went on Pitt. "I vote we try the giddy roundabouts first, then

have a shot at the cocoanuts, and then make a round of the sideshows."

"Any old thing you like," I said.

"What about this merry-go-round here? It's not so big as some of the others, but it seems more exciting."

I indicated an affair which was described as the most wonderful roundabout in the world. It was provided with imitation motor-scooters, and the "course" consisted of a circular track with many sharp hills and valleys.

It was, of course, driven by steam from the centre, but it was a novelty, and broke away from the conventional roundabout with mock motor-cars or horses.

"'Ere you are, ladies an' gents!" belowered a man who stood in front. "Only a tanner a time—the most excitin' ride you ever 'ad in your natural! Just starting! Walk up, and take your places! A tanner's the price for everybody!"

"Shall we chance it?" grinned Pitt.

"Yes, rather!"

"I'm game, dear old boys, although I'm awfully afraid that I shall get my collar ruffled," said Tregellis-West. "I'll do anythin' you do, begad!"

We paid our sixpences, and took our places.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE ROUNDABOUTS.

TROUBLE followed.

This, of course, was only natural. It must be remembered that Handforth was there; and Handforth's presence anywhere generally meant trouble.

The roundabout filled up, and the signal was given to start. I found the scooter quite comfortable. There was a seat and handlebars, and the thing ran along on two rubber-tyred wheels. There was no spook about it. It really worked, although, naturally, it was fixed by iron bars to the centre, and went with all the other scooters.

Hoot-hoot!

The central engine gave a hoarse whistle, and we started. Slowly at first, then with gathering speed. Down the slopes, up the sharp inclines, over the crest, and then down again. It was a somewhat dizzy joy-ride.

"Begad!" gasped Montie. "This is frightfully excitin', old boys. Whoop!

Great Scot! I nearly went over that time!"

He had turned for a moment, in order to speak to me, and a sudden lurch nearly sent him flying. It was necessary to hang on tight, in order to prevent mishaps. There was no danger, in any case. If any joy-rider was rash enough to fall off, he—or she—would merely skitter down a smooth slope to the outside, and alight peacefully at the feet of the on-lookers.

"Ripping sport, I call it," grinned Church, as he whirled round. "I'm going to have another sixpenn'orth on this contraption!"

"Rather!" agreed McClure.

Handforth, who was on the scooter just ahead, glanced round for a moment, being far more reckless than Montie, and being quite confident, moreover, that he would be able to keep his balance under any circumstances. He actually stood up and only held on with one hand.

"Rats!" he shouted. "I don't think much of it! I'm blessed if I'm going to waste another tanner on a kid's thing like this."

Actually, of course, Edward Oswald revelled in the experience, but it was his nature to disagree with everything his chums said. It was very remarkable if Handforth and Co. ever agreed on any one point. Handy always took a particular delight in contradicting Church and McClure—or, for that matter, in contradicting anybody.

When Handforth turned, his particular scooter was just on the top of an incline, so the next second he plunged down into the sharpest dip of the whole course. And then things happened.

"Look out, young shaver!" roared the man in charge.

But it was too late. Handforth lurched forward, toppled completely over the handle-bars, and grabbed at the occupant of the next scooter—who happened to be Fatty Little.

Handforth just succeeded in gaining a hold, and held on desperately for a brief second.

Then he was pitched clean out, and fell at the feet of two young ladies who were watching the roundabouts.

"Oh!" howled Handforth. "Yaroo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's not the way to do it, mate!"

"Try another time, sonny!"

Handforth sat up, rather dazed.

"You—you silly idiots!" he roared, glaring. "Why the dickens didn't you — Great pip! I—I—I—"

Handforth paused in the utmost confusion, for he had suddenly become aware of the fact that he was sitting at the feet of two extremely pretty young ladies, and they were decidedly amused, and showed it. Handforth was terribly self-conscious in the presence of the gentler sex.

"My—my goodness!" he gasped.

He picked himself up and fled, and was followed by a roar of laughter. But, meanwhile, other rather exciting incidents had been taking place—on the roundabout.

For Handforth had caused a catastrophe.

Fatty Little, thrown off his balance by Handy's sudden grip, flung all his weight upon the handle bars. These were not intended for such use. The whole scooter, in fact, had never been designed to carry people of Fatty's weight.

The contraption gave two ominous cracks, and then burst aside, precipitating Fatty Little down with a terrific bang.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaroo!" roared Fatty wildly. "Great cocoanuts! I—I— Yow!"

The following scooter, being a fixture with the others, naturally overtook the fat boy in less than a couple of seconds. It was empty, being the one which Handforth had just vacated—and Fatty clung to it in sheer desperation. But again his weight proved too much.

Crack! Smash!

The second scooter went.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stop!" bellowed the proprietor wildly. "Jim, you fool, why don't you shut off steam?"

For a moment there was wild confusion, and then the roundabout came to a standstill.

Fatty Little picked himself up, panting.

"Great doughnuts!" he gasped. "I—I thought it was all up that time! I'm blessed if I know what happened—"

"You young rascal!" roared the proprietor. "You'll have to pay for this 'ere damage or 'ave the law on you! I shall be ruined—"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "there's no need to get excited."

"No need to get excited!" bellowed the proprietor. "What's to become of me now? I can't run this 'ere thing all smashed up, I suppose? I was a blamed fool to let that helephant get on at all!"

"Are you calling me an elephant?" demanded Fatty warmly.

"Yes, I am!" snapped the man. "I must have been blind to let you on—a great, fat, 'ulking lubber like you! Smashing up my property! You'll have to pay the damage, young shaver——"

"We're not called upon to pay any damage," I broke in curtly. "The whole affair was an accident, and it's lucky for you nobody was hurt. If you'd only adopt a civil attitude we might be inclined to help you."

The man's manner changed.

"I didn't mean to be rude, young sir," he said apologetically. "But you can see 'ow it his. This 'ere affair is all I've got, and Bank 'Oliday is the only day when I takes a fair amount of brass. This 'ere accident will cost me quids——"

"Nonsense!" I interrupted. "It won't take me ten minutes to repair those two scooters—or you can cut them out altogether, and carry on without them. What's the amount of the damage?"

"Ten quid!" said the man promptly.

"Great bloaters!" gasped Fatty. "Tut—ten quid! Why, I've only got two quid altogether! I can't afford to pay all that. Besides, it wasn't my fault! That silly ass of a Handforth——"

"Don't you worry, Fatty," I broke in, being compelled to speak rather loudly, owing to the huge crowd which pressed round. "This gentleman says the damage amounts to ten pounds. Of course, we can take about eighty per cent. of that off——"

"What?" shouted the proprietor.

"And we'll pay you two," I said smoothly. "You ought to think yourself jolly lucky for getting anything."

"'Ear, 'ear!" exclaimed a burly gentleman in the crowd. "You ain't obliged to pay nothin', kids."

The proprietor fumed.

"I want ten quid," he roared, "and if I don't get it——"

"Here's the two," I said, passing over a couple of notes. "Do you want it?"

"You silly young fool!" roared the man. "I ain't going to take nothing less than ten!"

"I'll give you ten seconds to take it or leave it," I said. "Do just as you like—but you'd better buck up and decide."

"Look 'ere, I don't want none of this bunkum——"

"Four—five—six——"

"I won't accept no two bloomin' quid——"

"Eight—nine—ten!" I concluded. "All right, we won't pay anything——"

"'Old 'ard, young gent," gasped the proprietor. "I'll have that two quid—but you're simply robbing a pore man—that's what you're doin'. I might 'ave took five more quid by this time. I shall be ruined afore the day's out!"

We pushed our way through the crowd, and we noticed that within five minutes the roundabout was going at full swing again, and doing roaring business. The proprietor had been very lucky in getting the two pounds.

"He didn't jolly well deserve it," declared Pitt. "And where the dickens has Handforth got to? He ought to pay that money?"

"Of course he ought," said the Hon. Douglas Singleton. "He pulled Fatty off the bally scooter, you know. But I don't suppose the poor chap can afford all that lot, so I vote we go shares—it'll only be three-and-fourpence each, among the twelve of us."

"Marvellous!" grinned De Valerie. "How did you get that in your head so quickly? Whack out, my sons!"

They all whacked out—with the exception of Handforth and Co. Church and McClure had vanished, and we guessed that they had gone in search of the elusive Handforth. It was not such a difficult matter to find him.

He had retired behind a tent, and was in the act of brushing himself down when Church and McClure spotted him. They were some little distance away, and they grinned as they moved forward through the crowd.

"There he is, the dotty ass!" said Church. "We shall have terrible trouble with him before we're through the day. I shouldn't be surprised if he ends up in a giddy police-station!"

McClure nodded.

"He's bound to assault somebody before long," he said. "He'll get punching a few noses, there'll be a free fight, and Handy will either finish the day in the lock-up, or in the giddy hospital."

And, with these gloomy views, Church

and McClure picked their way through the throng towards their ram-headed leader.

But before they reached him something else occurred. Handforth had just finished brushing himself down, and he straightened up, red in the face, and still somewhat confused. He discovered that a young gentleman of about five years of age was regarding him with that frank and open curiosity which is peculiar to extreme youth.

"Hallo!" said the young gentleman cheerfully.

Handforth glared.

"Who the dickens are you?" he growled.

"Me?" said the youngster. "I'm Bobby!"

"Well, look here, Bobby, you can buzz off!" said Handforth gruffly. "Don't you know it's rude to stand staring like that? What are you looking at?"

"You!" said Bobby, promptly.

"Oh! And am I so interesting?" demanded Handforth, with sarcasm.

"You look awful funny!" said the young gentleman frankly. "You've got such a funny face, you have!"

Handforth's funny face grew redder.

"You cheeky little bounder!" he roared. "If you don't clear off I'll punch your nose—I—I mean, I'll give you a good slapping!"

Church and McClure had come up in the rear, and they paused, listening, and grinning hugely. They were in a kind of backwater, away from the amusement-seeking crowd. The little boy was by no means an urchin. He was very tastefully attired in a little suit of blue velvet, with a white lace collar. Upon his head was perched a little blue knitted cap, and his feet were encased in patent leather shoes, with big silver buckles.

He continued to regard Handforth with much calmness.

"You wouldn't slap me," he declared. "Big boys like you don't hit little boys like me. Wouldn't be fair. Besides, your face is such a funny one—you don't look as if you could hit anybody, really. Have one of my sweets, will you?"

Handforth was in a bit of a fix.

"Look here, my son, you'd better buzz off while you're safe," he said grimly.

"I'm not in the best of tempers, and I don't want any of your rotten sweets. Understand? Where's your mother?"

"My mummie's dead!" said Bobby.

"Oh! I'm sorry, kid——"

"Sides, my sweets ain't rotten," went on Bobby, who didn't seem to feel the loss of his mother very acutely. "They're nice sweets. Please have one, big boy. I like you. My mummie died when I was a tiny baby. I don't 'member at all. I don't 'member my daddy, either. I live with Auntie——"

"My dear kid, I'm not interested in your family history," interrupted Handforth. "I'll take one of your blessed sweets, and then you can toddle off. And here's a penny for your giddy nerve!"

Bobby shook his head.

"Got plenty pennies," he said. "Auntie told me I mustn't take money from anybody. 'Tisn't right."

He extended a sticky bag for Handforth's selection, and the Removite chose one of the sweets and half turned round—his intention being to toss the sticky sweet away, while pretending to eat it. And he caught sight of his grinning chums.

"Your little brother?" inquired Church blandly.

"Silly ass!" snapped Handforth. "I don't know who the kid is. He started jawing to me, and he's stuck here ever since. The young duffer will get lost if he's not careful——"

"Bobby!" came an imperative feminine voice.

"That's Auntie!" exclaimed Bobby cheerfully. "I been hiding. Let me get behind you, big boy! I like playin' with Auntie."

Bobby dodged behind Handforth, and grasped Handy's fist with his sticky fingers. The leader of Study D was rather helpless, and he mentally resolved to punch Church and McClure into the middle of next week as soon as he got free. What on earth they could see to grin at was beyond his comprehension.

"Me hidin' now!" whispered Bobby gleefully.

A refined-looking lady approached, smiling good-naturedly. She was well dressed, and carried a sunshade.

"Now, Bobby," she said reprovingly. "You shouldn't bother the young gentleman like this. Come here at once."

Bobby sprang out abruptly.

"Boo!" he exclaimed, with triumph.

"I do hope the little man hasn't been annoying you?" said his aunt, smiling at Handforth. "I'm afraid he is rather forward with strangers. The young rascal ran away from me, and I was quite nervous for a moment or two."

"That's all right, madam," said Handforth, in his best manner. "I thought the little kiddy was lost. He certainly seems to have a lot to say for himself."

He raised his hat, and Bobby was being led away when he turned.

"Goo'-bye. Me going now, big boy!"

"Thank goodness!" said Handforth, under his breath.

"Bobby want to kiss you!" said the young gentleman boldly.

"What!" gasped Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure roared—discreetly.

"I—I say, there's no need to kiss me!" said Handforth, in alarm, eyeing Bobby's somewhat sticky mouth with apprehension.

"You must come along now, Bobby dear," said his aunt firmly. "The young gentleman doesn't want you to kiss him. You mustn't be so naughty."

"Please, Auntie, I want to kiss big boy!" said Bobby tearfully.

Handforth was mortally afraid of a scene, so he dived down, grabbed Bobby, planted a kiss on his forehead which nearly knocked Bobby over, and drew a breath of relief.

"There you are!" he said. "You can buzz off now!"

Bobby was led away, and the last Handforth saw of him was a sticky hand waving energetically in the air.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "If this is the kind of thing you get at Hampstead Heath, I wish I'd never come!"

"You ass!" grinned Church. "You ought to feel complimented."

"Eh?"

"The kid recognised your manly charm," went on Church, winking at McClure. "As soon as he saw your face he couldn't help speaking to you. He had a tremendous desire to make pals. It's just a proof of your natural beauty."

"Well, of course, there's that about it," he admitted, totally unaware of the fact that his leg was being pulled. "It's surprising how kids take to me, you know. I suppose there's something about my face that attracts their attention?"

"Quite possibly," said McClure, manfully holding back a desire to yell.

"Well, let's change the subject," remarked Church. "What was the idea of buzzing off like this as soon as you'd done your best to mix Fatty up in the works of that roundabout?"

"You—you fathead!" snapped Handforth. "I didn't touch Fatty——"

"Yes, you did, and you made him smash two of those blessed scooters!" said Church. "Nipper had to give the chap two quid to square him."

"I didn't think Nipper was such an ass," sniffed Handforth. "A rotten thing like that oughtn't to be allowed on the Heath—that roundabout, I mean. Where are all the other chaps?"

"Looking for us, I expect."

"All right—let 'em look," said Handforth. "There's a jolly fine cocoanut shy just over there. I vote we go and try our luck."

"But we can't leave the others——"

"Oh, they'll find us," said Handforth. "I don't see the fun of wasting a lot of time by pushing about in these crowds. Come on! Let's try and win some cocoanuts! I'll bet anything you like I do some damage!"

"I'll bet you will!" said Church with conviction; "but not to the cocoanuts!"

He added the latter part of his sentence under his breath, which was just as well, for Handforth was feeling ready to punch any nose at the first flimsy excuse. He certainly felt like exerting himself somehow—his safety valve had to blow off. So he decided to expend his surplus steam at the cocoanut shy.

He and his two chums made their way to the place after a moment or two. They were all rather hot, for the sun was burning, and there was no shelter whatever from its sweltering rays. The day was almost like mid-summer.

The cocoanut shy was a big one, and the two men in charge were shouting out at the top of their voices, inviting custom. Perhaps this was necessary, for the charge was rather high—fourpence per ball.

But the cocoanuts, arrayed on the stumps at the end of the shy, looked large, and easy to dislodge.

"I'll have a bob's worth," said Handforth. "We don't want more than three cocoanuts!"

McClure grinned.

"You ass!" he said. "You won't get three bull's-eyes!"

"Anyhow, you have your shot first," said Church. "We'll try our hand afterwards. Go it, Handy!"

Handforth paid his shilling, and received three of the heavy wooden balls. Then he removed his coat and hat, and

got ready. It was quite evident that he meant business. The crowd looked on with great interest.

"Lumme, mate, we're goin' to see sumfink nah!" remarked a gentleman with pearl buttons decorating his waistcoat in profusion. "I reckon that young swell won't 'arf make the fur fly!"

Handforth grasped one of the balls firmly.

"Now, watch!" he said impressively.

Church and McClure and the crowd watched. For the time being there were no other people taking shies, and Handforth had the field to himself. He rather liked an audience on such an occasion, for he meant to show his prowess.

He was just about to make his throw when I strolled up with my chums and the rest of the crowd. We all grinned.

"Oh, here they are," remarked Pitt. "Patronising the giddy cocoanut shy! My hat! Handy looks as though he means to do good things."

"If he hits a cocoanut, it'll be a miracle!" grinned De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth heard the roar, and he glanced round.

"I don't want any rot from you chaps!" he bawled. "You'd better keep out of this affair, my sons! If you want any giddy cocoanuts, you'll have to knock some down for yourselves! I'm on the job now."

"Go it, Handy!" I chuckled.

"Begad! I really fear that I should be quite useless at this game," observed Montie, shaking his head. "It's too frightfully onergetic—to say nothin' of bein' detrimental to a fellow's clobber, begad!"

"Watch!" I murmured.

Handforth prepared himself. He stepped back, made several wild leaps and bounds, as though he were intent upon tying himself into knots, and then he flung the first ball.

"My—my goodness!" said Handforth blankly.

"Where's the cocoanut?" grinned Church. "I don't see——"

"If you want your nose punched, Walter Church, you'd better say so!" roared Handforth. "A chap can make a slip, I suppose? I'll show you something different this time! If I don't knock a cocoanut off, I'll eat my hat!"

He went through the same performance as before, and—whizz!—went the second ball. This one was slightly nearer the mark, but hopelessly wide, nevertheless. And the crowd roared with fresh amusement.

"Better let me try the next one, Handy," said McClure. "I'll chuck it while you eat this."

"Eh?" said Handy. "Eat which?"

"Your hat!" grinned McClure. "You promised to eat it——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Smack!

Handforth's fist smote McClure violently, and that youth went down with a howl.

"Yaroooh!" he roared. "You—you silly ass!"

"'Ere, none o' that, young gent!" said the man in charge. "We can't allow no fightin' 'ere——"

"Fighting — who's fighting?" demanded Handforth warmly. "I can punch a chum on the nose if I like, I suppose? You mind your own blessed business! I'm going to knock that central cocoanut off now!"

He hurled the third ball with terrific force, and it whizzed with unerring aim—not towards the central cocoanut, but towards the youth at the back of the shy, whose duty it was to pick up the spent balls and toss them back. This youth gave a wild gasp, leapt into the air, and received the ball in his chest.

"Yow-ow!" he yelled desperately.

But he wasn't hurt much, and he picked himself up, looking decidedly aggressive. It was just as well that he had jumped, or he would have received the ball on his head.

"Seems to me you went for the wrong cocoanut, mate," remarked the pearly gentleman, grinning broadly. "I reckon you must have had a grudge agin him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Turn that silly young fool away!" howled the injured youth. "I ain't goin' to stand here and be half killed! Don't

CHAPTER III.

TROUBLE FOR HANDY.

W HIZZ! Handforth's ball shot down with terrific force, but missed every cocoanut by yards—flying very high, and only just catching the tall canvas sheet at the back.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

you let him have no more balls, guv'nor! The kid's dangerous!"

The proprietor nodded.

"You'd best give up, young man," he said. "We can't afford to waste no more time like this 'ere. Now, then, who wants a shy? Three balls for a bob! Walk up, ladies and gents, and try your luck!"

Handforth glared.

"Hold on!" he roared. "I haven't finished yet!"

"Yes, you 'ave——"

"Rats! Here's two bob!" said Handforth grimly. "I want six more balls!"

"Go it, young 'un!" said somebody in the crowd. "That's the style!"

"Don't you let 'im 'ave them balls, guv'nor!" shouted the youth at the back.

But the guv'nor was not inclined to refuse two shillings—even at the risk of killing his nervous assistant. He pocketed the silver, gave Handforth six more balls, and turned.

"You'd best git well on one side, Bert!" he shouted. "Let the kid 'ave his whack! 'E's spendin' 'is money, anyhow!"

"The chap's quite frank about it, at all events," remarked the Hon. Douglas. "He knows there's very little chance of Handy winning a cocoanut!"

Handforth was steeled to great efforts. He had thrown the ball somewhat wildly at first, being influenced by the audience. He had just wanted to show what he could do, and now that he had failed to create a good impression, he was more than ever determined to make good.

And this time he was more cautious. He didn't throw himself about so much, and hurled the ball with far less velocity.

Whizz—crack!

A cocoanut, hit squarely in the centre, toppled over and rolled to the ground. Handforth turned, triumphant.

"How's that?" he demanded.

"Out!" grinned Church.

"Bowled first ball!" chuckled Pitt.

"Middle stump!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bravo, kid!" said the gentleman with the pearl buttons.

The proprietor was not looking so confident, but he regarded the incident as a fluke. The cocoanut was rolled up, and Church took charge of it.

Again Handforth had a shot. He failed, but went near the mark. The third ball was successful again. It struck a cocoanut with such force that the nut

was cracked up, but the pieces were hurled forward by the youth.

"I'll show you!" said Handforth grimly.

Whizz—whizz—whizz!

He sent his last three balls down in quick succession, and whether by pure luck or skilful aiming, the fact remained that three cocoanuts were dislodged in lightning succession.

"Well, I'm 'anged!" said the proprietor blankly.

Handforth had secured five cocoanuts for his three shillings—which was a most excellent record, considering. The crowd roared with approval and laughter, and this encouraged the leader of Study D to further efforts.

"I'll have another two bobs' worth," he said.

"No, you won't, young shaver!" declared the proprietor firmly. "You won't 'ave no more, not while I'm in charge! If you ain't satisfied with five prime nuts, you ought to be. I can't afford to lose a nut for every ball! The bloomin' things cost me a bob each—so I've lost on your deal!"

"Yes, but look here——" began Handforth.

"Chuck it, Handy; you've had your whack!" said Church. "You've covered yourself with glory, so why spoil it? You mightn't have such good luck next time, and then the crowd would grin at you again, instead of gazing with open admiration!"

Handforth took the advice, and redonned his jacket and hat. He and his two chums came through the crowd, with cocoanuts all over them.

"Ain't you going to have a shot?" demanded Handforth.

"No, thanks!" I grinned. "Your exhibition was terrific, old son, and it's rather too hot for such strenuous exercise. Besides, what should we do with all the cocoanuts? We can't even eat all these."

But one or two of the juniors did not agree with my view, and they proceeded to spend some of their money at the shy. Only two more nuts were added to the pile, however, although a good many shillings were spent. It was certainly a paying game—for the owner of the shy.

"Well, what's the next move?" asked Pitt cheerfully. "We're enjoying ourselves fine, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to try the swings."

"Yes, rather!" said Handforth. "That's what I was going to suggest."
 "Anything you like," I said. "They've got some ripping swings just over the rise, and—Hullo! What's become of T.T.?"

The others looked round. And for the first time we became aware of the fact that Timothy Tucker was no longer with us.

"He can't be long gone," remarked Grey. "I saw him here only ten minutes ago. I suppose he slipped off while we were watching Handy's evolutions at the coconut shy. But where could he have slipped off to?"

"Goodness knows!" said Pitt. "He's a queer kind of fish at the best of times—although he's true blue in the main."

"I can't understand where he could have got to," I said. "I suppose we'd better have a look round for him, in case he gets lost."

We wasted no time in searching about in the near vicinity—although this was no mean task, considering the enormous number of people who moved about in dense masses on every hand.

It was something like looking for a needle in a haystack.

After ten minutes we called a halt, and consulted.

"Well, he's vanished," said Pitt. "I reckon the best thing we can do is to ignore the ass, and get on with our own pleasures. He'll probably be at the meeting place at three o'clock, when we go for Mr. Lee. He's bound to remember that we fixed the appointment for three."

We practically came to the decision to abandon Tucker. Then McClure drew our attention to a crowd of people who were gathered about a spot near by. They all seemed to be highly amused, and were laughing uproariously.

"Might as well see what it is," remarked Watson.

We strolled over, and pushed our way through the crowd.

It appeared that somebody was giving a speech, and the audience did not take him very seriously. I caught sight of the speaker, started, gave an ejaculation of surprise, and then grinned.

"Well, I'm hanged!" I said. "Tucker!"

"What?"

"T.T.!"

"Begad!"

The speaker was Timothy Tucker!

"The fatheaded ass!" exclaimed Pitt warmly. "What the dickens is he making a speech about? I vote we buzz along and yank him away by force. This is no place to spout——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted, grinning. "We might as well hear what he is jawing about—it seems to be pretty amusing!"

We edged closer to the platform—the latter consisting of an old box. Tucker of the Remove was perched upon it, and he was pounding one fist into his other palm, and shouting in his somewhat shrill voice, and appeared to be deadly serious.

"What I say, ladies and gentlemen, is this!" he was shouting. "I repeat it once more, in case some of our friends on the outskirts of this throng have missed my early remarks. The position is this. The savages of thousands of years ago, under the system of society then in vogue, were far better in every way than the condition of yourselves at the present time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The silly juggins!" snapped Pitt. "What's that rot he's jawing about?"

"Evolution, I suppose," grinned Watson. "He's a wonder at jawing about things that happened hundreds of years ago. But to get on his hind legs at Hampstead Heath is a bit of novelty. Listen!"

Tucker was going it harder than ever.

"And what is more remarkable," he roared, "is the fact that, at that time, there were no inventions such as we have at the present time. Remember that, ladies and gentlemen, and allow it to sink in. Allow it to sink right into your minds, and retain it within your brain cells. The savages of that period relied upon hand tools, and hand industry. They did not have the benefits of so-called civilisation—as we understand it to-day. And, comrades and friends, let me tell you, further, that you would be surprised that, in their mode of living, and in their method of conducting affairs, they showed a remarkable breadth of thought——"

"I suppose you lived among 'em, matey?" asked one of the crowd.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, my friend, I did not live at that period, I regret to say," replied Tucker promptly. "Admitted. But your remark has deeply impressed me. That is so. It has caused me to think. When I look at your face, it reminds me of

certain specimens which one can see at any hour of the day—Sundays excepted—in the Zoological Gardens.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Well, that’s one to the kid, anyway,” said the interruptor good-humouredly. “He deserves to be swiped, but we’ll let it pass.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Go it, kid! Let’s hear some more!”

“I intend to tell you a great deal more, ladies and gentlemen,” exclaimed Tucker. “While on the subject of anthropology, let me tell you further that, notwithstanding the great conflict between scientists that is being waged at the present time, it has been proved beyond dispute that man is the descendant of the anthropoid monkey.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Rot!”

“Stand down, young ‘un!”

“We don’t want to hear that bloomin’ drivel!”

“Shut up, you!” roared somebody. “The kid’s right!”

But the crowd, on the whole, treated the speech as a joke, and was inclined to be good-humoured throughout; in fact, T.T. was causing quite a diversion, and we all listened with grinning faces. The most humorous aspect of the whole affair was that Tucker himself remained deadly serious.

“Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it is an undoubted fact that we are the descendants of the anthropoid monkey!” he shouted firmly. “People can dispute that fact, but do I care? No! It is a fact, and no man can dispute the truth! You hear a lot about the missing link——”

“We’ve found it now, youngster!” shouted one of the crowd. “But I didn’t know that it could talk!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“That’s one for T.T.!” grinned Handforth.

“Dear, dear, dear!” said Tucker severely. “This is very sad—indeed, deplorable. It is lamentable that I should be confused with the missing link. The missing link, let me tell you, does not exist, and never has existed. Notwithstanding the fantastic ideas existing in certain people’s minds, there is no missing link. I state that with positive authority—the authority of Professor Drinkwater!”

“‘E ain’t no good!” shouted somebody.

“Indeed!” said Tucker coldly. “And how do you make that out?”

“A chap who drinks water ain’t no good on earth!” declared the interrupter. “Now, if you’d said Professor Drinkbeer——”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Everybody roared afresh.

“I am afraid this is getting very farcical!” shouted Tucker. “I have only just commenced my address——”

“Help!”

“What about the bloomin’ savages, matey?”

“Yes, my friend, I am aware of the fact that I have deviated from my original standpoint,” said Tucker. “I intend now dealing with the relation of savages of primitive times with the present working classes, of which this audience in front of me is a representative throng.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Lumme!” said one man. “I’m blowed if ‘e ain’t callin’ us savages now!”

“Garn!” said somebody else. “We ain’t savages—we’re hapes!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Hapes!” repeated Tucker. “I do not remember—— Oh, apes! Quite so! As a matter of fact, we are apes—you are apes! Everybody within my vision at this present moment is an ape!”

“Time this ‘ere kid was gagged, I reckon!”

“Shut up! Let ‘im go on!” shouted a woman. “I’m blowed if ‘e ain’t better than all the side shows! We don’t ‘ave to pay nothink, either!”

“That’s all you know, ma!” said a gentleman who escorted her. “He’ll go round with a collection box next!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“When order is fully restored, I will resume my address,” shouted Tucker. “I am greatly distressed to find so much hilarity, for this subject is one of the utmost importance and gravity. I particularly regret to observe the exaggerated levity of our friend on the right. As I was saying before the interruption, you are all monkeys—and I will explain why. Since it is an undoubted fact that we are the direct descendants of monkeys, it stands to reason that the human race to-day is still a race of monkeys—it has merely altered its habits and customs, according to the different age. But, to all intents and purposes, we are still the same. And, to prove my assertion to

the fullest extent, I will call your attention to our friend here on the right. Observe, my friends!"

Tucker pointed dramatically to a weak-looking youth of the working class who stood almost immediately behind Handforth—a youth who was apparently not quite right in the head, for he stood listening without any apparent understanding, and blinked round with an amiable air which caused everybody to grin. He was apparently unaware of the fact that the speaker was referring to him, for he was engaged in the genial occupation of peeling an orange.

"Observe this specimen of humanity!" exclaimed Tucker, pointing. "Notice the protruding jaw! Further notice the small-sized head, denoting the lowest type of brain power, somewhat comparable to the Australian aborigine! Observe the lack of intelligence in the eyes, and the huge, flapping ears——"

"You — you blithering fathead!" bawled Handforth furiously.

"Hold on, Handy!" I grinned. "Let him finish——"

"Let him finish!" roared Handforth. "After he's called me all those horrible things? Why, I'm going to wipe him up, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my goodness!" moaned Pitt. "Hold me up, somebody! Handy thinks Tucker was talking about him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We had no opportunity of explaining the situation to the excited Handforth. Tucker, of course, had been referring to the youth who stood immediately in Handy's rear, but the leader of Study D did not grasp this important point.

The audience appreciated the humour of the situation, and fairly doubled itself up. The next moment Handforth roached the platform.

"Now, my son," he gasped, "take that!"

He delivered a punch which sent Tucker flying. The next second T.T. was firmly grasped by Handy, his head was placed in chancery, and his face was in great danger of being pounded to a jelly.

But we considered that it was time to interfere.

"Dear, dear!" panted the speaker. "This—this is most deplorable! Really, Handforth, I must protest—— Yarooooh!"

Handforth only got in one punch.

Then he was grasped by many pairs of hands, and yanked away. We rushed him out of the crowd, roaring. Other juniors rushed Tucker out, and we paused in a breathless group to ourselves.

"Lemme get at him!" shouted Handforth hoarsely. "I'm going to smash him up——"

"Really, this display on your part, Handforth, has not impressed me!" exclaimed Tucker, with mild reproof. "I am shocked—admitted. Your conduct is beyond all bearing——"

"Didn't you call me an Australian savage?" demanded Handforth hotly.

"Dear me! I——"

"You silly fathead!" grinned Pitt. "Tucker was talking to a chap who stood behind you, Handy. He didn't mean you at all!"

"What?" gasped Handforth.

It was not until the facts were fully explained to him that he agreed that he had no reason to desire Tucker's gore. And then, matters being smoothed, we decided to join the throng once more, and patronise the swings.

And this time we took very good care that Tucker remained with us. We were certainly not going to allow him to make another speech.

"Why, the ass might get jawing about the strike down at St. Frank's," said Pitt. "We don't want anything of that sort."

"Talking about the servants' strike. I wonder how the old staff is getting on?" said Watson. "They'd all been sacked when we left St. Frank's, and the school was without any servants at all. I'll bet Sir Roger Stone, the chairman of the Governors, will try some underhand game when we get back!"

"Such as installing a new staff?" suggested Grey.

"Dear me! We will not stand that!" declared Tucker.

"Of course we won't!" I agreed. "But there's no need to talk about the servants' strike just now. We're enjoying ourselves to-day, and I expect there'll be plenty of excitement when we get back to St. Frank's. There's that little mystery, too—that mystery of the cipher."

"That which?" asked Handforth.

"Oh, you wouldn't understand if I told you," I said.

And I mentioned no more of the subject. I had been referring to a little

matter which had caused both Nelson Lee and myself some little amount of thought. Two mysterious strangers had appeared near the school, and their movements had been decidedly queer.

A message had been found, concealed in a hollow stick—a message in cipher. Nelson Lee had taken this scrap of paper, intending to decode the message, but, although he had made some headway, he was still puzzled, and could not make correct sense of the wording.

As to why the message had been left, and who the mysterious men were, we were quite in the dark. For the time being this little mystery—and also of the affair of the servants' strike—was shelved. It was Easter Monday, and we were enjoying ourselves. But it was a certainty that the problems would be revived the very instant we got back to St. Frank's.

So I dismissed all thoughts of them now, and we strolled away to a set of huge swings, which were doing a roaring trade.

We awaited our turn, and were soon enjoying ourselves in the huge boatlike contrivances.

Handforth went up with Church, and very soon they were swinging with tremendous velocity; in fact, Handforth was pulling so hard at the ropes that their boat was beating all records, and people were pausing to watch. It was very seldom that one of the swing-boats went so high.

"Go easy, Handy!" roared McClure, who was on the ground. "You'll swing right over, if you ain't careful."

"He's safe enough, young gent," said the man in charge.

He applied the brake, so that there should be no doubt on the point. The brake consisted of a stout plank which was raised so that the boat scraped against it with every swing.

"Hi! What's the idea?" roared Handforth, looking down. "Who's messing about down there?"

"Mustn't let you go too high, my lad," shouted the man.

"Rats!" said Handforth warmly. "We'll go as high as we like. Pull up, Churchy, my son!"

Handforth proceeded to lug harder than ever; but Church was not so enthusiastic. He did not care for going high, and he did not pull on his own rope at all.

"I think we had better finish now,

Handy," he said. "We've had a good swing, and there's no need to overdo it."

"Don't talk rot!" said Handforth. "Pull, you ass!"

"No, I'm not going to," said McClure obstinately.

"You'll either pull or have your nose punched!" snapped Handforth. "I'm not going to stand any rot from you —"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Church.

"Did you tell me to shut up?" roared Handforth. "Why, you rotter, I'll make you see stars for that!"

He lunged forward in the swinging boat. Church dodged, and the next second the pair were rolling in the bottom of the contrivance—they were rolling about rather dangerously, in fact.

"Stop the swing!" shouted McClure, on the ground. "Handy's at it again! They'll both fall out— Oh, my only topper!"

It really seemed as though a disaster was about to occur, for Handforth and Church half came over the side; but the man applied the brake heavily, and the swing came to an abrupt standstill.

Handforth and Church rolled out, bumped on to the grass, and were pulled apart by the rest of us.

"You dotty lunatic!" I exclaimed warmly. "You might have had a bad accident, Handy——"

"Begad! I rather fancy he has had one, dear old boy!" observed Sir Montie. "He has had a frightful accident to his trousers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other fellows suddenly noticed it, and Handy heard what Tregellis-West said. He had observed that quite a number of young ladies were in the vicinity, and he gazed down at his trousers with horror.

"Where—where are they torn?" he gasped, forgetting everything else.

"At the back."

"Badly?" asked Handforth feverishly.

"About four or five inches," said Pitt cheerfully. "Just where you sit down, my son. I'm shocked at you! I don't know how you'll walk about in that condition!"

"Serves him right!" growled Church. "The silly ass ought to be put in a padded cell! I heard his trucks go while we were in that boat—I suppose there was a nail——"

"Crowd round me!" gasped Handforth. "Crowd round me, and we'll rush away to a quiet spot. Then some of you can find a reel of cotton, or some safety pins. Be sports, you know!"

We crowded round, grinning, and Handforth, thus hidden from public view, was rushed away to a quiet place where there were no roundabouts or side shows. And he took refuge in the midst of a clump of thick bushes.

The tear was really a serious one, and certainly something had to be done. And while he hid under the bush, all the rest of us scouted about for a needle and cotton, or some pins, all arranging to be back ten minutes afterwards, to report.

As it happened, Church and McClure were the first to arrive back at the spot, for they had secured a needle and cotton from a woman who was running a palmistry booth. Handforth, curious enough, was watching something intently through a little space in the bushes, and he did not turn at first. He continued to watch with great interest.

"Don't you want your trousers mended, ass?" demanded Church. "What are you staring at?"

"Jolly queer!" said Handforth thoughtfully. "I can't quite get the hang of this. Still, I suppose it's all right——"

"Eh?"

"Nothing," said Handforth. "I was only looking—— By George! Some cotton! Good business! You'd better get busy on the repairs!"

And while his chums were sewing him up, so to speak, he still remained thoughtful, and rather mysterious. He had evidently seen something through the bushes which had impressed itself upon his mind.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF BOBBY.

MEANWHILE, Sir Montie and Tommy and I had been delayed. Our search for repairing materials had been in vain, and we were on our way back to the unfortunate Handforth when we observed a well-dressed lady going about among the crowds in a state of considerable agitation. I paused, watching her, and I could not help being impressed.

"She seems to be terrifically worried over something," I remarked. "I wonder if we could be of any use to her?"

"Dear old fellow, we will offer our services," said Sir Montie.

We crossed over to the spot where the lady was standing, looking round almost feverishly.

"Is there anything we can do for you, madam?" I asked, raising my hat.

To our surprise, she seemed to recognise us.

"Oh, are you the boys who—— No, but you're not," she said. "They were very much like you, though. I'm so terribly worried—I've lost my little boy!"

"I expect a good many children have been lost on the Heath to-day, madam," I said reassuringly. "But there's not much chance of this being serious. I expect your little boy will turn up soon——"

"Oh, I do hope so," said the lady. "Bobby had been very tiresome this morning, and I really couldn't keep him with me. How he slipped off I can't imagine. Perhaps you young gentlemen have seen something of him—a little boy of five, dressed in a light-blue velvet suit, with a knitted cap. His hair is curly and golden——"

"I'm afraid we haven't seen him, madam," I interrupted.

"Hallo, you chaps!" exclaimed Church, coming up. "We got some cotton, but not enough, and I'm just going back—— Why, what's the matter? Isn't this the lady we saw before——"

"Oh, yes, you're one of the boys I did see—I am Mrs. Pratt," said our agitated companion. "I have lost sight of little Bobby!"

"That's bad!" said Church. "He's the little chap we told you about, Nipper—he wanted Handy to kiss him. But he can't have strayed far away, surely; and there must be plenty of people who have seen him."

"I've been inquiring everywhere—asking everybody!" said Mrs. Pratt, wearily. "Oh, I am so worried, I hardly know what I'm doing!"

"We'll have a look round for your little son," I said.

"He's not my son—he's my little nephew," explained Mrs. Pratt. "But I love him just as though he were my own son, and if he is really lost I think

I shall go mad. I don't know what to do. I can't see a policeman!"

"I'm afraid a policeman wouldn't be much help," I said. "If you'll stay here, Mrs. Pratt, I'll get the other fellows, and we'll go round searching. Bobby must be in this particular vicinity—he hadn't had a chance to go anywhere else. And there are one or two tents, I believe, where they look after lost children until they are claimed. You wait about here, and keep your eyes open, and we'll scout round in a big circle. I expect we shall find him all right."

"This is so good of you, my boys—so very good," said the worried lady. "I don't know how to thank you for the trouble you are taking."

"Pray don't mention it," said Sir Montie gracefully. "We are only too willin', dear old boy. I—I mean, madam! Begad!"

It did not take us long to find the other juniors, and explain what had happened. Handforth and McClure were still missing—being apparently still engaged upon repair work.

But the other fellows assisted to the full extent of their power. They helped with a will, and we searched about in every direction, for a little curly-headed child in a blue velvet suit.

But, although we spent well over half-an-hour, and although we searched all the tents and other places, we found no sign of the missing child.

It was while we were engaged in this task that we happened to run into Nelson Lee. The gov'nor was just on his way to keep his appointment with us, and we had met him by chance.

"Why, this is lucky, sir," I said briskly. "We're looking for a little boy. He's bunked away from his aunt, and we're all having a search round. But we can't find any sign of the kiddie."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I expect there are a good many anxious women at this moment," he said. "There are always a number of lost children on the Heath on Bank Holiday. The child will be found soon—quite safe and sound. Have you looked in the tents which are specially provided for the safe-keeping of strayed children?"

"Yes, sir, but he's not there."

"Oh, well, the youngster cannot have gone far," said the gov'nor. "Perhaps his aunt has already found him. We had better return, and see how things

are going. If the child is still missing, I will take a hand in the search."

"This way, sir," said Watson.

We made our way back through the crowds to the spot where we had left Mrs. Pratt. We found her still there, pacing up and down, wringing her hands, and with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, you haven't found him—you haven't found him!" she exclaimed, with great distress. "Whatever shall I do? Oh, what shall I do? He is lost! Poor little soul! I was mad to bring him here——"

"Really, my dear madam, you must not worry yourself unduly," said Nelson Lee, comfortingly. "It is a hundred to one chance that the little man will run up, smiling and cheeky, within a few minutes. Children frequently get lost on Hampstead Heath——"

"Yes, I know—I know," said Mrs. Pratt. "I know all that, but this is different. It is so different. I have terrible fears. I don't know what to think—I don't know what to do!"

"Please calm yourself, madam," said Nelson Lee. "My name is Lee, and I will do all I can for you——"

"This gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee, ma'am—the famous detective," put in Pitt, with a touch of pride. "He's the cleverest detective in the world—and if he can't find little Bobby, nobody can!"

"Really, Pitt," said the gov'nor, "there's no necessity——"

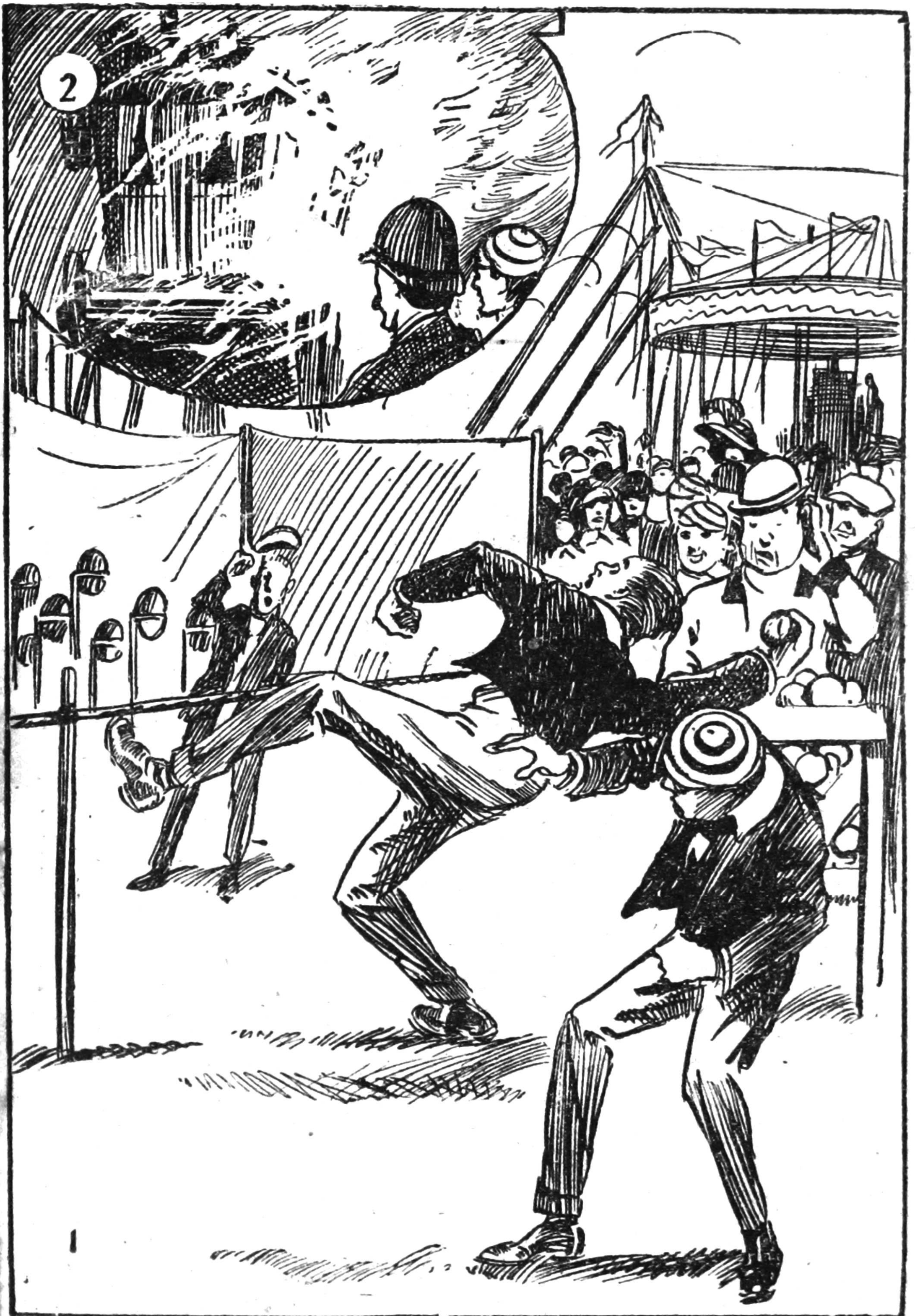
"Oh, Mr. Lee," panted Mrs. Pratt. "Please—please do everything you can! I am so nervous—so frightened! Bobby disappeared so suddenly—so mysteriously. I know something dreadful has happened—I know it!"

"When did you first miss him?"

"About half an hour ago," said Mrs. Pratt, controlling herself with difficulty. "I had been looking at a man with a Punch and Judy show, and was trying to find a place where Bobby could see—he's too heavy for me to hold—when I suddenly missed him. I looked round everywhere, but he had gone. It was all so sudden, too. I can't think what could have become of him."

"He probably tried to find a place for himself," suggested Lee.

"I thought so, and I searched everywhere," said Mrs. Pratt tearfully. "But I couldn't find him, and everybody was so interested in the Punch and Judy show that they hadn't seen Bobby at all."



1. After several wild leaps and bounds Handforth flung the first ball.
2. Our attention was drawn to the blazing caravan.

Nelson Lee was not at all alarmed. He knew, of course, that there was probably no reason at all for the good lady's alarm. Children were always getting lost, and mothers and aunts were always getting alarmed and upset. Before an hour had passed everything would probably be all right.

"I'm so afraid of William," exclaimed Mrs. Pratt, wringing her hands. "I can't help thinking that William might have something to do with it! He's a good-for-nothing rascal, and there's no telling."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Lee gently.

"William is a chauffeur, Mr. Lee," said the lady. "He's in bed with a broken leg. I know, but somehow I can't help thinking about him. Bobby's poor father and mother were both killed in that last dreadful air-raid in the war, and I took charge of the mite. All that money, too, with the business being sold up. I always thought William would do something——"

"But is William a relative?" inquired Nelson Lee, with pretended interest.

"He's a rascal, Mr. Lee," replied Mrs. Pratt, bursting into tears. "Oh, I know he's done something to little Bobby! You see, William is poor Robert's brother, and Robert married my poor, dear sister. Both killed in the air-raid! And all that money left! William always was a good-for-nothing scallywag, and I've been afraid of him for the last year. He's broken his leg, I know, but he's cunning and wicked enough for anything!"

We were looking at one another with straight faces: but inwardly, we were rather amused. Mrs. Pratt's story was decidedly disjointed, and far from lucid. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, and I think the guv'nor was pretty mixed up, too. The poor woman was so worried that she hardly knew what she was saying.

"Look here, Mrs. Pratt," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I want you to be guided by me. Your little boy is lost for the time being, and you will do yourself no good by standing about here and worrying. So I have a suggestion to make."

"Oh, Mr. Lee, I'll do anything you tell me," said the poor lady.

"It is simply this," said the guv'nor. "Not far from here there is a comfortable shelter, shaded from the sun, and

very quiet. I want you to go there, sit down, and wait patiently until we can bring you some definite news."

"Oh, but supposing you cannot find Bobby——"

"We must not suppose anything of that sort," interrupted Lee. "I am confident that you are worrying yourself unduly. Just a little patience, and everything will be all right. Will you do this, Mrs. Pratt?"

"I—I suppose it will be the best thing," said Mrs. Pratt. "Oh, but you will tell me, won't you? You will let me know as soon as you've found the poor child? He'll be fretting terribly, I know he will."

She was led off by Nelson Lee at last, and he saw her safely into the comfortable shelter. Then the guv'nor came back to us, and obtained a few more details of the affair.

"What do you think of it, sir?" I asked, at last.

"Very little, Nipper," he replied. "Just a very ordinary affair, magnified into a big one by an anxious woman's worried mind. Bobby will, no doubt, run up quite gaily before long."

"But what about Mrs. Pratt's talk about William, and the air-raids, and the broken leg, sir?" asked De Valerie, with a smile.

"I am afraid Mrs. Pratt got somewhat mixed up over that," replied Nelson Lee. "I am not disposed to take it seriously, at all events. Now, look here, boys, we have agreed to look for this little boy, and we must do so. I suggest we break ourselves into little parties—— By the way, I do not see Handforth or McClure. Where are they?"

"Handforth tore his trucks, sir," explained Church. "He's hiding while McClure makes repairs. They ought to be here by now. Perhaps they've missed us, and are searching about——"

"My hat!" exclaimed Watson abruptly. "What's that over there?"

He was staring across the Heath, and I noticed that a good many people were running excitedly. Then I saw a haze of smoke, and a few leaping tongues of flame rose up into the air.

"Egad! A fire!" ejaculated the Hon. Douglas Singleton. "How frightfully interesting. Shall we go and have a look?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Come on, my sons!"

"A fire!"

The juniors were rather excited, and for the moment all thoughts of Bobby left their heads. They started at the double for the scene of the fire, their curiosity getting the better of them.

I went with the others, and Nelson Lee came too. Perhaps he felt that little Bobby might be attracted towards the fire. It wasn't far off, and it would be just as well to start the search there as anywhere.

But we little guessed the terrible shock which was coming!

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE CARAVAN.

"WHAT a blaze!"

"Not much chance of saving that affair," said Watson.

"Even if the fire brigade came along now it would be hopeless, and I don't see how the fire brigade is to get here, right on the heath."

"Oh, they'll let the thing burn itself to ashes," I said. "There's nothing in danger, and it's impossible to put this blaze out now. It's simply providing the people with a bit of excitement—nothing more."

We had got to the fire, and by dint of much pressing and pushing, we had arrived in front of the crowd, where we could see distinctly.

Judging by the flames, the fire was a terrific thing. But, at close quarters, we found that the opposite was actually the case. A small, ramshackle caravan was burning with great fierceness.

There was nothing else of a combustible nature near it—not even a tree or a bush. The caravan had been placed in a little hollow, quite by itself, away from all the tents and roundabouts and shows.

It was blazing like a furnace. The flames roared up to a terrific height, and the whole caravan was a roaring mass of fire from end to end. The fierceness of the conflagration was astonishing.

Within a few minutes it would be out, for it was impossible to last. And as it was equally impossible to extinguish it, nothing was done. The brigade was not called, for, by the time an engine arrived on the scene, and by the time a hose was fixed up, the fire would be completely burned out.

"It's nothing much, after all," said Pitt. "By jingo! The heat's pretty stiff! I vote we get away from this, and have a look for that little kiddie——"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I'm just wondering why that old caravan burns so fiercely. The wood seems dry, but that doesn't account for this great blaze. Hold on! This chap here who's talking seems to be the owner. Perhaps we can hear something."

I referred to a rough-looking man who was standing just in front of us, talking gloomily to a constable. There were several policemen about, keeping the crowd back. But there was no excitement at all—only interest and curiosity.

"Don't know how it started, then?" I heard the constable ask, as I pressed nearer.

"No, that's a fact, I don't," said the man.

"Sun, perhaps?" suggested the policeman. "It's rare hot to-day, and it might have ignited the vapour. There was oil in the van, wasn't there?"

"Yes, that's right," replied the other. "Two big drums. I'm blowed if I know what I'll do to-night now. You see, I'm running one of these shows up here, and I stored all my paraffin in this caravan."

"Yes, I know."

"Two ten-gallon drums," said the man miserably. "Good thing the van wasn't much good. Still, I can't afford to lose it, you know. I wouldn't mind betting anything that some of the young varmints did it on purpose!"

"More likely a cigarette-end," said the constable. "People chuck lighted matches down, too. It's a regular wonder there ain't more fires. Good thing this one is isolated, and there ain't no wind."

"Well, it'll soon be out now," said the owner. "Lor', ain't it burning fast. Why, there won't be nothing left—even the iron parts will be melted up in that white heat. I never saw such a flare!"

"It is a bit fierce," agreed the policeman. "That's why it's burning so quick. That oil, you know, that's what does it. Oil's rare stuff for burning sharp. It spreads, too."

I turned round to the other fellows.

"Well, there's nothing to keep us here now," I said. "I can understand about the fire now—the giddy caravan was full of paraffin oil! I vote we clear off at once. I'm getting baked."

"Yes, come on, dear fellows."

We were about to move when Nelson Lee touched my arm.

"This won't do, Nipper," he said severely. "You mustn't spend your time gazing at this fire now. We have other work to perform. Dear me! What in the world is that noise?"

We all turned, for we heard several hair-raising screams.

An elderly woman was pushing herself violently and wildly through the crowd. She arrived through at last, and rushed towards the blazing caravan. A constable moved forward quickly, and stopped her.

"Steady, ma'am," said the policeman. "It's only a harmless fire—nobody hurt. No need to get excited——"

The woman looked round wildly.

"The child!" she screamed. "Have you got the child?"

"Now, now, keep calm, ma'am," said the constable. "There was no child in the van. It was empty, except for some oil-drums——"

"Oh, Heaven!" moaned the woman, horrified. "That poor, dear little child! He's burned all up by this time. Can't you get inside?" she added, becoming hysterical with excitement. "Can't you save him? Oh, you must, you must——"

"She must be crazy," said the owner of the caravan. "There wasn't anybody in the van—not even a dead sparrow. Maybe she's a bit off her head with the sight of it. Queer how some of these go off like this."

"She'll be all right before long," said the policeman.

But the woman appeared to be getting worse. She clung to the constable who had stopped her; and she sobbed and cried and shouted in turn. It was obvious that the poor woman was distraught.

"It's all right, ma'am," said the arm of the law. "I tell you, there was nobody in the van——"

"Was the little boy taken out?"

"There wasn't any little boy——"

"There was—there was—there was!" shouted the woman, her voice rising higher with every word. "Oh, Heaven! To—to think of that poor, darling child! I saw him go in there, not half an hour ago——"

"Look here, there wasn't any kiddie in my caravan," exclaimed the owner,

walking forward. "You don't know what you're saying——"

The woman turned, her eyes flashing with excitement.

"I do know what I'm saying!" she shouted. "I do know! I saw it with my own eyes, I tell you—with my own eyes! That dear little boy—I can see him now, in his pretty little blue velvet suit——"

"Velvet suit!" I gasped faintly.

"Begad!"

"Great pip!"

"It—it can't be Bobby!" said Church huskily.

For a few moments I stood stock still, thinking almost feverishly. Mrs. Pratt had lost her little nephew—he had vanished, and all our efforts to find him had been in vain.

Now we learned that a little boy had entered this burning caravan—a little boy in a blue velvet suit! It was altogether too astounding to be a coincidence. We knew that at once.

But was it possible—could it be believable—that little Bobby had perished in the flames? It was too horrible to contemplate, and for a moment my thoughts stood quite still. I dared not think too much.

Then I heard the woman talking again, and I pressed forward, and saw that Nelson Lee was close by.

The other juniors came round, too.

"One moment, constable," said Nelson Lee briskly. "As it happens, I am looking for a little child, with the help of these boys. We have been searching for some time—in vain. I heard what this lady said, and I am wondering if there can be any connection between the two affairs."

The policeman looked thoughtful.

"Well, sir, I don't know, I'm sure," he said. "But I think this good lady is a bit excited, and she don't properly know what she's saying. That caravan was empty when it started burning——"

"It wasn't—it couldn't have been!" interrupted the woman, breathing hard, and looking almost wild. "Oh, you don't realise—you don't know! But I saw—saw as plainly as I can see you——"

"What did you see, ma'am?" asked the constable.

"That little boy going into the caravan. I was going to get him out, but I didn't have time," panted the woman. "Oh, but how was I to know that a

dreadful thing like this would happen? I think I shall go mad!"

She sobbed hysterically for a second or two.

And we stood round, silent and horrified, listening for the next words. I glanced at the blazing van—now merely a framework, and liable to collapse at any second, with the flames roaring skywards like those from a blast furnace.

"There, that's better," said Nelson Lee gently. "Now, madam, it will be far better if you tell us exactly what you saw, in simple language. Begin at the beginning, and do not be hurried—"

"But you must save the child first!" wailed the woman.

The gov'nor shook his head.

"If any child entered that caravan, and was there when the fire started, there's no child now," he said quietly. "In that roaring furnace there would be no hope whatever. Please tell us your story."

The woman shuddered as she looked at the van.

"Poor little boy—oh, the poor little darling!" she exclaimed huskily. "Yes, I will tell you everything. It only seems a few minutes ago, but I suppose it must have been over half an hour, that I was here. It was all quiet then—there was hardly a soul to be seen down in this little hollow. I had come here for a little rest—to be out of the crowd, and I had my little Amy with me—she's a little girl of seven. Well, while we were sitting in the grass, we saw this little boy come running round from behind the bushes—"

"How was he dressed?" asked Lee.

"As far as I can remember, he had a blue velvet suit on, and a knitted cap. There was a lace collar, I believe, and his shoes were shiny black, with big buckles. He was only a little curly haired mite of five or six—"

"Bobby!" I muttered.

"Couldn't be anybody else," said Watson.

"The little boy was just playing about," continued the witness, recovering her composure. "He went towards the caravan, in childish curiosity, and mounted the steps. He went up and down two or three times, and then tried the handle of the door, to see if it would open. It did open—"

"Was your door unfastened?" asked

the constable, turning to the owner of the van.

The man hesitated.

"Well, not exactly open," he replied. "The lock went wrong yesterday, so I fastened up the door with string this morning; but I suppose some of the urchins cut it just for devilry. Boys are capable of anything—"

"Please go on, madam," said Nelson Lee.

"As I was saying, the poor little boy opened the door, and then he went inside. At first he ran out, but went back again, as children will. He grew bolder, I suppose, and after he'd gone in the second time, he closed the door."

"And what did you do?"

"Well, I guessed that the child had no right there, so I thought I'd see what I could do," went on the woman. "I went to the door, tried to open it, but found it was wedged somehow. I pushed hard, but couldn't shift it. There seemed to be a piece of board at the bottom, projecting somehow—"

"Ah, I know the meaning of that," said the owner. "There was a board a bit loose, ma'am, and sometimes when it stuck up I couldn't get the door open. To think that all this happened not half an hour ago, while I was up there with my show! Now I can understand how the van caught fire!"

"We will discuss that after the lady has finished her story," said Nelson Lee. "Well, madam? You attempted to get into the caravan, but failed. What was your next move?"

"I heard the little boy crying inside," said the woman. "He was crying bitterly, and asking to be let out. But I couldn't open the door, try as I would, so I decided that I would look round and find the owner. But when I turned I couldn't see any sign of my little girl. She'd run off somewhere, so I went as quickly as possible in search of her."

"Leaving that little boy locked in the caravan?" asked the policeman.

"Oh, but how was I to know?" asked the woman, tears springing to her eyes again. "I never dreamed there was any danger. I meant to find little Amy first, and then see about the caravan afterwards. It took me a rare time to find Amy, and then I saw the flames and smoke. When I found out that it was the caravan burning, I thought I should have gone mad. Oh, it was terrible—awful!"

The woman finished with a fresh outburst of sobbing, and nothing the guv'nor could say soothed her. Nelson Lee was looking very serious as he turned to the owner of the van.

"What was there inside the vehicle?" he inquired.

"Just a little fodder for the horse, two big drums of oil, a few candles, and a box of matches. That's all, sir—nothing else."

"Matches!" echoed the constable.

"Yes. I always kept a box there in case I went in after dark and didn't happen to have any matches on me."

"Then the inference is only too obvious," said Nelson Lee quietly. "It is a terrible tragedy by what we can see of it, and it is not even necessary to reconstruct what occurred."

The whole thing can be explained in a few words. This little child, all innocent, went to the caravan in a spirit of playfulness. He managed to lock himself in by accident, and then, I suppose, he got hold of the matches. One or two of those were sufficient to set light to the oil, and, of course, the whole interior of the caravan became a furnace in less than a second. It is one blessing, at all events, that the poor little child suffered no pain—he would not have time."

"But it's terrible, sir—ghastly!" I exclaimed. "It's as clear as anything—there can't possibly be any loophole. The little kiddie was killed at once; but do you think they'll be able to recover the remains?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'm afraid there will be no remains," he said quietly. "In such a roaring fire as that, with blazing oil causing the fire to become a furnace, there is practically no chance of recovering the slightest portion of a remain. The child must have been completely consumed by the fire!"

I couldn't help shuddering at the very thought of it, and I moved away with the rest of my chums, feeling sick at heart. All the mirth had gone out of us—all the gaiety. We were almost dumb with horror of the whole affair.

And, as though to clinch the matter finally—although, goodness knows, we had enough proof before—little Bobby's knitted cap was found under a bush near by. This was the last conclusive link, and there was no further doubt.

Somehow, we all felt sombre as we moved slowly away from the tragic spot.

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE GETS BUSY.

NELSON LEE said very little as we walked along; in fact, he said nothing until I spoke to him.

"I—I say, sir," I said huskily, "what—what are we going to tell Mrs. Pratt? She doesn't know anything about this—"

"Really, Nipper, I am at a loss," observed the guv'nor. "I hardly dare to go to the poor woman. She is in happy ignorance of the truth at the moment, but I suppose it will be necessary to explain—"

"Oh, so here you are?" exclaimed a well-known voice. "I wondered where on earth you'd got to, you bounders."

It was Handforth, and McClure was with him. The pair had just arrived, and Handforth's trousers were now presentable once again.

"Been having some more sport, I suppose?" he grinned. "I've never seen such chaps for acting the goat! What was that smoke we saw down in that hollow? Have you chaps been setting fire— My only hat! What's wrong?" added Handforth, staring at us. "You're all looking as pale as ghosts!"

We were certainly feeling shaky.

"What's wrong?" repeated Handforth.

"You—you don't know yet, Handy," said Church brokenly. "But you know that little kiddie—Bobby? The youngster who spoke to you—"

"And wanted to kiss me!" said Handforth, with a sniff. "Yes, I remember him, the young bounder! What's he been up to?"

"He's—he's dead!"

Handforth and Church started.

"Dead?" gasped Church, huskily.

"You—you don't mean it—"

"Dead?" echoed Handforth. "Good heavens! It can't be true, Churchy!"

"It is true, Handforth," I said quietly. "The little fellow went into a

caravan, half an hour ago, or more, and couldn't get out. Then he set light to some oil, and he was cremated before——"

"Don't, old man!" muttered de Valerie.

Handforth seemed curiously excited.

"How long did you say?" he asked sharply.

"About forty minutes, or three-quarters of an hour, to be exact," said Church. "He went into a caravan——"

"Rot!" said Handforth flatly.

"What?"

"Bobby didn't go into any caravan," declared Handforth. "And, if you think he's dead, all I can say is that you're off-side."

"Look here, Handy——"

"One moment, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "Why are you speaking so definitely, Handforth?" he added, turning to the leader of Study D. "Do you know anything about this affair?"

"Rather, sir!"

We all came to a halt, and regarded Handforth with excitement and curiosity. Not that we had much hope. Handforth was well known, and the manner in which he got wrong ideas into his head was equally well known.

"Now, Handforth, let me hear what you have to say?" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "To the best of our belief, this little boy, Bobby, perished in a burning caravan less than half an hour ago. You declare that such is not the case?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"You are quite certain?"

"Positive, sir," said Handforth firmly.

"But it's been proved, Handy," interrupted Watson. "It's been proved that——"

"I don't care about proof," snapped Handforth. "But if you've got the idea in your heads that the kid is dead, you're wrong."

"I sincerely hope that we are wrong, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "We were just on our way to break the terrible news to the child's aunt——"

"Then don't go, sir," said Handforth. "There's no need to alarm her for nothing. That little boy came and talked to me for a long time, and I couldn't possibly have mistaken him when I saw him with that chap."

"Er—which chap, Handforth?" inquired the gov'nor.

"Why, sir, the man who put Bobby into the motor-car," said Handforth lucidly.

"The motor-car?"

"Of course!"

"You—you silly ass, you haven't told us anything about a motor-car yet!" exclaimed Church. "How are we supposed to know——?"

"Didn't I just mention the car?" roared Handforth. "Great pip! Some people do seem to be dense! I'll bet Mr. Lee understands!"

"I'm afraid I don't, Handforth," said the schoolmaster-detective. "You must class me with the dense people——"

"I—I don't mean that, sir——"

"The best thing, my lad, is for you to tell us exactly what you saw," went on Nelson Lee smoothly. "All the evidence at our disposal indicates that little Bobby has been killed. Your evidence, I trust, will put a different complexion on the matter. So you must tell us your story without delay, for there is not a second to lose."

Handforth looked important.

"Well, sir, it's this way," he said. "I happened to get a tear in my trucks—that is to say, my trousers, sir—so I got out of sight by dodging in some bushes, and I waited there while the other chaps went about searching for needles and thread and safety pins."

"I see, Handforth," smiled Lee. "Well, what then?"

"Nobody could see me in the bushes, because they were so jolly thick, but I could look out through the leaves without any trouble," explained Handforth. "You see, sir, it was a quiet spot, and practically deserted. I hadn't got anything to do, so I looked round about, so that I should be prepared if any silly ass came along and disturbed me. And while I was looking I caught sight of that little kid, Bobby. He was being hurried over the grass at a run——"

"One moment, Handforth," interrupted Lee. "When did this happen?"

"About half an hour ago, sir."

"Not longer?"

"Less, if anything, sir."

"But how do you know for certain that the child was Bobby?"

"Why, I couldn't mistake him, sir," said Handforth.

"How was he dressed?"

"In a blue velvet suit, sir, light blue, with a queer little blue knitted hat, and patent leather shoes with big buckles. He was crying, too, and I thought it looked a bit rummy at the time."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "This looks frightfully interesting, old boys. And I must admit that I'm in a shockin' state of bewilderment—I am, really!"

"You saw this little boy, less than half an hour ago, being hurried across the grass by a stranger, Handforth?" asked Nelson Lee. "But you mentioned something about a motor-car."

"I'm coming to that now, sir," said Handy. "This man, who was dressed in a light-coloured overall, was leading Bobby by the hand, and Bobby didn't seem to like it. So at last the chap picked him up and carried him, and shoved him into the rear part of a motor-car that was standing on the road. The fellow locked the door, buzzed into the driver's seat, and away they went."

Nelson Lee nodded slowly.

"Certainly, the incident was significant," he said. "In fact, I am beginning to suspect that there is much more in this than meets the eye at first glance. Didn't you think it strange, Handforth, to see the little boy treated in that way?"

"I thought it was jolly fishy, sir."

"Then why didn't you interfere?"

Handforth regarded Nelson Lee somewhat pityingly.

"How could I do anything, sir?" he asked. "I couldn't move. I—I wasn't exactly decent, with a whacking tear in my trucks. And by the time the other fellows turned up, the car had vanished. And I thought perhaps the chap was the kid's uncle, or something. How was I to know?"

"It looks rather rummy, sir," I remarked. "If Handforth saw this little boy bundled off in a car half an hour ago, it stands to reason that he couldn't have gone into that caravan at all. There's a mistake somewhere."

The guv'nor nodded.

"That is what I am beginning to suspect, Nipper," he agreed. "We must remember that there is only one witness—the woman. And there is every possibility that trickery has been resorted to. I am not forgetting what Mrs. Pratt said to me. Her words have now assumed a deep significance—

although, at the time, I regarded them as rambling and inconsequent."

"Which words, sir?" said McClure curiously.

"I don't think you were there at the time, McClure," said Nelson Lee. "But the other boys know. Mrs. Pratt made some vague remarks concerning a relative named William who, it seems, is a chauffeur. This man, I understand, is little Bobby's uncle. The child's parents were killed in an air-raid, and William is a good-for-nothing fellow, and Mrs. Pratt was afraid he had been up to some roguery."

"Phew!" I whistled. "It's getting clearer, sir."

"Undoubtedly," said Lee. "Handforth, by a wonderful piece of luck, witnessed the incident of little Bobby being placed in a motor-car by a man who was obviously a chauffeur. The inference is quite clear, and we should be very foolish to regard the whole thing as a coincidence. We must get on the track at once, for every second's delay makes our task the harder. Some of your boys must go to Mrs. Pratt and tell her that Bobby is safe, and that I am doing my utmost to restore him to her. It will be as well not to be too definite."

We were all excited and eager now. It was fairly obvious that a tragedy had not occurred, but that a clever trick had been engineered, and, but for that chance accident to Handforth's trousers, it might have been entirely successful.

I have often marvelled at the fact that intricate mysteries have been frequently elucidated by a seemingly unimportant incident as a starting point.

"But what shall we do, sir?" asked Handforth. "That car went away over half an hour ago, and we can't follow it—"

"We can do our best, Handforth," said Lee. "To begin with, do you know the number of the car?"

"No, sir"

"H'm. That's a pity."

"Well, sir, I didn't think of looking at the giddy number," said Handforth. "How was I to suspect that anything like this was going to happen."

"I quite agree with you, Handforth, regarding that point," said Lee. "Mind you, I did not expect you to know the number, so it does not matter. But perhaps you will be able to describe the car itself?"

"Oh, rather, sir," said Handy. "I can do that easily enough. It was a pretty big car, all closed up——"

"A limousine?"

"That's right, sir."

"What colour was it?"

"Red, sir."

"Good—splendid!" exclaimed the guv'nor, keenly. "A distinctive red?"

"Brilliant red, sir—red all over, in fact," said Handforth. "I couldn't help looking at it, because I thought it was so jolly nice. A jolly fine car, in fact."

Nelson Lee rubbed his hands together.

"This is better than I had hoped for," he exclaimed. "A red car is always distinctive and our task ought not to be so very difficult. I am puzzled that this man should use a car of that description."

"Perhaps he thought it would be better to do the thing brazenly, sir," I remarked. "It pays sometimes, you know. Or, perhaps, being a chauffeur, it was the only car he could use. But I understand he'd broken his leg——"

"We need not go into details now, Nipper," interrupted Lee. "The fact remains that the man who took little Bobby was not suffering from a fractured leg. We must give chase at once."

"But how, sir?"

"In my car. I have it quite handy," said Nelson Lee.

"Splendid!" I exclaimed. "Can we come, sir?"

"Not all of you," replied the guv'nor, shaking his head. "We must have speed, and I'm afraid our speed will be handicapped if we take too many on board. I must limit the number to three."

It was soon settled as to who should go. Handforth, Tregellis-West, and myself. Watson was disappointed, but he stood down because Handforth had certainly earned the right to accompany us. And there was no time for arguing the matter out, anyhow.

Lee gave the others instructions regarding what they should tell Mrs. Pratt. Then we hurried off with all speed to the place where the guv'nor had left his powerful racing car.

We took no further interest in all the crowds in the roundabouts, the sideshows, the stalls—we were intent upon finding Bobby. We almost forgot that it was Easter Monday, for we were so keen to get busy.

As soon as we were in the car Nelson Lee drove it by a roundabout course to the spot where Handforth had seen the other car. It was a road which cut right across the Heath, and, acting upon Handforth's directions, we started off in pursuit of the red limousine.

For perhaps a mile there was no side turning of any account, so it was impossible for us to go wrong. Then, when we got off the Heath, we found the problem to be rather difficult.

There were many roads by which the red car could have gone, and our only course was to stop and make inquiries. Naturally, there was no policeman in sight. It is a remarkable thing, that when a man in blue is required he is never available.

But a fruit stall stood on a corner, and it was quite obvious that the man had been there for some hours. So Nelson Lee pulled up, and I hopped out and ran across to the stall.

"'Ere you are, young gent," said the stallkeeper. "Prime happles at a tanner a pound. Bananas——"

"It's all right, thanks," I interrupted. "I don't want any fruit just now—although I'm willing to pay you half-a-crown if you can give me the information I require."

The man grinned.

"I'm on, sir," he said promptly.

"Well, look here," I said, "have you seen a bright green car go by within the last hour—a brilliant green that hits you in the eye?"

The man stroked his scrubby chin thoughtfully.

"Green?" he repeated. "Well, I dunno as I can say I've seen a green one—— All right, kid, I'll serve you in a minute! Green? There's been a few cars go by, but not one like that. Now, if you'd said bright red, I might have been able to 'elp you!"

"Did you see a red one, then?"

"Yus, matey," said the stallkeeper.

"Less than an hour ago. The bloomin' thing came tearin' by 'ere at a terrific rate, and smothered my stall with dust. Brilliant red, it was, an' it turned to the left, and went straight on."

"Thanks," I said briskly. "Here's your half-crown!"

The man stared at the money in wonder, for he was under the impression that he had not given me the information I required. But I had got it indirectly—

for a purpose. He might have lied, merely for the sake of a tip.

"Straight on, guv'nor," I said when I got back to the car, "and bear round to the left. The limousine went by under an hour ago."

"Good!" exclaimed Nelson Lee.

We took the road, and found that it was a main thoroughfare leading in the direction of Golder's Green. We ignored all the small side turnings, for it was obvious that our quarry kept straight on, keeping to the main road.

But when we arrived at Golder's Green we thought it just as well to make further inquiries. And here a policeman on point duty clearly remembered a red car taking the direction of Hendon. So on we went, through Cricklewood, and then to Hendon.

One or two inquiries on the way were successful, and at last we found ourselves well on the road to Edgware and St. Albans.

We were extremely pleased at our luck—for luck certainly was with us. But when we arrived at Edgware itself, we met with a set-back.

Nobody seemed to have seen the red car, and nobody could tell us anything about it. We asked policemen and others, but all were ignorant of our quarry. Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"It seems that we have come too far, Nipper," he said. "Our friend must have turned off at some point down the road—"

"I can't see how that's possible, sir," I put in. "There weren't any side turnings worth a dump, and these people seem to be pretty sleepy, anyhow. It's quite likely the car went straight on."

"Well, we will make one more inquiry," said Nelson Lee. "I can observe a little two-seater pulling up just against that garage, having come from the direction of St. Albans. Perhaps the gentleman will be able to tell us if he had passed a red car on the road. There is nothing like persistence."

We drove on for a couple of yards, and pulled up opposite a neat two-seater which had just stopped. A young man was climbing out of the driving seat.

"Excuse me, sir," said Lee politely. "perhaps you could give me a little information. Have you passed a red car on the way from St. Albans—assuming,

of course, that you have come from that town?"

The young man nodded.

"I've just come from Luton, as a matter of fact," he said. "But I've seen the car you want—it's only a few miles up the road—"

"My hat!" said Handforth excitedly.

"I'm afraid it's not the one we are after, my boy," said Nelson Lee. "Our friend in the red car will be much farther away by this time."

The motorist grinned.

"I don't fancy so," he said. "The car's hung up."

"Disabled, do you mean?" asked Lee quickly.

"Yes."

"What kind of car is it—the one you are referring to?"

"A bright red limousine," replied the other.

"Upon my soul! This is luck, indeed!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "That is certainly the car we are seeking, sir. Do you know if the car is short of petrol, or had an accident—"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I pulled up, and asked if I could be of any use," said the young man. "The driver told me that the steering had gone squiffy, and that he couldn't fake it up. He asked me to drop in at a garage, and send somebody along. I was just going to do the necessary."

"I am very much obliged to you, my dear sir," said Nelson Lee. "Your information is most valuable. By the way, did you happen to see if there was anybody in the rear portion of the car?"

"I didn't take particular notice," said the motorist. "But I fancy somebody was there. I remember catching a glimpse of something light blue. A fair damsel, I dare say. Some Bank Holiday joke, I suppose," he added, grinning.

Nelson Lee did not think it necessary to explain, but smiled, thanked our informant again, and slipped the clutch in.

We glided off.

"Luck is undoubtedly with us, my lads," said Nelson Lee briskly. "Owing to this mishap we shall be able to overtake our quarry almost at once. There is not the slightest shadow of doubt that we are hot on the track of our man."

"And on the track of little Bobby, sir," said Handforth.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL SERENE.

BEGAD! There it is, dear fellows!"

We had just turned a bend in the warm, dusty road. It lay straight ahead of us—a long clear section, without any other traffic in sight. But, right in the distance, near the side of the road, stood a big, red car, quite stationary.

We could see it quite distinctly even at that distance, for the air was very clear. And Nelson Lee put on greater speed, for he was eager to get the thing rattled.

Handforth was looking very excited.

"There might be a fight!" he exclaimed. "By George! I hope there is! I just feel like a scrap now, and —"

"Hallo!" I exclaimed quickly. "The car's moving off!"

The red limousine was undoubtedly getting into motion, and it was only possible to conclude that the driver had managed to put the steering-gear right. We saw the man standing near his car for a moment or two before he had got her moving. Perhaps he suspected that we were in chase.

At all events, the limousine moved quickly, and before long we discovered that we were not gaining.

"So that's the game, is it?" said Nelson Lee grimly. "We'll soon put a stop to it, at all events."

Lee opened the throttle, and the racer fairly leapt forward. We simply tore along at an awful speed.

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "This—this is frightfully excitin'!"

"It's great," roared Handforth. "The faster the better!"

Conversation was difficult, for we were compelled to hold our breath, and we clung to the car like limpets. And we gained on the limousine by leaps and bounds. It was a real chase.

The man ahead must have known that we were intent upon overtaking him, for he, too, put on speed. But it was a hopeless task. Nelson Lee's racer was capable of overtaking practically anything on wheels.

"The man must be mad!" snapped the guv'nor. "If his steering-gear is at all doubtful, this mad speed will strain

it severely, and he may sacrifice his own life as well as that of his passenger."

The pace was certainly killing, and it could not last. We romped up, and Nelson Lee gave a long blast on the electric horn. But the limousine in front kept to the centre of the road. It was quite clear he had no intention of drawing to his near side. He realised that we were after him.

But the road happened to be quite clear of other traffic just then, and Nelson Lee took a chance. He opened the throttle a trifle, and shot ahead and drew alongside the other car—being perilously near to the edge as we roared along. The two cars were going at the same speed.

"Stop!" shouted Nelson Lee loudly.

The driver of the limousine turned his head for a second.

"Go to the deuce!" he roared angrily.

That, at all events, is what I understood him to say. His words were possibly far stronger—and I really fancy they were—but I had been fortunately unable to catch them.

And I was full up with another idea.

We were going along neck and neck, so to speak, the two cars being within a yard of one another. It couldn't last. Nelson Lee, I felt sure, would roar ahead, and then pull up, blocking the road. But something might go wrong, and I'm a chap who believes in taking a chance when it comes—without hesitation.

And there was a chance here.

I didn't hesitate. I was out of my seat in a second. Then, even as the two cars were on the point of drawing apart, I leapt desperately on to the footboard of the red limousine. I clung there—safe.

"Oh, begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "He's mad——"

"Good man!" bellowed Handforth. "Oh, good man!"

Owing to the fact that the road narrowed somewhat just ahead, Nelson Lee was obliged to fall back, and the limousine, carrying me on the step, forged ahead. I wrenched at the door, managed to open it, and simply threw myself inside. The driver was fully aware of this move on my part, and he was furious. He decreased his speed instinctively, hardly knowing how to act.

And my attention, for the moment, was given to the occupant of the comfortable tonneau. Little Bobby lay on the cushions, frightened, but unharmed, and with tear-stained checks. His curly head

was a mere mop, and his little ankles and wrists were securely bound by a couple of handkerchiefs.

"All right, my son, you needn't look scared," I said briskly.

"Oh, please, I want Auntie!" wailed Bobby.

He was unable to say any more, for just then something decidedly alarming occurred. A grinding kind of snap, accompanied by a jar, sounded in our ears. Then the engine was cut off abruptly, and the brakes applied.

I gave one glance out, and was able to see that we were running on the grass beside the road. It was bumpy, and the next second I was jolted down with some violence, and I sprawled on the floor. Bobby slithered off his seat on to the top of me.

And then confusion reigned supreme.

We gave a terrific jump, the car seemed to leap upwards, and then everything was mixed.

Glass splintered, wood snapped, and goodness knows what else happened. I thought my last moment had come, but even in that brief second I knew what had happened. The temporarily repaired steering had given way, and the driver had only just managed to apply his brakes in time to avert a triple tragedy.

For, somehow, I picked myself up unhurt. I was dazed, bruised, but quite unscratched. And Bobby, who had somehow managed to get squeezed between me and the cushions, was not even bruised.

Everything was topsy-turvy.

The offside door of the car was where the roof ought to be, and gaping holes were showing in the coachwork. The limousine, in fact, had overturned into the ditch. I hoisted myself out somehow, yanking Bobby with me. And as we came out into the sunlight, sundry exclamations came to our ears.

"Thank Heaven!" came Nelson Lee's voice.

"They're safe!" roared Handforth excitedly.

"Oh, begad!"

Within a couple of yards stood Nelson Lee's car, and the guv'nor and the others rushed forward and helped me out. I grinned rather shakily.

"It's all right, sir, you needn't look so anxious," I said. "We're as safe as eggs. Thank goodness we weren't smashed up!"

"It is indeed a mercy that you managed to escape so lightly, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "It was most foolish of you to take that leap——"

"It's just as well I did, sir," I broke in. "Bobby might have been badly knocked about if I hadn't been in the car. But what about the driver? Is he dead?"

"He doesn't sound like it," said Handforth grimly.

I was out by this time, and Bobby was quickly transferred into Nelson Lee's car—too frightened and dazed even to cry.

The limousine was a wreck, and the driver lay in the ditch, half pinned down by a portion of his car. But, judging by his language, and the power of his voice, he was not in a very bad way.

We managed to release him, and we found that he was cut rather badly in one or two places, severely bruised, and more or less smashed up. But there were no actual bones broken.

"Confound you!" he snarled huskily. "This was your fault—this infernal accident. What was the idea of chasing me——"

"You may as well know, my friend, that I am a detective," said Nelson Lee, as he busily attended to the man's cuts. "Your little scheme has miscarried, and I shall require you to give me a full explanation."

"What scheme?" demanded the man. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes, you do," said Nelson Lee. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, my man. The facts are well known to me. You kidnapped this little boy from Hampstead Heath, after having made full arrangements for a theatrical effect. You planned it to make it appear that Master Bobby perished. But your little scheme failed to work out in the way you intended. Come, I should advise you to tell me the exact truth."

The man looked amazed and scared.

"How—how do you know?" he asked hoarsely.

"You rotter!" roared Handforth. "I saw you putting Bobby into the car, and then Mr. Lee got busy——"

"Mr. Lee!" gasped the chauffeur. "Mr. Nelson Lee?"

"Yes," said Handforth.

The man seemed to shrink.

"Then I suppose the best thing I can do is to give in," he said gloomily. "Mr.

Nelson Lee! I never thought I should have anybody on my track—not even an ordinary copper! No wonder I was copped so quick! And I suppose the youngster what jumped on to my car was Nipper?”

“He was,” I said grimly.

The news seemed to break up the man pretty completely, and after Nelson Lee had smothered him with bandages from his first-aid case, he sat down on the step of the gov'nor's car, and gazed disconsolately at the wrecked limousine.

“A fair mess up—that's what it is,” he muttered. “I told Bill all along that it was a risky game, but he said it wasn't. I wish I'd never had anything to do with the darned business.”

“What is your name?” asked Nelson Lee.

“Manning, sir—Albert Manning.”

“But you're Bobby's uncle, ain't you?” put in Handforth.

“No,” replied Manning. “Bobby's uncle is in bed, with a broken leg—Bill Harvey. He's been a pal of mine for a couple of years now. You see, we both work for Sir James Earle, up at Oaklands, near Luton. Sir James keeps two cars, and, of course, two chauffeurs. Bill's one, and I'm the other.”

“I see,” said Nelson Lee, nodding. “And what was the origin of this precious little scheme of yours?”

“Well, it was Bill's idea to start with,” said Manning. “You see, sir, his brother Robert was killed in an air raid during the war, some years ago. Robert and his wife both pegged out, and the kid was left a poor little orphan. It was real hard luck, but his aunt agreed to take him in, and that's where he's been living since—with Mrs. Pratt—who ain't on speaking terms with Bill, and never was.”

“I understand that William Harvey is something of a black sheep?” asked Lee.

“Well, I suppose you would call him that, sir,” agreed our prisoner. “A bit of a boozier, and not very particular about where he gets money. Being mates, so to speak, we pull together pretty well. His brother was a rare gentleman—the whole family were first-class, I believe. But Bill, being the black sheep, wasn't anything of account. After knocking about for some years in good positions—and losin' 'em—he comes down to driving a car, and got fixed up

with me at Oaklands. As a matter of fact, I got him the job.”

“And this man planned to-day's affair?”

“Yes, sir; it was Bill's idea right from the start,” agreed the other. “I don't exactly know the rights of it, but it seemed that Robert Harvey owned a big business in Bayswater—a drapery place, I believe. It wasn't a limited company, or anything like that, and when Bob got killed the business was sold, and, of course, the money's been put up for his son—this young nipper here.”

“How much does it amount to?”

“Oh, a regular pile—twelve or fifteen thousand!”

“And if Bobby dies, the money naturally comes into the possession of Mr. William Harvey, the uncle?”

“Yes, sir; but Bill didn't have any idea of killing the lad,” said Manning. “It was just a bit of trickery, and if it had gone through all right young Bobby would have been well cared for by my old ma—it was all arranged. I was to get five thousand for my part of the job.”

Nelson Lee nodded.

“I think I can understand,” he remarked. “While William Harvey was in bed, suffering from a broken limb, it was reckoned no suspicion would attach itself to him if this affair was brought off. He calculated that appearances would go to show that the child met his death by accident on Hampstead Heath—and William, being in bed, would obviously be blameless. He would come into the money naturally, and not a soul would ever know that Bobby was still alive.”

“Yes, sir, that was the plan.”

“Begad!” murmured Sir Montie. “What shockin' duplicity!”

“The conspiracy was certainly a clever one,” said Nelson Lee. “But for one or two trivial incidents it would probably have been successful. It is rather fortunate that we were all on the Heath to-day, boys.”

“Rather, sir!”

“Fortunate!” echoed Manning glumly. “Blamed unfortunate, you mean!”

“I assume that you had accomplices?” asked Nelson Lee. “For example, the woman who saw the child enter the burning caravan—”

“She was my sister, if you want to know,” growled Manning. “They might as well be in the soup as me,” he added

vindictively. "She and her husband—the chap who owned the caravan—planned things splendidly. We didn't think that a hitch could occur. We knew that Bobby would be brought on to the Heath to-day by his aunt, so we made preparations. And now everything's upset."

The man glared at the red car.

"And what Sir James will say to this wreck, I don't know," he went on. "I'm durned if I care, anyhow! The steering went wrong—sure to, just when everything was so important! I tell you, the whole thing's been messed up!"

"It is just as well for you that it has, my friend," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Your sentence will probably be lighter. I am glad to find that murder was not intended; at the same time, conspiracy is a serious business."

Albert Manning nodded gloomily.

He knew all about it, and he knew that he would not be in a position to drive a motor-car again for quite a long time to come!

So our Bank Holiday at 'Appy 'Ampstead had been fairly exciting, after all. It isn't necessary for me to go into any further details. Bobby was restored to

his aunt, and everything was all serene.

Then we all went to the theatre, as Nelson Lee had arranged. And, needless to say, we enjoyed ourselves immensely. Handforth caused some trouble, of course—we had expected it.

It was impossible for Handforth to be anywhere without causing trouble, in fact. It seemed to be a habit of his.

He did not let anybody forget that he was largely responsible for the rescue of little Bobby. He had seen Bobby kidnapped, and he had been able to give Lee the direct clue. So Handforth was in his element. He loved the limelight, and he liked to keep in it.

Within a day or two we were due to return to St. Frank's, and we were looking forward to it with real pleasure and enjoyment. For this was no ordinary return. Some excitement was probably awaiting us.

We did not forget that the household staff were on strike—and Sir Roger Stone, the chairman of the Governors, would certainly assert himself. We were certain that trouble of some kind would crop up.

But exactly what that trouble was to be, and how we should deal with it, remained to be seen!

In any case, there were some thrilling times ahead!

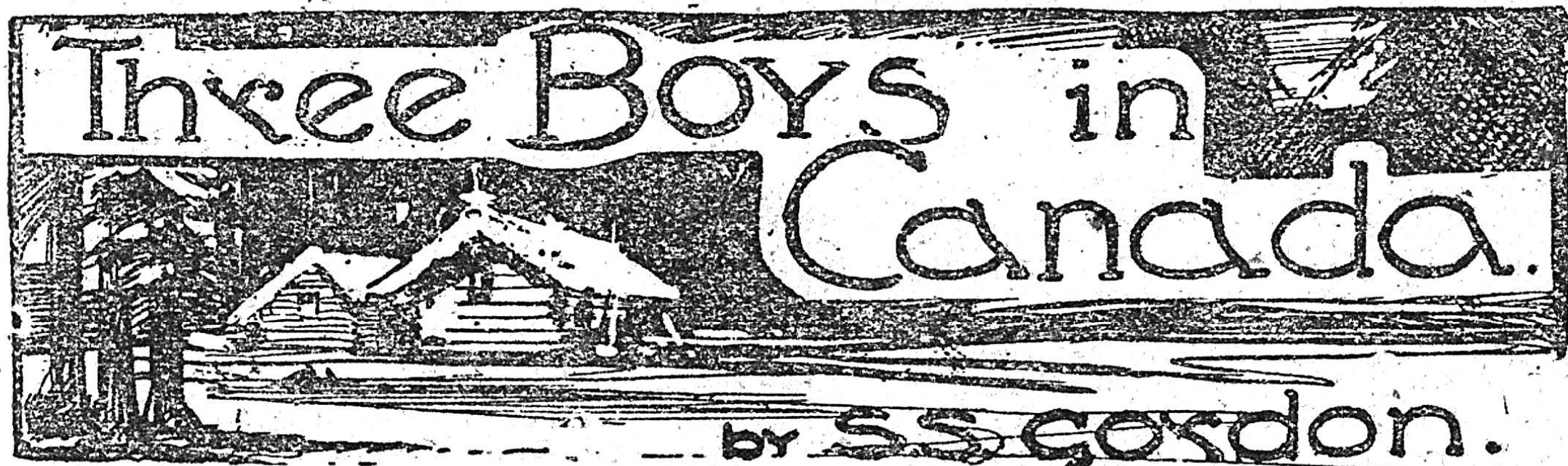
THE END.

TO MY READERS.

THERE will be a big surprise for the boys of St. Frank's when they return from their Easter holidays. You will remember that the school broke up a little earlier than usual because of the servants' strike, which Sir Roger Stone, the chairman of the Governors, was unable to settle owing to the sympathy of the boys with the strikers, and Sir Roger's obstinate refusal to meet their just demands. We know that a new batch of servants had been sent down from London, and were intercepted by the Remove at the railway station. Determined not to be beaten, Sir Roger takes advantage of the boys being away on their holidays to instal another complete staff of servants at St. Frank's. These new servants are being paid 100 per cent. more than the strikers, and as the dismissed servants had only asked for an increase of 50 per cent., there is not much doubt that Sir Roger was behaving both spitefully and unjustly towards the old staff. The boys are not slow to show their disapproval, and, in next week's story: "A Shock for St. Frank's!" you will read how they take up the cudgels on behalf of the strikers.

THE EDITOR.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS SPLENDID SERIAL TO-DAY!



A Tale of Life and Adventure in the North-West.

INTRODUCTION.

JACK ROYCE, returned from Canada, has called to see his brother, **TEDDY ROYCE**, a clerk in London. While the brothers are together, they are aroused by a loud summons at the door.

GERALD TELFORD has been set upon by roughs, and seeks assistance of the Royces. The roughs are driven off. Later, Gerald is informed by his guardian, Mr. Cardone, that the money which the lad was to inherit is lost, with the exception of £50. The three lads agree to try their luck in Canada. They set sail for Montreal, and eventually reach Winnipeg. Throughout the journey they are shadowed by a man named Obed Snaith, one of the ruffians who had attacked Gerald in London, and who is believed to be in the pay of Mr. Cardone. While in Winnipeg, the chums rescue a man, nicknamed the Mad Prospector, from ruffians. The man, however, dies of his injuries, but gives the lads a secret chart of a rich gold discovery. The three lads proceed to Medicine Hat, south of Alberta, where they are offered work at St. Pierre, 150 miles further N.W. Jack is put in charge of the train taking them there, and observes Obed Snaith with the party. When they near the end of the journey, Jack discovers that Gerald is missing from the train, and suspects foul play. From St. Pierre the brothers Royce set out in search of their missing chum, whom they suspect to have been pushed off the train at Devil's Falls. On the trestle bridge over the Falls they are attacked by Obed Snaith and Olesen, a burly Swede, but the boys get the best of the fight. Gerald is discovered on a rock at the bottom of the falls.

(Now read on.)

Rescued Under Difficulties.

JACK could not of course hear the sigh—the waters about them were thundering deafeningly—but he saw his friend's eyes. He also saw Gerald clap a hand uncertainly to his head, and gaze stupidly about him.

Then Gerald appeared to recollect where he was, or that he was in a remarkably strange position. His mouth dropped wide open; his eyes became round. He stared about him—at the water, up at the bridge above him, and finally looked at Jack kneeling there close to him. He stretched out a hand and touched the bare skin of Jack.

Jack bent closer over him, and placed his lips to Gerald's ear. He had to bawl before a sound could beat itself into Gerald's brain above the clamour.

"Tell me," he roared, "have you anything broken about you?"

"Where's your shirt?" asked Gerald, and though he undoubtedly shouted the question, only the faintest whisper reached Jack's ears.

Jack could not restrain a smile at the quaintness of the question. He held out the garment with which he had rubbed life back into Gerald.

"Are you hurt?" he roared again. "Think you could climb up there?"

Jack pointed to the lattice-like timbers of the bridge above them.

Gerald struggled up into a sitting posture, and again held his hand to his head. He stared for a long while at what he saw over his head. Then he tried to get to his feet. Jack helped him, thrusting a bare shoulder beneath his chum's arm.

Gerald leaned his weight against him for a while, then he began to stamp on the rocks with both his feet. At last he was able to stand by himself, though uncertainly. Jack was glad to see he had been right; no bones were apparently broken. But it was a nasty wound Gerald had on the head, and the generous-hearted Jack at once tore a

huge strip off his perfectly good shirt and formed a bandage, which he tied about the luckless tenderfoot's crown. Gerald tried to protest, but Jack could not hear a word he said above the din of the tumultuous waters.

Jack pointed again to the bridge's timberwork. Then he took Gerald by the arm and shoved him gently towards the edge of the flat rock. Gerald hung back for a second, his head shaking. But after another shove he reached out with both hands, took a very plucky jump, and landed with both feet firmly on a timber, both hands grasping another a little higher up. Jack followed him, and used his shoulder, helping his injured chum upwards and ever upwards.

It was a hard, grim struggle to make headway up through that intricate maze of timber, but an inch or two at a time they progressed. Jack found himself thanking his stars he had managed to restore the greenhorn to consciousness before starting out on the upward journey; otherwise, he was sure he could never have got Gerald along. As it was, his brawny shoulder was taxed to the limit of his strength, for he had most of Gerald's weight to force upwards at each movement they made. But Gerald was able to hang on with his fingers, and that made all the difference to Jack.

Even Teddy, looking down from above, never knew how long that return journey took to accomplish. Jack never tried to keep account. Only it seemed ages before, at length, Teddy, by lying flat on his stomach and reaching down with his hands through the bridge's sleepers, managed to grasp Gerald's upheld wrists. Teddy's tough young strength helped wonderfully; half Gerald's weight suddenly seemed to lift from Jack's shoulder. At length, Gerald's pale face appeared above the sleepers, and Teddy, laughing like a silly girl, slipped his arms beneath Gerald's armpits and again hoisted him upwards. Finally Gerald was lying across the sleepers, gasping faintly, his face again the hue of death, his eyes closed.

Jack climbed up alongside him, and, so spent was the big lad, he too lay at full length, and cared for nothing but that he had rescued his chum. How it had been done he did not trouble to recall. He just lay there, stripped to the waist, breathing heavily, but enjoying the delicious feeling of rest.

Teddy watched them both for a long

while, scratching his head. Then he shook his brother gently by the naked shoulder.

"You'll get your death of cold, old chap," he said. "You should have brought your jacket up with you."

These words of brotherly concern caused Jack to open his eyes. He laughed a little; then pulled himself together.

"Where's Johnson?" he asked.

Teddy started a little. In the excitement of the past half-hour or so he had quite forgotten the man who had been responsible for all this. He looked at the spot further along the bridge, where the man had been left lying stunned by Jack's blow.

Obed Snaith, or Johnson, as the Royces knew him, had gone. He had evidently recovered from his unconsciousness and, whilst Teddy had been looking anxiously below at his brother, slipped away. He was not to be seen anywhere.

"He's hared it off somewhere," said Teddy.

"You should have watched him," said Jack severely. "I was going to hand the beast over to the mounted police and charge him with attempting to murder Gerald here."

Gerald Telford sat up suddenly, and stared at the Royces.

"Murder me?" he asked blankly. "I—I can't understand."

"Well, he admitted himself that he'd chucked you down into the falls," said Jack, with a grim laugh. "Only a bit of luck that the charge against the man isn't actual murder, not attempted merely."

"He chucked me over?" asked Gerald slowly. "I don't know anything about it. I think I was asleep. Now, where was I asleep? Oh, yes, I remember! I was asleep on that flat car, and we were having a night ride up to a railroad camp, weren't we? Well, suddenly I felt myself falling, falling. It was an awful feeling, boys. Then I gripped something rough and hard with my hands, and that broke my fall. But I couldn't hold on."

"You must have caught against the timbers underneath," said Jack. "Looked as if you'd dropped through some of these sleepers when you were pushed off the car. Thank Heaven you did!"

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

"Then I went on falling again. I think I struck something hard with my head, but I remember striking water. Ugh!—It was cold water, too. Everything was as black as pitch. I wasn't carried far in the water, though, before I ran up against something solid, and managed to grip it with my fingers."

"The flat rock," said Jack, nodding his head. "Another bit of astonishing luck! And you managed to struggle upwards before you finally lost consciousness?"

"I suppose so," said Gerald wearily. "I haven't the foggiest recollection of doing so, but I must have done. Still, old man"—he suddenly reached out and grasped Jack's big brown fist in both his hands, and his face worked with emotion—"still, I'd have died if you hadn't come down and helped me up again. That's twice you've helped me out of trouble. Seems I'm always going to be owing you something more than I can repay."

"Rot!" said Jack hastily. "The only thing I could do. You see, I'd made up my mind to see you through in Canada till you'd got your feet. As for that other time, when this bounder attacked you back there in England—"

"That—that wasn't the same man!" Gerald cried. "Why—why should one man be so set on doing me in? I—I can't understand it. There's nothing to be gained if anybody does me down. I'm as broke as the next man, and— But you can't be right, old chap!"

"Well, I am; and now that bounder's shown his hand," said Jack, "I might as well tell you that he's dogged us all the way to Canada, though only to-day have we known definitely he was after you. Previously, I was only able to guess it. Another thing, Gerald, old chap, that bounder's as thick as thieves with your guardian, Septimus Cardone, the man who had all your money in trust and lost it for you."

"You're—you're joking!" Gerald gasped. "My guardian—"

"I'm only telling you facts; and let me warn you now to keep an eye out for trouble," Jack said boldly. "Somebody's very keen on doing you in, and I don't think that fellow, Johnson, would be very keen, except for one thing. Somebody who is keener is paying him for the dirty work. Those are my views, anyhow."

"Who—who would be paying him?" Gerald asked weakly.

Jack shrugged his shoulders, but said nothing. At the same time there flashed before his mind's eye the vision of Septimus Cardone, a man with a face no straight-living, clean-thinking lad could like. Ever since first meeting Cardone, Jack had disliked the lawyer.

"I think we'll be getting back to camp," he said at length, to change the subject. "I'm cold. Teddy, lend me your shirt. I'd never get into your jacket. Gerald, you'll have to ride back; we have horses here. It's twenty-five miles to Lac St. Pierre camp."

"And what about Johnson and the big Swede?" Teddy asked, as he obeyed his brother and peeled off his shirt.

"I'm not going to chase them just now," said Jack. "And I'm thinking they won't show up at the camp. If they do, Heaven help 'em! We'll inform the nearest mounted policeman we can find, give their description, and leave the affair for the law to settle. Probably, however, we have seen the last of Mr. Johnson."

"Well, I shouldn't be sorry to think so," said Teddy, as he and Jack helped Gerald walk back along the bridge to the place where they had left their borrowed horses to graze at will.

But they had not seen the last of Obed Snaith.

(To be continued.)

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