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Handforth's Handful!

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF MR. CLEMENT HEATH.

"CYCLING—that's the idea!" said Church, of the Remove.

"Rats!"

"Well, suggest something better!"

"That's easy," replied McClure. "Cycling's too jolly warm on a day like this—and too dusty. Finest thing we can do is to go rowing on the river, and take some tuck with us for tea."

Church nodded.

"Well, it's not a bad idea," he admitted. "Perhaps it will be better than cycling; but I've just got my bike from the makers, you know—a brand new one. I want to give it a good trial."

"It's a ripping bike, I'll admit," said McClure. "Jolly decent of your pater to send it. But the best time to take a run on it will be after tea—this evening. It'll be cool then, and the sun won't beat down. But what we require this afternoon is a lazy pull up the river, and some nice books to read. Think of it, lying under a shady tree, with the river in front of us, and——"

"Yes, by jingo, we'll go on the river!" said Church. "All three of us. Handy's got nothing special on for this afternoon, and he's always fond of the river. We'll go and select a good boat——"

"No, we won't!" exclaimed Handforth, from the doorway.

Church and McClure glanced round, and beheld the figure of Edward Oswald Handforth in the doorway of Study D. Handy was looking unusually determined, and there was a grim expression in his eyes.

The three juniors were in the Ancient House at St. Frank's, and the afternoon certainly was a glorious one. For a half-holiday this was rather astonishing, for it was generally noticed that half-holidays turned out wet, while working days were superbly fine. It was just the irony of things.

But to-day was really and truly glorious. The May sun shone with a heat which reminded one of August. The air was warm, and only a few filmy clouds were visible in the deep blue sky.

Cricket practice was not absolutely necessary, and it had been put off until the evening, when it would be much more enjoyable. So Church and McClure had been making plans to take full advantage of the perfect weather.

But Handforth, as usual, was not in agreement.

"We're not going on the river this afternoon, my sons," he said firmly.

"Look here, Handy, don't be an ass!" said Church. "It's a lovely day, and it's too hot for cycling. I wanted to go out on my bike at first, but McClure pointed out that the sun is too hot."

"We're not going cycling, either," said Handforth.

"Then what's the idea?"

"We'll do some rambling."

"Some which?"

"We'll go for a ramble," said Handforth grimly.

"I call that dotty!" exclaimed McClure. "It's too jolly hot to go walking to-day—too hot and dusty. There's a glorious river here, and plenty of boats. There's no reason why we shouldn't enjoy ourselves thoroughly."

Handforth regarded his chums pityingly.

"It's not a question of enjoying ourselves," he said. "We've got a duty to perform—a solemn, sacred duty."

"A—a duty!"

"Exactly!"

"Explain, you ass!" said Church.

"It's a half-holiday to-day, and we're not supposed to do any duties at all——"

"I don't mean school duties, you babbling idiot!" roared Handforth. "If you want to know the truth straight away, we're going to do some detective work—some tracking—some shadowing!"

"Wha-a-aat!"

Church and McClure stared at their leader speechlessly.

"That's the programme!" said Handforth, with a pleasant nod.

"De-detective work!" stuttered Church. "You must be dotty! There's no detective work for us to do—and even if there was we couldn't do it. We ain't detectives!"

Handforth nodded.

"I'll agree that you fellows aren't detectives," he said calmly. "But I'm one—I'm a detective——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure howled.

"You cackling fatheads——"

"Ha, ha! Ahem!" gasped Church, suddenly becoming serious. "We—we didn't mean to laugh, Handy, but we couldn't help it, you know. You've often thought you were a bit of a detective, but it's a silly idea to think things like that."

"You—you rotter!" snapped Handforth. "You know as well as I do that I'm jolly smart at detective work. You only run me down because you're jealous. I've never known such jealous bounders as you chaps. Anyhow, we're going to get on the track this afternoon. That's final."

"On the track of what?"

"We're going to shadow Mr. Heath," said Handforth.

"The new Remove master?" asked Church blankly.

"Oh, my hat, what a question to ask!" sighed Handforth. "There ain't a dozen Mr. Heaths, are there? Of course, I mean the new Remove master. He's a crook, and we're going to get on his trail."

Church and McClure gazed at one another, and breathed rather hard. Handforth had always had a bee in his bonnet that he was a keen amateur detective. This fallacy had been exploded many times, and one would have supposed that Handforth would have given up the job in disgust.

But he always came up smiling every time, and was already ready to undertake a fresh investigation at a moment's notice. Experience taught him nothing. And for him to interest himself in the affairs of Clement Heath was not particularly surprising. But Church and McClure did not like it.

True, the young Remove master was certainly mysterious in his ways. He was only at St. Frank's temporarily, filling Mr. Crowell's place while the latter was taking a rest at the seaside.

Mr. Heath had not been at St. Frank's long, and he had proved himself to be a capable man in the Form-room. He was exceedingly popular, in fact, and the Remove had nothing to complain of.

But Handforth had got into his head that the new master was a crook—or, at least, something different to what he pretended to be.

This was largely because of an incident which had occurred only a month or two earlier. Handforth had received a mysterious communication—even now he didn't know where that message had come from, or who had sent it. It was written in ink, but the words were in printed characters, so it was quite impossible to recognise the handwriting. Handforth had kept the appointment, together with his chums. But during that little jaunt between eleven and twelve at night, they had seen Mr. Heath. And Mr. Heath had acted in a very strange manner.

To begin with, he had crept out of the school grounds in a most furtive way, as though he had been afraid of being seen, although he had every right to be out, and could go where he pleased.

On the top of this, Handforth and

Co. had seen the new master climbing trees in the most aimless fashion in Bell-ton Wood. That was the point which Handforth could not understand.

Mr. Heath was either insane, or he had some hidden motive in being at St. Frank's. As Mr. Heath was undoubtedly sane, it therefore stood to reason that there was a rational explanation of his conduct.

But Handforth could think of nothing innocent. He could think of no reason why Mr. Heath should prowl about the district when he was supposed to be in bed. And it had been noticed that Mr. Heath was rather "down" on Handforth. He had given Edward Oswald more lines than anybody else in the Form.

Handforth somewhat resented this, and it only added to his determination to watch Mr. Heath closely, and to find out the truth. There was certainly very little to go upon yet, but there was no telling.

"I don't agree with this shadowing business, Handy," said Church, shaking his head. "It—it doesn't seem—well, square to me."

"What do you mean—square?"

"Well, it seems that we're prying into his business," said Church. "It's no concern of ours what he does. It's not right to spy on the chap, and to follow him when he goes out on a half-holiday. Surely you must have some sense of honesty and all that sort of thing?"

Handforth waved his hand.

"All that sort of talk is empty," he declared—"as empty as your giddy head! When you're dealing with a crook, it's necessary to act in accordance with the task. It's no good being a detective if you've got to wear kid gloves all the time. It's necessary to harden your heart, and put aside all scruples. I'm as much against spying as anybody, but it's not spying when you're a detective—it's shadowing!"

"The same thing with a different name?" asked Church.

"You can call it what you like, but we're going to shadow Mr. Heath this afternoon!" said Handforth grimly.

"Supposing he doesn't go out?" asked McClure.

"Then we can't shadow him, you duffer!"

"I think he's gone out already," said Church carelessly. "As a matter of

fact, I'm almost certain I saw him go out about half an hour ago. So the best thing we can do is to give it up for this afternoon, and go on the river."

Handforth withered his chum with a look—at least, he tried to.

"If Heath goes on the river, then we might go on it, but that's the only chance of boating you've got this afternoon," he declared. "I've made up my mind, and— My goodness!"

Handforth stared out of the window excitedly.

"What's the matter?"

"Look! He's going out now!"

Mr. Heath was certainly striding across the Triangle. He was a smallish man, quite young, and walked with a slight limp. He was dressed in a grey flannel suit, and he carried a walking-stick with him. Upon his head rested a straw hat, and it was quite evident that he meant to go for a stroll.

"This is where we get busy," said Handforth briskly. "Come on!"

"Yes, but look here——"

"No arguments—follow me!"

Church and McClure had half a mind to stay behind and risk the consequences when Handforth returned. But it was perhaps as well to accompany him. They were convinced that his shadowing would come to nothing, and that he would only make an ass of himself. There would be a certain amount of satisfaction in this, so Church and McClure went.

They left Study D by means of the open window, and walked leisurely across the Triangle in the baking sunlight. Mr. Clement Heath was a short distance down the road, and the juniors hung back, not wishing to be seen.

"Better get into the meadow, the same as we did the other night," suggested Church. "He can't see us then."

They lost no time in dodging through a gap, and it was then impossible for Mr. Heath to be aware of the fact that the three Removites were on his trail. He was striding along leisurely, smoking a cigarette, and it seemed clearly evident that he was merely out for a quiet afternoon walk.

Reaching the stile, he crossed over, and entered Bellton Wood. Handforth's eyes gleamed as he noted this fact. He looked at his chums grimly.

"There you are!" he exclaimed.

"Don't you call that suspicious?"

"Blessed if I can see anything suspicious about it," said Church.

"He went into the wood that night

"That's nothing," said Church. "It's only natural that he should go there now. It's quiet and shady, and the air in there is cool. It seems to me that you want to make mysteries out of nothing, Handy!"

"Rats! There's more material here than you'd find in a giddy shilling shocker!" said Handforth.

"Shilling shockers are about three bob nowadays," remarked McClure. "And in yarns of that kind you find about four criminals on each page, and a gory murder in every chapter. If you imagine that we're going to have some startling adventures this afternoon, you're off-side. Mr. Heath's as harmless as I am, and he's only out for a stroll."

"Well, we'll see," said Handforth grimly. "Don't forget what happened the other night—and don't forget that Heath was absolutely furious when he saw us. He was alarmed really, and tried to hide it by being angry. There's something queer about the chap, and I mean to find out what it is."

"Of course, if you choose to butt in

"Look here, you rotters!" shouted Handforth. "I know what your game is! You're deliberately jawing here so that Heath will have a chance to get out of sight! If we ain't quick we shall lose him!"

Church and McClure exchanged a glance. As a matter of fact, Handforth had divined their little idea. They had hoped, by arguing, to keep their leader in the meadow until Mr. Heath had vanished into the recesses of the wood.

But Handforth was "wise" to the move, and the next moment he had dodged across the lane, and was in the wood. Mr. Heath was not in sight at the moment, but by following the foot-path for some distance, the juniors came within sight of their quarry.

The new master was hurrying along now; he was not taking it leisurely as he had been, and it seemed that he had some definite object—to deceive anybody who happened to see him. Free from the public gaze now, he was putting his best foot foremost.

But where was he off to?

Handforth and Co. certainly performed their self-imposed task creditably. Although Mr. Heath glanced round more than once, he saw no sign of his

shadowers. Handforth and Church and McClure were strung out in a line, fifty feet apart. Handforth led the way, of course, and he kept Mr. Heath constantly in view.

The wood was very thick, trees and bushes abounding. It was quite easy to keep the master in view, and to remain hidden. But this did not apply after the wood had been left behind.

Handforth found it necessary to go more carefully.

On the other side of the wood there were two routes to take. One led on to Bannington Moor, and the other went across the fields, and led into the little, dusty lane which ran to Edgemore, and then joined up to the Bannington Road.

Mr. Heath went across the meadows, so it was fairly evident that he was bound for the tiny, sleepy village. Edgemore was right off the main track of things, and traffic there was almost unknown.

The place consisted mainly of a few old cottages, a big manor house, a post-office, two or three little shops, an old-fashioned inn, and a village green, with a public pump in the centre.

It was quite an interesting little place, but why Mr. Heath should be going there was a mystery to Handforth. It was no mystery, however, to Church and McClure. They came to the fairly obvious conclusion that Mr. Heath was bent upon looking over the village, for it was one of the choice bits of picturesque scenery of the district.

Mr. Heath was a new arrival at St. Frank's. Was it not natural that he should choose a fine afternoon like this to take a walk to Edgemore? Handforth, having got it fixed into his head that Mr. Heath was not what he pretended to be, thought of all sorts of explanations—all of them wildly improbable.

Church and McClure were not so inventive. They were a pair of matter-of-fact juniors, and they mournfully considered that the whole afternoon was being ruined. How glorious it would have been to partake of a picnic on the river! And, instead of that, they were getting this farce!

They were compelled to admit, however, that Mr. Heath's actions were very remarkable. Before very long the new Remove master made a move which filled Handforth with triumph, and which puzzled his two chums considerably.

Edgemore was nearly reached, the tiny church spire could be seen between some trees just down in the hollow. Mr. Heath, after turning a bend in the lane, had turned into a little spinney beside the road.

This led nowhere, and Handforth came to a halt rather uncertainly. He waited until his chums drew level with him, and explained what had happened. The three juniors concealed themselves in the hollow of a dry ditch. A profusion of ferns surrounded them, and completely hid them from view. There was some little confusion for a moment, owing to the fact that Handforth placed both his hands into a mass of stinging nettles, and he allowed his chums to know all about it.

"It's no good making a fuss," said Church. "You'd better take some of those dock leaves——"

"Those which?"

"Dock leaves!" explained Church. "If you rub some of those on your hands they'll take all the sting out."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I tried it once, but the giddy things only stained my hands. Blow the nettles! What are we going to do about Heath? He's gone into that thicket, and I'm afraid to walk up, because there's no cover—he'd spot me in a minute. And he might have gone right through the spinney to the other side! Why the dickens couldn't he keep straight on the road, instead of messing us about like this!"

Church and McClure were unable to answer this question.

"Anyhow, I'm not going to stop here for long," went on Handforth. "If there's no sign of him within two minutes we'll—— Hallo! What the dickens——"

He paused abruptly, for a stranger had emerged from a gap in the hedge, leading from the spinney—the same gap that Heath had entered by. The juniors, low down in the dry ditch, could see the man clearly, although he was unable to see them.

"Who's that merchant?" muttered Church.

The man was smallish; he wore a light overcoat, and a bowler was upon his head. This was a strange attire for such a very hot day. The man walked forward for a few paces, looking up and down the lane.

"Great—great pip!" gasped Handforth faintly.

"What's the matter?"

"Didn't you see?" asked Handy, with a gulp.

"See what?"

"That chap—he limped when he walked!"

Church and McClure stared.

"Why, what—what——" Church paused. "Do—do you mean——"

"It's Heath!" exclaimed Handforth breathlessly. "Heath himself! He's been into that thicket to put that overcoat on, and to change his straw-yard for a bowler! He's disguised himself!"

"But—but this chap has got a moustache!" said McClure, startled.

"False!" said Handforth keenly. "Look at him! He's walking away now. He limps! He can't disguise that! Oh my only hat! This is even better than I expected! Heath in disguise! A St. Frank's master——"

"It's—it's impossible!" said Church.

"We must have made a bloomer!" declared McClure.

"Piffle! That chap's Heath all right," said Handforth, with conviction. "Why, if you weren't so jolly pig-headed about the whole thing, you'd know the truth. I've said all along that Heath ain't square—and this proves it. You don't like to believe this because you thought I was wrong."

There was a certain amount of truth in this remark, and Church and McClure were compelled to admit it. They instinctively knew that the man who had just appeared was, indeed, Mr. Clement Heath. But somehow, they did not like to acknowledge it. The facts seemed too extraordinary—too astonishing.

But the truth of the thing was obvious.

It was Mr. Heath who had gone into the spinney, and it was Mr. Heath who had come out. The Remove master paused to light a cigarette, and unbuttoned his overcoat in order to obtain a match.

The juniors could see quite distinctly, and they saw something else—something which removed the last shred of doubt. The man standing in the lane was wearing a light grey flannel suit, and it was one which could not possibly be mistaken, for there were distinctive blue stripes in the material.

Furthermore, when his face was to-

wards the boys, they recognised him as Mr. Heath, in spite of his false moustache.

He turned, and walked slowly down the lane, swinging his stick carelessly.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Church, taking a deep breath. "It's him, right enough—no doubt about it at all."

"There you are," said Handforth triumphantly.

"But—but what's the idea of disguising himself?" asked McClure in amazement. "And, anyhow, what's the good of a rotten disguise like that? It wouldn't deceive a blind man!"

"You can bet there's some good reason for it," said Handforth. "The people in Edgemore don't come to St. Frank's, and therefore they don't know Heath. He wouldn't dare to appear in Bellton in that get-up—but he uses the disguise here because he isn't known. It's simply a matter of precaution, I suppose. A little change in his appearance like this doesn't take ten minutes, and it's quite effective in its way. People who only know him faintly by sight would never recognise him in that get-up!"

"But what the merry dickens is the idea of it?" asked Church, mystified.

"Goodness knows."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"Do?" said Handforth, rising out of the ditch as Mr. Heath's form vanished round the bend. "What are we going to do? Why, I'll show you!"

He jumped up, looking grim, and his chums felt rather alarmed.

"I—I say, Handy, don't be rash, you know," exclaimed Church. "Don't rush up to Heath and ask what his game is —"

"You silly ass!" interrupted Handforth scornfully. "Do you think I'd do a dotty thing like that? This is a case which needs finesse."

"Which needs what?"

"Careful handling," explained Handforth. "We've got to be cautious, and we mustn't act hastily or precipitately."

"My hat!" said McClure. "That's a good word!"

Handforth glared at his chums as though they were some inferior variety of insect. Then he sniffed, and walked briskly down the lane. Church and McClure, ignoring the insult, followed their brainy leader.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS COTTAGE.

EDGEMORE was quite asleep. The straggling little High Street was absolutely deserted as Mr. Heath walked leisurely along. He did not traverse the whole length of the street, but turned down a tiny lane, which was almost concealed by hanging trees.

As soon as he had vanished round the corner, three youthful figures bobbed into view from behind the whitewashed wall of an old farm building, which lay flush with the road.

Handforth and Co. were on the trail.

"Yes, my sons, we're on the track of something big," declared Handforth grimly. "No decent man—no honourable Remove master—would come to a place like this, and disguise himself before appearing. It's fishy."

"He might be doing it just for a joke —"

"I don't want any brainless remarks from you, Arnold McClure," snapped Handforth.

"Yes, but——"

"The facts are beyond dispute," went on Handforth, with a majesterial wave of his hand. "We've tracked Heath to this place, and we've found out that he's up to something crooked. We're fully justified in following up our investigation. We shall probably obtain more data for future use. It's just as well to press our inquiry forward with all speed."

Handforth spoke in an important tone, for it was one of his favourite weaknesses to pose as one of the fiction detectives he so much admired. He rather fancied himself in the rôle of crime investigator—and he was always somewhat apt to think people criminals merely for the sake of investigating their movements.

Church and McClure had assumed that Handforth's convictions with regard to Mr. Heath were based on a similar plan. But, by all appearances, Handy had at last struck something which seemed likely to bear fruit.

At all events, Mr. Heath's movements were by no means ordinary, and the three juniors were very astonished by what had occurred. Handforth was just as astonished as his chums, but he pretended to take it quite as a matter of course. According to his talk, he had

expected something of the sort from the very start.

They arrived at the corner some few moments after Mr. Heath had vanished. Peeping round, Handforth had no difficulty in sighting his quarry, two hundred yards ahead.

Mr. Heath was just disappearing round a twist in the narrow lane, so Handforth and Co. were safe in following.

"Come on, my sons," said Handforth briskly. "We're conducting this investigation in the right way. I don't exactly believe in theories, but I'm tempted to make a guess at things now. In my opinion Mr. Heath is a burglar, and he means to break into the Head's safe before long. He might have some confederates somewhere in the district, and he's probably going to meet them now."

"Steady on, Handy," protested Church. "That's a bit thick, you know."

"I'm judging by the facts——"

"So am I," said Church. "You seem to forget that there was an attempted burglary at St. Frank's only a week or two ago, just because the servants' strike ended. Nobody else would be idiotic enough to try the same game again so soon."

Handforth glared.

"I don't want any rot from my assistants!" he said tartly.

"Your what?"

"My assistants," repeated Handforth. "Don't forget that while I'm engaged on an investigation, you fellows must consider yourselves my employees. If I give orders, you've got to obey them. And if you don't obey them, you'll get it in the neck!"

"You'll be taking a larger size in hats next!" sniffed Church.

Handforth did not realise what this cryptic remark meant until several yards had been covered, and then it was too late to inflict punishment. For just after that he caught sight of Mr. Heath turning in to a gateway.

"Keep back, you ass!" hissed Church abruptly.

The detective-in-chief nearly made a bad bloomer, for he had exposed himself at the most critical time. But for the fact that Church pulled him back, Handforth would have been seen by the disguised Mr. Heath, who had glanced round for a moment.

As it was, the catastrophe was avoided,

and Mr. Heath entered the gateway still unaware of the fact that his movements were under observation.

The three juniors peered round the bend cautiously.

"My hat!" muttered Church. "He nearly spotted us."

"Nearly spotted Handy, you mean," remarked McClure.

"You shouldn't bother me so much!" snapped Handforth unreasonably. "I'm beginning to regret bringing you now. I think I could have conducted this case better on my own. We're wasting time."

He moved forward cautiously. The lane was very shady, and a thick hedge enclosed the garden of the house which Mr. Heath had approached. Before reaching the gateway, the boys came upon a slight break in the hedge, which permitted them a view of the building.

Mr. Heath was standing at the front door.

"H'm! Just what I expected," said Handforth grimly. "This looks sinister! It's the only word to use. It looks forbidding——"

"I thought you said sinister was the only word——"

"Silence!" ordered Handforth curtly. "No talking!"

As the "investigation" proceeded, Handforth was becoming more and more autocratic, and at this rate of progress he would probably expect his chums to address him as "sir" before another hour had elapsed.

Church and McClure were amused, but they did not allow their leader to be aware of this. At the same time, they were interested in the affair itself, and were puzzled over the whole business.

Mr. Heath had apparently only just arrived at the door, for he lifted the knocker as the boys watched, and then brought it down.

Rap-rap! Rap-rap-rap! Rap-rap!

The knocks were quite distinctive; a double knock, three sharp ones, and then another double knock. Handforth's eyes gleamed as he looked at his chums.

"A signal!" he announced.

"We can't be certain of that," said Church.

"Oh, yes, we can," declared Handforth. "He rapped in a distinctive way—in order to let the people in the house know his identity. This is getting more and more mysterious, my lads. We must

put all our energies forward in an attempt to discover the black truth."

"My hat!" whispered McClure. "Look there!"

But his chums were already looking, and they saw something which rather surprised them. For a second the casement curtains of one of the front windows was pulled aside, and a face appeared—a wrinkled, yellowish face which looked somewhat startling in the subdued light, for thick trees grew near the house, and the windows were in deep shade.

"This is getting grim!" declared Handforth. "What do you think of that? A Chinaman! A Chinaman, here in England!"

"I don't think it was a Chinaman," said Church. "We only caught a glimpse, and we didn't have time to see the face distinctly. I believe it was a woman—an old woman with grey hair."

Handforth regarded Church pityingly.

"What's the good of bringing a chap like you with me?" he demanded warmly. "An old woman! You're either blind, or short-sighted! It was the face of a Chinaman, and I'll bet a quid that—By Jupiter!"

The front door had opened a few inches. Mr. Heath slipped through the aperture, and the door was closed silently. But the boys heard a sound which indicated that a bolt was being shot.

What could it mean?

Mr. Heath had entered the place in a most mysterious way. It was quite evident that he was afraid of being seen, and there was something very strange about the whole affair. The juniors were astounded.

It was all so unexpected—so queer. For a St. Frank's master to act in this way was really extraordinary. And the very appearance of this house struck a chill into the hearts of the watchers.

Although the afternoon was so fine, and the sun was shining so brilliantly, this house somehow made the juniors feel serious.

It was a low-built place, of grey stone, and there was not an atom of creeper upon it to relieve the monotony. Thick trees grew all round, as though to shut out all sunlight. The front garden was a kind of wilderness, full of rank weeds and long grass.

The windows were like those of a

prison, and there was no possibility of making the place look homely. The house was old, but far from picturesque, and the mysterious behaviour of Mr. Heath only added to the strangeness.

"Well, are you satisfied?" asked Church.

"Satisfied?" repeated Handforth. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you started out to track Mr. Heath, and you've been brought to a full stop here," said Church. "You've discovered his destination, and we don't know any more now than we did at first."

"But we shall know a lot more before I've finished," said Handforth grimly.

"By George! I'm hot on his scent! I mean to discover what it all means—what Heath is doing here—and why he goes prowling about the woods at night."

"It certainly does seem somehow curious," admitted McClure.

"It's downright crooked," declared Handforth. "There's some plot afoot, and if we can only rake out the truth think of the honour—the honour for Study D! Why, our names will be on everybody's lips! Our photographs will appear in the papers! We shall be the heroes of the hour—"

"Don't you think we'd better get back to reality?" asked Church, with a touch of sarcasm. "I'll bet a quid you're making a mound out of a molehill. Mr. Heath has probably come here to see a friend."

"He hasn't had time to make friends with anybody."

"Well, it might be a matter of business," argued Church. "For example, for all we know, an advert. might have appeared in the local paper, offering a bike or a motor-car for sale. And Mr. Heath might have come here in answer —"

"You brainless fathead!" said Handforth witheringly. "Heath would give a mysterious knock, wouldn't he?"

"That might have been a coincidence."

"And people generally shove on false moustaches and alter their appearance when they answer adverts.—don't they?" demanded Handforth. "It's no good talking, my son. Mr. Heath is a wrong 'un, and I'm going to find out the exact truth."

"How?" asked Church, who realised that his argument was weak.

"I don't know yet; but I'm going to

start at once," said Handy, looking round. "This place is surrounded by trees, so it ought to be easy to do some scouting work. We'll get round to the back, and then creep up to the house."

"We'll be spotted."

"Not while I'm leading you!"

Church and McClure did not feel so confident as Handforth. In fact, they were mildly astonished that the investigation had gone so far without discovery. It was really a record for Handforth.

"Come on!"

They retraced their steps until they came to a meadow. By getting through the hedge they entered the meadow, and passed along the garden of the house—which, according to a board over the door, was called Greyhurst Cottage. The hedge was thick, so there was no fear of the boys being seen from the house itself.

They found many trees at the rear, and bushes and shrubs grew in profusion. By moving cautiously it was quite easy to penetrate into the rear garden itself, and there was not the slightest danger of being seen.

"This is topping!" murmured Handforth. "We might be able to discover all sorts of things if we're careful. I'm not sure about bringing you fellows, and I think it would be just as well if you stayed behind here."

"Rats!" said Church. "We're all in this!"

"Rather!" agreed McClure. "But look here—I've just thought of something. What if a dog happens to be loose in this garden?"

"My hat!" muttered Church, looking about anxiously.

"Oh, you needn't be scared!" exclaimed Handforth. "I don't expect there's a dog here, but if there is I'll deal with it. I'm not going to let any blessed dog interfere with my detective investigations."

Church and McClure thought it better to let the matter rest at that, and they all three crept on through the bushes and trees until they had approached the house to the very furthest point possible.

They could only go near by exposing themselves, and that, of course, was out of the question. There were at least three windows from which they could be seen. So the juniors came to a halt, and peered through the bushes at the back of

Greyhurst Cottage. The rear of the little building was even less prepossessing than the front. The garden here was like a rank patch of forest land. Some creeper grew on the walls, but it was overgrown and untidy, and gave the whole place an appearance of wildness.

"Not much to see here!" muttered Church.

He was certainly right in this assertion. From their vantage point, the boys could only see three windows—two upper ones and one lower. The upper windows were small and were closely curtained. It was impossible to catch the faintest glimpse of what lay within.

The lower window was open, and the casement curtain fluttered about occasionally as the warm breeze caught it. The juniors centred their attention upon this window, and also upon a narrow door which stood near to it.

The door was closed, and it had not been painted, apparently, for many years. Handforth and Co. listened for the sound of voices, but they heard nothing. At least, they heard no voice.

But faintly to their ears came a curious metallic sound, like the faint clanging of some machinery. They could not understand what it was caused by. But it certainly seemed strange.

Handforth wanted to creep further forward, but his chums were firm.

"Look here, you can't go, Hardy," said Church earnestly. "What's the good of ruining everything by exposing yourself?"

"There's no danger, you ass!"

"I don't suppose there is," said Church. "But if you allow yourself to be seen now, Heath will know that we've been on his track, and then all our trouble will have been for nothing."

"The best thing is to come here some other time," suggested McClure. "After dark, for instance. We can creep up to the very window then, without any fear of discovery. I'm blessed if I can see any sense in giving ourselves away."

Handforth was persuaded.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted. "We'll leave it for now; but I mean to come back here to-night, and it's a ten to one chance that Heath will be here too. What a fine thing it will be if we can expose him! My hat! Did—did you see—"

Handforth paused abruptly, his eyes gleaming.

His chums had certainly seen, and they

were somewhat puzzled. For a moment the breeze had blown the curtains aside, allowing the juniors to catch a brief glimpse of the interior of the apartment.

Everything was dark inside the window, of course, but during that brief spell the juniors had seen something which aroused their curiosity. It was only just a flash—a fleeting glimpse.

But during that short period they had seen a metal wheel whirling round: And then, before any other details could be impressed upon the vision, the curtain floated back in place.

"My goodness!" said Handforth, almost gulping with excitement. "Machinery! That's the cause of that clanging noise! This—this place must be a factory of some kind! They've got something shady here——"

"A printing machine, perhaps," suggested Church vaguely.

"You dotty ass! What good would a printing machine be?" demanded Handforth. "It couldn't be anything of that nature—— Great guns! I—I've thought of something. You're right, Church! It is a printing machine!"

"How do you know?"

"Why, it's obvious; there can't be any doubt," said Handforth excitedly.

"But what are they printing?"

"Bank notes—dud bank notes and currency notes!"

"Great pip!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

"Forgeries!" went on Handforth, with much relish. "That's what it is! Heath is the chief of a gang of forgers, and he's come to St. Frank's as a respectable schoolmaster so that he won't be suspected! He's got his gang here, and he visits the place every night, and every spare hour! I expect he engraves the plates, and all that sort of thing; and, being in a good position, he can order the ink and paper without being suspected!"

"I—I say!" panted McClure. "Draw it mild, Handy——"

"It's the truth, you ass!"

"We don't know that for certain, old man. After all, it's only guesswork on your part!"

Handforth laughed curiously.

"Guess work!" he echoed. "Why, you poor fathead, there's no guess work about it! It's all as clear as daylight. Any chap with a grain of sense can see the truth about it."

"You saw it all right," remarked Church.

"Of course I did! I can generally see——" Handforth paused, and glared at Church. "Are you trying to be funny?" he snapped. "Are you suggesting that I've only got a grain of sense?"

"Oh, don't be touchy!" grinned Church. "But, seriously, I can't exactly see how you arrive at your conclusions, Handy. We've seen some queer things here, I'll admit, but there's nothing to definitely show us that Mr. Heath is the chief of a gang of forgers."

"It simply shows that you've got no imagination," said Handforth sourly.

"Well, a detective oughtn't to have an imagination," declared Church. "He's got to stick to facts—not what he imagines. It's easy enough to see one or two things, and to guess the rest; but that's not a safe way."

"Are you trying to teach me how to be a detective?" roared Handforth.

"Shut up, you idiot!" muttered McClure. "If you're not careful you'll give us away! Don't yell like that!"

Handforth snorted.

"Well, this fathead here shouldn't be so jolly clever!" he exclaimed. "He thinks he knows better than I do! I'm the chief, and I'm conducting this case—don't forget that! If you chaps can't see the truth, I can. Heath is the head of a gang of counterfeiters, and it's within our power to expose him!"

"We can't tell the police——"

"Not yet," Handforth agreed. "But we can come back to-night, get our evidence complete, and then tell the police. After that it will simply be one long series of triumphs for us."

And Edward Oswald Handforth sat back in the grass, his face glowing with enthusiasm, his whole being thrilled with the thought of his great discovery.

Somehow, Church and McClure couldn't quite share his feelings. There was a doubt, somewhere in the back of their minds, that their mighty leader was on a false trail.

CHAPTER III.

NO SUPPORTERS.

"THIS is the place," said Handforth briskly. "We'll wait here."

The three amateur sleuths had returned to the little spinney just outside Edgemore. It was more cheerful

here. The sun was shining warmly, and the air was filled with the hum of insects.

Handforth was just as enthusiastic as ever, and by this time he was absolutely positive that his theory was correct. Indeed, one might have supposed that he had seen the printing press with his own eyes—that he had even fingered some of the forged notes.

And Church and McClure were beginning to share his enthusiasm now. His constant repetition of the theory was beginning to convince them that his story was true, and that Mr. Heath was, actually, the head of a gang.

But Church and McClure were cautious.

"Look here, Handy, I think we'd better tell Mr. Lee all about it," remarked Church, as he plucked the seeds from a grass head. "It's too big to keep to ourselves. If the gang escapes we shall be blamed."

"You can trust me, I suppose?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, yes, but——"

"You needn't worry at all," went on Handy. "As a matter of fact, I think I shall tell Nipper about it. He'll be able to give us a hand to-night."

"Good idea!"

"At the same time, I shall make him thoroughly understand that I'm the leader, and that this is my case," went on Handforth firmly. "I'm not going to be pushed aside by Nipper, or by anybody else. Not likely!"

Church and McClure nodded.

"Well, what about tea?" asked Church casually.

"It's nearly five o'clock," added McClure.

"That's just like you chaps, thinking about your beastly tummies when there's important work to be done!" said Handforth scathingly. "We're on important detective work, and we haven't got time to think about grub!"

"But even detectives must eat!" protested Church.

"Of course they must, but not until they're ready," said Handforth. "When a detective's on the trail, he's got to stick to it, and, if necessary, he's got to stick to it all day and all night. We've come here now to satisfy ourselves finally that the chap we saw is really Heath. He'll come back into this spinney, and we shall be able to see him discarding his disguise."

"But we might have to wait for hours!"

"Never mind; we can wait."

"That's not very profitable," said McClure. "I should think he'll get back to St. Frank's in time for tea. He's got to remember that he's a master, and he might find it awkward to explain his absence if he's away too long."

At the same time, Handforth's chums did not relish the idea of waiting in that spot indefinitely. They decided to stay there for another hour at least. And then, if nothing occurred, they would leave Handforth in charge while they went in search of tea, and risk his wrath.

However, this move was not necessary.

Hardly twenty minutes had elapsed before footsteps were heard. And then a form appeared through the trees, and the juniors saw that it was the man who had entered Greyhurst Cottage—a man in moustache and bowler.

"Not a sound!" breathed Handforth. "Watch!"

The juniors were securely ensconced in a bed of ferns, and they were not even visible at a range of ten feet. There was just a chance that Mr. Heath would come right upon them, but only a bare chance.

He didn't. He walked through the trees, and came to a halt against the dead trunk of an old tree. Then, after glancing round him carefully, he placed his overcoat in the trunk, did the same with his bowler, and produced a straw hat. When he turned his face again the juniors saw that he was minus his moustache.

He had become Mr. Clement Heath once more.

The Remove master wasted no time. Having completed the transformation, he walked briskly out of the spinney, and took the road to St. Frank's. Handforth and Co. followed shortly afterwards, and did not trouble to keep the new master in sight.

It was no longer necessary to shadow Mr. Heath, for it was obvious that he was returning to St. Frank's. The juniors took the journey leisurely, discussing the affair as they went.

And when they arrived within the Ancient House, they marched straight to Study D. At least, Church and McClure did, but Handforth stopped them from going in.

"Hold on!" he said briskly. "There's something to be done!"

"Exactly," said Church. "We've got to prepare tea."

"Blow tea!" snorted Handforth. "Don't think so much about your inside——"

"We're hungry!"

"So am I, but I believe in putting business before pleasure," said Handforth grimly. "We're going to have a chat with Nipper."

Without waiting for his chums to protest, Handforth walked to the door of Study C, turned the handle, and strode into the apartment. As it happened, we were just commencing tea, and our festive board was loaded.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson had already commenced, and I was pouring out the tea. I looked up, nodded to the visitor, and grinned.

"How did you smell the grub?" I asked cheerfully. "Looking for tea? Squat down, my sons, and make yourselves at home. There's enough fodder for a dozen."

"Good egg!" said Church briskly. "Thanks awfully!"

"This is stunning!" said McClure.

"But what ails the illustrious Handforth?" I inquired. "What great problem claims his august attention? I can see wrinkles of worry upon his manly brow, and his eyes gleam with fire."

The other juniors chuckled.

"Don't rot!" growled Handforth. "I've come here on urgent business——"

"Tea," I said. "Quite so. Squat down——"

"No, not tea!" roared Handforth, glaring. "I'm not like these chaps, putting their insides before matters of great importance. I've come to tell you a most important piece of information. Something that will make you jump in your chairs—something that will absolutely stagger you!"

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie mildly. "Really, old boy?"

"Yes, really," retorted Handforth. "In fact, it's so staggering, that all your appetite for tea will vanish——"

"Whoa!" I interrupted. "You'd better wait until we've finished, old son! I'm hungry, and I don't want my appetite removed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you can only be serious for five minutes, it's all I require," said Handforth grimly. "Of course, it's rather too much to expect, because you can't

appreciate the real gravity of this investigation I've been making."

"This which you've been whatting?" I inquired politely.

"Oh, dry up! Don't be funny!" snapped Handforth. "I've been making a most important detective investigation——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" I roared. "Ahem! Sorry!"

Handforth glared at our grinning faces almost balefully.

"If you can't take me seriously, I'll clear out!" he snapped. "You'll be sorry if you upset me this time. If you don't hear what I've discovered about Heath, you'll be in a fine old temper later on! You'll wish you'd known he was a forger right from the start! If you laugh again, I won't tell you a thing."

We became as grave as images.

"Let us hear the dreadful news!" I said solemnly. "Proceed, fair youth!"

"It's about somebody we all know," said Handforth mysteriously. "You'll be amazed when I tell you who it is——"

"I'll make a guess," I interrupted. "It's Mr. Heath!"

Handforth stared.

"How the dickens did you know?" he asked blankly.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, wagging my finger. "That would be telling!"

"Well, it was only guess, anyhow," he went on. "As a matter of fact, it is about Heath, and he's——"

"A forger!" I interjected impressively.

"Wha-a-t!"

Handforth fairly gasped out the word, and sat down abruptly.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "You—you know that, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We simply roared.

"There's nothing funny about it——"

"No?" I grinned. "My dear old son, considering that you told us three minutes ago that Heath is a forger, there's not much credit due to me for guessing the horrid fact. A detective of your stamp ought to be more cautious."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I didn't say a word about Heath!" snorted Handforth.

His chums attempted to remind him of the fact that he had said a good many words, but they were quite unable to

convince him. Handforth obstinately persisted that he had said nothing, and that they, on the other hand, must have let out the secret. A free fight would have resulted if I had not intervened.

"Peace, children—peace!" I said soothingly. "There's no need to go into gory fights about it. Let's have the yarn, Handy, and we'll do our best to stand the awful shock bravely."

Handforth was unsuspecting.

"Well, I believe in getting to the point straight away," he said. "Before I tell you how I arrived at the truth, I'll bring out the most important point. Mr. Heath is the chief of a gang of forgers, and he's got his quarters at a house in Edgemore. They're printing bank notes and currency notes as fast as they can operate machines!"

"Good heavens!" I said dramatically.

"Dear old boy, this is simply shocking!" murmured Sir Montie. "It is, really!"

"Of course it's shocking," agreed Handforth, "we all know that. But it happens to be the truth. I have been on the trail all the afternoon, and my investigations have resulted in cast-iron proof."

And Handforth proceeded to explain exactly how he had arrived at his conclusion. We were certainly impressed by his account of Mr. Heath's strange movements, and we listened attentively, and forgot to grin.

"It's jolly queer, anyhow," said Tommy Watson. "Why on earth should he want to get disguised for?"

"Well, obviously because he wanted to alter his opinions," I remarked. "What we want to get at is why he was so anxious to alter his appearance. It may be quite an innocent affair, but, on the other hand, there might be something important behind it all. There's no telling. The facts as we know them are very slender——"

"They're absolutely strong! The evidence is complete, and I'll tell you why."

He did not tell us why, and once more our grins became evident. Handforth's account of his doings was quite entertaining, and there was something really humorous in his cast-iron proof that Mr. Heath was the chief of a gang of forgers.

"Well, what do you think of it?" demanded Handforth at last.

I stirred my tea complacently.

"My appetite's just as keen as it was," I said. "And if you care to sit there you'll see me demolishing a hearty feed——"

"But—but what about my discovery?" roared Handforth.

"Your which?" I asked blandly. "You mean your wild guess, I suppose?"

Handforth nearly choked.

"Mum—my wild guess!" he stuttered.

"You silly ass, it's the truth——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell you——"

"You ought to have been a comedian, Handy—not a detective!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth went purple with indignation.

"Why, you—you—you——"

"Don't!" I interrupted. "Don't spoil the harmony by interrupting us, old son. The fact is, you've lost your head a bit. I'll admit that the facts are rather strange, but there's nothing whatever in your story to lead us to believe that there's anything wrong going on in that cottage. My dear chap, just look at the facts. Did you see any actual machinery? No! Did you see any printing going on? No! Did you see any sign of the gang? No! Your idea about forgery is a sheer piece of guess work—and pretty far-fetched at that."

"You—you senseless josses!" howled Handforth. "There's no guesswork about it at all! The truth is obvious. We did see machinery——"

"A mangle, probably!" I explained.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A mangle!" roared Handforth. "Do you think I don't know a mangle when I see one?"

"But you only caught a glimpse of a turning wheel——"

"I saw quite enough to convince me that Heath is a crook, and that Greyhurst Cottage is a forgers' den. I want you to come there with me to-night, after lights-out, and we'll obtain all the necessary evidence, and have the whole crowd arrested."

"Begad! Which crowd?"

"Why, the gang!"

"But, dear old boy, you only saw a single face——"

"I don't care about that," said Handforth. "I'm going to bring this case to a successful conclusion, and I'm sorry

I told you anything about it! I thought you'd be willing to follow my leadership, and to lend a hand in the capture!"

"My dear old chap, take a word of advice," I said smoothly. "Don't read so many third-rate detective yarns. They get into your head, and make you assume things that don't exist. If you want good detective stuff, read about the gov'nor, or about Sexton Blake——"

"You—you ass!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "Don't I keep telling you that I know all this about Heath?"

I nodded.

"You keep telling us," I agreed, "but it doesn't convince us."

"Are you coming to that cottage to-night, or not?" demanded Handforth, rising to his feet. "Are you going to give us a hand in the capture?"

"I'm sorry, but we can't enter into any dotty ideas like that," I said. "You haven't got any proof at all, Handy, and you'll only make an ass of yourself if you persist in this potty idea. We sha'n't say anything to the other fellows—so you needn't be afraid of that. But do be sensible——"

"You silly blockhead!" said Handforth witheringly. "You're as bad as Government officials! You have the facts put straight before you, and you won't believe them. It's—it's disgusting! What's more, I take it as a personal insult, and I'm going to punch your nose!"

"Mercy!" I pleaded, placing my hands together in supplication.

"You—you——"

Handforth rushed at me, but a few seconds later he rather wished he hadn't. There was only one thing to be done. Sir Montie and Tommy and I rose sedately, and we seized Handforth in a firm grasp.

Then, gently and deliberately we took him to the door, and hurled him into the passage. Church and McClure went rather hastily, without waiting for us to assist them. The door closed, and Handforth picked himself up, dusty, gasping, and red in the face.

"The—the mad asses!" he panted. "So this is all they can do when I bring them positive information! All right! They'll be sorry they didn't heed my words! We shall get all the glory now—and they'll be scorned!"

Handforth charged into Study D, brimming with indignation. But, somehow, Church and McClure had an idea

that it was their aggressive leader who would reap the scorn. He was undoubtedly well on the road to ridicule.

"I'll conduct this case on my own!" declared Handforth grimly. "We'll see! Yes, by George, we'll see!"

And, certainly, they were destined to see—something!

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRAIL.

THE Remove slept.

At all events, the Remove was supposed to be sleeping.

But two fellows at least were wakeful. One of them was Edward Oswald Handforth, and the other was little me.

Handforth was awake because he had firm intentions of performing great deeds, and I was awake because I had still firmer intentions of preventing Handy making an ass of himself.

As a matter of fact, Sir Montie and Tommy and I had retired to bed fully prepared to slip out quickly. Indeed, we were not fully undressed, and our outer clothing was already to be slipped into within half-a-minute. My chums had dropped off to sleep, knowing that I should awaken them at the right moment.

Eleven o'clock had just boomed out, and Handforth sat up in bed abruptly. It was a mild, warm night, and the prospect of venturing out into the soft moonlight was quite agreeable. Also, there was detective work to be done.

Handforth slipped out of bed, and was soon shaking Church and McClure. They were soon awake, for they had been dreading something of this kind.

Church sat up in bed, yawned, and gave an expressive grunt.

"You're not going to be an ass, I suppose?" he asked irritably.

"Get into your things, the pair of you, and do it as quietly as you can," ordered Handforth authoritatively. "It's gone eleven already, and unless we're quick Mr. Heath will be out before us. We've got to buck up."

"Oh, rats!" said McClure, yawning. "I'm sleepy, Handy, I don't want to go out now. We shall only make a mess of

things. Why don't you go alone? On a job of that sort a detective ought to be absolutely single-handed——"

"You're coming with me!" said Handforth grimly.

"Are you afraid of going alone?" taunted Church. "Are you funky?"

Handforth breathed hard.

"No, I'm not!" he snapped. "You rotters! By George! I will go alone! You can go and eat coke!"

Church and McClure gave little nods of satisfaction in the gloom. This is exactly what they had required—and what they had secretly planned. A taunt of that kind was just calculated to make Handforth independent.

But, unfortunately, he saw through their wheeze.

"I suppose you think I didn't see those nods?" he asked tartly. "I'm not going to be dished by a trick of that sort, my sons! You only said that so you could laze in bed. Rats to your taunts! I'm not afraid to go alone, but you chaps are coming with me. I'll give you twenty seconds to start dressing. One—two—three—four—five—six——"

"Oh, all right!" groaned Church hopelessly. "We'll go."

"There's no help for it!" was McClure's mournful comment.

I grinned in my bed. Handforth always had his own way in the end, and it was generally achieved by threats of violence. The chums of Study D were not long in dressing, and they soon slipped out of the dormitory.

The very instant they had gone I jumped out of bed like a Jack-in-the-box.

The next moment I was shaking Tregellis-West and Watson.

"Begad! What on earth——"

"Up you get!" I said crisply. "They've gone!"

"Eh?" said Watson. "Who——"

"Handforth and Co.," I explained. "We shall have to move sharp, or they'll get too far ahead. Get into your clothes as quickly as you can."

They were ready enough, and just a minute later we stole out of the Remove dormitory like shadows, and descended straight to Study C. There was no sign of Handforth and Co. They had lost no time in getting out.

"We shall have to buck up!" I said briskly.

I quietly lifted the sash of the window, and we were just about to pass out into

the Triangle, when I whispered a word of warning.

A figure had appeared from the master's private doorway, and it was now walking silently towards the outer wall with soft, noiseless tread.

I observed that the figure walked with a limp.

"Mr. Heath!" I whispered.

"So it is!" murmured Watson. "By jingo! I wonder if there's anything in Handforth's yarn, after all?"

"There's something in it, of course," I agreed, "but not what he thinks. I'll bet he's on the wrong trail altogether. That's one reason why I wanted to slip out to-night. We might be able to learn the truth. It's no good leaving it to Handy. We'll follow the whole bunch."

"How do you mean?" asked Tommy.

"Why, Handforth and Co. are waiting in the lane, probably—waiting for Mr. Heath to appear," I said. "They'll follow him, and we can follow them—and if they get into any trouble—well, we can lend a hand."

By this time Mr. Heath had vanished, and we quickly slipped across the Triangle, and were soon out in the road. The moon was obscured by thin clouds, but there was quite sufficient subdued light to enable us to see.

Mr. Heath's solitary figure was striding down the lane, but there was no sign of Handforth and Co.

"They're not here, after all," breathed Watson.

"Over in the meadow," I explained, with a nod to the opposite hedge. "It's too risky to follow down this stretch of road, so they've taken to the grass. Perhaps we'd better do the same——"

"Dear old boy, I've got a suggestion to make," put in Sir Montie.

"Let's hear it, then—but be quick."

"Well, you see, it's pretty certain that Mr. Heath is making for the cottage in Edgemore," said Montie. "You agree, don't you?"

"Certainly," I replied. "It's a dead cert."

"Well, old fellow, it seems to me that we shall be wasting our time by followin' those asses from Study D," went on Tregellis-West. "Wouldn't it be better to go right across the fields to Edgemore, an' get to the cottage first?"

I stroked my chin.

"Well, it's not a bad idea," I said.

"We know exactly where the place is, because Handy described it. There's only

a faint possibility that Heath is making for some other place—the possibility is so faint, in fact, that we needn't consider it. Yes, we'll buzz straight off to Edgemore—and get on the scene first."

"But it's further round by the fields," objected Watson.

"Very likely—but we can do the trip at the double," I said. "It'll be easy enough for us to beat the others."

And, having come to this decision, we wasted no further time.

We set off at a brisk run across the silent fields in the direction of Edgemore. We knew the countryside like a book, and there was no possibility of making a mistake.

We were familiar with every footpath and lane and gap, and we kept up the pace well. As a result, we arrived on the outskirts of Edgemore long before it was possible for Mr. Clement Heath to be due.

The hamlet was quite near to St. Frank's, as the crow flies, but it was difficult to get at by road owing to the fact that there was no direct route. The footpath through the wood was a short cut, and our journey across the fields had been slightly longer; but the trip was soon accomplished.

We arrived at Greyhurst Cottage, and found everything quiet and still. The village was dead asleep, and the only sound we heard was the crowing of a cock, somewhere on the far side of the little valley.

But in the cottage there was somebody wakeful, it seemed, for a lower window was illuminated. The blind was a green one—not dark, and we saw a shadow flit across the blind two or three times.

This was after we had entered the front garden. From outside it was almost impossible to see anything, so we slipped through the gateway, and crouched down among the dense bushes which grew in profusion.

"We're safe enough here," I murmured. "We can't be spotted, and we can see everything. When Heath comes he'll walk right past us, and we might be able to hear something when the door is opened to him."

"What do you think of the whole business?" asked Watson.

"Well, I don't think Handy's theory is correct," I smiled.

"You ass! I'm not asking you what you don't think! I'm asking you what you do think!" said Tommy softly.

"My dear old son, I haven't the faintest idea of the truth," I confessed. "How can I have? All we know is that Heath came here this afternoon, and that he adopted a simple disguise before approaching the place."

"Well, that looks pretty queer, doesn't it?"

"It does," I agreed. "It looks suspicious, even. It's not the kind of thing one would expect a respectable Form-master would do. In fact, it's clear enough that Mr. Clement Heath, M.A., is living a dual existence. He's Mr. Heath at St. Frank's, and somebody else here."

"It's frightfully muddlin', old boy," murmured Montie.

"That's because we only know a few bare facts," I said. "When we've discovered a bit more information, we shall be in a better position to judge. Personally, I rather like Heath, and I'm pretty certain he's not a crook. This place looks a miserable hole, I'll admit, and why on earth Heath should come here is a poser."

Greyhurst Cottage undoubtedly looked as sinister as Handforth had made out—at all events, by nightlight. The overhanging trees gave the cottage a sombre aspect, and one almost expected to see ghostly forms flitting about near the house. It was just that kind of place. And the dead silence which reigned on every side only intended to enhance this effect.

There was a mystery here, but what the explanation could be we could not fathom. And it was quite pointless to resort to guesswork. I was determined to keep an open mind until I knew a bit more.

"Look! There's somebody there!" whispered Tommy.

I was looking already. A figure had appeared upon the blind, and this time it did not merely flit across and vanish. The sharp silhouette remained in view, and it was quite easy for us to see the figure.

It was that of an old man. He was standing sideways, so that we could see his profile. His back was bent, his hair was long, and he appeared to have a flowing beard. It was impossible to be certain, for we could only see the out-



1. "Look! There's somebody there!" whispered Tommy.
2. A beam of light shot out upon the stranger.

line. However, this was the impression we received.

"Begad! What's he doin'?" whispered Tregellis-West.

The figure was busy with his hands, but we could not make out his occupation. And after a few moments had passed the movements became more distinct. The old man was running dozens of small objects through his fingers, and allowing them to fall in little showers—obviously upon the table.

"Money!" muttered Watson, rather startled.

"Seems like it," I agreed. "He looks like an old miser gloating over his hoard. Look at the way he's letting the coins trickle through his fingers!"

The whole affair was certainly strange, and this little incident made me think deeply. Who was this old man?

"I—I say," breathed Watson. "This is suggestive, you know."

"Suggestive?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Of what?"

"Well, there may be something in Handy's idea, after all," said Tommy. "That old chap's playing about with money—piles of it! It may be dud stuff, just manufactured! And he's looking the coins over to see if they're all satisfactory!"

I shook my head.

"Don't let your imagination run riot, old son," I said. "There's nothing to indicate that this old chap is using money at all. Those things he was running through his fingers may be card-counters, or pebbles, or—or anything! Don't make the mistake of jumping to conclusions. It's a bad habit!"

Tommy Watson grunted.

"Well, it's fishy," he said. "It's more than fishy, in fact. What are we going to do?"

"Stop where we are," I replied, "until Heath turns up, anyhow. After he's safely indoors we might make a few investigations. But for the moment we'll lie low and await developments."

We were all very interested—and exceedingly puzzled. But I did not allow myself to be influenced by what I had seen. I discarded Handforth's theory altogether, and looked at the affair with an open mind.

But I was decidedly curious, and I had every intention of getting to know more.

CHAPTER V.

HANDFORTH THE SLEUTH.

HANDFORTH came to a halt. His chums were just behind him, and they had arrived at the stile which led into Bellton Wood. Barely fifteen seconds earlier, Mr. Heath had vanished into the dense shadows.

"You chaps wait here!" whispered Handforth curtly.

"What for?" asked Church.

"We might give ourselves away," replied Handy. "It's a still night, and we're bound to make a row—the three of us. You stop here until Heath and I have got through the wood——"

"How shall we know?"

"Wait for about ten minutes, you ass!" snapped Handforth. "Then follow on quickly, and come straight to the cottage. We can't afford to let Heath know that we are on his trail. It's not worth the risk."

Church and McClure were of the private opinion that Mr. Heath would probably know the truth long before he got through the wood. Handforth thought himself to be an expert tracker, but his chums know well enough that Handforth was a bungler at detective work.

If he succeeded in carrying out his object he would do so by pure luck—and not by skill.

They were quite agreeable to waiting behind, and following on ten minutes afterwards. It would be far easier, and they could take it leisurely. In fact, they had sinister ideas of sneaking off back to bed.

They discussed this in soft tones as they crouched against the hedge, near the stile. They were quite hidden, and anybody happening to come along would have no idea of their presence.

"It'll be easy enough," said Church. "We can say that we couldn't find him—and that's true enough, if we don't look. After waiting here ten minutes we'll slide off back to the school."

"He'll slaughter us to-morrow," said McClure doubtfully.

"We can risk it."

But Handforth's faithless assistants were not quite decided upon the point. They discussed it at length; and, meanwhile, Handforth himself was on the trail. The master sleuth was getting busy.

Unfortunately, however, Handforth had wasted too much time at the stile, instructing his chums. The result was serious, for when Handforth hurried cautiously along the little path he could find no sign of the mysterious Mr. Heath.

Handforth went right through the wood—running most of the time—and he was quite certain that Mr. Heath could not have travelled all that distance. He had branched off the path somewhere, and Handy had missed him.

"Rats! Blow!" grunted the youthful detective. "What the dickens am I to do now? I don't suppose he's gone to the cottage at all, and I've missed him! Church and Clurey ought to be shot! It's all their beastly fault!"

This was rather unreasonable, but Handforth preferred to place the blame on other shoulders rather than upon his own. He could not see how Mr. Heath could have kept to the footpath, and Handforth was equally puzzled as to where the Remove master had branched off.

Then he suddenly remembered another footpath—one which was very seldom used—and which, now he came to think of it, made the journey to Edgemore shorter. What a silly ass he had been! He had passed the turning without a thought.

As quickly as possible Handforth retraced his steps, still thinking of Church and McClure with bitter thoughts. This was more unreasonable than ever, because those two youths could not possibly be responsible for this blunder.

However, Handforth's spirits revived with a leap a moment later. For, as he strolled silently along the path he saw something which made his heart beat rapidly. Just ahead there was a small clearing, and the moon shone into it with surprising brilliance. It seemed quite light after the overpowering gloom of the wood.

And there, crossing the clearing, was a figure—and Handforth clenched his teeth as he noticed that the figure was limping. Mr. Heath! The mysterious master had not left the wood, after all!

He followed the path towards Bellon Lane, and Handforth crept after him as cautiously as possible, making no sound. This time he would not make any blunder! He would stick to the trail constantly.

But just then Handforth received a shock.

The limping figure turned abruptly, and walked back several paces so rapidly that Handforth had no time to dodge. He was confronted by his quarry, and Handy could only stand there gasping.

"Well, young man, what is the trouble?" inquired a smooth, gentle voice.

"I—I——"

Handforth paused, greatly surprised. The voice was not that of Mr. Heath; but this, of course, was probably a subterfuge. But Handforth was ready, and the next second he had whipped out his electric torch.

He pressed the button, and a beam of white light shot out upon the man. And, certainly, he did not seem to be Mr. Clement Heath. Neither was he startled by the sudden glare. He smiled at Handforth almost benignly.

"Great Scott!" said Handforth faintly.

He stared at the man, dumbfounded. And the stranger was undoubtedly the last person one would have supposed to be wandering about the wood at the dead of night. He was elderly, by all appearances. Grey hair peeped from beneath the brim of his light-grey velour hat, and a neatly pointed beard adorned his chin—a beard which was very small, and tinged with grey. A pointed moustache bristled on his upper lip.

And his face, oddly enough, was the very essence of geniality. A wrinkled, bronzed countenance of quite unusual character. A monocle was screwed into his left eye, and through this he regarded Handforth with a twinkling, humorous eye. But deep down in its depths there was just a suggestion of grimness.

His face was creased up into little folds—little genial wrinkles which were particularly eminent round his eyes. And when he smiled he revealed two sets of perfectly white, even teeth.

His attire, too, was in keeping. He wore an exquisitely tailored suit of light grey cloth, his linen was perfection itself, and there was quite a charm about his necktie. A splendid diamond glittered in the centre of it.

Altogether, Handforth could not help realising that this elderly man bore the appearance of a foreigner, his English was perfect, apparently; but the man was certainly not British himself.

"Well, my boy?" he said smoothly.

"I—I'm sorry, sir!" gasped Handforth. "I— You—you see, I was just on the track of somebody—I mean I was taking a stroll——"

"So? That is very interesting, my young friend," interrupted the other, showing his perfect teeth. "Taking a stroll—eh? I am beginning to receive a new education! I was not aware that schoolboys took strolls at this hour of the night."

"We—we don't usually, sir," explained Handforth, somewhat laboriously. "It's—it's just a little private game——"

"Ah! Now I am beginning to understand!" smiled the stranger. "The less said the better—eh? No inquiries to be made, I presume?" he chuckled deep in his throat. "Well, well! You boys will get up to these tricks, won't you?"

Handforth felt more at ease. This genial old gentleman was evidently quite harmless, and the junior knew that his alarm had not been necessary. He grinned, and switched his electric torch off.

"You gave me quite a start for the minute, sir," he said. "I didn't expect to find anybody like you walking about the wood."

"Probably not," said the other. "The fact is, I am a queer character. I am a most original person, my young friend. It pleases me to wander in the woods at dead of night."

"Do you often come here?" asked Handforth.

"Good gracious! No! This is my first visit to this most delightful spot," said the old gentleman. "I may as well tell you that I am charmed—immeasurably charmed. A most interesting spot, this wood. I am convinced that I shall be able to enjoy myself thoroughly."

"Enjoy yourself, sir?" said Handforth, staring.

"Exactly," smiled the other. "And now that you have come to disperse the gloom, my enjoyment will be all the greater. But perhaps I am hindering, my dear lad? If that is so, speak up. I would not interfere with your little tricks for the world!"

"You're not interfering, sir," said Handforth. "I—I was just wondering what on earth you—— I—I mean, I can't quite understand——"

"What I am doing here?" chuckled the old man. "Naturally you can't! It

is possible to see that you are very smart—that your wits are fully alive, and that you are a remarkably astute young man."

"Yes, sir!" said Handforth, swelling visibly.

"At the same time, you are puzzled as to my presence in this most interesting little forest," proceeded the stranger. "So. My explanation will come as a great disappointment to you. I am afraid. I do not happen to be a poacher, and I am not setting snares for unwary rabbits. My task is quite harmless."

"Oh, I'm sure of that, sir."

"To be exact, I am a naturalist," explained the old gentleman. "I am searching the night woods for elusive specimens of the insect world—specimens which I cannot obtain by day. The task is by no means uncongenial, and I obtain a large measure of delight from the occupation."

Handforth nodded.

"Looking for beetles and earwigs, and that sort of thing, I suppose, sir?" he asked.

"Your perceptive powers are astonishingly acute, young man," said the elderly stranger. "You have fathomed my secret already. Yes, my lad, I am searching for beetles and such like. And this reminds me of something in which I may possibly be able to enlist your aid."

"My aid, sir?"

"To be sure," said the old man, nodding. "It is quite possible that your legs are somewhat more agile than my own. My age differs from yours considerably, I judge, and my one misfortune is that I am not so active as I should like to be. And moths are most annoying creatures."

"I don't quite follow, sir."

"No," smiled the other. "Dear me! Is my reading of your character at fault? I thought you were a smart young man. Surely you can understand my line of reasoning? Moths are very tricky customers, and they have a detestable habit of settling upon tree branches which lie out of my reach."

"Oh, I see!" said Handforth. "You mean we ain't quick enough to catch the beggars?"

"Ah, that's better—much better!" smiled the other. "Precisely! I am not active enough to outwit the elusive moth. True, I carry a crooked stick to assist

me in the art of climbing, but I have met with a misfortune. My faithful stick, sad to relate, is a considerable distance from my reach."

"You left it at home, sir?"

"Dear me, no!" said the other, with a chuckle. "I was referring to moths —"

"I've got it!" said Handforth brilliantly. "You climbed up a tree after a moth, and left your stick hanging from a branch!"

"Good gracious! This is truly remarkable!" exclaimed the old man, removing his monocle and polishing it with his silk handkerchief. "You have certainly probed the truth, my boy. That is precisely what happened. My stick caught upon a projection, and I slipped to the ground before I could recover it. And then, to my dismay, I found that I could not climb the trunk again. That is one penalty of declining years."

"Perhaps I can get your stick for you, sir?" suggested Handforth.

The old gentleman rubbed his hands together smoothly.

"An excellent idea—a most commendable thought," he said. "My boy, you have voiced the very words I was about to utter. I shall be deeply indebted to you if you can do this little favour for me."

"Oh, it's nothing, sir," said Handforth promptly. "Which tree?"

The elderly stranger moved a few yards down the path, and pointed up into the darkness of a great chestnut.

"The stick is just beyond the three lower limbs," he explained. "It can be easily reached by an active climber —"

"Leave it to me, sir," said Handforth.

He swarmed up the tree like a monkey, his original purpose being entirely forgotten.

This old gentleman was so genial, so entertaining, and so charming, that Handforth had no time to think about Mr. Clement Heath.

A faint chuckle floated up to him from the ground, and he groped about in search of the stick. He groped in vain. Climbing higher, he continued his search, but no reward came for his efforts.

"Are you sure this is the tree, sir?" he called down.

Dead silence reigned.

"I say, sir, I can't find the stick up here!" shouted Handforth.

Still there was silence, and Handforth listened wonderingly. Finally, after convincing himself that the stick was certainly not in the tree, he slithered to the ground, and looked up and down rather blankly.

The charming old stranger had vanished.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth breathlessly.

He shouted loudly, but received no reply. And then, in a flash, a staggering suspicion of the truth came to him. The genial old man had got him to go up the tree for a purpose—but what purpose?

There could be only one explanation.

He had tricked Handforth so that he could slip away! He had got Handforth into the tree, and had then noiselessly vanished.

But why? For what reason? Why should the old man perform such a trick?

"Oh, my only topper!" gulped Handforth.

For a moment he nearly choked. The hot blood rushed into his face, and he clenched his fist feverishly. He had suddenly struck the truth! And it was so startling, so amazing, that Handforth was thunderstruck.

He knew, in a moment, that he had been fooled—duped—tricked! And he had prided himself upon being a keen amateur detective! He had been deceived as easily as the most wooden-headed novice!

"It was Heath!" said Handforth thickly. "It was Heath all the time!"

Yes, that was the truth—it must be the truth! There was no other possible explanation! Mr. Clement Heath had slipped off the path for a while, and had adopted the disguise.

Now Handforth came to remember the old stranger, he was positive that the hair, the beard, and the moustache were all false. The wrinkles were false—the whole make-up was clever, but obviously a fake.

Then, too, Handforth remembered the light grey suit, and—and— Yes, and the limp! That alone ought to have told him, but he had forgotten it for the moment. He had been tricked by Mr. Heath, and that astute individual had now slipped away.

Which direction had he taken?

Handforth had not the slightest idea,

and he gritted his teeth as he remembered that little mocking chuckle which had floated up to him. How Mr. Heath was laughing at him now!

Handforth felt like hitting out at everything within reach—just to relieve his feelings. But the only things within reach happened to be very solid trees, and Handforth had a great respect for his knuckles.

"Oh, my hat! What an ass I've been—what a fat-headed, blithering, double-barrelled idiot!" he exclaimed, without mercy. "I can't think of anything bad enough to say! But—but he was so jolly clever about it! I didn't guess

But Handforth realised that he was wasting time, and he also realised that he had been foolish to leave Church and McClure behind. If only they had been near the spot they could have outwitted the ingenious Mr. Heath.

But Church and McClure were at the stile, waiting. Handforth decided to go there at once. Heath had probably gone to the cottage, and it was useless to attempt to track him now, anyway. So Handforth pelted down the path at the double, and arrived at the stile just as Church and McClure were going up the road.

"Hi! You asses! Come here!" called Handforth huskily.

Church and McClure turned, looking guilty.

"We—we thought— That is, we meant to—"

Church paused, groping for words. But it was not necessary to offer any explanation, for Handforth was so full of his own affairs that he didn't ask why his chums had been in the act of slipping off.

In a few breathless seconds he told them of what had occurred, and they listened with growing interest.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Church suddenly. "We saw him!"

"Saw him! Saw whom?"

"Why, that old chap—Mr. Heath in disguise."

"You—you saw him!" yelled Handforth. "Where—when?"

"He came over the stile not four minutes ago," said Church quickly. "He didn't see us, because we were in the bushes. He went down towards the village. But we didn't dream that he was Mr. Heath—"

Handforth didn't wait to hear the finish. He raced down the lane at top speed, and his chums followed. Handforth was determined to make amends for his bad slip. And when he came face to face with Mr. Heath again, he would not be deceived!

In fact, Handforth was determined to act boldly—to bring matters to a head on the spot. He could see no reason for waiting. Handy was always keen upon direct methods.

By extraordinary good luck, the juniors sighted their quarry just on the outskirts of Bellton—on the far side of the village. Mr. Heath was turning into the main Bannington Road.

"There he is!" muttered Handforth. "We'd better slow down now, and follow carefully. By George! It's a lucky thing we saw him while he was at the fork—we shouldn't have known whether he'd taken the Bannington Road or the Caistowe road."

"But what shall we do, anyhow," asked McClure.

"Leave it to me!" said Handforth grimly.

It was found to be quite an easy task to follow the disguised Mr. Heath. He walked along fairly briskly, in spite of his limp, and was totally unaware of the fact that he was being shadowed. He assumed, evidently, that he had got rid of his pursuers in the wood.

By keeping to the meadows most of the time—walking along the grass near the hedge—the juniors were able to follow without being seen. And at last the first straggling houses of Bannington came into view.

They were not really in Bannington itself, but in a quiet residential suburb, which extended out in this one direction. Everything was quiet and still, and Handforth and Co. were quite certain that Mr. Heath was intent upon going into the town.

But this did not prove to be the case. The figure suddenly disappeared, and it was seen that he had turned into the gateway of a fairly large house which stood within its own grounds.

The juniors crept up cautiously, and examined the place through a convenient gap in the hedge.

It was quite a big house, they saw, picturesque and semi-modern, with creepers growing over the walls. The garden was the very last word in per-

perfection—trimmed, neat, and kept with exquisite care.

There were no lights showing from any of the windows, but as the boys watched they saw the limping figure of the disguised Mr. Heath enter a low archway at the side of the building—an archway evidently leading to a door.

"Good!" muttered Handforth. "We've tracked him to his lair."

"He must have two giddy lairs!" said Church. "What about that cottage at Edgemore?"

"I expect that's merely the workshop," explained Handy. "This place is the real headquarters of the gang—a beautiful house like this would never attract suspicion. It's just the kind of thing these master crooks do! I'm going to investigate."

"How?" whispered McClure. "What can you do?"

"Leave it to me!" said Handforth importantly. "You chaps wait out here. If I get into any trouble I'll give a signal—three sharp whistles."

Handforth slipped into the garden before his chums could protest. It rather pleased his vanity to think that he was in full charge of this investigation—that he was acting in the same way as the detective heroes of fiction act. He had read many stories of detectives investigating cases similar to this one.

He reached the house wall without difficulty, and was enabled to keep in dense shadow all the time, owing to the thick trees. And, inch by inch, he worked his way round to the archway.

A black hole yawned ahead of him, but Handforth was not dismayed. He plunged into the blackness, and felt before him with his hands. He came into contact with a door—a heavy door with a black knob in the centre. And, to Handforth's surprise, the door yielded as he pressed upon it.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he muttered exultantly.

A more experienced investigator might have suspected a trap, but Handforth looked upon this circumstance as a pure piece of luck—an oversight on the part of Mr. Heath. The door was opened, and Handforth walked in.

He found himself in a stone passage, and after a moment he worked his way forward, feeling cautiously. He passed out of the passage without blundering, and then suddenly felt another door in

front of him. This door was fast, but when Handforth turned the knob, the door opened noiselessly.

He passed through, and then stood quite still. Click! Handforth turned, and felt the door. It had closed, and to Handy's startled dismay he found that it had automatically locked itself!

"Oh, my goodness!" he murmured.

His thoughts were rather wild for a moment. Then another startling thing occurred. Two sharp clicks were followed by a blaze of electric light. Handforth was dazzled—blinded—bewildered!

He was in a room, and the room was as bright as day. And there, facing him, was Mr. Heath—the genial stranger with the pointed grey beard!

CHAPTER VI.

ARRESTING THE CROOK.

"WELCOME, my young friend—welcome to my humble hearth!" exclaimed the old fellow genially. "This visit on your part is quite a delightful surprise. I am sure that we shall get along perfectly together."

Handforth was so startled that he could not reply.

Everything had been so startlingly abrupt—so stunning in its unexpectedness. He was not prepared to face his quarry in this unexpected fashion. It took all the determination out of him for a moment.

He saw that the disguised Mr. Heath was now wearing a wonderful smoking-jacket of rich velvet, with beautiful coloured silk ornamentations. A smoking-cap to match adorned his head.

And the monocle was fixed in his eye, with its black cord dangling over his waistcoat. And the old fellow was smiling with the most charming welcome.

Handforth saw him as though in a dream. He saw the room, and noticed that everything was of the finest quality. Expensive bookcases, a superb suite, soft carpets and rugs, valuable pictures. In fact, the whole place was replete with luxury, and there was every evidence of wealth.

But the host himself was calm, suave, and genial. His imperturbable countenance seemed as though it could not possibly alter. The smile was perpetual—by no means fixed or false.

"You—you—you——" Handforth got thus far, and then choked for words.

"Yes?" prompted the other. "Take your time, my boy—take your time. You are quite alone now, and there is no hurry at all. I want you to sit down, and make yourself thoroughly comfortable. Should you care for lemonade or ginger ale, there is an amply supply upon the sideboard. And perhaps I can tempt you with a sandwich, or with a few biscuits?"

Handforth clenched his fists, and set his jaw.

"You can't bribe me!" he blurted out.

"So? Really, my young friend, I was not thinking of bribing——"

"Yes, you were!" roared Handforth, determined to speak his mind before this astonishing man could influence him.

"And I'm not standing any nonsense! Understand? I know who you are, and I'm going to expose you!"

"Indeed! You make me quite nervous!"

The elderly stranger did not look very nervous as he carefully clipped a cigar, and proceeded to light it. His hand was as steady as a rock, and he had his gaze upon his young visitor nearly all the while.

"I'll make you shiver in your shoes soon," declared Handforth grimly.

"You can't bluff me, Mr. Clement Heath!"

The host lifted his grey eyebrows.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "You startle me!"

"You admit you are Heath, then?"

"My dear lad, I take it as a great compliment that you should address me as Mr. Clement Heath," said the other smoothly. "It appears to be quite useless to deny your thrilling accusations, and I feel demeaned and humiliated. I did not imagine that a detective so young as yourself could fathom my guilty secrets."

Handforth's eyes blazed with triumph, and he took no notice of his companion's soft, amused chuckle.

"You're Mr. Heath all right," he declared. "You're not my Form-master now, and I mean to tell you what I know. More than that, I'm going to expose you

—I'm going to hand you over to the police."

"Heaven forbid!" said the other, raising his hands.

"Oh, it's no good appealing for mercy!" said Handforth firmly. "I know your secret, and I know the truth. The game's up!"

"So?" said the old gentleman, with a sigh. "How dreadful! How appallingly dreadful! After all my trouble—after all my pains! It is a staggering blow to be exposed and defeated by a mere youngster."

Handforth expanded. He did not realise for a second that his companion was deliberately pulling his leg. He regarded it as quite certain that Mr. Heath was resigned to his fate, and that the game was up.

"Yes, I know everything," went on Handforth. "That disguise of yours is pretty good, but it doesn't deceive me!"

"I am deeply sorry," said the other. "And yet I prided myself that my grey hair and my little beard was sufficiently genuine to pass muster. It is time I humbled my pride and started afresh. This exposure has come as a great shock to me, and I am more than troubled."

"You'll get your deserts, and it'll probably mean penal servitude for ten years!" said Handforth grimly. "This case is going to make my name, and as soon as I leave school I shall set up a business as a private detective!"

"How sad! How terribly sad for my poor confreres!" sighed the host. "When you go into the detective business in real earnest, my boy, it will be time for the criminal classes to throw up their hands in surrender. I can see that it will be utterly impossible for any criminal to practise his nefarious profession while you are actively engaged. Your powers are positively uncanny, and I tremble to think of my own fate. Even so young, you are more than a match for me. My years of experience go for nothing compared to your amazing perception and ability."

Handforth did not feel quite so angry with his prisoner.

"Of course, I don't want any compliments from you," he said gruffly. "Other people will be able to praise me up when you're in prison. I don't want to boast, but I reckon I've carried out this case pretty neatly."

"My dear lad, your words are totally inadequate!" said the other, his eyes screwing up into a charming smile. "Neatly? Good gracious! What a mild expression to use! You have displayed marvellous ability—astounding finesse. And here am I, broken and crushed, entirely at your mercy!"

"There's no hope of escape now, anyhow," said Handforth. "I'd better warn you that if you try any silly games on—such as attempting to escape—it won't take me half a tick to punch your nose!"

"Heaven forbid!" said the other, in a shocked voice.

"I'm just telling you this so that we shall understand one another," went on Handforth. "The game's up, and you know it. It's a good thing you do, or it might land you into trouble. I've got my case complete, and my evidence is as clear as daylight. It'll mean penal servitude for you!"

"I am afraid that you are unmerciful in your determination," said the stranger sadly. "It is galling that I should be thus defeated at the moment of success. Well, I am not a man to grumble. This blow has fallen, and I will take it bravely. I am prepared to face my trial."

Handforth nodded. Of course, this criminal saw in a moment that it was useless to deny the truth; he saw that it was useless to attempt any prevarication, or to make any break for freedom. Handforth's grim presence had placed terror in his heart, and he could do nothing but submit to the fate which was justly his.

"I don't want to be hard on you," said Handforth. "And if you'll give me your word of honour that you'll go quietly, I sha'n't find it necessary to bind you up. Of course, it's a bit of a mistake to accept the word of a criminal, but I'll do it this time, because I know you can't escape. We'll get along to the police-station as soon as you like, and I should advise you to say as little as possible, because it may be used in evidence against you."

Handforth had remembered having read that phrase in many stories. It was generally used by police officials when arresting crooks, and Handy thought it was rather apt to use at the moment.

The stranger shrugged his shoulders.

"It makes no difference surely?" he exclaimed, with resignation. "Since you have all the evidence, since you have my dark history at your finger-tips, what matters it if I allow an incautious word to slip from my lips? Nevertheless, I shall be greatly interested to hear what charge you intend to prefer against me."

"Well, I don't think I shall tell you," said Handforth bluntly. "At least, not now. We'll wait till we get to the police-station. It'll sound better for me to accuse you of being a forger there."

The old gentleman's monocle dropped from his eye.

"Really, you must permit me to offer you a little refreshment here. I am so charmed with your society that I must show my appreciation in some little way. Surely you will not deny me this infinitesimal pleasure?"

Handforth smiled grimly.

"I'm not taking anything, thanks," he said.

"A little wine, perhaps——"

"No!"

"Oh, but you must——"

"I'm not taking anything!" repeated Handforth firmly. "Oh, you can't dish me! I'm too smart for you! I suppose you think I shall fall into the trap, and drink a lot of dope? I'm not taking any drugged wine, thanks!"

The other shook his head sadly.

"There is no hope!" he said. "You have me beaten at every turn. My last chance has vanished, and I stand before you exposed as a criminal and a forger!"

Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"Ah, you admit it!" he shouted.

"Dear, dear! My nerves are shattered!" said the prisoner, removing his cigar with careless ease. "I am giving myself away with every breath. This is truly appalling! But I think it was you who mentioned that I am indicted for forgery!"

"I didn't say a word!" declared Handforth. "You stand there, self-accused! You've admitted your guilt, and I've a witness! The game's up, Mr. Clement Heath, and you'd better not try any tricks! You came to St. Frank's as a Form-master, and you tried to dish everybody. But you couldn't dish me! I know all about the cottage at Edgemoor, and I know all about the forged bank notes and currency notes. I'm

getting you first, and I'll make sure of your gang later on."

"Oh! Have you no mercy whatever?" asked the old gentleman pleadingly. "Surely it will be sufficient if you hand me over to the police? Why should you trouble about my gang—mere underlings, after all?"

"I'm making a clean sweep!" declared Handforth. "It's the only way with forgers and counterfeiters!"

The old man sighed deeply.

"It is terrible to have all my plans shattered in this abrupt manner," he said brokenly. "It seems that it is quite useless to plead with you, and my best policy is to submit quietly and at once. Perhaps these may be of interest?"

He walked over to the magnificent desk, and opened a drawer. Handforth's suspicions were aroused on the instant.

"None of that!" he rapped out sharply.

"Eh?" said the other, looking up. "Really, I——"

"You'd better not bring out any revolvers!" said Handforth. "Revolvers don't have any effect on me at all! You wouldn't dare to fire, and threats only make me grin. If you try any rot, I'll punch your nose!"

Handforth's host smiled.

"But, my dear lad, I have no intention of attempting any—er—rot!" he said mildly. "I am merely producing some of the evidence which you require. Since the game is up, I may as well hand it over to you now. Your eagle eye will be able to detect the palpable fraud, I've no doubt."

He produced a thick bundle of currency notes, and Handforth's eyes gleamed afresh. The master crook was indeed resigned to his fate! He was actually handing over the results of his villainous ingenuity!

"Examine them, my dear boy," he said softly. "I really think they are creditable on the whole, and it disappoints me exceedingly to learn that these pretty slips of paper cannot be put into circulation!"

Handforth picked up the bundle of notes. They were all brand new, and their numbers ran consecutively. They were £1 notes, and there must have been at least a couple of hundred of them in the bundle. And this, probably, was but one bundle out of scores. It was just a sample.

Handforth removed one and examined it intently. His companion stood by, smoking his cigar with obvious enjoyment. He was greatly interested in his young captor's movements, and he did not appear to be so downhearted as he made out.

"Well, they're pretty good!" admitted Handforth grudgingly.

"Ah, you really think so? You consider they would pass muster?"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Anybody with half an eye can tell that these things are fakes! They ain't printed in the right colours. This brown is too reddy, and the green is wrong, too. The engraving's not so bad, and I dare say most people would be dished. But you can't diddle me!"

"Apparently not," said the other sadly. "It appears that I have met more than my match, and perhaps the better course will be to finish this painful business with as little delay as possible. Now, my dear young friend, what is your plan?"

"I'm going to arrest you!" said Handforth grimly.

"May I see your warrant?"

"My—my warrant?" repeated Handforth blankly.

"So, I think it is a necessary formality to——"

"I don't do things by formalities," broke in Handforth. "I'm not a police officer. I'm a private detective—and private detectives never bother about warrants. I'm going to arrest you at once, and I think I'd better bind your hands, after all."

The elderly stranger shook his head deprecatingly.

"But that is crude!" he protested. "Surely you would not resort to such methods? You—a clever detective such as yourself? Have you not come provided with handcuffs—with the necessary manacles?"

"I don't happen to have any on me," growled Handforth.

"Ah, then, perhaps I can come to the rescue!" beamed the other. "There is no reason why we should not do this thing in the correct style. Allow me!"

He went to the drawer again, and a moment later produced a glittering pair of handcuffs.

"You'd better not keep up this rot much longer, Mr. Heath!" said Hand-

forth. "And I shall want you to take that disguise off, too."

"That can wait until we are at the police-station surely?" said Mr. Heath smoothly. "With regard to these handcuffs, they are a relic of a former encounter—when I was pitted against an opponent far less formidable than yourself. I managed to elude the sleuth, and kept these little articles as a souvenir of the incident!"

Handforth looked closer.

"Well, I might as well use 'em!" he said sternly. "Hand 'em over!"

The stranger held out the bracelets, and Handforth grasped them. At all events, he intended to grasp them. But the next moment was one of such whirlwind activity that poor old Handy hardly knew where he was.

His companion became intensely active in a second. He leapt like a tiger. His hands worked with the speed of lightning, and the next instant Handforth found himself, much to his amazement, imprisoned!

Instead of handcuffing the crook, the crook had handcuffed him!

CHAPTER VII.

NOT QUITE A SUCCESS.

THE tables were turned with a vengeance!

Handforth stood gazing blankly at his wrists. And his companion stood back a pace or two, regarding him with an expression of keen amusement upon his wrinkled, bronzed face. He extended a finger, and jabbed Handforth lightly in the ribs.

"Well, my lad?" he said smoothly. "What now?"

"You—you treacherous rotter!" gasped Handforth, finding his voice. "Take these beastly things off my wrists!"

"I am afraid I cannot accede to that request," said the other. "I have been quite charmed with your visit, and I must now beg of you to leave. But I shall deem it a great honour if you will come again. You have entertained me exceedingly!"

Handforth was nearly off his head with rage.

"You—you scoundrel!" he shouted. "If you don't come with me to the police-station, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll punch my nose—eh?" smiled the other. "That appalling threat does not terrorise me, my young friend: I am exceedingly sorry, but I find it necessary to protect myself from your violence. As a detective, I must confess that your powers do not impress me very comfortably!"

Handforth gulped. He was beginning to realise, for the first time, that he had taken a handful bigger than he could hold. He also had a terrible suspicion that his polite prisoner had been pulling his leg, and pulling it hard. The old fellow had been playing with him—had been chuckling over his own astuteness.

For Handy suddenly saw himself in a ridiculous light. The glamour of the affair faded away, and he came back to earth with a jar that shook him up badly. He wondered how on earth the affair would end.

"Needless to say, your remarks about these notes are quite unkind," said the old man, picking up the bundle of currency notes, and replacing them in the drawer. "I obtained them from the bank, so I do not think there is much doubt regarding their genuine nature. And now, seeing that time is going on, I must close this little interview. Come, my young friend, step this way with me."

He seized Handforth by the arm, and the junior was too wretchedly disappointed and chagrined to resist. He walked as though in a dream, and he had a dim idea that he passed through a passage, that a door was opened, and that he saw the pale moonlight on the grave!

"Good-night, my lad, and allow me to thank you heartily for your most interesting presence," said the old gentleman genially. "I shall gladly welcome the opportunity of chatting with you again; but the time just now is not suitable for further conversation. Good-night to you—and good luck!"

Handforth received a slight push, and the next second the heavy door closed with a quiet click behind him. Then came the sound of bolts being shot into position. And in that second Handforth came fully to himself.

"Oh, my only Sunday topper!" he gasped faintly.

His dream was shattered—his vision of unlimited glory was no more. He

had been picturing himself as the hero of the hour. He had seen his name in all the newspapers, emblazoned on the pages in huge type.

And now had come the reality!

He had done nothing, and the crook had sent him out into the night, helplessly handcuffed! What was he to do? He hardly dared go back to his chums—and he knew very well they could not release him.

The police!

"Yes, I'll go straight to the police-station," decided Handforth grimly. "I wanted to do this job off my own bat, but that's impossible now. So I'll go to the police-station, tell 'em to take these rotten things off, and then we'll raid the house. Heath can't escape! He'll get what he deserves, after all!"

Perhaps things weren't so bad, and Handforth hurried down the garden path and got into the road. He had high hopes of bringing off a successful coup before he returned to St. Frank's. His hopes began to rise, and once again he saw himself figuring largely in the thrilling story of the capture—not so largely as before, but nevertheless in quite a prominent position.

"Well?"

...The voice came from his elbow. He had got out into the road, and he suddenly became aware of the fact that Church and McClure were beside him. They had crept out of the hedge, and they looked at their leader with interest, failing to notice, at the moment, that his wrists were manacled.

"We're going to the police-station!" grunted Handforth. "The rotter's in there. I bearded him in his den—"

"Rats!"

"I tell you I did!" snapped Handforth. "We've been jawing all the time. But he didn't admit he was Heath. He kept up a smooth, genial style all the time, and it got on my nerves. I believe he pulled my leg a bit, but you needn't tell that to anybody else. And—and he put these rotten things on my hands!"

Edward Oswald extended his fists, and his chums stared dumbly at the glittering bracelets for a moment or two. Then the humour of the situation burst upon them, and their startled looks gave way to grins. They chuckled, they laughed, and finally they howled.

"You—you cackling asses——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You dotty lunatics——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You burbling blockheads——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure held their sides, and yelled loudly.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, my only hat!" gasped Church. "You—you went in there—ha, ha!—to arrest the chap—ha, ha!—and he—ha, ha!—handcuffed you! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed McClure.

Handforth glared fiercely.

"You—you silly lunatics!" he shouted, in a thick voice. "Can't you do anything else but yell? Do you call it funny to be handcuffed like this?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" sobbed Church. "Yes, rather!"

"You've got to do great things, Handy," grinned McClure. "Oh, my goodness, I'm doubled up! Mr. Heath's a wonder! Anyhow, he's taught you a lesson, and you ought to be wary——"

"Taught me a lesson!" roared Handforth. "I'll show you what he's done! He's put the noose round his own neck, and when I tell the police all I know——"

"Cave!" gasped Church, abruptly.

"There's somebody coming!"

"I don't care!"

"But you can't be seen with those handcuffs on, you ass!"

"Oh, corks! I—I forgot—— I—I——"

Handforth's voice trailed away. For in that second he had recognised the identity of the newcomer. Church and McClure were also enlightened, and they stood frozen to the spot.

The man who had walked up was Nelson Lee!

"Good gracious! What is the meaning of this?" demanded the schoolmaster-detective severely. "Handforth! Church! McClure! What on earth are you doing here in Bannington at this hour of the night?"

"We—we—— I—I—— You—you——"

Church paused, tongue-tied.

"I'm afraid that is not very lucid, Church," said Nelson Lee grimly.

"Ask—ask Handforth, sir," said Church, with a gulp.

But Handforth did not need to be asked. He realised very suddenly that Nelson Lee's arrival was amazingly lucky, and he babbled out his story as

quickly as possible, one sentence following another so rapidly that Nelson Lee had great difficulty in following the narrative.

"And—and so, sir, I want you to arrest the rotter," finished up Handforth breathlessly. "He's Mr. Heath, and he's a forger! He's terrifically disguised, and you wouldn't recognise him—"

"One moment. Handforth—one moment!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "Before we proceed further I will relieve you of those bracelets."

"Oh, thanks awfully, sir!"

Nelson Lee examined the handcuffs, took out a bunch of keys, and a moment later Handforth was free. Nelson Lee pocketed the bracelets, and then looked at Handforth with real amusement.

"I should be very severe with you, strictly speaking," he said. "You have made yourself look very foolish, Handforth, and you have been repeatedly told that it is futile for you to attempt any detective work. You are not cut out for the task, and you only succeed in blundering headlong into the most appalling mistakes."

"Bl—bl—blundering, sir!" stuttered Handforth.

"Exactly!"

"But—but this chap is Mr. Heath, and——"

"Nonsense, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee crisply. "He's no more Mr. Heath than I am, and you have simply made yourself look extremely foolish by acting in this preposterous manner!"

"Not—not Mr. Heath, sir!" gasped Handforth.

"Of course he's not!" retorted Lee.

"But he limps, sir, and——"

"And simply because of that, do you assume that everybody who limps is Mr. Heath?" demanded Nelson Lee, with a touch of sarcasm. "When I tell you the truth, Handforth, you will realise more than ever the terrible nature of your mistake. I am not at all surprised to hear your account of what happened in this house, for the gentleman is quite a unique character. He is not wearing a disguise, as you imagined, and he is undoubtedly elderly."

Handforth felt too weak to make any comment.

"Who is he, sir?" asked Church nervously.

"Although he speaks perfect English, and has lived in England for a great

many years, I have reason to believe he is a Frenchman," said Nelson Lee. "Or, to be more exact, a French nobleman!"

"A nobleman!" gasped Handforth.

"His name is the Comte de Plessigny," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Great pip!" said Handforth weakly. "A—a count!"

"Yes, Handforth—the Count of Plessigny," replied Nelson Lee. "He has not been in Bannington long, and is a man of most quaint habits, and is considerably rich. Everybody who meets him is charmed with his wonderful personality, and he is apparently staying in Bannington for a little holiday."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"I understand that he has taken this house for a short period, furnished," went on Nelson Lee. "He's a naturalist—merely a hobby—and he performs all sorts of curious actions. That you should have followed the Comte home is preposterous, but the affair is lifted out of the commonplace by the Comte's amusing action. You have only yourself to thank, Handforth, for your late predicament."

Handforth was flabbergasted.

"And—and I called him a thief and a forger, and all sorts of other things!" he exclaimed. "I—I say, sir, I hope the whole neighbourhood won't get to hear about it!"

"You may rest assured, my boy, that the matter will be kept quiet," said Nelson Lee. "And now I will refer back to something which has been overlooked. Why, were you following Mr. Heath?"

"We—we suspected him of—of being a crook, sir," said Handforth lamely. "So we got up and kept our eye on him—"

"Let me tell you, Handforth, that you have no right whatever to keep your eye on Mr. Heath!" said Nelson Lee severely. "If I did not know you for what you are, I should punish you with the utmost severity. But seeing that you are a very foolish boy, and that you enter into these escapades quite innocently, I will merely give you an imposition of five hundred lines."

"Thank you, sir!" said Handforth meekly.

"Church and McClure will not be punished at all," went on Lee. "I am quite convinced that they left their dormitory against their will, and they

took no willing part in this ridiculous affair. You had better get back to school as quickly as possible."

The juniors were only too glad to escape, and Church and McClure voted that Nelson Lee was the finest school-master in the world. Handforth was not quite so certain about that—until Church and McClure promised to help him with his lines.

Handforth, although he had received a terrific shock, still had a lingering idea in his mind that the Comte de Plessigny was probably Mr. Heath, after all. Church and McClure refused to argue on the point.

But when they got back to the Remove dormitory I was able to settle the question once and for all. I proved to Handforth that Mr. Heath was at Grey-

hurst Cottage during the time Handforth was with the Comte.

Nothing particular had happened in Edgemore, and Sir Montie and Tommy and I had returned to bed feeling rather disappointed. But Handforth's story enlivened us a great deal, and we were greatly amused.

Very shortly, however, we were to discover that the Comte de Plessigny was not merely a passing character. He was destined to appear very prominently in many adventures, and there would be further developments in the Greyhurst Cottage affair.

Handforth and Co. had attempted to solve the puzzle, but had only succeeded in deepening the mystery.

What was the next turn in affairs to be?

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

BELLTON WOOD seems to be very much alive with mysteries just now. Is there any connection between the Comte de Plessigny and Mr. Heath? Have they any common interests at stake, or is it merely a matter of coincidence that both should be found indulging in nocturnal and secretive jaunts into the wood? These questions I must leave to you, my chums, to ponder over during the interval between this and the next story, "*THE RIDDLE OF BELLTON WOOD!*" when a little more light will be thrown on the mystery. One thing is clear, however. Mr. Heath and the comte are two distinct personalities.

THE EDITOR.

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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, and after some exciting times at St. Pierre, 150 miles further N.W., they are offered work in connection with the opening up of a new line from Edmonton, N.W. of the Rockies, through the Grand Cougar Pass, and touching Dead Breed Lake, which latter place, being in the vicinity of the Mad Prospector's gold mine, the three young adventurers were in luck's way. While bivouacking, the chart is stolen by Connell, a rascally cook to the party. He is observed and followed by Teddy and Gerald, who track him to his accomplices, and these prove to be none other than Snaith and Olesen, both old enemies of the boys. While listening to the rogues in consultation, an unforeseen occurrence causes the lads to be discovered and captured by the villains. (Now read on.)

In a Predicament.

TEDDY looked on at the scene helplessly. It seemed just then as though he had been forgotten by the scoundrels.

Connell was hard at work trying to restore Snaith to his senses. The big

Swede was making it his job to keep Gerald pinned down; and the weighty man was doing that very thoroughly, making Gerald writhe beneath the huge foot like a caterpillar on a pin.

Then the sharp eyes of the boy caught sight of the rifle that a revolver bullet had torn out of Gerald's hands. It was lying there, well within the light of the camp-fire.

Teddy dropped to his stomach, and decided to take the risk. He was himself unarmed, and he knew these men to be desperate, with, in the case of one of them, a great amount of feeling against Gerald.

The boy could not keep himself hidden. He had to creep right through the fire-light. But his outstretched hand seized the shattered rifle. The butt and stock were splintered, and there was a hole right through the thinner part of the woodwork. But it was a weapon, and though Teddy was not used to handling firearms, he felt a glow of pleasure thrill through him on feeling this ally.

But, even as he seized the weapon, he was seen, and by the huge Swede. The big man gave out a roar akin to that of an angry grizzly.

He pressed down heavily on Gerald's body with his foot, squeezing out of it what wind there had been left in. Gerald was rendered a heap of gasping helplessness.

The Swede* fired point-blank at the plucky Teddy with his revolver. He must have been a poor shot, for his bullet went wide. But it caused Teddy to start and throw the shattered rifle to his shoulder, presenting the muzzle of it at the Swede.

Hank Olesen was a man with no particular courage. When he saw the grim, suggestive ring of steel with Teddy's eyes behind it, he gave a yell, and dodged.

At the same moment, Teddy, his teeth set, his heart slogging painfully, pulled the trigger.

Click!

That was all the sound that came from the rifle. Teddy gave a gasp of dismay, and felt for the lever of the rifle. He pulled at it, but without result. The revolver-bullet that had shattered the stock of the rifle appeared also to have disorganised the ejector.

And the Swede was quick to see his opportunity. He knew that Teddy was harmless enough. He fired again, and the bullet stirred Teddy's hair. Then he gave a roar like a bull, and dashed straight at the younger Royce.

Teddy pluckily aimed a sweeping blow at him with the rifle as he charged.

The weapon caught the man fairly in the ribs, fetching out a yelp. But, shaking himself like a great dog, the Swede reached out and caught the rifle in his huge hand.

Teddy was only about sixteen. His muscles were not yet set. In a test of strength between himself and this huge mountain of beef and muscle, he was outmatched. He hung gamely on to the rifle for a moment. But the Swede gave it another tug and that literally pulled Teddy off his feet. The boy was swung round; then his hold on the rifle relaxed, and he felt himself flying through the air.

He fell right across the crackling camp-fire, sending the embers scattering. The red-hot cinders clung to his clothes, his hands, his hair.

He cried out aloud in the pain of it. He struggled clear of the flames, but before he could come to his feet, the big Swede was on him again.

He was seized by the collar, was dragged to his feet, and was shaken till his teeth rattled. Then, using his flat hand, the bullying squarehead began to rain swift, merciless blows on the boy's unprotected head and face, accompanying the blows with more violent shaking.

Soon Teddy was gasping for breath, his head was reeling. But the Swede kept up his punishment until, at length, Teddy lay limp in the brute's grasp;

and when the Swede released his hold of him, he slipped into an inanimate heap to the ground, close alongside the equally unfortunate Gerald.

Gerald was the first to recover himself. He sat up, feeling himself tenderly all over.

"You big cad!" he panted. "What have we done to you that you should knock us about like that!"

"Dot boy," said the Swede, pointing to Teddy, "him bosh me in der body mid der goon! Dot vos enough. Ya!"

Gerald turned to the cook, who now had managed to make Obed Snaith sit up.

"Connell," he said, "you'd better tell this fellow to let us go, or, when we're missed at camp, there'll be a row. Jack Royce will soon get after us, and Heaven help you when he finds out how you've treated his brother and me!"

Connell laughed.

"Guess Jack Royce'll want all his time to get over his own clip on the head," he said; and this was the first intimation Gerald had that Jack had not been left in the camp sleeping peacefully, as he and Teddy had fondly thought they had left him.

"Just you wait till my head's stopped buzzin', sonny," said Obed Snaith, staggering to his feet, "an' then we'll talk to you properly!"

Gerald looked around for some means of escape. But Teddy was lying there like a log beside him, and, even had there been a chance to make a dash for freedom, he could not have taken it and left his young pal in the hands of these utter blackguards.

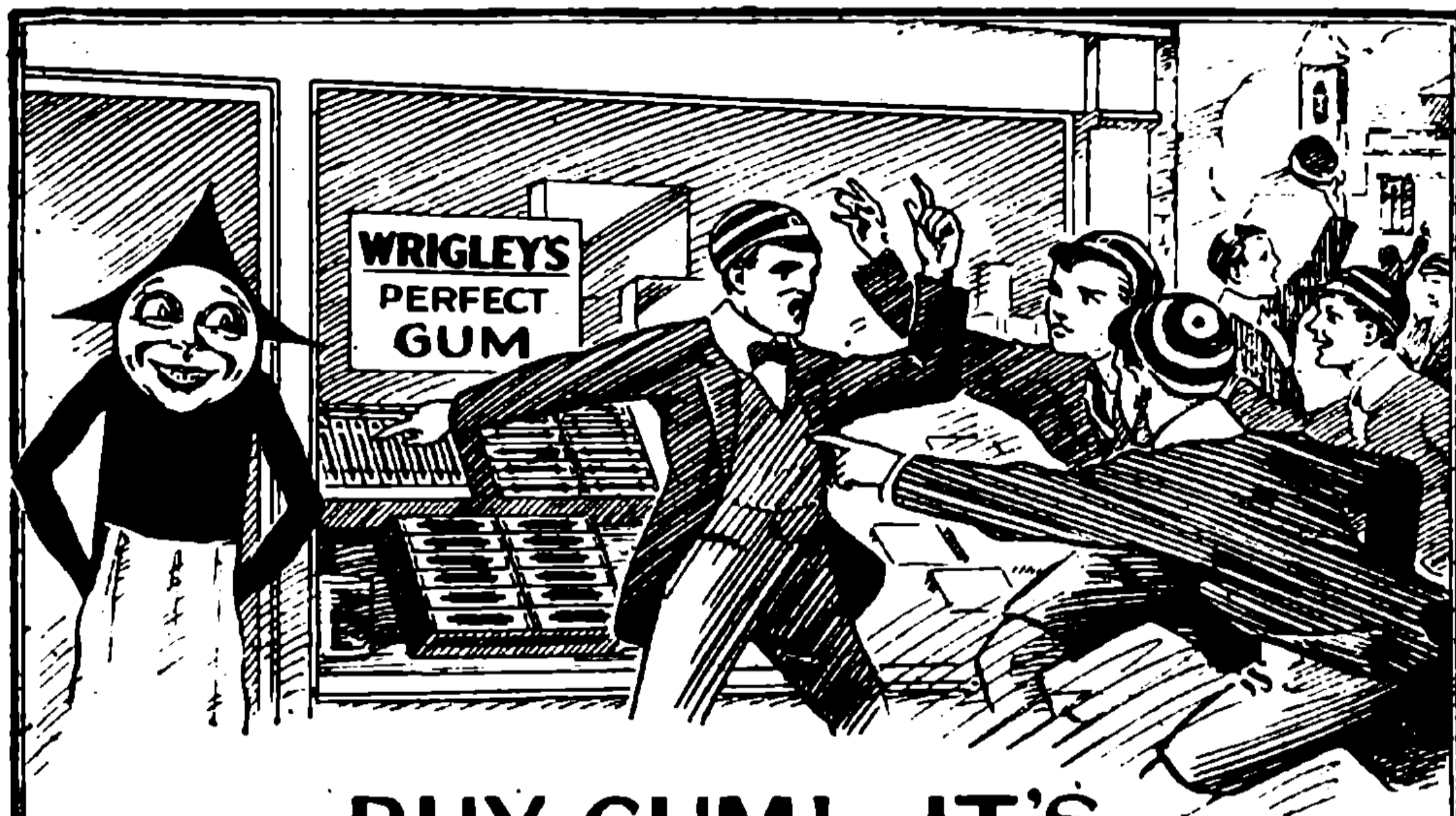
He sighed, and tried to wait with resignation for what was to follow.

He knew these men were unscrupulous. He knew that the presence of this little camp was entirely unsuspected by the people up at the surveying camp. And he knew—he had overheard Snaith say it—that Snaith was quite ready to do away with him—and with Teddy, too. Truly the position was desperate enough. He wondered exactly what these men would do to him and Teddy.

He had not long to wait before he knew.

Obed Snaith's head must have stopped buzzing at length, for he staggered over to Gerald's side a few minutes later.

(Continued on page iv of cover.)



BUY GUM! IT'S WRIGLEY'S

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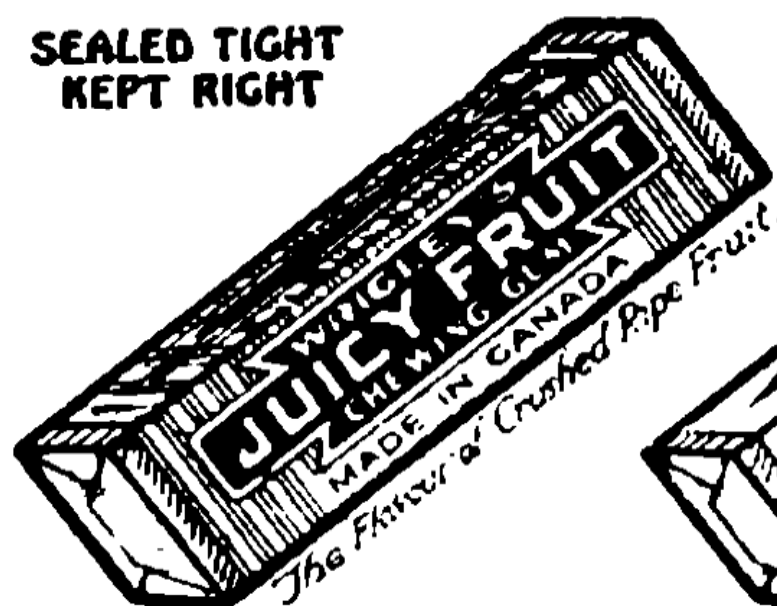
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Gerald, still feeling limp from his rough handling, crouched on the ground and looked up at the ruffian; the man whom, he knew now, his guardian, Septimus Cardone, had hired to put him out of the way, though why, Gerald did not yet know.

Snaith opened up his conversation with the hapless lad by a savage kick in the ribs that made Gerald groan. "He was not feeling any too fit before it, now he was reduced to gasping helplessness, though he was able to understand the words Snaith said jeeringly to him.

"You were spyin' on us, weren't you, kid?" Snaith said. "It was a pity—for you, I guess. S'pose you found out some-thing by listenin' to our talk, eh?"

"Y-yes!" Gerald gasped. "You—you hound!"

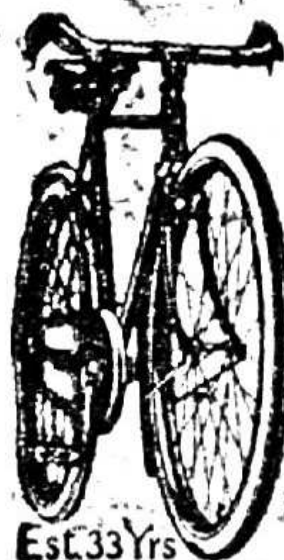
"Well, that don't matter. You've only done yourself harm by spyin' on us!" Snaith growled. "Honest, I've been followin' you about quite a bit lately,

but I'd made up my mind to let you alone for the future. Got a better payin' proposition on hand, seein' your pal's brother was so good as to let us have the Mad Prospector's map. But ye know too much, Telford, as a result o' your listenin', and, as I came out to Canada after you to put you out o' Cardone's road, I might as well carry on with the good work now, to put you out o' my road! Savvy?"

Gerald began to recover his wind and his nerve. Teddy Royce also, by this time, was sitting up, panting, feeling himself all over. The Big Swede had been thorough in his treatment of the younger Royce.

He understood what Snaith was saying, certainly. And he guessed Snaith to be quite capable of putting him—and Teddy, too—out of the way to suit his own ends.

(To be continued.)



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