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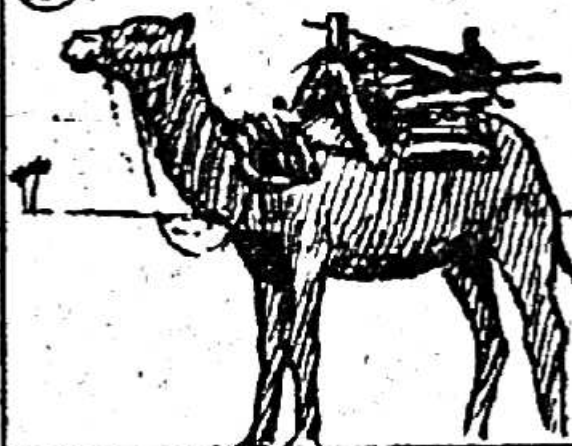
By GORDON WALLACE.

①



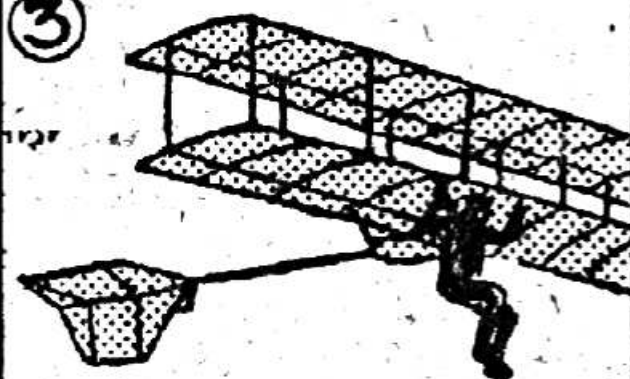
The Boy Scout says
 "Be *Prepared.*"

②



The camel is the
 ship of the

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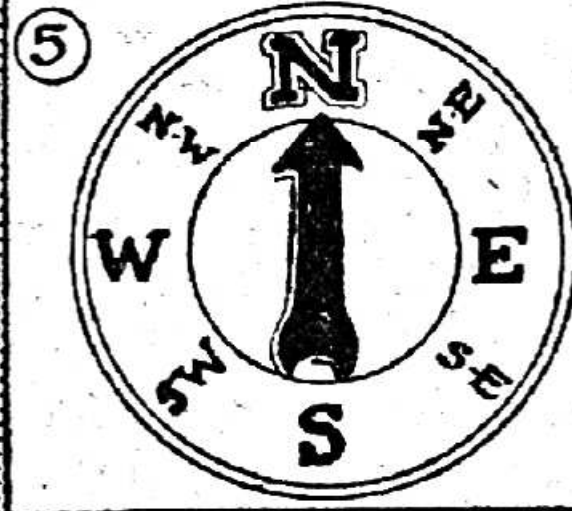
An early 'glider', the
 forerunner of the

④



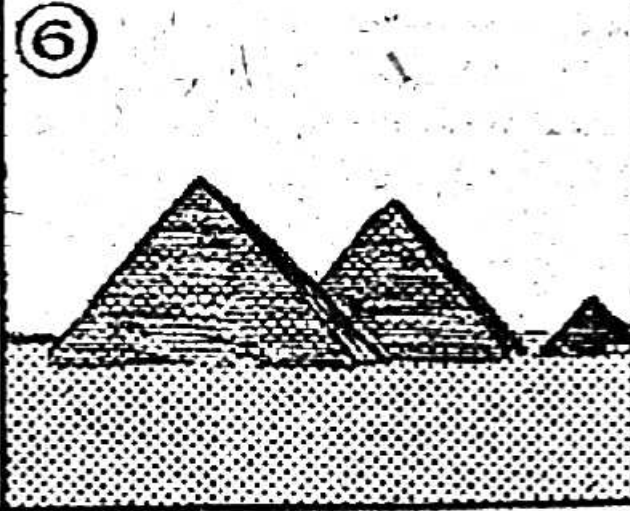
The bat only flies
 by

⑤



The compass-needle
 always points to the

⑥



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 WEEKLY



A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the

Author of "The Clue of the Oil Trail," "The Ruined Lighthouse," "The Schoolboy's Patent," and many other exciting Tales.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

OFF TO COTTON-MILL LAND!

SIR LANCELOT MONTGOMERY TREGELLIS-WEST shook his head thoughtfully, and adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear old boys, I really don't know what we are goin' to do!" he exclaimed. "Or, to be more exact, I don't know what Mr. Lee is goin' to do. The whole position is frightfully difficult, begad! It is, really!"

Tommy Watson nodded.

"Well, one thing's absolutely certain," he said. "Mr. Lee won't be able to overtake that robber who has got Dick Goodwin's plans. It's my belief they've gone for good now. Naggs went to Oldham on the four-fifty train. He left King's Cross over twenty minutes ago! So what the dickens can we do?"

"My dear fellows, it isn't necessary for you to worry your heads in the slightest degree," I said smoothly. "You can leave all the thinking to the guv'nor—he'll manage everything all serene. Leave it to him—he has ways of doing things which ordinary people don't think of."

Sir Montie regarded me thoughtfully.

"I'm quite ready to agree with you, dear old boy," he exclaimed. "It is rippin' of you to have such unbounded confidence in Mr. Lee. At the same time, our highly respected House-master is only human, an' I don't see

how it is possible for him to overtake Mr. Naggs now that the utter scoundrel is on the Oldham express."

"There are such things as telegraphs, anyhow," I said grimly. "There are telephones, too. The guv'nor can be in communication with police headquarters in Oldham hours before Naggs gets there—and you can bet your boots that Mr. Lee won't let any grass grow under his feet."

My chums and I, who usually occupied Study C, in the Remove passageway of the Ancient House at St. Frank's, were amid very different surroundings just now. To tell the truth, we were standing in the front room of a house in Bramcourt Road, Bloomsbury, London. It was just after five o'clock in the evening, and we were not the only people present—for example, Dick Goodwin, of the Remove, was there, too, to say nothing of his father, Mr. Richard Goodwin, the mill-owner, of Hollinwood, Lancashire. And last, but by no means least, there was Nelson Lee himself.

There had been some exciting times just recently. Dick Goodwin, who had invented a wonderful spinning machine for his father's cotton mill, had brought up the plans of the invention to London, in order to set the machinery in motion to have them patented. His father had come with him, but, unfortunately, they had fallen into a trap.

This trap had been set for them by a Mr. Naggs, a rascal who had been on

Dick Goodwin's trail for some little time. And at last Mr. Naggs had succeeded in his object—he had got hold of those precious plans, and had disappeared with them. Owing to the activity of Nelson Lee, Mr. Goodwin and Dick had been released—only an hour or so after they had been captured.

But the harm had been done. Naggs had the plans, and he had gone; but it was known that the man had left London on the four-fifty train for Oldham. He was on that train now, speeding northwards.

I had obtained permission from Nelson Lee to come up to London with him—and Sir Montie and Tommy had taken French leave. However, they had been forgiven by the gov'nor, so everything was all right.

In one way we were highly satisfied—and in another way we were intensely worried.

For Dick Goodwin and his father had been rescued from their predicament. At the same time, they knew that Mr. Naggs had got away with those valuable plans. They were unprotected, and once they were copied, and the originals destroyed, it would be a matter of impossibility to claim them. Mr. Naggs was working on behalf of somebody else—somebody higher—and it was this man who required the plans. We knew that much, and we knew also how necessary it was to recover Dick Goodwin's property before any copies could be made.

Mr. Goodwin was pacing up and down the apartment, a keen, anxious look in his eyes. He was stroking his clean-shaven chin, and his brow was wrinkled with worry.

"I don't know what we can do, Mr. Lee—I don't that!" he exclaimed. "Ay, it's a difficult position. That rascal has gone—and by the time we get to Oldham he will have seen Fordley, and it will be too late for us to do anything. By gum! What a fool I was to walk into this trap, Mr. Lee! The fault is entirely my own!"

"As I mentioned to you before, Mr. Goodwin, it is quite useless to talk of what has happened—we must confine ourselves to the future," said Nelson Lee crisply. "Those plans must be recovered, and I intend to use every effort in that direction. A moment ago you mentioned Mr. Fordley?"

"Ay, that's right, Mr. Lee," said the

mill-owner. "Mr. William Fordley, a scamp and a rascal, if ever there was one. He owns the mill a little distance from mine, and there has always existed a keen rivalry between us. Only I happen to be an honest man, and he happens to be an unscrupulous hound! I know what his game is now. He means to get hold of these plans of Dick's, and he will have them patented in his own name, and then he will exploit the invention, and reap all the benefit. And it means a fortune, Mr. Lee—a huge fortune! There are amazing possibilities in this invention of Dick's!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I realise that, Mr. Goodwin," he said. "That is all the more reason why we must waste no time. Naggs has obtained a start, but that need not worry us."

"Do you intend to telegraph to Oldham?" asked Mr. Goodwin. "Don't you think it would be a good idea to wire the police——"

"I shall certainly do so; but I shall not let matters rest at that," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I have not much faith in that kind of thing, Mr. Goodwin. It is quite likely that Naggs will take precautions; he will probably disguise himself before leaving the train at Oldham, or Hollinwood, and he will elude capture by so doing. Again, we have no definite proof against him, and it is quite likely that the police would refuse to act. What evidence is there? Naggs wasn't here when we arrived, and it is more than probable that he would bluster his way out of the difficulty, if faced by the police. No, Mr. Goodwin; I want to be there myself—on the spot. I want to meet Naggs when he steps out of that train!"

"Ay, but that's impossible!" protested Mr. Goodwin.

"Of course it is, sir!" said Dick.

"No, it is not impossible," corrected Nelson Lee. "It may be difficult, I will grant—but not impossible. Mr. Naggs has gone by express train; but there are even faster vehicles than expresses!"

"By Jingo!" I exclaimed eagerly. "Do—do you mean an aeroplane, sir?"

"Exactly, Nipper!"

"My only hat!"

"Begad!"

"By gum!"

"An—an aeroplane?"

"Yes, an aeroplane!" repeated Nelson Lee. "It will not take us long to

get to Hendon. There is a motor-car waiting outside, which we can use; and an aeroplane will take us to Oldham in just over two hours. We shall be able to arrive just before dark, if we hurry."

"That's a fine idea, guv'nor!" I said enthusiastically. "Why, you'll be able to get there long before Naggs, and you'll be able to meet him on the platform!"

"And catch him red-handed, begad!" said Sir Montie.

But Mr. Goodwin shook his head.

"Ay, it's a good enough idea, Mr. Lee," he said slowly; "but it can't be done!"

"Indeed! Why not?" inquired the great detective.

"Aeroplanes are expensive!" said Mr. Goodwin. "I'd give almost anything to save those plans of Dick's, but I haven't got the money to spend on such an adventure. An aeroplane will cost an awful lot to hire for such a journey. I can't manage it, Mr. Lee. I can't find the money necessary——"

"My dear Mr. Goodwin, there is not the slightest need for you to worry over that point," interrupted Nelson Lee crisply. "I have taken up this case on your behalf, and I intend to use every effort to frustrate Naggs. With regard to the cost of the aeroplane, I will see to that."

"Ah, but that won't do, Mr. Lee!" said the mill-owner. "I shall have to pay you——"

"If you insist upon the matter, we can easily arrange it," interrupted Lee. "But we will not discuss that now, my dear sir. The main thing is to get to Hendon, without any delay."

"May—may we come, sir?" asked Watson eagerly.

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"Well, since you have come so far, boys, you may as well come a little further," he said. "Mr. Goodwin and I will go in the aeroplane to Oldham, and you boys must get back to St. Frank's as soon as you can. I leave you in charge, Nipper."

"Right you are, guv'nor!" I said. "That'll be all right—leave it to me. We'd like to come along to Oldham with you; but that's impossible. So we'll come to Hendon, to see you off!"

"That's a rippin' idea, begad!" said Sir Montie approvingly.

"Ay, it's champion!" said Dick Goodwin.

Having decided upon the course of action, no time was lost. Within a very few minutes we were speeding through London, in the direction of Hendon aerodrome. The route was well known to me, for I had often been there—indeed, on many an occasion I had piloted an aeroplane from that famous aerodrome myself. I should have loved the trip to Oldham, but I knew that it could not be. The guv'nor would charter the fastest aeroplane available, and that would probably be a two-seater. So there would be no room for any other passengers.

"Well, never mind, you chaps," I said. "We shall see them off, anyhow, and we shall hear about everything to-morrow."

We lost no time on the journey to Hendon, and when we finally arrived we found the great aerodrome in a somewhat deserted condition, for it was evening, and a great many of the sheds were closed.

However, Nelson Lee set about making active inquiries. While he was doing this, we remained with Mr. Goodwin and the motor-car. And it was not long before Nelson Lee returned, with some interesting information—interesting from my point of view, at all events.

"I have done the best I can, Mr. Goodwin, and I find that there is no two-seater aeroplane available at the moment," said the guv'nor. "It is rather a bother, and I am surprised. A dozen machines could be got ready within the hour, but that won't do for us. We want one now, immediately, without the delay of five minutes."

"Ay, that's quite right, Mr. Lee," agreed Mr. Goodwin. "It won't do for the machine to be ready in an hour's time. And what is this one that can be had at once—a single seater? I suppose I sha'n't be able to come with you, Mr. Lee?"

The guv'nor shook his head.

"Quite the opposite!" he exclaimed. "This machine, which is ready to leave the ground at once, is a powerful, twin-engined Handley-Page, capable of carrying a dozen passengers, if necessary. I have given instructions, and the machine will be ready for us at once."

Mr. Goodwin shook his head.

"Ay, but it will be expensive!" he exclaimed. "A big Handley-Page!"

It'll run into a mint of money, Mr. Lee——"

But the gov'nor brushed this matter aside, and was just about to turn away when I grasped his coat-sleeve.

"Hold on, sir!" I exclaimed tensely.

"Well, Nipper, what is it?"

"You're going to Oldham in a Handley-Page machine, sir?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And it is capable of carrying ten or twelve people?"

"Exactly!"

"Will it make any difference to the speed whether it carries two or six?" I asked.

"It will make no difference at all, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "But I cannot quite understand——"

"Yes, you can, sir!" I said. "If it won't make any difference to the speed, and if there's plenty of accommodation for us, there's no reason why we shouldn't all go on this trip?"

"Begad!"

"Oh, my only topper!"

"By gum!"

Nelson Lee regarded me rather severely.

"Now, Nipper, you must not take advantage of the fact that this Handley-Page is the only aeroplane available," he said firmly. "You know well enough that I cannot take you and the other boys. You must get back to the school this evening——"

"But why, sir?" I put in eagerly. "Why is it necessary for us to go back at once? Dash it all, now we've started on this adventure, you might as well let us go through with it! Besides, I shall probably be useful up in Oldham—there's no telling. I don't suppose everything will be plain sailing, and there might be some detective work to do. Dick wants to go, I know—he'd love to go with his pater——"

"Ay, I would that!" said Dick Goodwin eagerly.

"I should like you to let the lad come, Mr. Lee," put in Mr. Goodwin. "Aeroplanes are queer things, and we've never been up—we've never been off the ground; we'd like to go together, Mr. Lee, in case—in case——"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"My dear sir, you appear to be under the impression that aeroplanes are unsafe vehicles," he said. "But the contrary is the case. There is no more danger in flying in an aeroplane than

there is in travelling in a railway train—probably far less danger. It is safer to fly in the air than it is to ride in a motor-car. Aviation has reached a great pitch of perfection, and accidents are rare. However, since it is your wish that Dick should come with us, I will offer no objection."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" exclaimed Dick gratefully.

I grinned.

"Well, there you are, sir," I said. "Since you've allowed Goodwin to go, you can't stop us going—it wouldn't be fair. You must treat us all alike!"

"Yes, rather, sir!" said Tommy Watson.

"We're simply dyin' to go!" declared Tregellis-West.

Nelson Lee regarded us with a kind of grim amusement.

"Well, boys, under the circumstances, I will not refuse," he said. "You may all come, if you like; but you must obey all orders without question. Since Goodwin is coming, and Nipper insists upon doing the same, it would hardly be fair to forbid the others. So you have got your own way. I only hope that Dr. Stafford will deal with you leniently when we get back to St. Frank's."

"Oh, the Head will be all right, sir!" I said cheerfully. "You'll explain everything, and there won't be any trouble at all. My sons, we're goin'—it's all serene! We're going on this trip to Oldham!"

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Tommy Watson excitedly.

"Begad! We're frightfully lucky!" murmured Sir Montie. "We are, really!"

Nelson Lee was a brick, and I could have hugged him. We were all going on this trip to Lancashire. It was splendid—we should be in at the end of the adventure. We should witness the defeat of Mr. Naggs.

And we waited impatiently and eagerly, while the giant Handley Page aeroplane was brought out of its shed, and prepared for the flight. Not that many preparations were needed. This particular machine was tuned up, and her tanks were full. Both the engines were in perfect order—for the big bi-plane had been tuned up to a pitch of perfection in readiness for the flight on the morrow. There was nothing to delay our immediate departure.

And, very soon afterwards, we entered the luxurious body of the aeroplane. It

was quite a novel experience for us.

I had flown in an aeroplane on many occasions—I had piloted an aeroplane scores of times. But these had always been smaller machines—of the fast, scout type.

But this was different—vastly different. For here we slipped into a beautifully appointed cabin, with luxurious arm chairs, curtains, cushions, and big windows. The cabin was wind proof and it was like slipping into a miniature drawing-room. It was quite unnecessary to wear any special flying kit. We walked in just as we were.

Nelson Lee, of course, came with us. The regular pilot was on hand, and he elected to take us to Oldham. I fancy the guv'nor would have preferred to sit in the pilot's seat himself—for he was an expert airman. But Nelson Lee did not press this matter—as long as we all got to Oldham, that was the main thing.

And, presently, the great engines roared out their song. And we rolled over the ground, took to the air gracefully, and soared aloft. There is always something very stately and magnificent about the flight of one of these huge Handley Page bi-planes.

It was a splendid machine of its type, too. And, in addition, we were assisted very materially on our way, by a following wind. This wind probably increased our speed by fifteen or twenty miles an hour. And every minute was of value in a case of this kind. The pilot found this wind much stronger at a height of six thousand feet. And so we soared along, high above the countryside, enjoying the trip immensely.

It was hardly like flying in an aeroplane. There was no more noise than one encounters in the compartment of a railway train. Conversation was quite possible. And we flew along steadily, without any particular vibration, and in ease and comfort. To fly in one of these aeroplanes is to fly in luxury.

And so we went on, racing towards Oldham. There was very little doubt that we should arrive long before the express which was carrying Mr. Naggs and Dick Goodwin's plans. Unless any unforeseen mishap occurred, we should certainly do so.

Nelson Lee had done everything possible—and now we were on our way to the North. Telegrams had been sent

galore—not only to the police, but also to some aerodrome people in the Oldham district. It was necessary that everything should be ready for our reception when we landed in Lancashire.

"My sons, this is great!" I exclaimed, addressing Sir Montie and Tommy. "This is simply gorgeous! I've got an idea in the back of my head that we shall defeat Mr. Naggs all along the line—and bring him to book! He's going to be wiped to a cocked hat this time!"

"Dear old boy, I sincerely hope so!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "It would be frightful if this scoundrel succeeded in stealing Goodwin's invention. He has got the plans for the moment, but that does not mean to say that he will keep them."

"Oh, leave it to Mr. Lee!" said Tommy Watson. "He'll do the trick!"

In any case, it was quite apparent that Mr. Naggs would not have everything all his own way!

CHAPTER II.

MR. JOSH CUTTLE STEPS IN.

THERE was a dreamy look of pleasure in the eyes of Mr. Naggs as that gentleman lay back among the cushions in a third class compartment, and filled his pipe. The train was speeding northwards energetically, and Mr. Naggs had this particular apartment completely to himself. He finished filling his pipe, and then lit it.

"By thunder!" he muttered. "Everything's all right now—I've got the plans—and everything will be plain sailing from this minute onwards!"

Mr. Naggs patted his breast pocket with a feeling of comfort. Just there, hidden from view, lay a large foolscap envelope. That envelope contained Dick Goodwin's precious plans. And now they were in the possession of this scheming rascal, and it was Mr. Naggs's intention to sell those plans for a large sum of money as soon as ever he arrived in Oldham.

"Yes, it'll be all plain sailing after this!" Mr. Naggs told himself. "I reckon I deserve this success—after all the darned trouble I've had. But nothing can go wrong now—absolutely nothing. Goodwin and the kid are prisoners, and

they can't escape from that house. They can't even be traced—and by the time they are released, I shall have skipped out of the country altogether. Oh yes, we're on safe ground now—it's all sunny!"

Mr. Naggs chuckled with a sense of intense satisfaction. He was quite confident that nothing could prevent him winning through now. And he had the plans in his possession, and it was only necessary for him to hand them over to his chief, and he would receive a large sum of money. Then Mr. Naggs's responsibility would be at an end. The rascal was eager to lay hands on that money—so that he would be able to clear out altogether. He mentally arranged his movements.

When he arrived in Hollinwood—which was quite near to Oldham—he would go straight away to Mr. William Fordley, the rich millowner. Fordley, of course, would be only too pleased to receive the unscrupulous Mr. Naggs. The whole business would be concluded in an hour, Naggs told himself. Fordley would have the money ready, and he would hand it over. And when Naggs stepped out into the street again, he would be free to go where he pleased—and there would not be one single atom of evidence against him. His position, he told himself, was safe and sound.

Naggs sighed with contentment as he drew lazily at his pipe, and lay back among the cushions. He had had a great deal of trouble to get hold of those plans, but he had succeeded, and there was something very pleasant in the sense of victory.

It was a fast train, and was not due to stop until a great number of miles had been covered. And Mr. Naggs was soon feeling the effect of the rhythmic thud-thud of the wheels as they passed over the rail joints. The motion of the carriage was smooth and comforting. And the solitary occupier of the compartment closed his eyes with another contented sigh.

Within two minutes he was dosing, and subconsciously took the pipe out of his mouth, and thrust it into his pocket. Then he settled himself more comfortably, and dozed once more. Within five minutes, Mr. Naggs was sleeping soundly.

It was the effect of the train's motion more than anything else—but Naggs had had very little sleep lately. Owing

to his chase after Dick Goodwin's plans, he had led a somewhat strenuous existence, and during the last forty-eight hours, at least, he had not had more than four hours of sleep. Therefore, now that all worry was over, he took advantage of the train journey to have a quiet snooze.

For ten minutes Mr. Naggs remained in solitude.

The train continued on its way without any halt. Beat—beat—beat—beat! The wheels thudded over the rail joints as rhythmically as ever. And Mr. Naggs slept soundly to the accompaniment of that song.

And then the mysterious stranger appeared.

He came stealthily. Walking quietly along the corridor, the mysterious stranger paused when he came to Mr. Naggs' compartment. He peered in through the window, and a gleam of satisfaction entered his eyes when he noticed that Naggs was sound asleep in the corner seat. Just for a moment or two, the mysterious stranger hesitated. Then he pushed back the sliding door of the compartment, and entered.

He walked over to Mr. Naggs, and stood immediately in front of him—and it was the mysterious stranger's evident intention to wake Mr. Naggs up. But he did not do so. Quite abruptly, a gleam came into the eyes of the stranger. For he had seen the corner of a thick, bulky envelope peeping out of Mr. Naggs' inner pocket. Owing to the position of the sleeping man, his jacket was bulging slightly—and the envelope was thus revealed.

The intruder stood quite still for a moment or two, evidently coming to a decision. There was now a hard glitter in his eyes. And, reaching a hand forward, he placed his fingers over the envelope. Then, with infinite care, he withdrew the bulky package from Mr. Naggs' pocket.

And he performed this task so quietly that the sleeping man had no knowledge whatever of what was taking place. He breathed evenly and regularly, and that precious package vanished.

It was in the grasp of the mysterious stranger—and the latter individual was creeping quietly and stealthily out of the compartment. Arriving in the corridor, he made his way to the next compartment. The train was swaying somewhat, for it was travelling along at

a high speed. The stranger entered the next compartment, which was empty, and with rapid fingers he opened the envelope.

"By hokey!" he exclaimed softly.

For one glance at the contents of that envelope told him the truth. They were the plans—the priceless plans of Dick Goodwin's invention! And they had left the possession of the astute Mr. Naggs. But how could the rascal have known that an enemy was on this train? How could he have been prepared for such a contingency as this?

The mysterious stranger proceeded to act in the same deliberate, calm manner. He produced another envelope, and he quickly folded some sheets of thick, blank paper. These he placed inside the envelope, and sealed it up. To all intents and purposes, it was the same as the other. Certainly, Mr. Naggs would not be able to detect the difference by the exterior.

The mysterious stranger crept back along the corridor, re-entered Mr. Naggs' compartment, and once more bent over the sleeping figure. This time he acted with even greater caution. Slowly and deliberately, he inserted this substitute package into Mr. Naggs' pocket. Then, with an expression of excessive gloom on his countenance, the mysterious stranger crept out of the compartment.

As he moved along the corridor he made one or two remarks to himself.

"There was men which was careful, and there was men which was careless!" murmured the mysterious stranger. "Them which was careful took care of their property—but them which was careless was made to suffer. By hokey! Mr. Naggs was a fool! And why? Ask me! Because nobody but a fool would go to sleep leaving them valuable papers in such a position that they could be easily took!"

The mysterious stranger re-entered his own compartment, and the expression of gloom settled itself over his countenance in a final manner. He did not appear to be at all satisfied with what he had done. But perhaps this was because this was his natural expression to be melancholy—perhaps he did not know how to smile.

But, whatever his expression, there was not the slightest doubt that Mr. Josh Cuttle was extremely pleased with himself.

And, meanwhile, the train continued

on its journey towards Lancashire. And Mr. Naggs awoke after a while, re-lit his pipe, and surveyed the landscape with great pleasure. Now and again he touched his breast pocket, and there was a note of satisfaction in every sigh he breathed. Certainly, Mr. Naggs had not the slightest notion that a disaster had occurred to him.

And, finally, the long journey was over. The train steamed into Hollinwood Station. Mr. Naggs had mentioned that he was booking for Oldham, but he lost the train for Hollinwood. The platform was busy, and the rascal found many people standing about, and bustling about. It was quite dark now, but there was plenty of illumination on the platform.

"I'll be with Fordley within half-an-hour!" Naggs told himself. "There's no reason why I should go on to Oldham——"

His thoughts came to an abrupt, jarring end. And he stood stock still, an expression of utter, dumbfounded amazement on his face. His eyes almost started from his head, and he gasped, for he had seen something which surely must be hallucination—which could not possibly be the truth.

There, standing on the platform, not ten yards from him, were two figures—the figures of Mr. Richard Goodwin and Dick Goodwin.

"By thunder!" panted Mr. Naggs. "I'm mad! It—it can't be true! It's impossible! Absolutely——"

The words choked in his throat.

His mind was in a state of chaos. He had left Dick Goodwin and his father in London, prisoners in that house at Bloomsbury. And he—Naggs—had hurried straight to King's Cross, and he had taken the fastest express to the North. And yet here, on the platform at Hollinwood, Dick Goodwin and his father were standing. They had arrived in Lancashire before him! And it was impossible—it simply could not be!

It was hardly to be wondered at that Mr. Naggs was so thunderstruck. He came to the conclusion that he must be suffering from some delusion—that his eyes were playing him false. But, as he was about to move forward, in order to take a closer scrutiny, a hand was laid upon his arm.

Mr. Naggs swung round, with a gasp.

"One moment, please, Mr. Naggs," said a soft, quiet voice.

The man found himself looking straight into the eyes of Nelson Lee.

"Good heavens!" gasped Naggs, panic stricken. "I—I— What— Hang you!" He snarled. "Leave my arm alone—"

"It will be better, I think, if you do not make any scene, Mr. Naggs," interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "You must surely realise that it is quite impossible for you to escape. You will be advised to remain composed."

"What—what is the meaning of this?" demanded Mr. Naggs, attempting to bluster. "How dare you detain me, you infernal idiot? Who are you? What is the meaning—"

"I fancy you know who I am, Mr. Naggs!" interrupted Nelson Lee grimly. "This bluff on your part will not avail you anything."

Mr. Naggs was almost lost in his confusion, but he still kept up his pretence.

"I don't know what you mean—you must have made a mistake!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "My name is not Naggs. I am Mr. James Mitchell, and I have come from Derby. You are making a mistake, if you think—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Naggs, but I am making no mistake," interjected Lee coldly. "Your name is—Walter Naggs, and you have in your possession, at the present moment, an envelope containing some plans which are the rightful property of Master Richard Goodwin. I advise you to deliver that envelope to me without any further delay. I can assure you that it will be your better plan."

Mr. Naggs looked round him desperately. But he was trapped—and he knew it. Nelson Lee was standing immediately in front of him, and there was no escape for the rascal. Not only that, but Mr. Richard Goodwin was there, too—and Dick Goodwin. I was standing just near by, and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were with me. Mr. Naggs gulped something down in his throat. It seemed to him that the whole of St. Frank's had come—he could see dozens of us—everything swam before his eyes. Just when he had thought that he was safe—just when he had gained the complete victory—this disaster had occurred. In some miraculous manner Dick Goodwin and his father had escaped, and had arrived in Lancashire in advance.

Naggs came to the one obvious con-

clusion. Nelson Lee was the cause of this—of course! Nobody else could have accomplished such a task—nobody else could have displayed such promptitude and ingenuity. And Naggs was captured—beyond all hope of escape.

Our trip from London had been accomplished without mishap. We had arrived at a landing ground, not far distant, and had come to earth in perfect safety. And then, without losing any time, Nelson Lee and all of us had come straight on to Hollinwood Station.

The gov'nor thought it would be better to wait here—because it was distinctly probable that Naggs would alight at Hollinwood. If we had seen no sign of him, we should have entered the train, and we should have travelled on to Oldham. But this had been unnecessary—for Mr. Naggs had walked right into our midst.

His amazement was easy to understand. It must, indeed, have seemed like magic to him to find the Goodwins here. Naggs had left them prisoners in London, and he had come to Lancashire by the fastest possible express. And yet here we were, facing him when he alighted on the platform. No doubt it was a terrific shock for the rascal.

"I tell you you have made a mistake!" exclaimed Naggs harshly. "If you do not let me go at once, I shall call the stationmaster, and have you arrested for obstructing me. You impudent fool! Why can't you—"

"Now, Mr. Naggs, be reasonable!" interrupted Lee calmly. "You know that you are bluffing, and it will not do. That kind of thing carries no weight with me. The game is up, and the only thing you can do is to deliver those plans at once. You can take your choice."

"My choice?" blustered Naggs.

"Exactly!" said Nelson Lee coldly. "You can either hand over those plans now, or you can be detained by force, and handed over to the police. In the latter event you will be kept in custody, and ultimately sent for trial."

"And what if I hand over the plans at once?" demanded Mr. Naggs.

"It is not my intention to make any bargain with you!" said Nelson Lee. "I am not in the habit of doing such things with criminals. Come on, Naggs, admit your defeat, and hand over those plans. Or, better still, I will take them!"

Nelson Lee reached forward a hand, and before Mr. Naggs could stop him, he seized the bulky envelope. He snatched it out of Mr. Naggs's pocket, and the man uttered a snarl of fury.

"By thunder!" he shouted thickly. "You sha'n't have them! I've been working week after week to get those plans, and——"

"Better take it quietly, Naggs," said Mr. Goodwin quickly. "You'll find it better!"

It was quite impossible for Naggs to escape. Mr. Goodwin had hold of his arm, and I was immediately behind him. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were in front. Naggs, in fact, was surrounded; there was no possible chance of his breaking away.

With deft fingers, Nelson Lee opened the flap of the envelope, and a moment later he had withdrawn the pieces of paper from within. He unfolded them, glanced at them quickly, and an expression of astonishment entered his eyes. He turned the sheets over, and glanced at their backs.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "Blank!"

"Blank?" exclaimed Mr. Goodwin.

"Blank?" roared Naggs frantically.

He stared at those sheets of paper with goggling eyes.

"Yes, blank!" repeated Nelson Lee. "What is the meaning of this, Naggs? I want those plans!"

"They are the plans—they are the plans. I tell you!" shouted Naggs hoarsely. "I put them in that envelope myself—I examined them beforehand. You must be mad to say those sheets are blank!"

"Ay, but this kind of bluff won't go down!" said Mr. Goodwin angrily. "We want the real plans, Naggs, and we are going to have them. If you try any trickery——"

"Trickery!" yelled Naggs. "There's no trickery about this! I put the plans in that envelope, and I've carried them with me all the way from London. They're not blank—they can't be! It's absolutely impossible!"

"The man is trying to spoof you, guv'nor!" I whispered.

Nelson Lee did not reply for a moment. As a matter of fact, he was rather surprised. Naggs did not appear to be acting now. At all events, if he was acting, he was doing it extremely well. He appeared to be positively staggered by this discovery.

"Look here. Naggs, the best thing you can do is to tell me the truth, without any further tomfoolery!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "The sheets in this envelope are blank, and this proves that you have the plans in some other pocket. You will deliver them to me at once, without any more parley. Do you agree, or must I take them by force?"

Mr. Naggs nearly choked.

"I haven't got them, you mad fool!" he raved. "The plans are in that envelope, don't I keep telling you? I haven't got them! Everything seems to be going wrong—I must be mad! I know they were the plans—they couldn't have been changed; it's absolutely impossible. I had them in my pocket the whole time——"

"It is obvious, Naggs, that you intend to keep up this tale all along!" interjected Nelson Lee curtly. "I have already told you that it will not do. Consequently, you will be handed over to the police without delay. If you do not choose to be reasonable, my only course is to call in the assistance of the law!"

Mr. Naggs found it absolutely impossible to speak. The words choked in his throat. He was amazed—flabbergasted—staggered. He hardly knew what he was thinking, or what he was doing; but he knew that he was to be arrested, and he knew that in some uncanny manner the plans had left his possession.

And just at that moment the train began to move out of the station. It had been standing against the platform for several minutes, but now the guard had blown his whistle, and the train was already moving. A sudden gleam came into Naggs' eyes. There was one way of escape for him—one bare possibility that he would be able to get away.

And he did not hesitate.

Crash!

His fist thudded into Nelson Lee's chest. The detective staggered back, tripping over Sir Montie Tregellis-West as he did so. The pair fell upon the platform in a heap. Mr. Naggs rushed along at break-neck speed. The train was now travelling fast, and the last carriage had already passed the spot where we were standing. Mr. Naggs raced after it like a greyhound.

He simply leapt at the train. It was a terribly risky proceeding, but he was

so reckless and so desperate that he hardly knew what he was doing; he certainly did not realise the danger.

More by luck than anything else, he grasped one of the brass holds, and he was simply carried forcibly on to the footboard. Several shouts rang out from people on the platform, but Mr. Naggs wrenched open the door of the carriage, and pulled himself into the train. It was only by a miracle that he had escaped disaster. It had been touch-and-go.

But he had escaped, and we were left staring after him on the platform!

CHAPTER III.

THE LUCK OF MR. NAGGS.

MR. WALTER NAGGS breathed hard, his breath coming in great, gulping gasps. He had had a narrow escape, and he knew it.

By sheer chance, the compartment into which he had flung himself happened to be empty. He lay on the cushions, his chest heaving. But at length, as the train gathered speed, he commenced to collect his wits.

One thing was certain—he would be unable to visit Mr. William Fordley in the open. Nelson Lee was here, in Lancashire—and the police, too, would be on the alert. Everybody was on the watch, and Naggs knew that it was up to him to be excessively careful, otherwise he would come a cropper.

And then he started.

Why should he go to Fordley? What reason had he for going—now?

The plans!

They had gone; there was some startling mystery concerning those plans. Naggs was frantic with dismay and fury. He sat there on the cushions, thinking hard. He racked his brain, but he could arrive at no solution.

He tried to remember everything that had occurred since he had left the house in Bloomsbury. He had examined the plans, and he had sealed them up in the foolscap envelope. Then he had placed the package into his breast pocket; it had not left that pocket once.

How, then, had those sheets become blank? They were not even the same sheets—Naggs knew that well enough.

The real ones had been taken, and these faked things substituted.

But how—how had it been done?

Naggs remembered that he had slept for a certain time during the trip; but he was convinced that nobody had entered the compartment. And who, in any case, would know that the bulky package contained anything of value? If Lee had been on the train, Naggs might have suspected something—indeed, if anybody who knew the secret had been on the train. But Naggs had been by himself—there had not been a soul on that express who knew anything about the plans. This was the same train now—Naggs had re-entered it, and was continuing the journey to Oldham.

The man hardly knew what to do. Everything had gone wrong; just when success had come to him, there was now nothing but failure! It was a shock for Naggs, and he was all the more exasperated because he could not discover how the disaster had taken place.

His brain refused to work properly—he could not think clearly in any direction; but, after a little while, he began to realise that his position was by no means as safe as he had first supposed. The next stop was Oldham, and the train would soon be there. Undoubtedly, Nelson Lee would send a telegram to the stationmaster, and Naggs would be detained when he stepped out on the platform. It was up to him to act at once, without wasting a second.

It was known that he had entered the last carriage. Many people had seen him jump on board; therefore, it would be the last carriage that would receive the most attention when the train pulled up at Oldham.

But it was a corridor train, and Mr. Naggs remembered this fact. Leaving his seat, he pushed the sliding-door back, and set off down the corridor, meaning to pass right to the other end of the train, if possible. Then he would jump out near the engine. It was just possible that he would be able to escape in the crowd.

He glanced into one or two of the compartments as he walked along. Most of them were occupied. And suddenly Mr. Naggs paused, for he saw a figure sitting along in one of the compartments which brought him to a standstill. It was a figure well-known to him—a figure which sent a flash of understanding into Mr. Naggs's troubled mind.

For he recognised the man as Mr. Josh Cuttle!

Cuttle—on this train! Naggs knew well enough that Mr. Cuttle had been at St. Frank's ever since the commencement of the present term. He was there, presumably, as an employee; but Naggs knew well enough that Cuttle was really at St. Frank's in order to keep his eye upon Dick Goodwin. He was, as a matter of fact, a kind of body-guard for the lad. And here he was, this bow-legged, gloomy countenanced old fellow—here he was, in this train! Obviously, he had been in it all the while. What could have been easier than for him to pass along the corridor, come upon Mr. Naggs when he was asleep, and take the plans out of his pocket? In a second Mr. Naggs knew that Cuttle was the culprit—Cuttle had got away with those priceless documents!

And Naggs went mad with fury for a moment.

He hardly knew what he was doing; but he slammed back the slide of the compartment, and went in. Mr. Cuttle was on his feet in a moment.

"By hokey!" he exclaimed.

The next moment Naggs was upon him, and the pair were fighting fiercely. Cuttle was taken at a disadvantage. He was a much older man, and by no means as active as he had been at one time of day. Furthermore, Naggs was aided by the strength which fury lent to him.

"By hokey!" gasped Mr. Cuttle. "It was a outrage!"

"You thieving meddler!" snarled Naggs. "You took those plans out of my pocket—and you're going to give them up to me—now!"

"There was trouble in the hair!" muttered Mr. Cuttle painfully. "By hokey!"

In all probability, Mr. Cuttle had meant to say "air," but it so happened that Naggs had very appropriately grasped Mr. Cuttle's ginger locks. Naggs jerked his victim's head back, and held him helplessly against the cushions. Then, with rapid fingers, he searched through Mr. Cuttle's coat pockets. Almost at once his fingers encountered the envelope containing the plans.

"Ah, I knew it!" panted Naggs triumphantly. "You confounded thief! I knew you took them—you took them while I was asleep!"

"There was going to be trouble!" said Mr. Cuttle grimly. "Them plans was no more yours than they are mine! Them plans was the property of Master Goodwin, and if you think you're goin' to keep 'em, Naggs, you're mistook!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Naggs suddenly.

He felt that the brakes were being applied to the train, and he was seized by a momentary panic. They were already running into Oldham! Naggs rushed to the other side of the compartment, flung down the window, and looked out. All was dark; the train was slowing up, certainly, but not at a station. Lights gleamed everywhere—street lamps, lights in windows, etc.; but there was no station near by.

And Naggs came to a sudden resolution.

He had the plans now; they were in his possession once more.

It was up to him to escape—to get clear away. If he went on to Oldham, he would probably be detained before he could leave the station. But here was a chance—here was an opportunity which would not occur again. The train was running slow, and it was more than likely that Naggs would be able to reach the ground without doing himself any bodily injury. In any case, the rascal did not hesitate.

In his present excited state of mind he hardly realised the danger, and he opened the carriage door, got out on the footboard, and closed the door again. Then, taking a deep breath, he leapt into the darkness.

Crash!

Mr. Naggs landed on the gravel beside the track. He rolled over, striking his left shoulder hard. For a second or two he remained motionless on the ground, filled with agony. He really thought that he had smashed something, but, when he scrambled up and saw the light of the train disappearing into the gloom, he struggled to his feet. And he was soon quite certain that he had broken no bones.

He was bruised, and he had several scratches about him, but he had come to no actual harm. And now a great feeling of victory filled the scoundrel. He had regained those plans from Cuttle, and he had also obtained his freedom. He would be able to visit Mr. Fordley, after all, and receive his money! If the unscrupulous mill-owner got into

trouble afterwards—well, that would be his funeral.

Luck was certainly with Mr. Naggs—amazing luck.

He had lost the plans before reaching Hollinwood, and he had been stopped on the platform at Hollinwood by Nelson Lee and the others. There he had discovered that somebody had stolen the plans from him, and he had escaped only by the skin of his teeth. Getting on to the train once more, he had then encountered Mr. Cuttle, and had obtained the plans once more. Without question, it was an astounding run of luck for Mr. Naggs.

He left the railway track, and presently found himself going down a small side-road, which led into a rather squalid district, where the lights were dim.

And, after walking for perhaps twenty or thirty minutes, Mr. Naggs recognised where he was, for he knew Oldham and Hollinwood well. As he walked, he made his plans, and he decided that he would go to some obscure lodgings, and lay low.

It would never do to visit Fordley to-night; he would have to leave that until to-morrow. And, even then, he would find it necessary to take every precaution.

He was a marked man now, and it would never do for him to be seen in the vicinity of Fordley's mill. He would have to arrange a meeting in some other place—right out of the district, if possible.

Once in his lodgings, Mr. Naggs examined the package he had taken from Cuttle. And he was soon satisfied that this package contained the plans. He had not been deceived. Once more those elusive documents were in the possession of the rascal. And this time he did not intend to lose them!

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was not inactive.

The famous detective had lost no time. There was no sense in wasting time by deploring the fact that Mr. Naggs had escaped. The only thing to do was to remedy matters.

Lee had little faith in telegraphing to Oldham. He decided that it would be far better to get to Oldham in the shortest amount of time possible. There was a powerful car waiting outside—the car which had brought them to Hollinwood Station from the aerodrome—and,

in less than a minute, the party were seated in that car, and Nelson Lee was at the wheel. He drove like fury to Oldham.

There was just a faint hope that they might get there in time, for the train was slow after leaving Hollinwood, and there was a bare possibility that the pursuers would be able to arrive just after the train had done so.

As a matter of fact, they succeeded.

Nelson Lee pulled up outside Oldham Station, and he and Mr. Goodwin hurried to the booking-office. I was close at their heels, and we ran full tilt into—Mr. Josh Cuttle!

"My only hat!" I exclaimed, in surprise.

"There was many strange things happening this evening!" exclaimed Mr. Cuttle gloomily. "It was queer, Mr. Lee. And things was bad."

"I won't ask you for any explanations now, Cuttle," said Nelson Lee quickly. "But can you tell me one thing—do you know anything of Naggs?"

"Naggs was gone!" said Mr. Cuttle, shaking his head. "Naggs has escaped!"

"Escaped?"

"Them was my words!" said Mr. Cuttle. "Mr. Naggs jumped out of the train, and he was gone—and he has took the plans with him. That man was a willain. And why? Ask me! Because he has stolen them plans—"

"Look here, Cuttle, I want you to speak plainly—not in riddles!" said Nelson Lee sharply. "You say that Naggs has escaped. How? When? How do you know this?"

"Them was questions which was easy to answer, sir!" said Mr. Cuttle. "Naggs come in the train, and he committed a houtrage. He took them plans, which was a willainous proceeding—"

"But how could Naggs take them from you, Cuttle?" said Nelson Lee. "You did not have the plans—"

"Which was wrong—begging your pardon, sir!" interrupted Mr. Cuttle. "Them plans was in my possession. And why was they in my possession? Ask me! Because I took them from Naggs afore the train got to Hollinwood. I took them while Naggs was asleep—"

"My only topper!" I exclaimed. "Then that explains why Naggs was so surprised to see those blank sheets,

guy'nor! Mr. Cuttle substituted some duds in place of the real goods! Naggs didn't know anything about it, and he was telling the truth when he told us that!"

"Undoubtedly, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "It seems to me that there has been an unfortunate confusion over this matter. We knew nothing of Cuttle's presence here, and it seems that he has inadvertently ruined my plans."

Mr. Cuttle scratched his head.

"Which was bad, sir?" he said gloomily. "There was bad luck this evening. There was bad luck for us, and there was good luck for Naggs—which was even worse."

Although Cuttle spoke calmly, I could see quite plainly that he was boiling with fury within him. And he was excessively downhearted, too. It was not unusual for Mr. Cuttle to be gloomy—he was always gloomy. It was a habit with him.

It was not long before we scouted out the truth.

And it was quite apparent that, all unconsciously, Mr. Cuttle had spoilt everything. It was certainly not his fault—he could not be blamed in any way. He had acted all for the best when he had taken those plans from Naggs's pocket.

But it was a pity he had done so.

For, had he allowed Naggs to arrive at Hollinwood with the original package, it would have passed into Mr. Goodwin's possession straight away, and then there would have been no complications, and Naggs would have been completely defeated.

As it was, Naggs had jumped upon the train again, had found Mr. Cuttle, and had once more seized the document. It was a most unfortunate series of circumstances, and nobody could be blamed for what had happened.

But there was no getting away from the fact that, if Cuttle had not intervened, Naggs would have been caught red-handed. However, there was no sense in crying over spilt milk. The only thing to do now was to get on to Mr. Naggs's track again, but this promised to be rather a difficult task.

We knew that he had left the train somewhere between Hollinwood and Oldham. There was no telling where he had gone to—which direction he had taken. And, in all probability, he was

now lying extremely low, waiting his opportunity.

"Doar old boys, this reminds me of one of those serial films!" observed Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "It does, really!"

"I'm blest if you're not right, Montie!" said Tommy Watson. "We've often laughed at those films—how the hero and the villain are always getting hold of something—a yellow pearl, or a blue diamond, or something like that. First the hero gets it, then it's pinched from him by the villain, then the hero gets on the track of the villain, and so it goes on until you get jolly fed-up! This seems to be something of the same kind, only it happens to be real life."

"It only proves that truth is very often as strange as fiction, my sons!" I said grimly. "Anyhow, the villain has got those plans now, and it's up to the hero—in the form of the guy'nor—to recover them. And you can bet your last penny that Mr. Lee will soon get on the trail."

It was not long before Mr. Cuttle explained his presence in Lancashire. And it was rather a surprising explanation, for it turned out that Mr. Cuttle had followed Dick Goodwin and his father to London on the previous day. He had seen them taken to Bloomsbury, and he had known all along that they were in that old house. He had watched diligently, and he had seen Mr. Naggs leave. Following the rascal Cuttle had gone to King's Cross, and he had boarded the same train. Cuttle, in fact, had stuck to the trail like a good 'un.

We had been at cross purposes, and that is why the mishap had occurred.

If Cuttle had been left to his own devices, everything would have been all right. Naggs would have got out of the train at Hollinwood, and Cuttle would have gone straight on to Oldham, with the plans. On the other hand, if Cuttle had not interfered, Naggs would have been defeated just the same, for Nelson Lee would have collared him on the platform at Hollinwood. Simply because both Nelson Lee and Cuttle had been engaged upon the same game, Naggs had got away, and he had the plans in his possession. It was really an extraordinary state of affairs.

Nelson Lee did not show any sign of annoyance or anger. It would have been quite useless to do so. Blame could not be attached to anybody, so

there was really no sense in getting angry. The guv'nor decided upon the best course to adopt.

"We must go to a hotel at once, Mr. Goodwin," he said briskly. "I do not think it would be advisable for you to go to your own home. For the present stay in a hotel, and take the boys with you."

"Aren't you coming, sir?" I inquired.

"Yes, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "I will be there to begin with. We'll go at once."

It was not long before we were comfortably settled in the Malden Arms Hotel, Oldham. It was in a rather quiet part of the town, and it was now getting fairly late in the evening.

Presently I was greatly worried. I did not see what could be done. Naggs had eluded us completely, and it would be an extremely difficult matter to get on his track again. Owing to the unforeseen circumstances, all the guv'nor's plans had gone wrong. It was a most exasperating business. Mr. Goodwin, of course, was greatly worried, and Dick himself was gravely concerned. But Nelson Lee told them not to worry; he gave them his assurance that everything would be all right before long. And this comforted them somewhat.

Very shortly afterwards, Nelson Lee took me aside, and we had a little chat.

"There is only one thing to be done, Nipper," said Nelson Lee keenly. "We have lost Naggs, and I do not see how we can get on his track. The only thing to do, therefore, is to watch Mr. William Fordley's house. Naggs is certain to go there, sooner or later. Possibly he will lose no time in visiting his chief—for there is no doubt that Naggs has been acting all along for Fordley."

"And you think that if we watch Fordley's house, we shall see Naggs arrive?" I asked.

"It is very possible, Nipper. In any case, it is the best thing we can do at the moment," said Nelson Lee crisply. "We will go at once!"

A few minutes later we had left the hotel, and were hurrying along towards the great mansion which was occupied by Mr. William Fordley, the rich mill-owner.

"Events have not happened as I should like, Nipper, but there is no sense in grumbling," remarked Nelson Lee, as we walked. "And I do not alto-

gether care for those boys being with us—Watson, Trogellis-West, for example. Strictly speaking, they ought not to have come."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, guv'nor!" I interrupted. "It won't do us any harm—we shall probably be back at St. Frank's by to-morrow evening."

"You are optimistic, Nipper," remarked the guv'nor. "I only hope that your optimism is justified."

"Why, don't you believe that we shall complete this case to-morrow?" I asked.

"I do; but it is very doubtful whether we shall be able to get back to that part of England by the evening," smiled Nelson Lee. "Now listen, Nipper. We must make plans, and we must stick to them. To begin with, we will scout round Fordley's house, and find out everything we can."

"That's the idea, sir," I agreed.

"I shall leave you on watch until about midnight," went on Nelson Lee. "You must take up your station near Fordley's house, and watch. If Naggs appears and enters the house, you must not lose one second in acting."

"How shall I act, sir?" I asked.

"You will go to the nearest police-station without delay," replied Lee. "We will find out where it is situated beforehand, and we will leave instructions there. If nothing has occurred by twelve o'clock, you will return to the hotel, and go to bed. I will continue the vigil during the night. In the morning you will relieve me."

"Right you are, sir!" I said. "It seems to be the best thing to do, under the circumstances."

"I have other plans in mind, Nipper, but I will not discuss them now," said Nelson Lee.

We arrived at Fordley's house, after making full arrangements at the police-station, which was fairly close by. It was a big house—a splendidly appointed mansion, in fact, proving quite conclusively that Mr. William Fordley was a very rich and influential man.

Nelson Lee left me almost at once, but I did not know on what mission he had started. At exactly midnight, however, he returned, and I had nothing to report.

Naggs had made no sign whatever.

What was to be done? Was it likely that Naggs would come to Fordley's

house during the night? And, if so, would Nelson Lee be able to recover the stolen plans?

I was filled with doubt and uneasiness, but I returned to the hotel, as I had been ordered. I did not sleep well that night, however. I was too worried, and my mind was filled with uncertainties.

Everything had gone wrong, just as everything had been going right. It was extremely exasperating, and there was not the slightest doubt on one point. Mr. Walter Naggs was having all the luck at the moment.

But would that luck last?

CHAPTER IV.

HANDFORTH'S GREAT IDEA.

ST. FRANK'S was agog.

Everybody was talking about Dick Goodwin and his troubles.

The Remove, as a matter of fact, was greatly excited, for four of its members were absent, and it was already known that those four members had gone to London, and probably to Lancashire.

It was morning, and the juniors had just come down from the dormitory. It was quite a bright morning, and the October sun was shining with a fair amount of warmth. Out in the Triangle, many groups of juniors were discussing the recent happenings.

"Well, I call it a cheek!" exclaimed Reginald Pitt. "It's about the biggest piece of nerve I've ever heard of!"

"What is?" asked Grey.

"Why, Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson going off like that!" exclaimed Pitt. "Without saying a word to a soul, they go up to London yesterday with Mr. Lee. We didn't know anything about it till long afterwards. And there they are, having a fine old time, while we're stuck down here, doing lessons!"

"They jolly well deserve to be flogged!" said Hubbard wrathfully. "And I bet they'll get into terrific hot water when they come back. The Head will see to that!"

"Don't you believe it, my sons!" put in Cecil De Valerie. "Those chaps are with Mr. Lee, and that's good enough. They won't get into any hot water. They're having a ripping time, and

they'll come back looking as pleased as Punch!"

Pitt nodded.

"Yes, I expect you're right, old son," he said. "But what's happened to the bounders—that's what we want to know? Why didn't they turn up last night? Where are they now?"

"Goodness knows!" said Fatty Little. "Let's hope they bring some grub back with them—something special from London, you know! They ought to—they ought to bring back whole piles of good stuff——"

"Oh, dry up!" said Pitt. "You're always thinking of your tummy, Fatty."

"Well, there's nothing better to think about!" said the fat junior. "Grub is everything! The world couldn't get on without grub. Tremendous battles are fought and won on grub! What would soldiers do without anything to eat? How would nations get on if they didn't have any grub? Grub is the life and soul of a people—and just because I take an exceptional interest in food, you chaps stare at me——"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Handforth. "If you don't ring off, Fatty, I'll punch you into the middle of next week! We're talking about Nipper and those other asses! It's about the last word in cool cheek!"

"Hear, hear!"

"They go off on this investigation with Mr. Lee, and they leave me behind!" exclaimed Handforth, full of indignation. "Isn't that absolutely the limit?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing to cackle at, you duffers!" roared Edward Oswald Handforth. "Of course, they won't get on the right track—that's to be understood. They ought to have taken me with them, then they would have been successful——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Without you, there's just a chance that Mr. Lee might succeed!" said Do Valerie. "But, if you'd gone, there's no telling what would have happened, Handy! We don't know what's in the wind, anyhow—we're in the dark. We can only suspect things—that Dick Goodwin had some plans, or something of that kind, and that some rotter was trying to pinch them——"

"Of course, that's the truth—we all know that!" said Handforth. "They're all in London now—the whole batch.

"And what have they been doing all night?" he added darkly. "They've been engaged in detective work—they've been on the track! And I've been left out of it——"

"How awful!" said Pitt solemnly.

"It's dreadful!" declared Grey.

"Shocking!" said De Valerie.

"Somebody had better write to the 'Times'!" suggested Singleton languidly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared round.

"Oh, I expect you chaps to make fun of me!" he sneered. "A prophet is never respected in his own country! I'm a detective, and simply because you chaps sneer at me, you——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Handy—I say, Handy!" came a voice from the Ancient House steps. "Just a minute!"

It was Arnold McClure who was calling, and he was waving something in his hand. Handforth looked round, just as he was pushing up his sleeves, preparatory to punching a few noses.

"I can't come now!" he shouted. "Wait a minute."

"It's a letter for you, old son!" shouted McClure. "From your pater, I believe!"

"What?" roared Handforth.

He was forgetting all about his war-like intentions. As a matter of fact, Handy was rather hard up, and he had not thought of looking in the letter-rack that morning. But it was a letter, after all, and it probably contained a remittance. Handforth dashed up the steps, and snatched the letter out of McClure's hands. Church was there, too, and they both looked on interestedly while Handforth tore open the flap. They, too, were rather hard up. There had been lean times in Study D for the last day or so. Handforth extracted the letter from the envelope, and as he unfolded it he gave an exclamation of satisfaction. For there were two pink slips enclosed—postal orders for one pound each.

"Good!" said Handforth. "Two quid! Good old pater, I thought he'd turn up trumps!"

"He is a sport!" said McClure. "You don't mind lending me five bob, do you, Handy?"

"You can have ten, if you want it," said Handforth generously. "Here you are—take one of these postal orders and divide it between you. You can pay me

back when you get a tip from your own homes!"

"Oh, thanks awfully!"

Church and McClure took the postal order with delight. Handforth was certainly very useful with his fists, and he had a most exaggerated idea of his own importance; but nobody in the whole of St. Frank's could say that Edward Oswald was mean. On the contrary, he was one of the most generous and open-handed fellows in existence. When Handforth had money, he always shared it with his chums. He was generous to a degree in that respect.

"Now let's see what the pater says," said Handforth. "A lecture, I expect; he generally tries to give me a dig when he writes."

Handforth scanned the letter, and as he did so his eyes grew larger, his face became flushed, and finally he let out a whoop of excitement. He fairly startled Church and McClure, and they gazed at him wonderingly.

"What's the matter—bad news?" asked Church quickly.

"No, you ass—good news!" roared Handforth. "My only hat! Good old pater! I only hope the Head agrees!"

"What is it, you ass?"

"What do you mean—the Head?"

Handforth gazed at his two chums in a kind of ecstasy.

"Read it—read the letter!" he exclaimed, with a gasp. "Great kid! I never thought the pater was such a brick!"

Church and McClure, who were thoroughly excited by this time, made such a grab at the letter that they nearly tore it in half. But, fortunately, this catastrophe did not happen, and Handforth's chums read the letter with eager eyes. It ran as follows:

"Wayfarers' Club,

"Piccadilly,

"London, W.

"Dear Edward,—As you will observe from the paper, I am jotting down this note to you at the club. You will be pleased to hear that your uncle George is in London at the present moment. He only arrived from China yesterday, and he does not expect to be in town for more than three days. As he cannot find time to come down to St. Frank's, and as he is rather anxious to see you, I am wondering if you can obtain permission from your Headmaster to allow you to run up.



Reaching a hand forward, the intruder placed his fingers over the envelope, and, with infinite care, he withdrew the bulky package from his pocket.

"It will be quite nice if you can get two days' holiday, and come to London by the first train in the morning. If you are successful in obtaining this permission, wire me at once, and it is quite possible that your uncle will meet you at Victoria. It is, of course, quite beyond my powers of comprehension to understand why your uncle should express a desire to see you. But he has requested me to write this letter, and I am doing so now.

"The enclosed money will bring you safely to London, I imagine, and when you get here I shall probably give you some more. By the way, if you can bring two of your chums with you, by all means do so. There will be a little party here to-morrow night, and you will enjoy yourself much better if you have some people of your own age with you.

"Do your best, my boy, and don't forget to send that wire.

"Your affectionate
"FATHER."

"Great Scott!" gasped Church.
"This—this is great!"

"Two days in London!" exclaimed McClure, his eyes gleaming. "My hat! How ripping! What a piece of luck for you, Handy!"

Handforth nodded.

"Yes, rather!" he agreed. "Of course, I don't suppose you chaps will be able to come—that's out of the question. The Head won't give me permission to take you with me. But still, I shall be all right."

"Let's go to the Head now—all three of us!" said Church excitedly. "If we go and show him this letter, he might let us go—"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "I'm going to the Head—alone. It'll be far more impressive, and he'll give me the permission, if he means to give it at all. I won't forget to put in a word for you chaps—but don't rely on it."

"Do your best, old son!" said McClure anxiously.

"Say we're run down, and need a change, or something!" suggested McClure.

Handforth shook his head.

"I'm not going to tell any giddy whoppers!" he said. "If the Head lets you come, all well and good. If he doesn't, you're to stay behind. That's all there is about it."

It was not yet breakfast-time, but Handforth did not lose a moment. He knew very well that a train left for London within an hour. If he obtained the Head's permission to go, Handforth would be off at once, without waiting for any breakfast.

Church and McClure watched him go along the passage, and they were in a state of uncertainty. They tried to make themselves hope that the Headmaster would be lenient, and that he would allow them to go. At the same time, they had doubts—they had an awful fear that Dr. Stafford would not grant the request which Edward Handforth was about to make.

"Oh, it's no good—we sha'n't go!" said Church glumly.

"We might!" declared McClure. "The Head's a good old sort—"

"That may be, but four Remove chaps are away already," interrupted Church. "If we go, there'll be seven of us away—seven members of the Remove at one time. Oh, no, Clurey, there'll be nothing doing!"

McClure nodded.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he admitted. "It's rotten, those other chaps being away just now. Just our luck! If they'd been here, we should have got the permission all right. I wonder how long that ass will be?"

"Oh, give him a chance!"

But Church and McClure were impatient. They waited, minute after minute, and still there was no sign of Handforth's return. The juniors haunted the passage not far from the Head's study. They hovered about, anxiety written large upon their features.

Meanwhile, Handforth was doing his best. He arrived at the Head's study, and was about to walk boldly in, after knocking on the door, when he observed that the study door was slightly open. And voices came out to him. They were the voices of Dr. Stafford and Mr. Stockdale, the Master of the College House.

Handforth paused.

"Better wait a minute or two!" he muttered. "I don't want to butt into a private conversation, or I might get the bird! The best thing for me is to catch the Head alone, then I shall be able to wangle him all right!"

Handforth was certainly wise in this decision. The Headmaster would not

give him much attention if he entered while he—the Head—was engaged in conversation with the Housemaster.

So Handforth waited.

He could not very well help hearing the voices of the two men within the room, neither could he help what they were saying. It was not Handforth's intention to listen. He was not the kind of junior who took a delight in eaves-dropping. Handforth was by no means a spy. But certain words came to him which made him prick up his ears, for the Head and Mr. Stockdale were discussing a subject which was of great interest to Handforth.

"My dear Stockdale, I really do not know with any degree of exactitude what has been happening," the Head was saying. "The facts I have at my disposal are quite bare and vague. I do know, however, that Mr. Lee is in Oldham."

"That's rather a long way away, sir," said Mr. Stockdale.

"It is, indeed!" agreed the Headmaster. "Mr. Goodwin is there, too, and, needless to say, young Goodwin, of the Remove."

"And what of the other boys, sir—Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson?"

"Strange as it may seem, Mr. Stockdale, those three juniors are also in Oldham," exclaimed the Head. "They are all staying at the Malden Arms Hotel. Why Mr. Lee has taken these boys with him, I cannot imagine; but I am certain that Mr. Lee has an excellent reason for so doing. In any case, I shall not quarrel with him over the matter. They are all boys of his house, and are under his control."

"And has Mr. Nelson Lee been successful, sir?" asked Mr. Stockdale.

"I fancy not," replied the Head. "Things have been going rather badly, I believe, and I know for certain that young Goodwin's precious plans have not been recovered. They are still in the hands of the rascal who stole them. But, as I said before, the whole affair is something of a mystery to me. We shall really have to wait until Mr. Lee returns before we know the actual facts."

"Yes, I suppose so, sir!" said the Housemaster. "A very queer business, to my mind."

Handforth's eyes were gleaming as he heard these words.

Nelson Lee had not been successful!

The plans were still missing! They were still in the possession of the man who had taken them—Mr. Naggs! And Nelson Lee and all the others were staying at the Malden Arms Hotel, Oldham! Handforth knew all the facts—and he was thrilled.

A moment or two later, as he paced up and down the passage, the door of the Head's study opened, and Mr. Stockdale appeared. He was somewhat astonished to find Edward Oswald Handforth standing in the middle of the passage, gazing blankly into space. There was a smile of supreme happiness on his face. And the next moment he proceeded to execute an elephantine waltz.

"Handforth!" ejaculated Mr. Stockdale. "What on earth are you doing?"

Handforth came to a standstill, as if he had been suddenly frozen. His face was as red as a beetroot, however, as he looked at the master of the College House.

"Nun-nothing, sir!" he gasped, covered with confusion.

"What was the meaning of those extraordinary gyrations?" demanded Mr. Stockdale.

"I—I was just—just practising, sir!" panted Handforth desperately. "I—I was waiting to go into the Head's study, sir, but I know he was engaged with you, and so I didn't butt in—I—I mean, I didn't interrupt!"

"Then you had better go into Dr. Stafford's study at once, Handforth," said the Housemaster. "He is about to go in to his breakfast, I believe, so you must be sharp!"

"Thank—thank you, sir!" gasped Handforth.

He fairly budged into the Head's study, anxious to escape any further questioning by Mr. Stockdale. He turned round, once he got inside the study, and found that Dr. Stafford was regarding him with some little amount of curiosity.

"Good-morning, Handforth!" said the Head smoothly.

"Good—good-morning, sir!" said Handforth, with a gulp.

"Apparently you did not think it necessary to tap upon my door before entering, Handforth!" went on Dr. Stafford. "You must learn manners!"

"I—I'm awfully sorry, sir! I apologise!" said Handforth hurriedly. "You

—you see, sir, Mr. Stockdale startled me a bit. Please—please forgive me, sir!”

“Since you have expressed your regret, Handforth, we’ll let the matter pass,” he exclaimed. “I fancy I know why you have come to see me. You have undoubtedly received a letter from your father this morning?”

Handforth looked blank.

“How—how do you know, sir?” he asked, in amazement.

“I do not pretend to be a thought-reader, and I have made no elaborate deductions, Handforth,” smiled the Head. “That sort of thing is hardly in my line. The fact is, my boy, I have received a letter from your father by this morning’s post, in which he informs me that he has written to you also.”

“Oh, I see, sir!” said Handforth. “My—my pater wants me to go home for a couple of days, sir, if you’ll give me permission——”

“Your father has explained the circumstances to me, Handforth,” went on the Head. “And he has made it quite clear that this is a very special occasion. Therefore, I have decided to grant his request, and you may be absent from school until to-morrow night. I will grant you two days’ holiday——”

“Oh, hurrah!” roared Handforth excitedly.

“Dear me! Really——”

“I mean, thank you, sir—thank you terrifically!” gasped Handforth. “You’re a brick, sir. You’re absolutely a top-holer! Thank you, sir!”

“My dear boy, there is no necessity for you to get so excited!” protested the Head, amused by the junior’s expressions of joy. “You may leave as soon as you like, and do not forget to send your father a telegram. And you must be back before locking-up to-morrow night. Please remember that, Handforth.”

“Yes, sir; I’ll be back all right!” said the junior. “Thanks awfully, sir. Oh, I forgot——”

“You forgot what?”

“The—the pater suggested something about me bringing two other fellows, sir!” said Handforth hesitatingly. “I—I was wondering if you would allow Church and McClure to come up to London with me. A change would do them good, you know——”

“I have no doubts on that point, Handforth,” interrupted the Head

dryly. “Well, I am not at all sure whether I shall grant this request. It is one thing for you to go home to your father’s house, in order to meet your uncle from China, but it is another thing to grant permission for your friends. I should certainly not consider the matter if your father had not made the suggestion in his letter.”

“Did—did the pater put it in his letter to you, too, sir?”

“He did, Handforth,” replied the Head. “Well, under all the circumstances, I am rather inclined to be generous on this occasion. I am aware of the fact that you are a particularly dense boy, Handforth——”

“Eh?” gasped Handforth.

“You are surprisingly clumsy, too, my lad,” went on the Head calmly. “You are quite capable of getting into the wrong train, and over-running your station, or some such preposterous thing of that kind. Therefore, it will be perhaps all the better if you take Church and McClure with you—so that they may take care of you properly. Therefore, I will give you my permission for Church and McClure to go also. I trust that you will enjoy yourselves, my boy!”

“Thank you, sir—thanks awfully!” said Handforth, forgetting the insult which had been levelled at him.

He really didn’t remember how he got out of Dr. Stafford’s study. But he did so, somehow. Then he polled down the passage like a whirlwind. He turned the corner, and charged full tilt into Church and McClure—who had heard their leader coming.

Crash!

The three juniors met, and the next moment two of them went bowling over. However, they were on their feet again in a moment.

“Well?” gasped Church. “Any luck?”

“We’re going!” panted Handforth.

“You clumsy asses——”

“All of us!” yelled McClure.

“Yes!”

“Oh, hurrah!”

Handforth suddenly yanked out his watch, and consulted it.

“My hat!” he exclaimed. “We shall have to buck up. The train goes in just over half an hour—and there’s not another one for over two hours! If we get the early one, we shall have the whole day in London! We shall have to change into our best togs like lightning!”

"What about breakfast?" gasped Church.

"Rats to breakfast," said Handforth. "We don't want any brekker this morning. I couldn't eat any, anyhow!"

"Neither could I!" said McClure. "Come on!"

They rushed down the passage, and charged full tilt into the lobby just as several of the other juniors were about to leave.

"Hallo! What's the giddy excitement about?" asked Pitt. "Have you chaps gone dotty, or what?"

"We're going to London!" said Handforth importantly.

"Eh?"

"Which?"

"We're going to London!" repeated Handforth, enjoying the sensation he was causing.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

"Draw it mild, Handy!"

"It's a fact!" said McClure. "We are going—all three of us! We've the Head's permission to be in London until to-morrow evening!"

"What rot!" said Owen Major. "You can't spoof us like that, you ass!"

Handforth waved his hand.

"We can't stop arguing with you fellows—we're in a hurry!" he said loftily. "Come on, my sons—we've got to go up into the dormitory to change. And we'll have to buzz like the very dickens, or we shall lose the train."

Reginald Pitt grinned.

"Oh, draw it mild, Handy," he said. "A joke's a joke—but there's no need to carry it too far. The breakfast bell will ring in a minute—there it goes!"

"Let it go—we don't care!" said Handforth. "We haven't any time for breakfast. We're catching the early train. Come on, you chaps!"

Handforth and Co. raced upstairs, and went to the dormitory. The other juniors gazed after them in wonder, and at last began to dimly realise that Handforth had spoken the truth.

When breakfast was half over, and there was still no sign of Handforth, Church and McClure, the other juniors were quite certain that they were off to London.

And there was further indignation. The jealousy was simply tremendous—everybody wanted to know why Handforth and Church and McClure had been

granted permission to be absent from school for two whole days. It was the limit.

Meantime, the three happy juniors just managed to catch the train at Bell-ton. It was a local train, and it connected with the London express at Bannington. And when the three juniors were comfortably seated in a third class compartment of the London train, Handforth sprang his great idea.

"Now look here, my sons," he said solemnly. "While I was waiting to go into the Head's study, I got a terrific idea—a real stunner. Mr. Stockdale saw me when I thought of it—and he thought I'd gone dotty, or something!"

"That's not surprising!" said Church.

"Eh?"

"Oh, Stocky is always thinking silly things like that!" said Church hurriedly.

"Of course he is," declared Handforth.

"Well, my marvellous idea is this. As soon as we get to London—to Victoria—we shall find Uncle George on the platform. He is coming to meet us—and it's a penny to a pound that he'll give us some cash. He's got pots of money—he's a millionaire, or something—and we can easily wangle five or ten quid out of him."

"Is this the marvellous idea?" asked Church.

"Part of it," replied Handforth. "Well, we'll get round Uncle George, and ask him to allow us to go off to Oldham."

"To where?"

"To Oldham!"

"Oldham!" repeated McClure blankly. "What the dickens for? What ever do we want to go to Lancashire for, you silly ass!"

"To get on the track of Dick Goodwin's missing plans!" said Handforth triumphantly.

Church and McClure stared harder than ever. Then, suddenly, they saw the joke, and roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, jolly good!" grinned Church.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled McClure.

Handforth tried to freeze them both with a glance.

"When you've finished," he said coldly. "I'd like to know what you're cackling at!"

The two juniors ceased abruptly.

"Isn't— isn't it a joke?" gasped Church. "Ain't we supposed to laugh Handy?"

"No, you potty ass, you're not supposed to laugh!" snapped Handforth.

"This is serious—it's not a joke!"

"Not—not a joke!" said McClure. "But—but you can't mean it really, Handy! You're not suggesting that we should go straight off to Lancashire—to Oldham?"

Handforth nodded.

"That's exactly what I am suggesting," he said. "We've got two days holiday, and we've only got to get round Uncle George, and everything will be all serene. We can take the first train to Oldham, and then we can help Mr. Lee to get on the track of Naggs. Naggs has got some valuable plans belonging to Dick Goodwin, and Mr. Lee has failed to find them. That being so, it's up to me to go to the rescue!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at, Arnold McClure?" demanded Handforth, glaring.

"Nun—nothing!" gasped McClure. "Something—something tickled me, Handy!"

"We'll go to Lancashire, and we'll solve the problem," went on the leader of study D. "There'll be nothing easier—once I'm on the spot. Nelson Lee has failed, and so I'm going to get busy. Think of the honour—think of the glory——"

"It's no good thinking anything of that sort!" shouted Church sourly. "You won't get the honour, Handy. You'll only get ridiculed. By the time we arrive, we shall simply waste our time—we shall go for nothing. I think you must be dotty!"

"Stark, raving mad!" said McClure.

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, I expected this—I was prepared for it!" he said, bitterly. "I never expect to get any support from you chaps. All you can do is to sneer at everything I say, and disagree with everything I don't say! Whether you come or not, I'm going! We've got two days holiday and we can go where we please. I'm absolutely firm on this point—and I'm not going to be turned aside. I mean to go up to Oldham—I mean to join in the hunt for Dick Goodwin's plans!"

And there was something about Handforth's voice which conclusively proved to Church and McClure that nothing would divert him from his intentions. Once Handforth got an idea into his

head it could not be driven out, even with a sledge hammer.

And this particular idea, so far as Church and McClure could remember, was about the most insane notion that Handforth had ever conceived.

It was therefore rather singular that the consequent events should turn out as they did. For Handforth was destined to do some very wonderful things in the near future.

CHAPTER V.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF NELSON LEE.

"SOMETHING," I said decidedly, "has happened!"

I was hanging about in the vicinity of William Fordley's house, in Oldham. It was morning—quite a bright, clear morning. This, in itself, was nothing unusual—for Lancashire. And although I had been on the spot over half an hour, I had seen no sight whatever of Nelson Lee. I had come to relieve the gov'nor—exactly as he had told me. But there was no sign of him. He had vanished completely—and he had not communicated with the hotel in any way.

Why had Nelson Lee left his post?

Why had he gone away—without communicating with me at all? Apparently, there was only one explanation, Nelson Lee had left in a hurry—he was probably following Fordley, or Naggs. At all events something had happened—I was quite convinced on that point.

I waited until pretty nearly an hour had elapsed. Then I realised that it was quite useless for me to remain here. Nelson Lee had disappeared—and he had obviously gone off on some special mission. It was a simply a waste of time for me to hang about Fordley's house.

But I did not like going back to the hotel empty handed, so to speak. So, at last, I walked away, and boarded a tramcar. After a short ride in the direction of Hollinwood, I dismounted and found myself near to Fordley's cotton mill. I was greatly interested in all I saw here.

There were many mills in this district—great, ugly buildings which were hives of industry. They were all humming with life, for work was going on at full swing.

I waited about near the entrance to

Fordley's Mill for some little time. But there was no sign of Nelson Lee there—no sign of anything suspicious. I even managed to get into conversation with one of the mill employees. And this man informed me that Mr. Fordley had not yet arrived. This was rather unusual, for the millowner generally got to the works before 10 o'clock every morning. Evidently something of a special nature had kept him away on this particular day.

But, since there was nothing else for me to do, I waited there—worried, and rather uncertain. I did not know what would be my best course. Why hadn't Nelson Lee communicated with me in any way? What was he doing now—where had he gone off to? These were questions which I could not answer.

And, meanwhile, Mr. William Fordley was at home. The millowner was a large, flabby kind of man, of about forty-five. He possessed a big face, with loose, clean-shaven cheeks, and rather watery eyes. Altogether, he was not at all a nice looking specimen.

He was an unscrupulous man, and many of his business deals would not have borne the light of day. He was successful—mainly owing to his shady habits—and he was extremely rich.

He was just about to leave his house when the telephone bell rang sharply in his library. He went to the 'phone, and lifted up the receiver.

"Well?" he demanded. "Who is it?"

"Naggs!" came the reply over the wire. "Is that you, Mr. Fordley?"

"Yes," said the millowner sharply. "What name did you say?"

"Naggs!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Fordley. "I didn't know you were in Oldham."

"I arrived last night," said Naggs. "I want to see you, sir."

"Any success?"

"Yes!"

"You have obtained the—goods?" asked Mr. Fordley eagerly.

"Yes, sir—everything is O.K.!" replied Naggs. "In fact, I've got the papers with me!"

"Good man!" said the millowner. "I thought you would be successful, Naggs. You had better come to see me at once—without any delay. Why didn't you communicate with me last night?"

"For reasons which I can't quite go

into now, sir," replied Naggs. "And I don't think it would be advisable for me to come anywhere near your house this afternoon."

Mr. Fordley pursed his lips.

"Well, what is the matter, Naggs?" he demanded. "Has anything—happened?"

"Yes, sir—and I must be very careful," replied Naggs. "Unless I go easy, somebody may get wind of this—deal. You understand what I mean?"

"Not quite," said Mr. Fordley. "What do you propose, anyhow?"

"Can you go to Brentlowe this afternoon, sir?"

"Brentlowe!" interrupted Mr. Fordley. "Where is that?"

"Oh, just about fifty miles away, sir—in the direction of London," replied Naggs. "I know of a little house there, just outside the village. It's all quiet, and the house at the present moment is empty."

"Why on earth should you go to an empty house, Naggs?" demanded the millowner curiously.

"I will explain better, sir, when I see you face to face," replied the other. "Although the house is empty, it is not unfurnished. It belongs to a friend of mine, and I have got the key from him—under the pretext that I want to take somebody to have a look over it, with a view to letting. If you can meet me there, sir, it will be all the better."

"Brentlowe," said Mr. Fordley. "On the road to London? All right, Naggs—if it is so important I will put other matters aside and meet you there. What is the name of this house?"

"Rose Cottage, sir, and it is about half a mile from the station," replied Naggs. "I will be waiting there for you at exactly four o'clock this afternoon."

"I think I shall be able to manage that quite comfortably," said Mr. Fordley. "I will be there, Naggs. By the way, do I understand that you will bring the—er—contract with you?"

"Yes, sir—the contract!" said Naggs. "And you, I take it, will bring some cash?"

Mr. Fordley understood.

"Yes, my dear fellow, I will bring some cash," he agreed. "I know precisely what you mean, and you need not worry on that point. At four o'clock, then, at Brentlowe. Good-bye."

Mr. Fordley hung up the receiver,

and then he paced up and down his library for some little time. There was a gleam in his eye—a gleam which denoted keen satisfaction.

"Splendid!" he muttered. "Naggs has been successful—as I thought he would be. But something has apparently happened—something of rather an unpleasant nature. Otherwise, Naggs would not be afraid to come openly to my house. He must have been getting into trouble with the police—and it will be rather uncomfortable for me for a time."

The millowner reviewed the situation, and finally, he decided to keep the appointment. His own position at Oldham was so assured—he was such a big man there, that he would not be suspected of anything.

If, by any chance, his name became mixed up with something of an unpleasant nature, Mr. Fordley would be able to clear himself without any difficulty.

But he did not think this likely. He was going to meet Naggs fifty miles from Oldham, and it was most improbable that anything of a startling nature would occur there.

"It was rather a good idea of Naggs," the millowner pondered. "For him to meet in an empty house, half a mile from a small village, was certainly an excellent suggestion."

Nobody would ever know of that interview, and no comment would be raised. Naggs would hand over those plans, and he would receive payment for them. After that, Fordley would be able to do exactly as he pleased.

In any case, he would wait for a month or two before bringing out the design as his own. But, provided he was thoroughly satisfied that he could manage the affair without getting into trouble, he would certainly do so. Mr. William Fordley was not troubled by any scruples.

Mr. Fordley paced up and down for some little time, then he sat down in his easy chair, and rang the bell. It was answered by a neat maidservant.

"Tell Fletcher that he is to bring the car round at once," said the millowner.

"Yes, sir."

Very shortly afterwards a huge motor-car came round from the private garage, and pulled up in front of the house. Mr. Fordley had been thinking meanwhile, and he decided that he would leave Oldham at once.

There were several hours to spend

before his appointment with Naggs, but it would be as well, the millowner decided, to pretend that he was going round on a series of business visits. There was no reason why everything should not be open and above board. Mr. Fordley had nothing to fear, and he decided he would act openly.

He could go straight to Macclesfield, partake of luncheon there, and then continue on to one or two towns, making innocent calls, then, at four o'clock, he would arrive at Brentlowe.

It would not take long to deal with Mr. Naggs. Then Fordley would return home—and those valuable plans would be in his possession. Once they were in his grasp, he would not lose them.

And, at just about this time three youthful passengers were starting from London—from King's Cross. The express had just left the great terminus, and those three youthful passengers were fortunate in being in a compartment to themselves.

"Good!" exclaimed Handforth, rubbing his hands softly. "We're off, my sons!"

"Speak for yourself," grunted Church.

"Eh?"

"There's no need to include us," said McClure. "You may be off, Handy, but we're not. You're off your rocker!"

"I'm not going to punch your head—it's too much trouble!" said Handforth loftily. "Besides, I expect this sort of talk from two fatheads like you. You haven't got any imagination—you don't possess an atom of energy. Here we are, just starting off on an important mission, and all you can do is to growl and grumble. What about Uncle George? He knew jolly well that the thing was serious—and he dubbed up a fiver at once. Two fivers, in fact. My uncle's a brick!"

"He was spoofed by you, anyway," said Church. "He thinks this thing is important—that it's really vital. The way you talked to him was scandalous, Handy. And all because of that, we're bound for Lancashire, and when we get there we shall have nothing to do—except come back. In my opinion, it's wasting the whole holiday!"

"Wasting it!" roared Handforth. "Ain't we going to the rescue of Dick Goodwin?"

"Oh, don't talk piffle!" said McClure

"What's the good of us fellows going to the rescue of Goodwin, when Mr. Lee is there—on the spot? Can't we trust Mr. Lee to do the thing? Is it necessary for us to butt in?"

"Even the best detectives are liable to go wrong now and again," said Handforth. "Even I make a bloomer at times."

"Go hon!"

"No!" said McClure, staring. "Impossible!"

"Not bad bloomers, of course," went on Handforth, unsuspecting. "And it's quite likely Mr. Lee has got on the wrong trail, or something of that sort. Anyhow, Naggs has got away with the plans, and it's up to us to find them. That's why we're going to Lancashire."

Church and McClure knew it was quite useless to argue. And so they said very little. In any case, they were having quite a decent holiday, and Church and McClure were resigned. They knew well enough that argument was hopeless—and that it made no difference what they said.

They really hadn't the faintest idea what they were going to do when they arrived at Oldham. Certainly they would engage in no detective work. They were convinced on this point.

As Handforth had said, his uncle George had turned up trumps. They had "wangled" some money from Handforth's genial relative, and the net result was that the three juniors were now on their way to Oldham.

In his own heart, Handforth probably had very little hopes of doing anything towards recovering those plans of Goodwin's. But he hated to be left out in the cold. He loathed the very thought of being out of this great adventure.

And that was why he was travelling to Lancashire now—so that he would be able to share in the glory when they all returned to St. Frank's.

Even if he hadn't got any glory of his own to take about, he would probably find some belonging to somebody else. And reflected glory was better than none at all—in Handforth's opinion.

The long journey to the North was devoid of all incident—until the last lap had been entered upon. Handforth and Church and McClure were rather fond of travelling in railway trains—they had a boyish liking for it. But they were rather tired of the journey

long before they were due to enter Oldham.

"Well, I shall be jolly glad when the trip is over!" remarked Church. "I'm just about fed up with railway trains for to-day, Handy. And what are we going to do when we get to Oldham? That's what I've been thinking about." Handforth smiled.

"You leave it to me," he said. "When we get to Oldham I'll tell you what to do. In any case, we're going to get on the track. Mr. Lee has failed, so it's up to me to step into the breach!"

"Oh, of course," said McClure. "I was overlooking for the moment that you're about four times as clever as Nelson Lee."

Church tried his utmost not to laugh, and only succeeded in making an extraordinary sound in his throat.

"Well, not four times, my son," said Handforth. "I'm not going to say that I'm four times as clever as Mr. Lee. But he's failed in this case, and I think it will only be sporting for me to put things right. I shall be the chief detective, of course, and you chaps are my assistants."

"Oh, good!" said Church. "And how do we assist?"

"I shall give you your instructions later on," said Handforth. "There'll be plenty to do. When we get to Oldham we shall probably find a gang of criminals there. And you'll have to follow them—get on the trail, you know. It all depends upon—"

"Hallo! Another stop!" interrupted McClure. "I thought this train was an express?"

"Well, it was an express until half-an-hour ago," said McClure. "But now we seem to be stopping at every little station."

The train was slowing down, and a moment or two later it pulled up against the platform of a small country station.

Curiously enough as it was doing so, another train, travelling in the opposite direction, came to a standstill against the opposite platform.

Both trains were in the station at the same time. There was nothing very peculiar about this, of course, but Handforth, who was staring at the other train, suddenly gave a tremendous start.

"Great pip!" he ejaculated.

"What's the matter, you ass?" demanded Church.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Hand-

forth. "I—I saw—there was somebody in that train!"

"Go hon!" grinned McClure. "How tremendously startling!"

"If you're going to be funny, Arnold McClure, I'll jolly well punch your silly nose!" said Handforth grimly. "Mr. Naggs—Naggs himself!"

"Oh, rot!" said Church.

Handforth fairly danced.

"I tell you it was Naggs, he shouted excitedly. He's in that train. I saw him as clearly as I can spot you now. He was sitting in a corner seat, and he's just up near the front of the train! I've seen the chap two or three times at St. Frank's, and I'd know him in a thousand. He's on that train—and it's a ten to one chance that he's bent on mischief. Mr. Lee has lost the trail—but I've succeeded in getting on to it! That's where we score, my sons!"

"But—but we can't do anything, Handy," protested Church.

"Can't do anything! Can't we? You wait, my children. You wait! I'll soon show you whether we can do anything or not!"

CHAPTER VI.

HANDFORTH BUTTS IN.

THERE was nothing particularly startling in this peculiar situation.

Mr. Walter Naggs was, indeed, on that train—exactly as Handforth had said. He was on his way to Brentlowe, in order to keep his appointment with Mr. William Fordley.

It was certainly something in the nature of a coincidence that these two trains should pull up at the same station, and thus give Handforth the opportunity of recognising the rascal who had been operating for so many weeks in the vicinity of St. Frank's.

But, after all, it was merely a natural state of affairs. Mr. Naggs was going to Brentlowe on one train, and Handforth and Co. were on their way to Oldham on another train.

It was inevitable that the two trains should pass—but it was extremely fortunate that they should stop at that small station at precisely the same time. Mr. Naggs, of course, was totally unaware of the fact that he had been seen and recognised.

"I'll soon show you what I'm going

to do!" repeated Handforth grimly. "Look here, my sons, there's not a second to lose! One of these trains will be going in half a minute—and we've got to change!"

"Change!" exclaimed Church. "What do you mean?"

"We've got to get into that other train!"

"But—but that's impossible!" said McClure. "There ain't time, Handy! We've got to get out, cross over the footbridge, and then——"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "There's no need to go to all that trouble. I'll show you how to we'll do it. Follow me!"

Handforth grabbed his handbag, and then opened the off-side door of the railway carriage. Church and McClure stared at him in alarm.

"What—what's the idea?" said McClure.

"Why, we're going across into that other train," said Handforth. "The compartment just opposite here is empty—you can see that? We've only got to step across—My only hat! There goes the whistle!"

The guard's whistle was indeed blowing.

Handforth wrenched open the door, leaned over towards the other train, and in a second the door of the opposite compartment was open. Handforth leapt across, and he was followed immediately by Church and McClure, who were too excited to do anything else.

And they were only just in the nick of time. They only just had a bare second to close the two carriage doors before the train for Oldham moved out of the station.

"Whew!" whistled McClure. "We've done it now!"

"There's no need for you chaps to worry," said Handforth, becoming quite calm. "We're in this train—and Naggs is just a little further up, in one of the other carriages. We're going to follow him all the way—until he gets out! We'll watch every station——"

"But—but he may be going on to London!" protested Church.

"All right—we'll go to London, too!"

"My hat!"

"You—you must be dotty!"

Handforth smiled.

"A good detective never worries about distances," he said smoothly. "Once he gets on the trail, he sticks to the trail

—even though it takes him half across the world! We're going to follow Naggs—we're going to follow him for miles and miles—until he gets out of this train!"

"And what about our tickets?" asked McClure.

"Leave that to me. I'll arrange it," said Handforth. "I'm in charge of this case, don't forget!"

Handforth was in his element. By sheer chance he had succeeded in getting on the track of Mr. Naggs. Certainly, no credit could be given to Handforth for what had occurred.

But Handforth took the credit. He proceeded to explain to his chums, with many details, how he had executed the clever manoeuvre.

Credit was due to Handforth in one respect, however; he had shown commendable promptitude in acting. He had not hesitated for a moment, but had taken the only chance that had presented itself.

As events turned out, however, the journey was not a very long one. The train stopped at the very next station—which Handforth and Co. had whizzed through at full speed on the other train.

It turned out to be Brentlowe, and Handforth was looking out of the window keenly, even before the train came to a standstill.

One second later he withdrew his head, and his face was flushed and excited.

"He's got out—Naggs has got out!" he exclaimed. "Come on, you chaps!"

"But—but——"

Handforth did not give his chums any time to argue. They bundled out of the train, and they carried their handbags with them. Only one or two people had alighted from the train, and Mr. Naggs had passed out by the time Handforth and Co. reached the barrier. A youthful ticket clerk was there, and he regarded the three boys with interest.

"Leave it to me," whispered Handforth. "I'll wangle things all right!"

Of course, the juniors had no tickets—excepting their tickets to Oldham. And Handforth did not want to go into any long explanations now. He gave his handbag to the ticket-collector and smiled beamingly.

"I say, you don't mind us going out here until the next train comes in, do you?" he said. "We'd like you to take charge of our handbags, too. There's no need to show our tickets, be-

cause we'll be coming back presently. Thanks awfully!"

The ticket collector took Handforth's bag, and was about to speak. But Church and McClure piled their bags on to him as well. And before the surprised collector could say anything, all the three juniors were outside, hurrying away from the station.

Handforth had certainly managed the trick smartly.

"It was the only thing to do, my sons!" he said. "If we had explained matters, we should have been kept there for hours!"

"But—but where's Naggs?" asked Church.

"There he is—right down the road!" said Handforth. "Can't you see him?"

He nodded his head, and Church and McClure, gazing down the country road, distinctly saw the figure of Mr. Naggs. The rascal was quite unsuspecting—he did not even glance round, to see if anybody else had got off the train. As a matter of fact, Naggs was perfectly confident in his own safety, and he did not even consider the possibility of being tracked.

And, even if he had looked round, he would not have seen anything suspicious. Merely three boys, strolling along the road. He was too far off to recognise their features—and they were not wearing the well-known St. Frank's caps. They had changed these for tweed caps and put on overcoats as they left the train.

But if Handforth and Co. continued on the trail as they were going now, Naggs would certainly suspect something if he saw the boys. Handforth, stupid as he was, had sense enough to realise this. But perhaps it is rather hard to call Handforth stupid. He was really impulsive and headstrong, rather than stupid.

"You chaps had better fall behind," he said. "Leave this game to me—I'll track Naggs down. We'll string ourselves out, so to speak. You get a hundred yards behind me, Church, and McClure can get a hundred yards behind you. Then, if Naggs looks round, he won't see anything suspicious—because we shall be able to dodge into the hedge before he can spot anything."

"Right you are," said Church. "We're game for anything, Handy."

As a matter of fact, Church and McClure knew that it would have been

quite useless to offer any suggestions of their own, not that they had any. They were not quite so sceptical as they had been. Handforth had, at least, got on the track of something—although there was no telling what it would lead to. It was quite likely that this would turn out to be a wild goose chase. But there was no telling.

Mr. Naggs went along the country road at a swinging pace, and after proceeding for some little distance, he turned down a small lane which was almost concealed by thick trees. Handforth had not been seen—he had taken care to follow Naggs quite near the hedge. Thus, when Mr. Naggs glanced round for a moment, he saw nothing but the bare, open road. Handforth had kept to the hedge, and Church and McClure were concealed by a turning.

"Good!" muttered Handforth.

He hurried forward, and when he arrived at the turning, he peered cautiously down. The road was straight for some little distance, and the figure of his quarry was in view. A small house was in view, too—standing quite near the road, and it had an open front garden. It was a small, old fashioned place, with a great deal of creeper hiding the brickwork.

Rather to Handforth's surprise, Mr. Naggs turned in at the gateway, walked up the short path, and let himself into the house by means of a key. The front door closed, and Handforth pursed his lips.

"Run to earth!" he exclaimed, dramatically. "By George! It hasn't taken me long to do this little bit of work! Naggs is in that house—and it's a ten to one chance that he is meeting his fellow criminals there. It's up to me to see what the game is—and to recover those plans of Goodwin's."

Church came up at that moment, and after waiting for a minute or two, McClure appeared.

"What's the game?" asked the latter. "Have you lost him, Handy?"

"Lost him!" echoed Handforth. "No, you ass, I haven't! Naggs has gone into that cottage—he let himself in with a latch key!"

"Perhaps he lives there," suggested Church.

"Well, that's possible, but I don't believe it's true," said Handforth. "In my opinion, the house is empty—except for Naggs."

"How the dickens can you tell that?"

"Well, all the blinds are down, for one thing," said Handforth. "That doesn't seem as though anybody had been in there, does it? And if the house was occupied, Naggs would have knocked at the door, or he would have walked in, instead of using a key. It looks to me as if the house is empty. Anyhow, I'm going to scout round, and make investigations."

"You'd better be careful——"

"Oh, you needn't tell me to be careful," interrupted Handforth. "I know what I'm doing. You chaps have got to stay here on the watch. Or, better still, you'd better get behind the hedge, in case anybody else comes along—then you won't be spotted. You watch the house, and wait until I come back."

Handforth walked off without waiting for his chums to say anything. And he approached the house cautiously. At least, he imagined that he did so. But Handforth was not much good at this kind of work. He dodged about, from side to side, and when he arrived at the house, he exposed himself on several occasions.

Finally, he reached the garden of the place, and managed to squeeze through a little gap in the hedge. Handforth did not believe in doing things by halves. He had come to have a look round this cottage, and he was going to look thoroughly—at close quarters.

The blinds were down, so it was impossible for him to be seen. That is the way Handforth argued. He decided that it would be better for him to creep round to the back, for there might be a window there, through which he could glimpse.

With this object in view, he crept along, and passed round to the rear of the little house. But there was nothing to be seen here. All the blinds were drawn, and there was no door. This rather surprised Handforth. Surely there was a rear door to this house?

"It's rummy!" muttered the amateur detective. "Oh! I suppose there's a side door—round in the other wall. I'd better have a look in that direction."

If only Handforth had used his eyes earlier, he would have seen the side door—for it was in full view from the corner. Church and McClure could see it distinctly from the spot where they were hiding.

And, presently, they saw Handforth creeping round the corner of the house

with exaggerated caution. Handforth's eyes gleamed as he saw the doorway. And, to his satisfaction, the door was slightly open.

Handforth believed in bold measures. He was always a rain-headed youth, and he decided, then and there, to creep up to the door, and to venture in. He would go into the very house itself—and, what was more, he would capture Mr. Naggs single handed.

"By George!" muttered Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "I'll do the trick—I'll collar the scoundrel!"

He arrived at the doorway, and he was just about to creep in, when something of a rather startling nature took place.

The door opened abruptly, and a hand reached out. It grasped Handforth by the collar before he could say anything, or do anything. The next second, Edward Oswald Handforth was yanked through the doorway with terrific force. And the door closed with a slam.

Church and McClure, who had seen this little incident, gazed at one another in alarm.

"Ho's—he's collared!" gasped Church. "Oh, my only hat!"

"Nabbed!" said the other junior. "What—what the dickens shall we do!"

Handforth's chums were rather startled, and they were worried, too. For they knew that Handforth's impetuosity had led him into a difficult position. He had been captured by Mr. Naggs—who had probably been on the alert. And now, without the slightest doubt, Handforth was a prisoner in the cottage.

"Well, we shall have to go and rescue him!" said Church. "We simply must, you know. There are two of us, and I think we can manage the trick, if we go about it in the right way."

"Hadn't we better tell the police?" asked McClure.

"The police—where are they?" asked Church. "There aren't any police about here, you ass. The only thing we can do is to take matters into our own hands, and——"

"Shush!" whispered the other. "There's a car coming—a motor car!"

A large open motor car came along the main road, and then turned down this little side lane. Church and McClure watched it with interest—but they themselves, were quite concealed. And, to their surprise, the car came to a halt outside that cottage. It contained two

men—the chauffeur and a gentleman who was lying among the rear cushions.

This individual rose, stepped out of the car, and spoke for a moment or two to the chauffeur. Then he opened the gate, went up to the little house, and entered.

Almost at once the motor car turned about, by a series of manœuvres, and came back along the road. It turned out of the lane, and soon vanished in the distance. Church and McClure witnessed all this, and now they looked at one another rather doubtfully.

"It's no good, old son," said Church. "We can't go and rescue Handforth now—there are two men there—Naggs and this other chap. We shall only get ourselves into trouble, too, if we interfere."

"Then what shall we do?"

"I reckon the best thing to be done is for us to go back to the station, get on a train, and go on to Oldham!" said Church firmly. "We shall find Mr. Leo there, and all the others. We'll tell Mr. Lee all about it, and he'll know what to do. I don't feel like taking the responsibility."

"But that'll take hours!" protested McClure.

"It can't be helped—it's our only course," said Church. "Come on!"

And, as a matter of fact, their position was rather a peculiar one. If they went to the local police—provided they could find a policeman—what could they tell him? The representative of the law would probably laugh at their story, and would do nothing. They had no real evidence of any villainy, and it was practically certain that a country policeman would take no action. Therefore, it was better, on the whole, to go on to Oldham, and to tell Nelson Lee all about the whole adventure. It would take time, but that was unavoidable.

By a pure piece of luck, a train was due almost at once when Church and McClure arrived at the station. They did not worry about their handbags, they waited until the train was in the station, and then they dashed past the barrier, and into a compartment just as the guard blew his whistle. And before any action could be taken by the ticket collector, the train was off. Church and McClure had their tickets, so there was no swindle about this—they had only acted in this way in order to avoid lengthy explanations.

In well under the hour they were in Oldham—they were in that busy, teeming

hive of industry. But Church and McClure had no time to take any interest in their surroundings.

They were intent upon arriving at the Malden Arms Hotel, and they only took casual interest in the thousands of sturdy figures that were everywhere to be seen—the mill workers on their way home, after their day's labour. And Lancashire lasses, with their shawls, only gained a scant amount of attention from the two schoolboys.

They found it necessary to make two or three enquiries before they were on the right road towards the hotel. But, at last, they arrived, and they were greatly relieved when they were informed that Mr. Nelson Lee and Mr. Goodwin and several others were staying at the hotel.

Without delay, the two juniors hurried up to the suite of rooms which had been engaged by the party. And when they arrived in the corridor, they came face to face with three juniors—Sir Montie Tregollis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself.

"Begad!" ejaculated Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "This is simply amazing, dear old boys!"

"Church!" shouted Tommy Watson.

"McClure!" I exclaimed. "Where's Handforth?"

"He's a prisoner!" gasped Church. "Handy has been taken prisoner by Naggs—and we want Mr. Lee to go to the rescue!"

"What!" I exclaimed. "Handforth has been made a prisoner—by Naggs! Is this a joke? And what the dickens are you chaps doing here—in Oldham? How did you get here? Who told you to come? How did you manage to get leave from St. Frank's——"

"We can't answer all those questions now," said Church. "Where's Mr. Lee?"

"He's not here!"

"Not here!" said McClure blankly.

"No—he is missing!"

"Missing!"

"Well, we haven't seen anything of him since last night," I exclaimed. "Everything seems to be a bit upside down. But what's this you're saying about Naggs?"

Before going into any further details, Church and McClure were taken along to the apartment where Mr. Goodwin and Dick were seated. They jumped up as soon as we entered. And then commenced a long series of explanations.

Church was the spokesman, and he told us exactly what had happened. He explained how Handforth had got the letter from his father, how they had all come to London, and how Handforth had decided to hurry straight off to Oldham—to accomplish the work which Nelson Lee had failed to do. We simply roared with laughter at that—but, at the same time, we realised that Handforth had done something which we had failed to do.

The guv'nor had vanished—he had not turned up during the whole day. Personally, I believed that he was on the track somewhere—that he knew precisely what was going on, and was making arrangements of his own. At the same time, we didn't know—therefore, it was up to us to act upon this information.

I suggested that we should hurry off to the rescue of Handforth without any delay. Mr. Goodwin seconded this proposal, and before long there was a great deal of bustle.

Exactly ten minutes later we were off. And, although we did not know it, Nelson Lee was extremely active. He had been doing much—and it was his intention to bring this affair to a satisfactory conclusion almost at once.

This was Handforth's plan, too—but Handforth had not managed things quite so well as he intended.

The climax of this case was near at hand!

THE END.

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ADVENTURE IN LONDON.

INTRODUCTION.

LIN FLEET, a lad of fifteen, wrongfully accused of stealing, loses his job at a motor garage. His parents being dead, he lives with an unscrupulous pair known as Uncle and Aunt Pawley, the former being better acquainted with the thefts at the garage than he would care to admit. Lin meets a stranger in a grey suit, who takes an interest in him, and the boy nicknames him "Mr. Mysterious." The stranger sends him on an errand to deliver a packet to a Mr. Crawson-Crake, who, behaves like a madman and threatens to shoot the lad unless he discloses the name of his employer. Lin escapes and recounts his experiences to "Mr. Mysterious," at the latter's house in Hampstead. To test his honesty, he is given a valuable diamond pendant to take to a jewellers. His unworthy guardians discover the pendant on him, and try to get possession of it. He escapes from his persecutors and finds refuge at a lodging house kept by Sam Wade.

(Now read on.)

Lost!

"**W**HY, you look white as this cloth, sonny!" Jess exclaimed. "Been up against it, haven't you? Come into the warm! You look perished!"

She led him into the kitchen at the back of the shop, where the big coke fire still glowed, with a mighty iron cauldron of peas-soup—for the morrow—simmering at one side.

Jess ladled out a basinful, and set it before Lin at the corner of the table nearest the fire, where she planted a chair for him, and made him sit down.

It was rattling good soup, strong and hot, and Lin began to feel better before he had half finished it.

Jess—not to be idle—filled mustard-pots and salt-cellars, at the other side of the table while he ate.

She asked him no questions; that was not her way. Of his own accord, Lin presently told her everything; how he had been discharged from the garage as a thief—all through his uncle. He did not mention the affair of the motor-car in the Strand, having, in fact, forgotten it himself for the time. But he told her of his meeting with "Mr.

Mysterious," and just hinted that his errand to the gorgeous flat in the West End had been a queer adventure, without going into its dramatic details. Then there was his visit to the strange little house at Hampstead to tell about; and, afterwards, the ugly affair at Cowl Street, that had made him risk his neck to get out of the house, as safer than staying there.

"And I don't mean to go back again—ever!" he declared.

"You're right, Lin," said Jess, whose hands had actually been idle for nearly ten minutes, so intently had she followed his story. "You are best away from that little lot. I never did think much of that blessed uncle of yours, from the bits you've let drop about him at odd times. And now, there's your aunt, and that Bimber—seems to me they are all tarred with the same brush. You're well out of it, I'd say. Stay here, for a time, at least. There's a little room at the top-back you could have. I'll fix it up with Sam, and you can begin to pay us when you get regular work."

Lin tried to thank her, but she cut him short in her abrupt, decisive way:

"All right; then that's settled. And now look here, young Lin. You've just got to finish with this Mr. Mysterious, as you call him, and drop him straight away. You don't want anything to do with shady people and dark, underhand work—it never comes to any good. And as for that necklace, or whatever it is—take it back; and get rid of it as soon as you can. What do they mean by putting a thing like that into the hands of a poor boy they didn't know? Looks like a plant to me. It's the sort of thing that might be done to get you into trouble, and so have a hold on you. I've heard of crooks who get hold of young boys and girls by tricks of that kind, and when they've netted them, train 'em to become thieves like themselves."

Lin flushed, and said rather awkwardly:

"It—it was the young lady who gave it to me; and I'm sure she isn't anything of that sort."

Jess tossed her dark head; rather a bitter smile darkened her frank, handsome face, as she said:

"Oh, that's because she is good-looking! But good-lookers aren't all angels, not by a long way, young Jimmy Green! Take that thing back, and have nothing more to do

with the pair of 'em. That's my advice. And now I'll show you up to your room," she finished, in a more genial, kindly tone, as she glanced at the tired boy. "You look played out. You ought to sleep well to-night, my lad!"

And Lin, yawning, thought so himself. But he didn't!

It was a snug little room, that tiny "top-back," which Jess led the tired boy up to, and left him, with a cheery "good-night!"

Nothing grand; but to Lin it seemed absolutely luxurious, after that bare garret at Cowl Street. For it had a real bedstead instead of just a mattress on the bare boards; a tiny washstand; a chair, and a strip of carpet on the floor.

But the bed was the chief object of interest to Lin just then. He was too tired to linger over the charms of his new quarters. He undressed rapidly, and had no sooner laid his head upon the pillow than he fell asleep. How long he slept he had no idea; it seemed to him but a few moments. Then he was wide awake again, with a sense of horror upon him.

That jewel-case had been stolen!

It was only a dream, and an absurd one—the phantasy of an overwrought brain. For he dreamed that a tall, angular figure in a rusty black dress, just like Aunt Harriet's figure, only with the round, bullet head of Blimber, and the thin, crafty face of Uncle Ben, crept into the room, and snatched his jacket from the chair by the bedside where he had placed it; threatening him with Sam Wade's big carving-knife if he dared to move, and making off with Blimber's hateful grin!

Only a dream. But it brought drops of sweat out upon his forehead, and made him start up in bed, trembling. If he really lost that jewel-case!

The mere idea filled him with horror. In the darkness he reached out for his jacket, and gave a deep sigh of relief when he felt the jewel-case safe in that inner pocket. He would not trust his jacket on the chair again, but rolled it up carefully with its precious contents and placed it under his pillow.

Then he lay down again and tried to forget it and go to sleep.

But sleep seemed to have deserted him. He was very wide awake now, and his thoughts, taking on a gloomy tone, began to haunt him like evil phantoms, and would not be driven away.

He didn't want to; but it seemed as though he had to go through all his late misfortunes and worries over and over again. But—perhaps because the rolled-up jacket made his pillow too high for comfort—it was the diamond pendant that worried him most of all. He wished that he had refused to take charge of it, even for an hour, and longed for the next day to come, so that he could get rid of it.

He meant to be up in good time next morning, and get to the jewellers in the Strand as soon as they opened. Then, by

leaving the pendant with them he would be free of it for the rest of the day. Then he would only have to call for it in the evening, take it to Hampstead, and get it off his hands for good!

And he would never go there again—never! He did not want anything to do with shady people and mysterious jobs! He wanted straightforward, honest work, and he'd have nothing more to do with "Mr. Mysterious!"

With that resolve he slept again at last, in the small hours of the morning, and slept soundly in spite of his worries and troubles—a little too soundly, in fact.

He was awakened by a sharp rapping on the door, and the voice of his friend, Jess, calling through the keyhole:

"Lin! Young Lin! Are you awake yet?"

"Yes," he answered sleepily, trying to recall how he got there, in that strange room!

"About time, young man!" said Jess, from the other side of the door. "I've let you lay it out because you were fairly knocked up last night, but you had better turn out now, Lin." Then she added: "Here's a bit of breakfast for you; I'll put it down on the floor outside. It's too late to have it downstairs; nearly twelve, and the dinner-rush coming on! Awfully busy—can't stop!"

And Lin heard her brisk feet flying down the stairs.

Nearly twelve o'clock! Lin was staggered—he had slept nearly the round of the clock! Then he realised that it was a Saturday, and that the jewellers might close early, before he could get to the Strand—in which case he would have to take care of that pendant for two whole days!

The very thought threw him into a fever of haste and anxiety!

He tumbled out of bed, had a hasty wash in the tiny basin; and then, opening the door and taking in the tray, drank the half-cold tea and munched the congealed toast as he dressed.

The whole business did not take ten minutes, but a clock on the lower landing showed a quarter past twelve as he hurried down the stairs. He went out by the private door, to escape Sam Wade, or anyone likely to detain him.

To his relief, the jeweller's shop was open when he reached it. He pushed the swing-door open and plunged in, breathless with the haste he had made.

A spick-and-span gentleman in a frock-coat, who was arranging a tray of rings in the glittering counter-case, looked up sharply and stared hard at him. He put the rings away hastily and shut the counter-case with a snap. He looked startled, even suspicious. A poorly-clad boy, flushed and breathless, bursting into the shop like that! It was a thing unheard of in that splendid establishment!

"Well, what may you want, boy?" he demanded, in a tone not quite as suave as

(Continued on page iii of Cover.)

his usual manner of address to people on the other side of the counter. Lin didn't like it; but he answered civilly:

"Please, will you repair this necklace"—he couldn't think of the word pendant at the moment—"as soon as you can, and let me know when I may call for it."

"We only undertake repairs for our own customers," said the shopman curtly.

"It is from Miss Twyford—lives at Hampstead," Lin said. And he was not a little surprised at the effect of that name on the jeweller's manner.

"Oh, Miss Twyford!" he murmured, quite smoothly. "Certainly we will repair it as quickly as we can, for her. Let me see it, my lad."

Lin took the case from his pocket and laid it on the counter.

"Ah," said the jeweller, "I remember that case; Miss Twyford's diamond pendant. We reset it for her." He picked up the case, and as he did so, remarked sharply:

"That is very unsafe. The case is not fastened. The catch is broken; and"—still more sharply—"there is no pendant here! The case is empty!"

He held it out, open. Empty it certainly was! Lin stared at it with dilated eyes, and a sudden tightness at the chest that threatened to stifle him! He remembered then that he had thrust the case into his pocket just as he had snatched it from those three clutching hands—closed, as it seemed to be; and had not taken it out to look at it, or even wished to, since.

"Was the pendant in the case when Miss Twyford gave it to you?" asked the shopman.

Lin could not speak; he could only nod an affirmative. And even that he did mechanically, without thought. He couldn't think. The sight of that empty case fairly stunned him. He felt dazed, stupid and helpless under the sudden shock.

"Then how do you account for this?" said the shopman. "The pendant is not here now. You can see that for yourself. What has become of it, my lad?"

Lin, white to the lips, did not answer. How could he give the explanation which rushed upon him with fearful force and certainty in that dreadful moment; that the pendant, fallen or snatched from the case in the struggle, was now in the hands of those three people at Cowl Street; or already disposed of, and anyhow, lost beyond hope of recovery?

"Wait here, boy!" ordered the jeweller. And, to make sure that Lin did not run away, he pulled a wire under the counter, and the shop door was bolted behind the boy's back. Not that the precaution was needed. Lin had not thought of flight; his trouble was not the panic of detected guilt. The shopman went away, taking the jewel-case with him. In a few minutes he returned, accompanied by a white-haired old gentleman, Mr. Shenstone, the proprietor of the establishment.

Both looked grave, and the shopman was talking in a serious undertone. Vaguely, for he was too dazed and bewildered to listen intentionally. Lin overheard disjointed bits of a sentence here and there.

"Can't, or won't explain . . . most extraordinary . . . thing of that value . . . boy of his sort . . . police at once, eh, sir?"

At that word "police" Lin started—he may even have faintly gasped in dismay. If they sent for the police, what could he do—what could he say?

The old jeweller noted that start, and looked at the white-faced boy with suspicion very plainly visible behind his gold-rimmed glasses.

"The police? Miss Twyford might not desire that. We had better consult her first. I will ring her up and explain."

"Mr. Twford—it was he who answered my call—says that the boy is to come to him at once," said the old jeweller; adding in a lower tone: "I think it would be as well if you were to go with the lad, Mr. Simmons. This is a serious affair! Take a taxi and avoid all delay."

"Very good, sir," said the assistant, in a tone of evident satisfaction.

Many men would have disliked such a job, but Mr. Simmons was quite pleased with it. He loved sensational scenes, and expected a fine one when they got to Hampstead. As the representative of Messrs. Shenstone, the great jewellers, he would play an important part in it, and he rather hoped to impress the beautiful Miss Twyford with his astuteness, when he was asked—as he did not doubt he would be—to give his advice and assistance.

Once or twice Mr. Simmons attempted to question him, but gave it up as he got no reply. The boy's silence he put down to the sullen gloom of guilt, or awe of him. But Lin was silent from sheer wretchedness. He was not thinking of Mr. Simmons at all.

He had one thought only; and that seemed to burn itself into his brain:

"They will believe I stole it! They will think I am a thief!"

A thief! Perhaps they would even hand him over to the police! The horror of that was too much for him; and the boy who could face death itself without flinching, sank in cowed, silent misery before the very thought of shame and dishonour!

That ride to Hampstead was a nightmare to him. He felt like one oppressed by a horrible dream! He was a prisoner, going to his trial without a shred of evidence to offer!

It was like a dream to find himself in that queer double room once again. Now it seemed like the court where he was to be tried; and the man in grey, who turned in his chair and fixed those keen, searching eyes upon him, the judge who was about to try him.

(To be continued.)

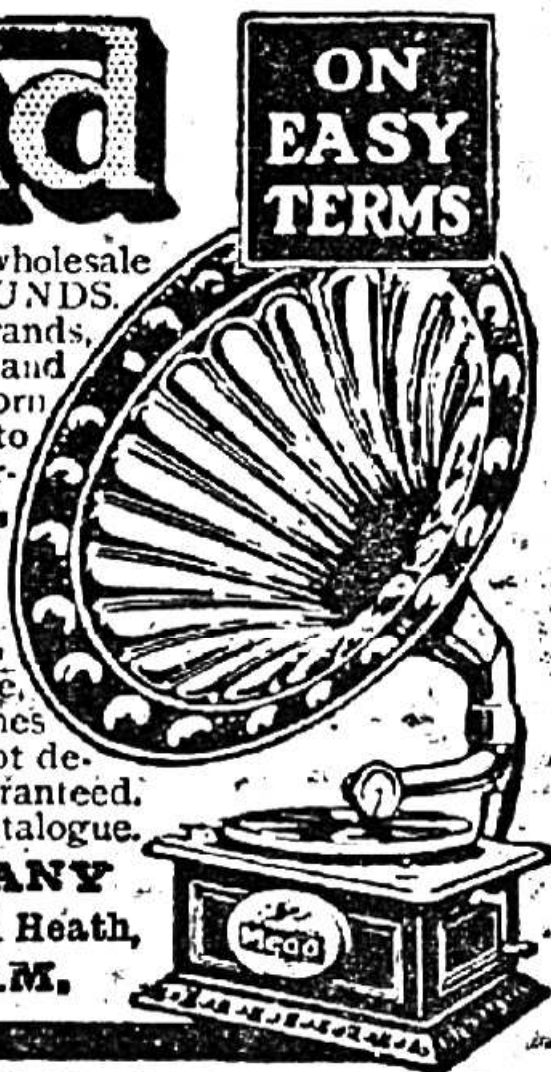
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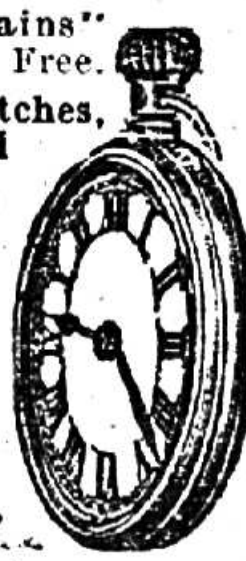
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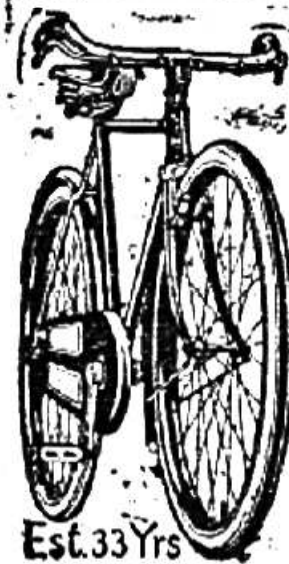
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