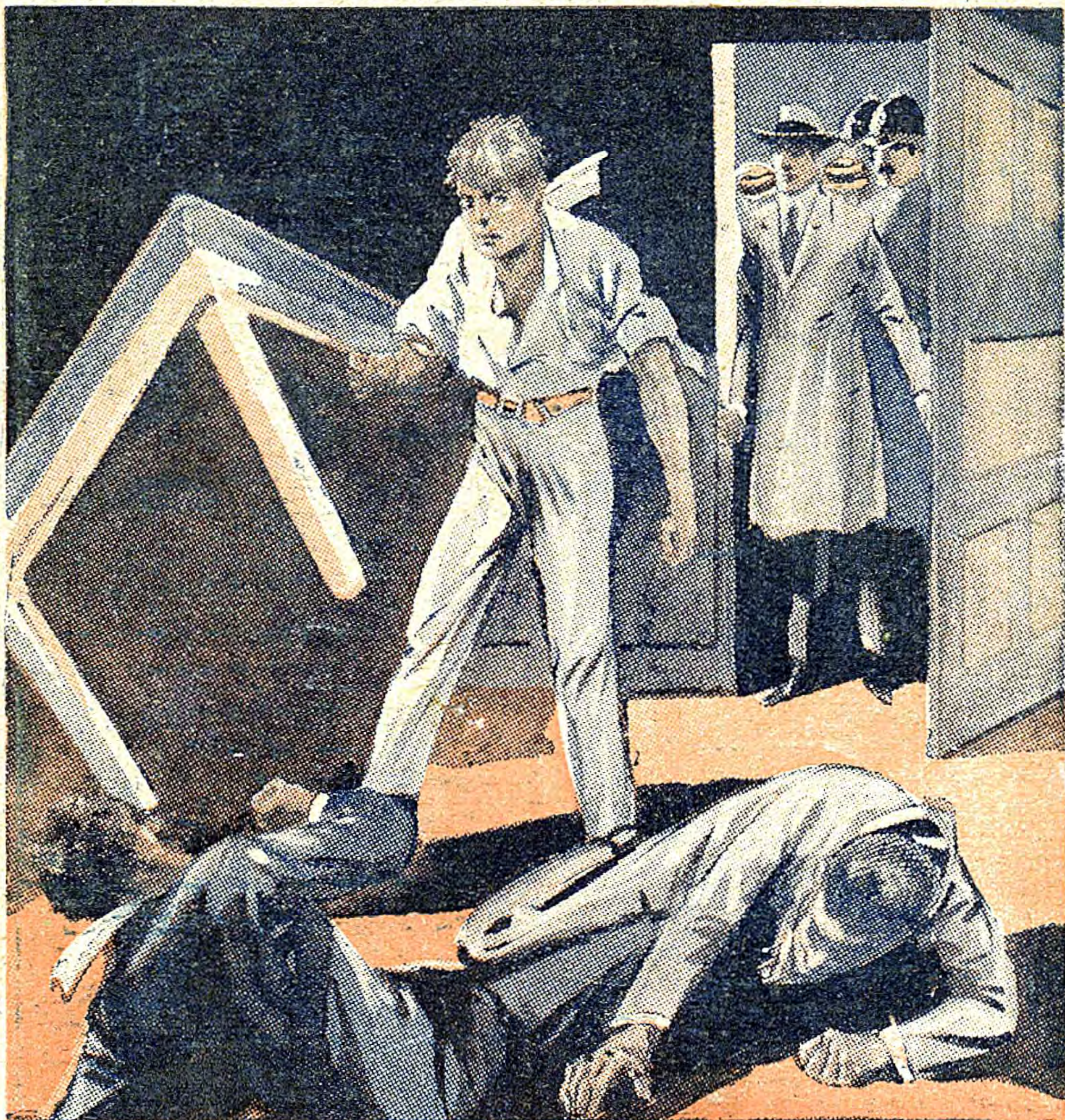


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

SOMETHING OF A MUDDLE.

I LOOKED at my watch anxiously. "I wish they'd hurry up!" I exclaimed, with an impatient note in my voice. "We ought to have been off long before this—and now we are simply hanging about here, wasting time!"

"Dear old boy, it no good worryin'," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Worryin' never did any good to anybody. We must simply wait until the car arrives—and then we can be off at once. Begad! We are havin' a frightful amount of excitement this afternoon!"

"Rather," said Tommy Watson, nodding.

Church and McClure were in agreement with Sir Montie's words. Those two juniors, in fact, had been having more excitement than anybody else, by all appearances. The famous couple of Study D, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's, had not been in Oldham for long. They were famous, of course, because of the exploit with their leader—the one and only Edward Oswald Handforth. Handforth had been doing big things, according to what we could understand.

And, at the present moment, we were all standing outside the entrance of the Malden Arms Hotel, Oldham. Mr.

Goodwin was with us—to say nothing of Dick Goodwin, the schoolboy inventor. And we were all anxious and worried. For things had not been going exactly as we would have liked.

"I can't understand what has happened to the guv'nor!" I said, frowning. "It's jolly mysterious, to my mind. We haven't seen a sign of him since last night—not a sign! He hasn't communicated with us, and he has vanished completely!"

"Really, old boy, I shouldn't worry," advised Sir Montie. "Mr. Nelson Lee is quite capable of looking after himself, begad! He is big enough, and strong enough, and clever enough to defeat any rotters who try to play any games with him."

"Oh, don't be a fathead, Montie!" I said briefly.

"Really, dear boy——"

"I mean, don't think I'm anxious in that way," I explained. "I'm pretty certain the guv'nor is safe—there's no doubt on that point. Mr. Lee isn't the kind of man to get into trouble. I'm wild about it—I'm jolly wild in fact. Why hasn't he brought us into this affair? Why hasn't he told us what he has discovered, and where he has gone to? Why should he leave us in the dark?"

"Perhaps he had an excellent reason, my lad," put in Mr. Goodwin quietly. "Mr. Lee is a clever man, and he gave me his word that he would recover

Dick's plans. I am quite sure that Mr. Lee will keep his promise."

I nodded.

"That's absolutely a dead certainty, Mr. Goodwin," I agreed. "If the gov'nor makes a promise, he keeps it—he's never been known to break his word yet."

"Ay, Mr. Lee will keep his word—he's a champion!" said Dick Goodwin.

No doubt it will be thought rather strange that we should be so far from home—such a long distance from St. Frank's. For we were right in the North Country—in Lancashire, Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, and myself; Church and McClure, and Dick Goodwin.

Handforth was not far distant—only about thirty miles away, according to the story which Church and McClure had told us.

The circumstances were exceptional—that is why we were in this part of the world.

Dick Goodwin, who had invented a wonderful new spinning machine for his father's cotton mill, had been taken to London by Mr. Goodwin so that the plans of this new machine should be patented. That was really the cause of the whole trouble.

For a rascal named Walter Naggs had been on Dick Goodwin's track for some weeks, vainly attempting to get possession of those plans. Naggs knew well enough that his last chance had come. If once the plans were registered and protected, it would be all up with his game. They had to be stolen now or not at all.

And so Naggs had played a deep game—with the result that Mr. Goodwin and Dick had been captured, and the plans secured. As a net result, Naggs had come straight up to Lancashire, his intention being to sell the plans to Mr. Goodwin's rival, a rich mill-owner named William Fordley.

This precious gentleman was the owner of a large cotton mill near Mr. Goodwin's property. And it was his intention to crush Mr. Goodwin by fair means or foul. If he only succeeded in getting this invention of Dick's, his success would be assured.

And now things had reached a climax.

Mr. Naggs was in Oldham, and he had the plans with him. Nelson Lee, who had gone on the track late the previous night, had not turned up since,

and we did not know what had happened to him. I was fairly certain, however, that the gov'nor was engaged upon some valuable work.

And now, while we were waiting, some fresh developments had occurred. To our astonishment, Church and McClure had turned up, both of them very excited and worried.

And it turned out that Handforth had obtained leave from St. Frank's for a couple of days in order to see an uncle, or something, and he had brought Church and McClure with him.

But Handforth, who rather fancied himself as a detective, had come straight up to Oldham, with the stated intention of doing the work which Nelson Lee had failed to do—in short, he intended to recover Dick Goodwin's plans. And, by a sheer piece of luck, Handforth had spotted Mr. Walter Naggs at a small station about forty miles from Oldham. Handforth and his chums had lost no time in following Naggs, and a rather remarkable incident had occurred.

Just outside a small village called Brentlowe, Naggs had entered a small house by the roadside. Handforth, who insisted upon investigating, had been pounced upon and captured. And Church and McClure, feeling certain that they would do no good by going to his rescue alone, had come straight on to Oldham with the story.

And now we were waiting for a powerful motor to turn up from a neighbouring garage, so that we could rush off to Handforth's rescue.

Whether Nelson Lee was on the track or not, we did not know. But we felt that we should be justified in following up this affair on our own. We certainly could do no harm, and it was quite possible that we should do a large amount of good. It had certainly been an exciting time.

Mr. Josh Cuttle was with us, too, and Mr. Josh Cuttle was, if anything, even more gloomy than usual. He had certainly had some bad luck, and there was every reason why he should be downhearted. But misfortune, as a rule, always seemed rather palatable to Mr. Cuttle.

He was standing on the steps now, some little distance from us, staring up and down the road with broody eyes, and with a sullen countenance. I

glanced at him, and could hardly help smiling.

"Cheer up, Mr. Cuttle," I said. "Everything will come all right, if we only have patience."

Mr. Cuttle looked at me, and heaved a sigh.

"There was them what interferes, and there was them what minds their own business!" said Mr. Cuttle. "What was the result? Ask me? Them what interferes meets with trouble—and, by hokey, I got it!"

"Oh, that's quite wrong, Mr. Cuttle!" I said. "You didn't interfere——"

"Begging your pardon, Master Nipper, it was different!" said Mr. Cuttle firmly. "Mr. Nelson Lee was engaged on this case. But was that good enough for me? Ask me? It was not! I was an old fool, and I interfered! If I had left this for Mr. Lee to see to there wouldn't have been no trouble!"

"Well, there's a certain amount of truth in that, Cuttle," I agreed. "At the same time it wasn't your fault—and nobody can say it was. It was simply a piece of bad luck—for everybody concerned. You didn't know that Mr. Lee had the case well in hand, and he didn't know that you were on the trail of Mr. Naggs. In consequence, there was a muddle. And everything seems to be in a bigger muddle than it was before!"

Mr. Cuttle nodded.

"Things was bad, Mr. Nipper!" he declared. "Things was that bad that my 'air was going grey. Grey hair was not nice? Why was it not nice? Ask me! Because grey hair was inclined to make a man look old when he don't feel old!"

I smiled, and could not help thinking over the details of what had actually happened. Mr. Cuttle, acting all for the best, had followed Naggs from London in the same train. And he had actually taken the plans out of Naggs' pocket while the latter was asleep.

But when we had confronted Naggs on the platform at Hollinwood, we had captured him, but the plans had not been on him. Naggs had been as amazed as we were, and had managed to escape, jumping on the train again, just as it was leaving the station.

Mr. Cuttle, of course, was still in the train—with the plans in his possession. He had fondly imagined that he had defeated Naggs, and that everything was all right. But Naggs, catching

sight of Cuttle as he passed along the corridor of the train, guessed at once how the plans had disappeared.

As a net result, Cuttle had been attacked, the plans taken from him, and Naggs had disappeared. He had jumped out of the train before it entered the station. And now the man had gone—and this was the first that we had heard of him since. He was in Brentlowe, and Handforth had been captured!

But, in spite of all the difficulties, I felt confident. I was sure in my own mind, that everything would come all right before darkness set in.

Church and McClure had rushed to Oldham in order to tell Lee what had happened. But Lee wasn't there—he had not been seen by any of us since the previous evening.

So, without any delay, Mr. Goodwin and I decided to act upon our own initiative, and we were just about to start off by motor-car to Brentlowe. We would go to the rescue of Handforth, and we would face Walter Naggs.

"Oh, good!" said Church.

"Here comes a car," added Tommy Watson. "We shall soon be off now."

The car was a large, powerful one, and in less than five minutes we were all on board, and speeding through the outskirts of Oldham. The driver had instructions to go at a high speed, and he was certainly carrying out his instructions to the letter.

"We sha'n't be long now, my sons!" I said. "Well within the hour we shall be in Brentlowe. I think it will be better to drive straight up to this house, and hammer boldly at the door."

"Ay, Nipper, that's what I was thinking, too," said Mr. Goodwin. "It won't do to beat about the bush. We'll get straight to work. We'll force our way into this house, if necessary, and then we shall know what we are doing."

"It seems frightfully strange to me, dear old fellows," remarked Sir Montie. "My brain is really incapable of dealing with all these matters, begad! Why hasn't Mr. Lee shown himself to-day? Why has Naggs gone to this cottage, thirty miles from Oldham——"

"Well, the last query of yours is fairly simple to answer," I broke in. "It's pretty obvious, Montie, that Naggs has gone out to Brentlowe in order to meet somebody. He knew that we were here, on the alert, and so he probably

made an appointment to meet Fordley in this out-of-the-way cottage."

"Yes, dear old boy, I suppose you are right," said Sir Montie.

"Nipper's bound to be right!" declared McClure. "We saw Naggs go into that cottage, and then only a few minutes later a motor-car drove up, with a gentleman in it. I wouldn't mind betting anything that this chap was this Mr. Fordley you keep talking about. And there's one point that's worrying me tremendously."

"What point is that?"

"Well, it took us well over an hour to get to Oldham, we've been here some little time, and it will take us nearly an hour to get back," said McClure. "It's not likely that Naggs and Fordley will be talking for all that time. We shall get there, and we shall find the birds flown."

I nodded.

"I've been thinking about that, too, McClure," I said. "But even if we find the bird flown we shall be able to get some information from Handforth. And, in any case, it's no good worrying. We're on the way to the scene now, before long we shall arrive. Take my advice, and leave all the worry until we know for certain that there is something to worry about!"

But, although McClure probably took my advice, Dick Goodwin certainly did not. He was greatly worried—and he revealed this fact to everybody. And we could not blame Dick Goodwin for being in this state of mind. Everything that he had accomplished was at stake. And the Lancashire boy sat in his seat still and expressionless, and rather grim.

What should be found when we arrived at that small house in Brentlowe?

CHAPTER II.

HANDFORTH GETS A SURPRISE.

"**W**HOA! What the dickens—" Handforth uttered that remark—and he did so while he was being suddenly hauled into the side doorway of that small house just outside Brentlowe.

As Church and McClure had related, Handforth had been captured; they had seen him yanked into the building by Mr. Naggs. And then the door had closed with a slam.

Handforth was considerably astonished to find himself in trouble. He had been prowling round the house, with the avowed intention of finding out a great many things. Not for an instant had Handforth anticipated that he would get into trouble.

And now, quite suddenly, Naggs had appeared in the doorway, and Handforth was hauled bodily into the building. As an amateur detective, he was not an unqualified success.

"You young brat!" rapped out Mr. Naggs. "I'll teach you to come prowling round here—"

"Lemme go!" gasped Handforth. "By George, I'll jolly soon show you what I'll do! If you think you can hold me, you've made a bloomer!"

"Steady, kid—steady!" smiled Mr. Naggs. "I know who you are. Your name is Handforth, and you belong to St. Frank's School. How you got here I don't know, but you're going to stay here!"

"Am I?" said Handforth. "We'll see about that, you rotter! I know what your game is—I know everything! You've got those plans belonging to Dick Goodwin, and you're going to sell them, or something! Well, I've come along to put a stop to your rotten game!"

He struggled fiercely, and Mr. Naggs found that he had a pretty large handful. Indeed, the man appeared rather startled to discover, a moment or two later, that he was incapable of holding his prisoner. Handforth was lashing out wildly, and in a minute or two he would certainly regain his freedom.

And Handforth had all that intention. He was quite determined to give Mr. Naggs—free, gratis, and for nothing—several samples of his famous punch.

But, then suddenly Handforth received a shock.

"Look here, Handforth," said Mr. Naggs sharply. "I didn't intend to reveal the fact to you, but you compel me to do so. Stop this struggling at once. Do you hear me?"

Handforth stopped.

"Why, what the dickens—you—"

"You apparently notice the difference in my voice, Handforth, eh?" said Mr. Naggs. "I think you know who I am now, don't you?"

Handforth seemed to gulp something down.

"Mr.—Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed huskily.

"Exactly!" smiled the man. "Now, Handforth, perhaps you will realise that your presence here is not absolutely welcome?"

"I—I—I'm awfully sorry, sir!" panted Handforth. "You—you see I didn't realise——"

"I'm very annoyed with you, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee sharply. "You had no right whatever to enter this house, and to interfere in affairs which do not concern you!"

"But—but——"

"I do not want to hear any excuses, Handforth," interrupted Nelson Lee curtly. "I came to this house on a special mission, and I am exceedingly annoyed to find that you have forced your presence upon me. You must leave without any delay, Handforth; I cannot have you here!"

"I—I'm frightfully sorry, sir!" said Handforth, staring at Nelson Lee in a peculiar way. "But—but it seems so strange, you know! I know who you are, sir; but you look just like Naggs! It's a marvellous disguise, sir!"

Lee smiled slightly.

"I have a very good reason for adopting this disguise, Handforth," he said. "It is necessary that I should be quite alone in this house. Within a minute or two I am expecting a visitor. I have an appointment here with Sir Charles Rigby. It is on a matter of great importance—not unconnected with the affairs of Dick Goodwin. That is all I can say to you. I am angry with you for interfering, and you will hear more about this later on!"

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Handforth. "I only acted for the best!"

"I do not want to hear——"

"I thought you were Naggs, sir, and I followed you because I wanted to get on the track!" said Handforth. "There was no harm in that, sir! Dash it all, I'll go at once if you want me to, and I'm perfectly willing to remain here and lend you a hand!"

"You will lend me a hand, eh?"

"Rather, sir!" said Handforth eagerly. "I'm rather good at detective work—this affair proves it. I'm not a chap to boast, but I think I was pretty smart on this job. If you had really been Naggs, I should have been on the track right off!"

"You would, Handforth—I agree

with you there!" said the detective, nodding. "Well, I do not feel inclined to waste any further——"

He paused, for at this moment came the sound of a throbbing motor-car.

"Ah, Sir Charles has arrived!" said Nelson Lee. "Wait here, Handforth, until I return. I must have a word with my visitor, and then you must leave at once. But there is just a chance that I may wish you to take a message to Oldham for me, so wait here until I come back."

"Right you are, sir!" said Handforth.

Nelson Lee left the room, and Handforth heard him open the front door. Then there followed a low mumble of voices for several minutes. Handforth looked about him without interest. He was rather disappointed with the result of his inquiry. He had expected to do this thing off his own bat, and he had now discovered that Nelson Lee was on the job, too. It was a decided disappointment.

The door opened, and Lee entered once more. Behind him came another man—a gentleman attired in a thick overcoat, and he was wearing goggles—great goggles which acted like a mask.

"Oh, so this is the lad, Mr. Lee!" said Sir Charles. "Well, it doesn't matter—don't be cross with him. I dare say he was acting all for the best. Let him go at once."

"Just as you wish, Sir Charles," said the detective. "You do not wish him to take any message for you?"

"No, Mr. Lee, I think not."

Nelson Lee turned to Handforth.

"You must go at once, Handforth," he said. "The best thing you can do is to go straight to Oldham, and go to the Malden Arms Hotel. When you get there, wait for me. I shall probably be in Oldham later on in the evening. Good-bye, my lad!"

"Good-bye, sir!" said Handforth.

Handforth was about to turn away when he paused, and an expression of slight astonishment came into his eyes, for he suddenly noticed that Nelson Lee had extended his hand.

"Oh, I see, sir!" said Handforth.

He shook hands with the detective, and then Nelson Lee escorted him to the front door. And, somehow or other, Handforth appeared to be somewhat dazed.

There was a blank expression in his

eyes, and his cheeks had become flushed. He walked out of the doorway, and walked down the short garden path, as though he were in a kind of trance.

His heart was beating rapidly, and within him he was tremendously excited.

As a matter of fact, Edward Oswald Handforth had made an astounding discovery.

It was so startling that he could hardly believe it at first. As he used his wits, he realised that he had made no mistake. But he still walked on—he still walked away from that cottage.

In the first place, Handforth had been rather surprised at Nelson Lee's action in extending his hand. It was not the detective's usual custom to shake hands with junior schoolboys. Only on very special occasions would Nelson Lee offer his palm to Handforth, and this did not seem to be one of those special occasions.

But Handforth had not been actually suspicious because of this action. In taking Nelson Lee's hand, however, Handforth had noticed a deep scar on the detective's forefinger. It was not a scar that could be missed very easily.

There had been a wound on that finger two or three years earlier, by the look of it, and the scar was an ugly one. It was this disfigurement that was causing Handforth such a lot of mental agitation.

When he got some little distance down the road, he came to a halt.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he muttered. "What the dickens does it mean? That scar isn't on Mr. Lee's hand! I've seen his forefinger dozens of times, and I know jolly well that he hasn't got a rotten scar on it like that!"

Handforth stared unseeingly before him, thinking rapidly.

"I've been spoofed!" he exclaimed, addressing the hedge. "I've been diddled—I've been dished! By George, it's a good thing I've got my eyes about me—it's a good thing I'm not a silly ass! That was Naggs, after all, and not Mr. Lee——"

This was certainly a startling conclusion to come to, but it was obviously the truth. The man in the cottage was not Nelson Lee at all, but Walter Naggs. The rascal, finding Handforth had entered the house, had bluffed the matter out, in making Handforth believe that he was really Nelson Lee in disguise.

But for that forefinger incident, Hand-

forth would probably have been deceived all along. But Naggs had made a mistake in offering the boy his hand—a very big mistake, for it had given Handforth the direct clue.

Nelson Lee had no such scar on his finger, therefore this man could not be Nelson Lee!

"And now I come to think of it," muttered Handforth, "the chap didn't speak much like Mr. Lee, either. I was deceived at first, because I wasn't on the alert. But these rotters can't spoof me! Sir Charles Rigby! What rot! I'll bet that's not his name at all! He's probably the rotter that Naggs is going to sell those plans to!"

Handforth was certainly well on the scent, and he was firmly determined not to relax his efforts.

Handforth was furious, but he did not push back along the road and burst into that house again. He had too much sense for that.

He stood there, quite still, thinking the matter out.

"The rotters!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "The confounded rotters! But they haven't been able to diddle me—not likely! I'll show them what I'm made of! I'll show them whether they can get rid of me in that way, the cads! Now I can understand why that other chap kept his goggles on all the time. He didn't want me to see who he really was, because I should be able to recognise him afterwards!"

For once in a way, Handforth was quite shrewd. He had seen through Mr. Naggs' little scheme. It was obvious to him that Naggs had pretended to be Nelson Lee in order to get the junior out of the way.

Meanwhile, Mr. Naggs was quite pleased with himself.

His companion, of course, was none other than Mr. William Fordley, the mill-owner. Naggs had explained the situation to Fordley as soon as he had admitted him into the house, and Fordley had acted his part. And now Handforth had gone, and it was pretty certain that he would go straight into Oldham.

"The young imp!" said Naggs harshly. "It's a good thing I got hold of him, Mr. Fordley. It might have been a serious matter for both of us if I had not succeeded in throwing dust in his eyes."

"But do you think you have succeeded?" asked Fordley anxiously.

"Of course I have, sir!"

"Are you sure?" persisted Fordley. "If that boy knows the truth, Naggs, it will be terribly serious!"

"Don't you worry, Mr. Fordley," interrupted Naggs. "He has been duped completely, and by the time he gets to Oldham we shall have our business completed, and then we shall separate. There will be absolutely no possibility of Handforth giving any information that will prove to be of value. Don't you worry, sir!"

"Well, I don't feel quite satisfied, Naggs," said Mr. Fordley. "However, I don't suppose that it will make any difference if we discuss the subject. We had better get to business without any delay."

"That's my idea, sir," said Naggs promptly.

They were in the little back room, which was quite comfortably furnished. In the centre of the apartment stood a square table, with a long plush cloth covering it. Both Naggs and Fordley drew chairs up to the table, and sat down, facing one another. This was the moment for which Mr. Naggs had long been waiting, and he was only slightly disturbed by the incident which had just taken place.

Naggs was quite certain in his own mind that nothing harmful would result from Handforth's interference; but, of course, Naggs looked upon the thing from a totally different point of view to what Fordley did. For it was known that Naggs had taken the plans, and once he had got rid of them, and received the money from Fordley, it would be all right. Even if he fell foul of the police, they could prove nothing, for he would have disposed of the plans by then, and, so far as he was concerned, everything would be straightforward.

But it was different with Mr. Fordley. He was about to take those plans into his possession, and, if the police got any wind of what had taken place, it would be very awkward for the mill-owner. It was, therefore, not surprising that Mr. Fordley was rather worried.

"I don't feel at all sure about this, Naggs," said Fordley, frowning. "I don't like that boy being here, and I think it was a mistake on our part to send him away."

"Not at all, sir!" said Mr. Naggs. "It would have been a greater mistake for us to keep him here, for we should

have been compelled to show our hand. We should have had to make him a prisoner, in order to keep him quiet."

"That might have been better," said Mr. Fordley grimly.

"I don't think so, sir," said Naggs. "That would have been a police job then. But there is nothing to prove that Handforth's word is true, if he takes his story to the police, even. It will be regarded, in all probability, as a pure fabrication."

"There is that, of course," admitted the mill-owner.

"You needn't worry at all, Mr. Fordley," went on Naggs. "We didn't mention anything about the plans, and Handforth hasn't the slightest idea of your identity. You were wearing those goggles, as I suggested, and it will be quite impossible for the boy to recognise you again. You were very well disguised."

"Oh, well, there is no sense in worrying about it, I suppose," said Mr. Fordley. "As you said, Naggs, anything that the youngster may report to the police will not do any harm. My own position is secure, and if there is anything spread against me, I can clear myself with the greatest of ease. I have already prepared a perfect alibi for myself to-day. At the present moment I am in Macclesfield—you understand? There are plenty of witnesses who will be able to prove that, if necessary."

Mr. Naggs smiled.

"I knew you were a clever gentleman, sir!" he exclaimed. "You'll be safe enough; there's no need to worry at all. And now we'll get to business."

"Right!" said Mr. Fordley. "You have the plans with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see them."

"Certainly!"

"I observe that you are hesitating, Naggs," said Mr. Fordley. "There is no necessity for you to do that. We are sitting here, facing one another, and there will be no treachery on my part. I agreed to pay you a certain price for those plans, and you have got them. I shall not attempt to get out of that agreement."

"I trust you, Mr. Fordley, of course!" said Naggs, rather hurriedly.

He had appeared to be reluctant to take the envelope out of his pocket, but he did so now, mentally deciding that he was on the safe side. He was a more

powerful man than Fordley, and if the latter attempted any treachery, Naggs would be able to deal with him.

The rascal took the envelope from his pocket, and passed it across the table. Mr. Fordley opened the flap, and then removed the contents. He was greatly interested, and he examined the plans intently. He gave them so much attention, in fact, that Naggs became somewhat impatient. Minute after minute passed, and still Fordley made no remark. He was examining those wonderful plans of Dick Goodwin's.

"Well, sir?" said Naggs at last.

"Yes, Naggs—yes," said Mr. Fordley. "We will go into the business in a moment or two. Man alive! This machine is wonderful—positively wonderful! I can hardly credit that it has been designed by a boy!"

"He seems to be a clever kid, sir!"

"Clever!" echoed the mill-owner. "I can assure you, Naggs, that this boy is a genius! He has solved a problem that has been worrying the experts for years. This machine, when built, will put every other machine out of the market. It is positively the most wonderful instrument of its type that has ever been evolved. It will mean a fortune for the man who exploits this invention!"

"So I understand, sir," said Naggs. "That is why you are agreeable to pay me a good price."

Mr. Fordley looked across the table.

"Exactly, Naggs!" he said. "You have got those plans for me, and I am going to pay you well. But you must not overlook the fact that I am taking a good deal of risk in this affair. However, I think we are fairly safe now, and we will discuss——"

Ting-ting-ting!

The front door bell rang loudly. The bell itself was in the kitchen, just off the apartment where the two men were sitting. They started up, looking at one another in rather a peculiar fashion. Mr. Fordley went pale, and Naggs set his teeth.

What was the meaning of this interruption?

"Good heavens!" panted Fordley. "Who—who is that?"

"I don't know, sir—I can't think!" said Naggs. "We are expecting nobody, and——"

"Go to the door at once—go and see who it is!" said Fordley. "If the police have come, shout a warning—I may pos-

sibly be able to get away at the rear. Hurry, Naggs—but wait! I will come with you. I will be in the front room, and watch from behind a curtain. I do not want to be trapped!"

Both the men were in a considerable state of agitation. This sudden interruption was unexpected. Who could the caller be? At any ordinary time both Naggs and Fordley would have thought nothing of a chance ring at the bell, but at the present moment, and with guilty consciences to worry them, they were both exceedingly troubled.

Mr. Naggs passed out of the room, and went along to the front door. Mr. Fordley followed him, but took up his position in the little hall, close behind a curtain. From there he could see who the caller was, and would be able to get away quickly, if necessary.

Mr. Naggs opened the door, and he instinctively clenched his fists. If capture was coming Naggs fully intended putting up a fight before being taken.

And Naggs found himself looking upon a curious specimen of humanity. He stood upon the doorstep, ragged and dirty, a rather pitiful figure.

The man was a tramp, obviously. His clothing was torn, patched, and repaired in almost every garment. His boots were gaping, and they were secured by pieces of string. His head was adorned by a dilapidated old trilby hat, the brim of which was parting company from the crown.

And under the brim of the hat there could be seen a grimy, unshaven face. He was a gentleman of the road, and he looked up at Mr. Naggs with an appealing light in his eyes.

"Beg pardon, sir——" he began.

"What the deuce do you want?" demanded Mr. Naggs angrily.

He was relieved to find that the visitor was no more harmful than that. At the same time he was angry for being put into a flutter by a mere tramp. He glared at the harmless scarecrow rather furiously.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I'd welcome a glass of water," said the tramp. "It's dry work—walkin' along the roads, sir. I ain't askin' for beer or money—or grub. All I want is a glass of water, if you'll be so kind as to let me have it!"

"Go away!" said Naggs curtly.

"Only a glass of water, sir——"

"You won't get any water here,"

snapped Mr. Naggs, preparing to close the door. "There are some other cottages further down the road—they will give you water, perhaps. I haven't got time to attend to you now. Besides, the well here is out of order!"

"Only just a cupful, sir——"

Slam!

The door closed with a bang, and the tramp stood on the step, looking at the panels of the door in a somewhat disappointed attitude. Then, without wasting a moment, he seized the knocker, and gave a sharp rat-tat. At the same time he pushed the electric-bell button.

Almost at once the door opened again.

"Confound you!" snapped Mr. Naggs. "What the deuce do you think you're playing at?"

"Only a glass of water, sir!" protested the tramp. "It don't matter if it's dirty. I'm thirsty, sir! There ain't any other cottages for a long way——"

"I told you to go away from this house, and if you don't go quickly, I'll throw you into the road!" exclaimed Mr. Naggs hotly. "And if you ring this bell again, I'll——"

"No offence meant, sir," said the tramp apologetically. "I'm a poor, harmless feller. Mebbe you can spare me a cup of water, sir? I ain't askin' for money, or grub, or beer!"

Mr. Naggs drew a deep breath.

"I'll give you just two seconds to get off that doorstep!" he snapped. "I've had just enough of your nonsense, my man, and I'm not going to stand any more."

The tramp shook his head.

"All right, sir—I beg your pardon," he said humbly. "But I thought as how good, honest people wouldn't mind obligin' a poor feller with a glass of water. It seems I was wrong. I'm very sorry, sir."

He turned away, and as he did so, Mr. Naggs suddenly had an idea—an idea which rather startled him. He made up his mind on the instant.

"All right—hold on a minute!" he said quickly.

The tramp turned.

"Beg pardon, sir?" he exclaimed.

"Come here!"

The tramp stepped on to the door step, and as he did so Mr. Naggs reached out a hand, and pulled the dilapidated hat from the tramp's head. Then, quick as a flash, Mr. Naggs

grasped the man's hair, and gave a sharp and vigorous tug.

"Ow!" gasped the tramp. "Lumme, guv'nor! What the thunder——"

Mr. Naggs suddenly released his hold, and there was an expression of relief in his eyes. He looked into the tramp's face searchingly.

"Only a joke, my man," he exclaimed. "Look here, I can't stop to give you any water now, but here's half-a-crown, if it's any good to you."

The tramp's eyes opened wide.

"Thank you kindly, sir!" he said eagerly. "You're a real gent, sir!"

He turned away, walked down the path, and when he reached the gate he raised his dilapidated hat, and then went on his way. Mr. Naggs nodded, and closed the door. The very instant he did so, Mr. Fordley came hurrying along the passage from his hiding place.

"What the deuce did you want to waste all that time for, Naggs?" he demanded angrily. "Who was the fellow, anyhow?"

"Only a tramp, sir——"

"A tramp," snapped Mr. Fordley. "You ought to have got rid of him at once, and instead of that, you kept him hanging about all this time. What on earth were you thinking about, man?"

"Well, I'm cautious, sir," explained Mr. Naggs. "At first I only wanted to get rid of the fellow—he was so persistent asking for a glass of water."

"You ought to have shut the door in his face!"

"I did—at first," replied Mr. Naggs. "But, as you know, sir, he rang the bell again. And then something suddenly struck me."

"What was it?"

"Well, sir, I just wondered if the tramp was a 'tec in disguise——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Fordley.

"But I don't think he is," added Mr. Naggs, with a chuckle.

"How do you know—how can you be sure?" demanded the other huskily.

"Man alive! That fellow may be a Scotland Yard man, or even Nelson Lee himself. I've heard that Lee is wonderful when it comes to disguises——"

"He's a bit of a marvel, sir," said Mr. Naggs. "That's why I kept that tramp waiting, so that I could make sure. But when I pulled at his hair, I was quite certain. His hair is coarse,

reddish stuff, and there's a thick stubble on his chin. He's a genuine tramp, right enough, Mr. Fordley. There's no need for us to worry now.'

The mill-owner breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "It's just as well you made sure, Naggs. Well, come along, we will get back into the rear room. I do not intend to remain here a moment longer than is necessary. We will get this business over at once."

"Good enough, sir," said Mr. Naggs. "Nothing will suit me better!"

They passed along the little passage, and re-entered the room at the rear of the house. Then they took their seats at opposite sides of the table, and faced one another. Mr. Fordley withdrew the plans from his pocket, and once more spread them out on the table in front of him.

"Yes, Naggs, these plans are extraordinary," he exclaimed. "I do not pretend to understand how a boy of fifteen could have evolved the intricate mechanism of this machine. I am more than pleased that I commissioned you to obtain these documents from Goodwin's son."

"It's been a rare trouble to get them, sir," said Naggs. "I had two men helping me all the while, and one of them—Colmore—got nabbed the other day. He's in prison now, or, at least, in the police-station awaiting his trial. I've been pretty near being copped myself, so I reckon it's worth a pretty decent sum to you!"

Mr. Fordley nodded.

"You will not have any cause to grumble at the price I will pay you, Naggs," he said. "When I get what I want I pay well. You are quite sure that these are the original plans."

"Quite sure, sir!"

"And there are no copies in existence?"

"Not to my knowledge, Mr. Fordley."

"Well, it makes little difference, in either direction," said the mill-owner. "I shall produce these plans as my own when a short space of time has passed. I shall have them patented, then I can snap my fingers at Goodwin. He will never be able to prove that this invention is really his son's. He will know that such is the case, of course. But it will be quite impossible for him to bring any evidence against me."

"Of course it will, sir," said Mr. Naggs. "You're as safe as houses. There's no need for you to worry about anything, sir."

"Well, Naggs, we'll get to business at once, without any beating about the bush," said Mr. Fordley. "I am willing to pay you the sum of eight thousand pounds for your services in this matter. Will that be satisfactory?"

Mr. Naggs looked straight across the table at the other.

"Eight thousand pounds was the agreed upon figure, sir," he said. "But, under the circumstances, I think that a little larger sum will meet the case. I had far more trouble than I expected I should have, and a good deal of expense, too. I think it's worth more than eight thousand, Mr. Fordley."

"Well, I don't want to haggle with you, Naggs," said the mill-owner. "We will say nine thousand——"

"Hold on, sir!" interrupted Mr. Naggs. "That's uneven money. I don't care for uneven money, so what about making it ten thousand? That seems more like the figure, to my way of thinking."

"Look here, Naggs, I didn't think you were a grasping man of this sort," said Fordley irritably. "As it happens, I have brought ten thousand with me. I am not going to argue, and we shall not quarrel. I will pay you ten thousand, as you wish."

"Done!" said Mr. Naggs, his eyes gleaming.

"Well, don't forget, Naggs, that this is the one and only payment," said Fordley. "If you come to me later on, in a month or two, and expect to obtain a further sum, you will be disappointed. You will be unable to blackmail me, either, because you will have not one atom of proof. I want you to thoroughly understand that now. I pay you ten thousand pounds, and that settles the deal completely."

"Quite right, sir," said Naggs. "I understand that perfectly. And I'm not the kind of man to attempt blackmail—it's rather too risky, to my way of thinking. Ten thousand settles the deal, as you say."

But, even while Naggs was saying these words, his thoughts were quite different. For, inwardly, Mr. Naggs was assuring himself he was on velvet. After a respectable interval, he would be able to go to Fordley again, and he

would extract more money from the mill-owner. For Mr. Fordley would be unable to refuse. Naggs knew this well enough. He was cunning, and he intended to get all he could.

Naggs had not really expected to receive the extra two thousand. But it was evident that Mr. Fordley had prepared for such a demand. For he had brought ten thousand pounds with him, in cash.

It was a good stroke of business for him. He would give Naggs ten thousand pounds for obtaining the plans, and Fordley would make a fortune out of the invention. The mill-owner had the money behind him in order to exploit the new machine. And, before many months had elapsed, he would be raking in the profits, hand over fist.

So he regarded this ten thousand as a very excellent investment. And it gave Fordley keen satisfaction to know that he would be delivering a death blow to Mr. Richard Goodwin.

But, although the transaction between Mr. Fordley and Mr. Naggs was nearly completed, it was somewhat unwise of them to take things for granted.

There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.



CHAPTER III.

NELSON LEE MAKES HIS PLANS.

ANDREWS drove sedately and steadily.

He was Mr. Fordley's chauffeur, and he was carrying out the instructions which his employer had given him.

Upon reaching Brentlowe Fordley had got rid of the chauffeur at once. He had no desire to have his car waiting about outside a small house, while he and Naggs were coming to terms.

So he had sent Andrews off to the nearest town, in order to obtain a supply of petrol. The man would be absent just about long enough to enable Mr. Fordley to complete his arrangements with Naggs.

Andrews appeared to be in no hurry.

He drove very easily along the quiet country road, and at length he arrived in the town. He certainly went to a garage and obtained a supply of petrol. But instead of returning straight to

Brentlowe, he occupied himself in another manner.

There was nothing very remarkable about this. Andrews knew well enough that it would be useless to turn in to Brentlowe now, Mr. Fordley would not be ready. And the chauffeur, evidently had ideas of his own.

From the garage he drove his car along the High Street until he pulled up outside a grey stone building—a somewhat forbidding-looking place, with a few notices posted up outside the door. It was, in short, the police station.

Andrews stopped his engine, and got down from the driving-seat. Then he passed into the police station, and was soon talking to a constable.

"I should like to have a few words with the inspector," said Andrews. "Is he anywhere handy?"

"Yes, the inspector is in the charge-room, if you want him," said the constable. "What's wrong?"

"I would prefer to see the inspector," said Andrews.

A minute or two later Mr. Fordley's chauffeur was ushered into the presence of Inspector Hammond. This individual was a short, thick-set man, with close-cropped hair, and a bristling moustache. He looked a somewhat aggressive person, and he did not bestow a very kindly glance upon the chauffeur as he entered.

"Well, my man, what is it?" asked the inspector. "I'm busy at the moment, and I should like you to be quick!"

Andrews nodded.

"As a matter of fact, Inspector Hammond, I shall detain you for some little time," he exclaimed calmly. "My business is of considerable importance, and I must request you to give me your full and complete attention."

"Oh, indeed!" said the inspector glaring. "And who the deuce do you happen to be?"

Andrews smiled slightly, felt in his waistcoat pocket, and produced a small slip of pasteboard. He handed it to the constable, who glanced at it before passing it on to Inspector Hammond. The constable glanced twice, and his second look was rather a startled one.

"H'm! What's this?" growled the inspector, taking the card. "What's the good of a tongue if you can't use it? I didn't ask you for your card—Why, what—Good gracious!"

Inspector Hammond stared at the slip of pasteboard in a curious, sceptical manner. He glanced up at Andrews, and then stared at the card again. Finally, he laid the little object on the desk in front of him, and leaned forward.

"Now, my friend, what's the game?" he inquired grimly.

"I think you have read the name—"

"I have read it, and it is like your infernal impudence to present me with such a card!" snapped the inspector.

"What's the idea of it, my man?"

"You do not seem to grasp—"

"Look here, I don't want any nonsense!" interrupted the inspector sharply. "And if you think you can palm yourself off as Mr. Nelson Lee, you have made a big mistake. Who are you? A chauffeur, by all appearances—and you had better be sharp about your explanation. I want to know what you mean by giving me this card?"

Andrews shrugged his shoulders.

"I simply thought you might be interested, Inspector Hammond," he replied.

"Interested!" spluttered the inspector. "Who are you? What is your real name?"

"You are already aware of my real name," said the chauffeur.

"Nonsense! Your name has not been mentioned—"

"It is before you on the desk at this moment!" interrupted Andrews calmly. "Really, Inspector Hammond, you do not seem to grasp the position."

The inspector glared.

"Are you attempting to make me believe that you are Mr. Nelson Lee?" he demanded curtly.

"I am Mr. Nelson Lee!" said the chauffeur.

"You are—" The inspector breathed hard. "Well, of all the impudence! If you are not careful, my friend, I shall detain you here while I make inquiries. I have never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Nelson Lee personally, but I have seen his photograph on several occasions. You do not resemble him in the slightest degree—"

"Which is not at all surprising, considering I am wearing a slight disguise," interrupted the visitor. "Come, inspector, you must surely realise that you have made a mistake! I have presented you with my card, and I claim your full attention. I have come to you on a

matter of great importance, and I require your co-operation and help."

The inspector stared.

"But, good gracious!" he ejaculated. "I can't believe—"

However, after another three or four minutes had elapsed, Inspector Hammond did believe—he could do nothing else. And the worthy inspector was rather startled. His visitor—this rather common-looking chauffeur—was really no less a person than Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated crime investigator of Gray's Inn Road—and St. Frank's. It was hardly to be wondered at that Inspector Hammond was taken off his balance for a moment or two.

And there was no deception about it.

"Andrews" was, indeed, Nelson Lee himself. The famous schoolmaster-detective had been extremely busy, and now he was feeling very satisfied with himself, for he knew that all his plans had worked out well, and that he was in a position to catch Mr. William Fordley red-handed. Nelson Lee did not worry so much about Naggs. Naggs, after all, was only a tool of the greater villain. Fordley was the man whom Lee wanted to secure.

It did not take Nelson Lee long to explain matters to Inspector Hammond. It was necessary that he should explain, since he required help from the police. And the inspector, although a somewhat aggressive individual, was only too pleased to fall in with Nelson Lee's plans, when he learned of them. There would be some credit for Hammond himself in this job, and he was quite delighted at the prospect.

"So you see, inspector, I was compelled to act in a decisive way, Nelson Lee concluded. "I knew that Naggs had these plans in his possession, and I knew also that he would arrange a meeting with Fordley at the first opportunity. Reasoning matters out, I came to the conclusion that the pair would not meet in Oldham itself, but would, in all probability, go some little distance afield. And I came to the further conclusion that Fordley would use his motor-car."

"What made you think that, Mr. Lee?" asked the inspector.

"It is far easier to prove an alibi," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "As events turned out, my deductions were not far wrong. It was quite a simple matter for me to arrange affairs with Fordley's own chauffeur."

"I take it that you are impersonating the man?" asked the inspector.

"Not at all."

"But Fordley—does he not suspect?" asked Hammond.

"I think that Fordley is quite pleased with the arrangement," said Nelson Lee. "You see, his own chauffeur sent him round a message saying that he was unwell, and requested that I, who posed as his friend, should take his place for the time being. It was simply a chance, and it was successful. I am exceedingly pleased that I decided upon this form of action."

"But why should Fordley be pleased about it?" asked the inspector.

"I fancy he is pleased because I am not his regular man," said Nelson Lee. "Knowing nothing of Fordley's usual movements, I am not likely to question his procedure of to-day. In any case, Fordley did not suspect the truth, and that is the main thing. I know for a positive fact that Fordley is now in Brentlowe, discussing terms with Naggs. And they have the plans with them. It is only necessary for us to go immediately to this house, break in, and arrest the two men red-handed. That is what I have been working for, and I am extremely pleased that we shall be able to finish the affair without any further delay."

"And you require my help?"

"I do!" said Nelson Lee. "I want at least four police officers, inspector. I should like you to come yourself also. These plans have been stolen from Mr. Goodwin, and Naggs and Fordley have much to answer for. I can supply you with all the evidence necessary to convict the two rascals. And there must be no delay—we must start off as soon as ever we possibly can."

"Very well, Mr. Lee, we will waste no time," said Inspector Hammond briskly. "I will have the men ready for you within five minutes."

"Good!"

The inspector was as good as his word. Exactly five minutes later the motor-car started off, carrying Nelson Lee, Hammond, and four police officers.

And, with Nelson Lee at the wheel of the car, the ground was soon covered. Lee drove quickly, for he was now rather anxious. He did not want Naggs to go before he arrived on the scene. Lee was

most anxious to capture the two men together.

But, before reaching Brentlowe, a certain incident occurred—an incident which was satisfactory to all parties concerned.

As Nelson Lee drove the car at high speed, he became aware of the fact that another car was travelling along in front, also going in the direction of Brentlowe. Nelson Lee and the police were overtaking this car rapidly, and the great detective smiled grimly to himself as he recognised several forms in the other car. He sounded his hooter, and then opened the throttle wider. He simply roared alongside the other car, and then drew ahead. After that he applied his brakes and came to a halt.

"Anything the matter, Mr. Lee?" inquired Inspector Hammond.

"No; but I should like to have a word with these good people," said Nelson Lee.

He turned round, and held up his hand. The other car, which was just passing, was brought to a standstill. Of course, it contained Mr. Goodwin's party, including myself.

I looked at the police, and I looked at the driver of the car, without recognising him. But I was decidedly curious.

"By gum!" said Mr. Goodwin. "I thought we were going too fast—I did that!"

"Oh, we haven't been pulled up for speed, sir!" I grinned. "I believe these policemen have something to do with Fordley and Naggs. Anyhow, we shall know in a minute or two."

"Well, Nipper, what is the idea of this?" inquired Nelson Lee. "Are you going to Brentlowe, too?"

I stared.

"Why, great Scott!" I shouted. "It's you, guv'nor!"

"Precisely!"

The chauffeur nodded and smiled.

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "This is simply amazin', dear old boys!"

I was out of the car in a second, and I dashed across to the other motor. I jumped on the step, and stared into Nelson Lee's face.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I exclaimed. "I didn't know you, sir! It's a jolly fine disguise! But what does it mean?"

Where are you off to, sir? Why are you taking the police with you?"

"I do not think it necessary for me to go into very precise details at the moment, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "This car belongs to Fordley, and I am acting as his chauffeur at the present moment. I am just taking him a few visitors, although I am afraid that Mr. Fordley will not welcome them."

I grinned.

"Well, hardly, sir!" I said. "It's a jolly good thing we met you. We're off to Brentlowe, too. And we might have butted in where we weren't wanted. It seems that all roads lead in the same direction—to this part of Brentlowe."

"How did you know about it, Nipper?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Why, Church and McClure told us," I replied. "Handforth is there now—a prisoner!"

"That's right, sir!" put in McClure quickly. "We all followed Naggs to this house, and Handy was a bit too rash. He was pulled in all of a sudden, and we didn't see any more of him. I expect he's being held a captive by Naggs and that other rotter!"

"Handforth?" echoed Nelson Lee curiously.

"Yes, sir."

"But what is Handforth doing up here, in Lancashire?"

"He came up to investigate this case, sir," grinned Church. "He brought us with him, although we didn't want to come. You see, sir, we got leave from St. Frank's for a couple of days, to go to London to see Handforth's uncle. Handy persuaded his uncle to let us come along here!"

Nelson Lee smiled for a moment.

"I am afraid that Handforth is irrepressible," he remarked. "Well, it is just as well we met one another. We have joined forces, and we shall be able to go along to this house in Brentlowe in a body. I do not think there will be much chance of Naggs and Fordley escaping."

We were extremely pleased to see Nelson Lee, of course—that goes without saying—for now we knew why he had been absent; we knew what he had been doing. And when he recommenced the journey, we all had the conviction that the end of this affair was within sight.

The climax, in fact, was at hand.

CHAPTER IV.

ALONE HE DID IT!

MR. WILLIAM FORDLEY pushed a bundle of notes across the table.

"Count them, Naggs," he said. "I think you will find them correct."

Mr. Naggs nodded, and there was a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes as he handled the crisp, crackling bank notes. This was the moment he had been waiting for—this was the moment he had dreamed of. He was being paid for the trouble he had taken, and he was being paid handsomely. And it was to be the first of many payments—Naggs was quite certain of this in his own mind. Mr. Fordley, however, fondly imagined that this ten thousand pounds would be the one and only payment.

It was simply a question of a difference of opinion.

Naggs looked up, after he had counted the notes.

"Yes, quite correct, Mr. Fordley," he said. "Ten thousand exactly."

Naggs folded up the notes, and stowed them into his pocket.

"Good!" he went on. "There's no signing to do, of course?"

"Not a word," replied Mr. Fordley. "We cannot afford to take any risks like that, Naggs. Our original agreement was verbal, and this settlement is verbal. We should be taking an unnecessary risk in putting anything into writing. The money is yours, and the plans are mine. I only trust that everything will be all right."

"How can it be otherwise, sir?"

Mr. Fordley shook his head.

"I don't know," he replied; "but I am rather worried, Naggs."

"Worried?"

"Yes."

"But why, sir?"

"I do not feel exactly comfortable

"There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be absolutely settled in mind, sir," said Mr. Naggs. "I thought we had settled that. For the life of me I can't understand why you should be worried."

"I am not exactly worried, Naggs," said Fordley. "But I must be careful—very careful. If there is any possibility of this matter being found out—"

"But there is no possibility, sir—not the slightest," said Mr. Naggs, quite comfortable in the possession of these notes. "Goodwin's plans are unprotected: they have not even been patented or registered. There is not the slightest atom of evidence to show that they have passed into your possession, and, later on, you can produce the invention as your own."

"That is my intention," said Fordley. "But I am worrying about what might happen in the meantime."

Mr. Naggs laughed.

"Nothing can happen, sir," he said. "What you must do, if you care to take my advice, sir, is to copy the originals as quickly and as quietly as you can. Then, when you have the copies, you can destroy those papers which are now in your pocket. Goodwin and the boy will know the truth, but they can prove absolutely nothing, and it will be an easy matter for you to put up a bluff. A man in your position can do that sort of thing easily."

"Yes, I suppose it will be all right, Naggs," said Mr. Fordley. "In any case, the transaction is settled, and we will let it stand at that. The chief danger, of course, has been the possibility of us being captured with the original plans in our possession. If the police came at this moment, for example, it would be decidedly awkward, for we should be caught red-handed."

Mr. Naggs laughed again.

"The police!" he said contemptuously. "What do the police know? Why, we have even got the better of Mr. Nelson Lee himself. There is not the slightest fear of our being caught, and, after we have parted, and you have placed those plans safely away, everything will be rosy. I tell you, Mr. Fordley, it is impossible for either of us to get into any trouble."

Mr. Naggs was full of confidence, but in his own heart he did not think that everything was quite so rosy as he said. But he did not care now; he had the money, and he intended clearing right out of the district—out of the country, if possible. It would then be up to Mr. Fordley to face the consequences alone, for, somehow or other, Naggs had an idea that there would be some consequences. But he had got his money, and he didn't care. If Mr. Fordley got into trouble—well, that would be his own funeral!"

Fordley had a last look at the plans before placing them finally in his pocket. He was quite delighted with them, for he had seen at the outset that he had not paid his money for nothing. Dick Goodwin's invention was a wonderful one.

"There are immense possibilities in this machine, Naggs," said the mill-owner. "It will create a sensation when it is produced. And, although Goodwin will know the truth, I shall be able to snap my fingers in his face. It will be quite delightful. Even if the fellow brings an action against me, it will be futile; I have the upper hand."

Naggs nodded.

"You have, sir," he agreed. "Well, I reckon we deserve this success, after all the trouble we have taken."

The two men sat for some moments while Fordley was looking at the plans. Naggs produced a packet of cigarettes, and they both lit up. Then Fordley folded the plans and replaced them in an envelope.

"You are quite sure, Naggs, that nobody knows of this visit of yours?" he asked.

"Not a soul, sir," replied Naggs. "Who do you think I should tell? I'm not quite a mug!"

"It is impossible to be too cautious," said Fordley. "This meeting of ours is unknown to a soul; but I cannot help worrying somewhat over that boy."

"Young Goodwin?"

"No, no!" said Fordley irritably. "I mean that boy who was here——"

"Oh, you needn't concern yourself about him, sir," said Mr. Naggs. "I spoofed him completely, and he's gone away to Oldham——"

"Has he?"

Mr. Naggs and Mr. Fordley stared violently.

The voice came from somewhere beneath—apparently near the floor. It was the voice of Handforth! Just for a moment Naggs thought that his ears were deceiving him—that they had played a trick with him. And Fordley had gone as pale as a sheet. He sat in his chair, clutching at the edge of the table. Just for one brief second there was a tense silence; then everything became noisy and confused. Without the slightest warning the table heaved up from the floor! It rose in front of the eyes of the startled men, then it overturned with a crash, right on the top

of Mr. Naggs, who was sent flying backwards, his chair tipping up.

Mr. Naggs went over on the floor, and the table fell upon him, half pinning him down. The rascal was momentarily stunned by the shock, and his lighted cigarette entered his mouth and nearly choked him.

Meanwhile, Mr. Fordley staggered back, breathing hard. From beneath the table had appeared Edward Oswald Handforth! And the junior was looking grim and determined; his fists were clenched, and there was a warlike light in his eyes.

"Now then, you rotters," shouted Handforth thickly, "I'm going to capture you—the pair! I've got you red-handed—I've heard everything! And when I hand you over to the police, you'll each be shoved into penal servitude for about ten years!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Fordley. "You—you young fool!"

Crash!

Out came Handforth's fist, and it landed fairly and squarely upon Fordley's nose. The mill-owner went over backwards with a tremendous howl. That punch had been a terrific one, and the man was dazed.

At the same second Handforth snatched the plans, which had still been held in Fordley's hand. In a moment Handforth placed those plans in his own pocket. He felt more secure then; he felt a glow of triumph running through his veins. This was what he had waited for, this capture. Alone he was dealing with these two rascals—alone he was finishing up the whole case!

But, if Handforth thought the fight was over, he was mistaken. Certainly he was not disappointed when the two men showed signs of a fresh attack, for Handforth was a warlike individual, and nothing pleased him better than a terrific fight. He was certainly going to have his heart's content on this occasion!

"You—you young hound!" snarled Fordley, white with rage and fear.

"I know all about it, you scoundrels!" shouted Handforth. "I know what your game is; I've heard everything!"

"By thunder!" snarled Mr. Naggs.

"Everything!" repeated Handforth. "And I've got the plans, and I'm going to keep them! They belong to Dick Goodwin, and I'm going to make it my duty to hand them back to him! You

rotters! You thieves! You burglars! You thought you were going to succeed, but you reckoned without me!"

By this time Naggs had got to his feet, rather dizzy and dazed, but very dangerous. He appeared to be incapable of any action, but suddenly, and without any warning, he seized an ornament from the mantelpiece and hurled it with all his strength at Handforth's head.

Whiz-z-z!

The ornament, a heavy pottery affair, just scraped Handforth's head by a fraction of an inch. It crashed into the wall and fell in a thousand pieces.

"You — you murderous rotter!" roared Handforth furiously.

He dashed forward, and the next moment he was fighting with Naggs, hammer and tongs. The man was pretty lively now, and he succeeded in getting in one or two punches which made Handforth feel rather queer. But he was by no means beaten.

Biff! Slam! Crash!

Again and again his blows went home, and then, once more, Naggs fell to the floor. By this time, however, Fordley had got to his feet, and he attacked Handforth, from behind.

It would have gone hard with the St. Frank's junior if he had not turned just in the nick of time. He twisted round, and found himself confronted by Fordley; but the man's hands were already outstretched, and they gripped Handforth's throat.

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth.

He gurgled and struggled, and the grip grew tighter and tighter. Then at last, mainly by chance, one of Handforth's fists crashed into Fordley's face.

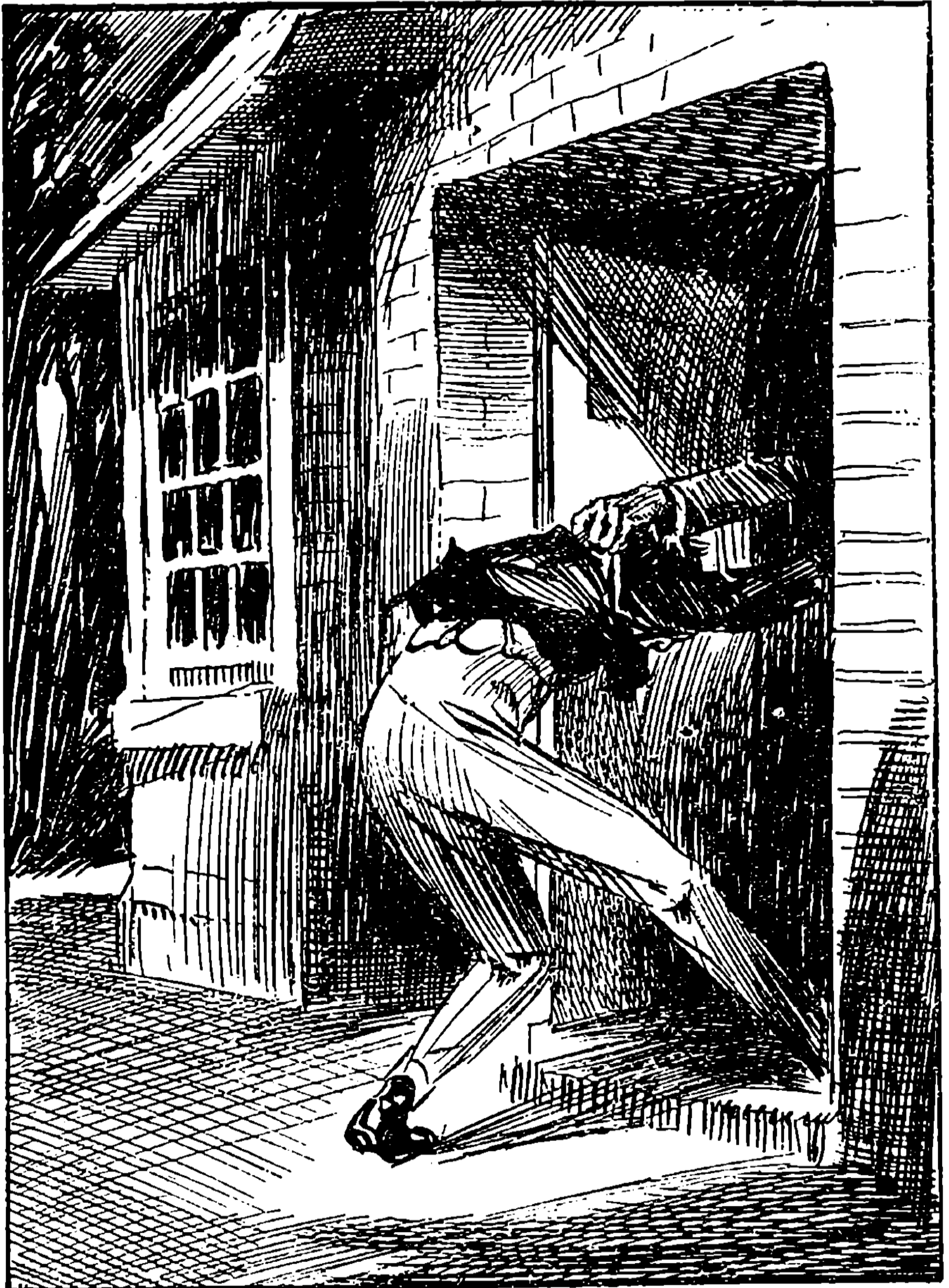
With a wild howl, the man staggered back, and Handforth was released.

"So—so that's the game, is it?" gasped Handforth. "By George, I'll show you! I'll teach you to play these dirty tricks on me!"

And then Edward Oswald let himself go.

Both men were on their feet now, and they were getting ready to attack the youngster again, but before they could actually do so, Handforth sailed in. He did so with a vengeance.

He simply let himself go, and he gave Naggs and Fordley a tremendous time. Single-handed, Handforth was thrashing these two men as they had never been thrashed before. The junior was worked up to a tremendous pitch of excitement



"Whoa! What the dickens—." Handforth uttered that remark—and he did so while he was being suddenly hauled into the side doorway of that small house just outside Brentlowe.

and anger, and he was not at all particular about his blows.

Handforth was enormously strong, and his punches were famous for their effectiveness. Try as they would, neither Naggs nor Fordley could avoid those blows.

Bang! Crash! Thud! Biff!

A perfect hail of thuds descended upon the two men. Handforth was like a whirlwind. His arms were sailing about in a manner which made it almost impossible to avoid them, and Naggs and Fordley had been driven into a corner of the room. And there, fighting with every ounce of his strength, was Handforth, battering the pair about until they were dazed and helpless.

Every one of his blows went home. Fordley was the first to give in. With one black eye, and with two of his front teeth knocked out, the mill-owner sank to the floor, moaning. He was beaten to the wide—he was knocked out of time.

Naggs held on a little longer, in spite of numerous injuries, including two black eyes. He was vicious and he was desperate. He fought like a madman, kicking and biting if he could get the chance; but Handforth was prepared, and he kept the rascal at arm's length.

With a perfect snarl of fury, Naggs gathered all his remaining strength together, and simply hurled himself at Handforth. It was a fatal move on his part.

Handforth was ready, and he held his fists in such a position that Naggs rammed into them with the point of his jaw.

Crash!

It was rather a sickening sound, and Naggs received an uppercut which laid him out as flat as a pancake. He lay on the floor, groaning painfully; he was beaten to a standstill.

And Handforth stood there, panting hard, only slightly marked, and triumphant.

Alone he had done this thing!

Even Handforth himself could hardly realise it—it seemed too big, too amazing. But it was true. Handforth, of the Remove, had captured these two criminals. They were helpless at his feet, and he had not the slightest intention of allowing them to go. They were his prisoners, and he would keep them.

"You thought I was a mug, didn't you?" panted Handforth, glad of an

opportunity of triumphing over his enemies. "But I'm not quite such a kid. Mr. Naggs! I'm not quite such an ass! You thought you had spoofed me, but you didn't!"

"Hang you!" snarled Naggs weakly.

"You're the chap who ought to be hung!" said Handforth. "Unfortunately, that won't happen to you; but you'll get years and years of penal servitude. You've got a lot to answer for, you scoundrel! You tried to kill Dick Goodwin by binding him to that old lighthouse! You kidnapped Goodwin's pater, and you stole those plans. My only hat! There's a whole list of convictions against you!"

"You—you young fool!" snarled Naggs. "If you think you'll get away from this house, you've made a mistake! You can't prove anything against us—you can't do anything——"

"Oh, can't I?" interrupted Handforth grimly. "We'll see about that, you brutes! I've heard everything—I know all the details! And I dare say you're wondering how I got under that table?"

"I knew what it would be!" moaned Fordley. "I knew that boy was a spy. Naggs! He was here all the time, and you told me that you'd sent him away——"

"I did send him away!" snapped Naggs hoarsely.

"Precisely!" said Handforth. "You sent me away, but I didn't go far. And I'll tell you why, Naggs. I saw a scar on your finger, and I knew jolly well that that scar wasn't on Mr. Lee's finger! You diddled me about the voice—I'll admit that. I thought you were Mr. Lee for the moment, but not for long. So I made my plans!"

"A clever kid, ain't you?" sneered Naggs viciously.

"Well, I'm not the chap to boast, but I think I've been pretty smart this time!" said Handforth modestly. "I arranged with a tramp to come to your front door, and keep you busy."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Fordley.

"I gave the chap strict orders to keep you at the door for at least three minutes," went on Handforth, "and while he was doing that, I slipped round to the back, and got in by a window. It didn't take me more than ten seconds to get under that table, and I was under it for over half an hour. I heard all your plans—I heard everything! You haven't

got a leg to stand on, and when you're handed over to the police, you'll be——"

"You mad young fool!" shouted Naggs furiously. "Do you think you're going to hand us over to the police? Do you think you'll be able to prove anything? By thunder, I'll—I'll——"

"You'll lay down again!" said Handforth grimly.

Crash!

Just as Naggs was getting to his feet, Handforth landed another punch, and Naggs, with a hoarse cry, tottered over again, holding his nose with both hands. And then Fordley tried to get up a minute later, but he was treated in exactly the same way. Handforth had the pair down, and there was very little chance of their getting up again. Bruised and battered as they were, they had practically no fight left. And Handforth was full of fight; he was simply bursting to get busy again.

"Well, why don't you get up?" he demanded defiantly. "Why don't you attack me? Go on—I don't mind! I'm waiting to knock you down again!"

"You—you infernal young hound!" rasped out Mr. Naggs.

Biff!

"That's for being insulting!" said Handforth, as he tapped Mr. Naggs on the chin. "I don't allow insults!"

The tap had been rather a heavy one, for Naggs went over backwards, and his head struck the floor with a terrific bang. Fordley swore viciously, and a moment later he wished he hadn't, for Handforth treated him in exactly the same way as he had treated Naggs. The junior had everything his own way. Both the men were severely battered, and they were unable to withstand Handforth's brute strength, for the junior was tremendously brawny, and his muscles were highly developed. In the art of punching, Handforth was a real champion.

The leader of Study D never paid much attention to science; he relied upon brute strength to defeat his enemies. When he had a fight he simply sailed in, quite careless of any blows that he might receive. Blows had very little effect upon Handforth; he was as hard as nails, and he could stand anything. So his main idea, when he had a scrap, was to charge in and do as much damage as he could in a short space of time.

On this occasion, certainly, he had excelled himself. Single-handed, he had beaten two full-grown men—two des-

perate men. Certainly Handforth had had the advantage to start with, and that made all the difference.

Under ordinary circumstances he would probably have failed; but now things were different. Handforth had been under the table, and he had taken both the men by surprise. Naggs, in fact, had been knocked out of time by the table itself, and at first Handforth had had only Fordley to deal with. The rest had been quite simple for him. And now it was quite impossible for either of the men to gain the upper hand.

And Edward Oswald Handforth stood now, with clenched fists, and with grim, determined eyes. He didn't exactly know what he should do now, but one thing was quite certain—neither Naggs nor Fordley would be able to escape. They were beaten; they were knocked out for good.

And Handforth had performed this amazing feat entirely off his own bat!

CHAPTER V.

ALL SERENE!

"THAT'S the house!" said McClure, pointing.

Our motor-car had just turned out of the main road, into the small side-lane a little way from Brentlowe, and there, standing by itself, was a small, rather old-fashioned house. We looked at it with interest.

"There's nothing particularly exciting about it, anyway," remarked Tommy Watson. "It looks just an ordinary common or garden house, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we find the birds flown when we arrive!"

"Dear old boy, you are frightfully cheerful—you are, really!" said Sir Montic.

"Well, there's no knowing!" said Watson. "These criminals have a way of slipping off, you know. And what's happened to poor old Handy? I'll bet he's put his foot in it somewhere! The clumsy ass is always getting into hot water!"

Church sniffed.

"And he thinks he's a detective!" he exclaimed, witheringly. "Well, if he's done anything worth twopence this afternoon, I'll eat my hat!"

"I'll eat my giddy boots!" said McClure. "Handy is about as good at

detective work as an inmate of Colney Hatch. I'll bet he's got himself into terrific trouble over this job!"

"Well, we shall soon know," I remarked. "There's going to be some excitement, I believe!"

By this time both the cars had arrived outside the house. Nelson Lee had advised Inspector Hammond what to do, and the inspector had wisely decided to follow this advice.

Two of the policemen, without the slightest delay, hurried round to the rear of the house. Nelson Lee and the inspector went to the front door, and hammered loudly upon it. Then, finding that the door was open—that is to say, unlocked—they marched in. By a piece of luck, I managed to get close behind, and followed them.

Nelson Lee glanced into the front room as they went by, but this apartment was empty. Then we passed down the passage with the inspector, and a moment later they stood in the doorway of the rear room—a kind of parlour.

And both men stared for a moment or two, rather astonished.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Nelson Lee softly.

"Well, upon my soul!" ejaculated Inspector Hammond. "What on earth is this?"

The spectacle within the rear apartment was somewhat peculiar.

Edward Oswald Handforth was there—there was not the slightest doubt on that point. Handforth stood in the centre of the room in his shirt sleeves. He was looking extremely warlike. He was somewhat knocked about, his hair tousled, but he was triumphant.

His collar was unfastened on one side, his necktie was streaming over his back. One eye showed some signs of becoming blackened, and blood was trickling down from the left corner of his mouth.

"Oh, you've come, then," said the warrior, glancing round somewhat carelessly. "Why, hallo, Mr. Lee! Glad you've arrived, sir. I've got your prisoners for you!"

"So I observe, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "You have done well, my lad!"

"Oh, it's nothing, sir," said Handforth. "Merely a trifle."

There was a world of condescension in his tone, and it was quite obvious that

Edward Oswald was suffering from an attack of swelled head already.

Nelson Lee glanced from Handforth to the corner of the room. And the famous detective could hardly prevent himself from smiling. For Mr. William Fordley and Mr. Walter Naggs were in a somewhat pitiable condition.

Both the scoundrels, far from being active, were decidedly incapable of action.

Fordley himself was sitting up, holding his head in both his hands. He did not seem to care what happened to him, and he was entirely uninterested in his surroundings.

Mr. Naggs on the other hand, was glaring round with a look of fury and fear in his eyes. It would be more exact to say, perhaps, in one eye, since one of Mr. Naggs' optical members was closed for repairs. It would be likely to remain closed for some little time.

His nose, somewhat large by nature, was now double its usual size and of a fiery red colour.

It was not difficult to guess that Mr. Naggs had been in very close contact with Handforth's fists.

"There are the two men, inspector," said Nelson Lee, crisply. "William Fordley and Walter Naggs. They are both implicated in this affair. No doubt if you search them you will find the plans, which are the rightful property of Mr. Goodwin and his son."

Fordley took the hands from his face, and he looked up in a stupid, startled fashion.

"Wha—what is the meaning of this outrage?" he demanded thickly. "How dare you break into this house like this? Go away at once. Where is your warrant for this intrusion?"

"I really think it will be just as well, Mr Fordley, if you refrain from bluffing," said Nelson Lee quietly. "There is no hope whatever for you now. You have been caught redhanded with Naggs, and the consequences will be serious."

The inspector blew his whistle sharply, and in a very few seconds the police were on the spot. Naggs and Fordley were dragged to their feet, and they were rapidly searched. And, of course, Dick Goodwin's plans were found immediately.

"I think, Mr. Lee, that it will be better if I take charge of this property

for the time being," said the inspector. "It will be necessary for the police to hold it until matters are somewhat straightened out."

"Quite right, Hammond," said Nelson Lee. "I should advise you to take your prisoners to the station without any delay. Later on Mr. Goodwin and myself will come along, and we will prefer the charge."

Meanwhile, Tommy Watson, who had heard nearly everything, had dashed into the hall, where Church, McClure and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were waiting. Watson was very excited.

"My only hat!" he shouted. "What do you think, you chaps?"

"Goodness knows!" said Church. "Is Handy dead?"

"No, you ass!"

"Has he been taken prisoner?"

"No. He has taken Fordley and Naggs prisoners," said Watson.

"What!"

"Eh!"

"Which!"

"It's about the most amazing thing I ever heard of," said Watson. "Handforth, single handed, has knocked those two chaps about in the most dreadful manner. They've got black eyes, swollen noses, thick ears, and all the rest of it! There's been a terrific scrap here, and Handforth has knocked both those scoundrels out!"

"Great Scott!"

"Begad!"

"My only topper!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said McClure.

"It—it can't be possible, you know! Handy has captured these two crooks single handed?"

"Yes."

"Oh, hold me up, somebody," said Church faintly. "It's too much for me all at once!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's staggering," I exclaimed. "We always thought that Handforth was a duffer—an absolute simpleton at these sort of things. But there's no doubt that he's covered himself with glory on this occasion. He was left alone in this house with these two men. And when we arrive, with a whole force of police, we find that we've got nothing to do. Handforth has made the capture in advance!"

"Dear old boys, it is amazin'—it is, really!" said Sir Montie. "It is the most astoundin' thing that I have ever

heard of, begad! I think it will be necessary for all you chaps to apologise to Handforth. He has turned up trumps, after all!"

"And have they found the plans—Dick Goodwin's plans?" asked Church.

"Yes, rather," replied Tommy Watson. "Fordley and Naggs were searched, but they couldn't find the plans on them. Handforth had them already. He'd taken charge of them!"

"My hat!"

"There'll be no holding him after this!" said Church, with a sigh. "He's had enough at any ordinary time, but, after this, he'll go simply dotty with pride. He'll be boasting about the place in the most insufferable manner!"

It was clear that Church knew all about Handforth's little weaknesses. And this prophecy was not very wide of the mark. Indeed, even now Handforth was showing some signs of what we might expect later on.

Acting under Nelson Lee's advice, Inspector Hammond lost no time in getting away with his prisoners. They took Fordley's own car, and conveyed the two prisoners straight away to the police station. And we were left alone with Handforth, the hero of the hour.

Nelson Lee was surprised, and he did not mind showing it. At the same time, he was extremely pleased with Handforth, and rather amused at the junior's triumphant tone.

Nelson Lee did not altogether blame Handforth for adopting this attitude. The Removite had done well, and he was quite aware of this fact.

"Good old Handy!" said McClure heartily. "My hat! You've done splendidly, old man!"

"Well, what did you expect?" said Handforth, staring.

"I—I— Oh, you see——"

"Didn't you think that I should bring off this coup?" asked Handforth. "You know what I am. You know that when I start on a thing I always finish it! I came here to arrest Naggs and Fordley. I came up to Lancashire because Mr. Lee had failed——"

"Shush, you ass!" said McClure.

"Eh?"

"Dry up, you ass!"

"If you call me an ass, Arnold McClure, I'll punch your nose through to the back of your head!" said Handforth aggressively. "I've put up with too much rot from you chaps in the past.

And I'm not going to put up with any more of it. Understand? You've never shown me the respect which is my due. You've got to show it now, or you'll know something!"

"Oh, my goodness," growled Church. "We shall be in for a fine time after this!"

"There's no need to go into arguments, my sons," I said soothingly. "Surely you don't want to do any more scrapping now, Handy."

"I'm ready to punch any fellow's nose who chooses to be cheeky!" replied Handforth promptly.

"Well, I sha'n't be guilty," I said solemnly. "Now, then, my son, tell us how it happened. Explain all the details. We're simply dying to hear the yarn!"

"Begad, rather!"

"Out with it, Handy!"

"Let's hear the story," said Watson.

"Let's hear how you captured the villains single handed!"

Handforth put his necktie straight, and swelled his chest out somewhat. He reminded me of a very proud cockerel strutting round the chicken run.

"Well, Handy, out with the yarn," I said. "How did you do this marvellous thing? How did you vanquish the two knaves without assistance?"

"Yes, my boy, we are very anxious to hear your story," said Nelson Lee. "You must allow me to compliment you on your wonderful achievement."

"Yes, I was expecting you to thank me, sir," said Handforth candidly. "Of course, you've failed in this case, and I've succeeded. But I don't suppose there'll be anything in the nature of professional jealousy. One can't always be successful, sir."

Nelson Lee kept his face quite grave.

"Of course not, Handforth," he said.

"Yes, you have beaten me—certainly. And I should be exceedingly pleased if you will tell me how you did this? How did you manage it, my boy?"

"Oh, it was easy enough, sir," said Handforth. "Of course, I came round here especially to accomplish this piece of work. Church and McClure were against it—they said I was wasting my time, and that I should only make an ass of myself. But Church and McClure always have been a couple of silly duffers, so I took no notice of them."

"I sincerely trust, Handforth, that

you did not take French leave from St. Frank's?" said Nelson Lee.

"Rather not, sir," said Handforth. "I had a letter from my dad, asking me to go up to London for a couple of days. You see, my uncle is in town at the moment, and he particularly wanted to see me. And the Head gave me permission to go up, and to take two of my chums with me. But when we got to London I told my uncle that I couldn't stop there. I said I had more important business in Lancashire."

"Oh, indeed," said Nelson Lee mildly.

"Yes, sir," went on Handforth. "My uncle was pretty decent over it, and he paid the ex'es. So we all came up to Lancashire at once."

"With the intention, no doubt, of running Mr. Naggs and Mr. Fordley to earth?" asked the gov'nor.

"That's it, sir. That was precisely the idea," said Handforth. "We know that you had failed——"

"Eh? What did you say, Handforth?"

"Only that you had failed, sir——"

"He—he means that we hadn't heard anything about you being successful, sir!" put in Church hurriedly. "We told him not to come barging into the affair, but you know what he is, sir! And just by a piece of luck he happened to spot Mr. Naggs!"

"By a piece of luck!" roared Handforth. "Why, you—you fathead! There was no luck about it! I was on the lookout for Naggs. I was on the alert."

"And how did you get on the track of the man?" asked Lee.

"Well, sir, our train happened to stop at the next station along the line—the one past Brentlowe. I don't remember what station it was, but that doesn't matter. Just at the same time another train was coming in from the opposite direction. And I spotted Naggs in that train, and acted without delay. I got out of one train into the other, and followed Naggs to this house."

"That was certainly very smart of you, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "And what happened?"

"I was captured, sir," said Handforth. "But, mind you, not really captured. I was having a look round, and then Naggs pulled me in. Of course, I could have knocked him sideways if I had wanted to, but that wasn't my policy. I was out to get all the information I could, and to pounce at the

right moment. You see, I knew that nobody else was on Mr. Naggs' track, and so it was up to me to be careful!"

"You apparently imagine, then, that I was a nonentity in this particular place, Handforth?" asked Nelson Lee smoothly.

"Well, I knew you had failed," said Edward Oswald.

"Indeed!"

"And as you hadn't been able to get on the track, sir, I came to the rescue," said Handforth. "I really felt compelled to do so, because I didn't like to think of you being left in the cold. Even the best detectives can't always be successful. Sometimes, when they meet with failure, they have to give way for cleverer people!"

"Oh, corks!" muttered Church, in dismay.

"The boasting ass!" said Watson.

"Cleverer people! Is he trying to make out that he's cleverer than Mr. Lee?"

"Something like that!" I grinned. "Let him run on. It's funny! I know I shall burst out into a yell before long. And you needn't think that the guv'nor will be offended. He's highly amused!"

But Nelson Lee did not appear so; he was quite grave.

"Please continue, Handforth," he said. "I am intensely interested. You were captured, I understand, by Naggs?"

"Well, Naggs happened to spot me, that's all," said Handforth. "Then he tried to bluff the thing out, but I wasn't taking any. I pretended to, though, and walked out of the house, and went down the road."

"And then?"

"Well, then, sir, I set my wits at work," replied Handforth. "I knew that something had to be done—something brilliant. Of course, that just suited me, and so I got busy. My idea was to get back into the house, and to overhear, if possible, what Naggs and Fordley were saying."

"Fordley, I imagine, had already appeared on the scene?"

"Yes, sir, and I was suspicious," said Handforth. "Well, anyhow, it didn't take me long to think of a wheeze. I found a tramp coming along the road, and I gave him five shillings, and instructed him to knock at the door and to keep there as long as possible. I

wanted him to detain Naggs and Fordley at the front of the house."

"While you were gaining admittance at the rear, I presume?"

Handforth looked astonished.

"Yes, that was the idea, sir," he said. "But how did you get it?"

"I really cannot imagine, Handforth," said Nelson Lee gravely. "But even persons of such low intelligence as myself happen to get these flashes now and again!"

The guv'nor was quite serious, and it was obvious to us all that he was pulling Handforth's susceptible leg. Handforth did not see this. He was always blind to leg pulling. It was the easiest thing in the world to spoof the leader of Study D.

"Yes, that was the idea, sir," went on Handforth. "While this cove was engaging the attention of the rotters at the front door I managed to slip through a window at the back, and I got straight into the rear apartment, and crept under the table."

"That was decidedly smart, Handforth."

"Well, it was rather clever," admitted Handforth carelessly. "Of course, I listened to everything, and I heard the rotters making plans about the money, and all that sort of thing. And, then, when I thought the time was ripe, I lifted up the table with one heave, and then sailed into the rotters!"

"In other words, Handforth, you attacked them?"

"That's the idea, sir," replied Handforth. "I knocked them both into the middle of next week. It was a glorious serap—the best I've had for years! I was just thinking of taking my prisoners to the police station when you came along. I'm rather glad you arrived just then, sir."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"It was, perhaps, fortunate, my boy," he said. "But I am quite convinced that you would have been able to deal with the matter in a masterly fashion single-handed. It was perhaps as well that you were on the scene all the time, Handforth."

Edward Oswald stared.

"Perhaps as well, sir," he repeated. "Why, without me the whole thing would have been messed up."

"Really, Handforth?"

"Of course it would, sir," said Handforth. "Those rascals would never have

been captured unless I had performed the trick. That's what I came from St. Frank's for, knowing that you were in a bit of a mess, I came to the rescue. But you needn't trouble to thank me, sir. I take it all as a matter of course."

"That is very nice of you, Handforth," said Nelson Lee smoothly.

"Don't mention it, sir. Don't say another word about it!" said Edward Oswald. "Any time that you're in a bit of a difficulty, just come to me. I sha'n't mind lending you a hand, sir. Give me a call, and I'm there. When you find yourself at a loose end, and don't know what to do, I'll let you have my advice. It won't take me long to put you on the right track, sir."

Handforth paused, and glared at Church.

"What the dickens are you making those silly faces at me for, Walter Church?" he demanded.

Church turned very red.

"Oh, I—I—you—oh, my hat!" gasped Church.

"I know what it is to be in a mess, sir," went on Handforth. "Of course, I'm never like that myself. When I start an investigation, I go straight through with it to the finish. And just because you failed this time, it doesn't make any difference. You can't always be successful, sir."

"Of course not, Handforth—of course not!" said Nelson Lee. "We are not all so fortunate as you. We are not all so exceedingly clever."

Handforth nodded again.

"Of course, cleverness counts a lot in this game, sir," he remarked. "I happened to be jolly smart, and you're pretty smart, too. At least, you are as a rule, sir. In this case you've been rather slow—— Yaw yaroo!"

Handforth broke off with a wild howl, and danced about on one foot.

"You—you fathheaded ass!" he roared. "What did you want to clump my foot for, McClure?"

"I—I—— Oh, you ass!" hissed McClure. "Why the dickens couldn't you keep quiet?"

"I'm not going to keep quiet while you tread on my feet!" said Handforth sharply. "I'm not surprised at it, of course. You've got feet like an elephant!"

Handforth was certainly insufferable.

He strutted about looking as pleased—as Church put it—as a dog with two

tails. Although why on earth a dog with two tails should be delighted, I cannot imagine.

Handforth talked with a superior air. He seemed to regard all the rest of us as so much dirt—even including Nelson Lee himself. On two or three occasions I felt like seizing the boulder, and gagging him.

Handforth didn't seem to realise.

He did not seem to realise in the slightest degree that Nelson Lee would have captured Naggs and Fordley in any case—whether Handforth had butted in or not. Nelson Lee had laid his plans cleverly, and with much forethought. He had been aware of the game the whole time, and was not for a moment at a loss. This was proved by the very fact that we had all arrived on the spot soon after Handforth's fight with the two scoundrels.

But Handforth refused to see it.

He had made the capture; he had done everything, and everybody else had failed. That was the way he looked at it. And, of course, it was quite useless to argue with him.

To argue with Handforth was about as profitable as arguing with a dead mule. He had only gained his chance by a piece of luck, by just happening to be on the scene first. And even then, he had only got on to Naggs' track by catching a glimpse of the man in that other train.

But, apart from all this, nothing could get away from the fact that Handforth had defeated the two crooks single handed.

In that respect he had done well, magnificently, in fact. It had been a wonderful effort on his part. To face those two men, alone in the house, and to knock them both into a dazed and bruized condition was, indeed, an achievement worthy of much praise. If Handforth had been content with that, all would have been well. But Handforth was not content with that. He claimed the credit for the whole capture—from the first moment to the last.

And he crowed over his success in a manner which made all the juniors feel exasperated beyond endurance. But they couldn't very well take hold of him and bump him there in the presence of Nelson Lee. They promised him a somewhat rough time of it afterwards, however.

After a little more talk, we all got into the car, and we drove straight off to the town, Nelson Lee intending to make the charge against Naggs and Fordley at once.

When we got to the police station Handforth insisted upon entering with Nelson Lee. He looked upon it as a right. The idea was simply absurd that he—Handforth—should remain outside while Nelson Lee went in!

I managed to go in, too, and during the proceedings the prisoners were brought in. Handforth regarded them with much enjoyment, and he noted with even greater enjoyment that their injuries were very apparent. He had knocked them about in a terrific manner, and they knew it.

"Well, Mr. Lee, I am glad that this affair has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion," said Inspector Hammond, at length. "You must allow me to compliment you upon the clever manner in which you engineered——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Handforth, glaring. "What about me?"

"My dear boy——"

"It was I who made this capture. I did everything!" interrupted Handforth warmly. "But don't you make any bloomers of that sort, inspector, or I shall get wild!"

The inspector laughed.

"You did well, Master Handforth," he said. "You did very well, indeed! But you mustn't get the idea into your head that nobody is deserving of any credit except yourself. Mr. Nelson Lee is mainly responsible for the capture of these two men——"

"What rot!" interrupted Handforth warmly. "Why, Mr. Lee didn't do anything. I captured the rotters. I tracked them down. I took the plans away from them. I sprang out at the right moment, and brought the scoundrels to a standstill. I did everything——"

"Of course you did, Handforth," interrupted Nelson Lee soothingly. "We are not attempting to belittle your performance, my boy. You have done very well indeed, and you must be given due credit. Do not spoil the good opinion we have of you by boasting and bragging about your wonderful effort."

Handforth nodded.

"I'm not the kind of chap to boast,

sir," he said. "But, at the same time, it's only fair to me to let everybody know that I wangled the whole thing from start to finish. If it hadn't been for me, Naggs and Fordley, would have escaped. But they couldn't get over me. Not likely! I settled their hash! Look at their faces—look at the way I've marked the rotters!"

"By thunder! You'll pay for it one day!" snarled Mr. Naggs savagely.

"Oh, you needn't think that I'm afraid of your threats!" said Handforth. "You can't do any harm to me. I'm equal to wiping you up any day you like—and half a dozen like you! I could knock you sideways in my sleep!"

"You—you young brat!" shouted Naggs thickly.

Before anybody could stop him he sprang forward, goaded to violence by Handforth's arrogant tone.

It was more than Naggs could stand. To remain there, perfectly still, and to hear Handforth gloating, was more than Naggs could put up with. It was more than flesh and blood could stand.

Crash!

Naggs' fist struck Handforth fully on the nose, and the junior went flying backwards with a howl. He tripped, went down, and lay sprawling upon the floor, half dazed.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Inspector Hammond.

Naggs was seized at once, and held firm. But he had got one good blow in, and he felt more satisfied.

Handforth was not feeling quite the same.

He had been practically knocked silly, and after that he was rather quiet. He did not feel inclined to boast quite so much.

And when all the formalities had been dealt with the whole party of us left for Oldham. Mr. Goodwin and Dick were so happy that they hardly knew what they were doing. Their mission in Lancashire had been successful, their plans had been recovered, and there was no more fear of their being stolen.

And, early the next morning, we all left for St. Frank's, all of us that is, except Mr. Goodwin himself. Dick was with us, and he was returning a happy and a proud boy. The excitement was over, and two cunning rascals had met with their just deserts!

CHAPTER VI.

FATTY LITTLE IN TROUBLE.

"WELL, I'm blessed!"

Reginald Pitt sat up in bed, rubbed his eyes, and then stared along the Remove dormitory. Yes, it was quite right, he had made no mistake. Handforth's bed was not empty, it was occupied by Edward Oswald himself.

Looking further, Pitt noticed that the beds of Church and McClure were also occupied. And, glancing round in the other direction, Pitt could see that three other beds which had been empty when the Remove retired on the previous night, were no longer in the vacant condition.

"They're here, all the giddy lot of them!" remarked Pitt. "When the dickens did they arrive?"

"Eh?"

Jack Grey, who occupied the bed next to Pitt, sat up, and looked round him. It was very gloomy in the dormitory, for the daylight was weak as yet. He blinked at his study mate inquiringly.

"What's the matter, Pitt?" he said. "The rising bell hasn't gone yet."

"No, I woke up for some reason," said Pitt. "But the rising bell will be going in about five minutes, so I'm not going to trouble to go to sleep again. What do you think of this?"

"Think of what?"

"Use your eyes, my son," replied Pitt. "Look who's here!"

He made a sweeping motion with his hand, and Jack Grey rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and looked round the dormitory. And then he gazed back at Pitt. He, too, was looking astonished.

"My word!" he ejaculated. "I wonder when they blow in?"

"Late last night, I suppose," said Pitt. "I heard a rumour that they were coming back yesterday, but when the last train came in and they weren't on it, we took it for granted that the bounders wouldn't arrive until to-day."

"How did they get here?" asked Grey. "This is a bit of a surprise, Reggie."

"Rather," agreed Pitt. "I expect they came to Bannington by one of the express trains from London. Then they probably finished the trip by car. Anyhow, they're here, the lucky beggars! I'll bet they've got a lot to talk about!"

The wanderers had returned, during

the hours while the Remove had slept. As a matter of fact, Pitt's explanation was a correct one. We had all arrived at Bannington, tired, worn, and sleepy, late the previous night. There had been no connecting train to Bellton, and so we had come on by car.

Needless to say, we had gone to bed straight off, without disturbing anybody. It had been a tiring journey, all the way from Lancashire. But we had come back satisfied and happy.

Even Handforth had been rather quiet during the last lap of the trip. Tiredness and sleepiness had robbed him of his enthusiasm. His triumph was a tremendous one, and he was bent upon letting everybody in St. Frank's know about it.

The fact that they knew already—or that they would know from other people—made no difference to Handforth. It was his intention to go about the school, telling all and sundry how he had captured Naggs and Fordley single-handed.

It was Handy's one failing—boastfulness. And, in a way, he could hardly be blamed for crowing over this particular affair. He had done well, and he had proved that he was not such a duffer, after all.

Everybody had laughed at him, even his own chums, and everybody would have yelled themselves hoarse if he had failed. Therefore, having met with success—as much to his own surprise as anybody else's—he was determined to talk about this success as much as possible. He wanted the school to realise that he was a keen fellow, that he had the makings of a great detective in him.

Clang! Clang!

The rising bell sounded noisily and persistently. Pitt and Grey, who were already sitting up, watched with interest as the other juniors turned over in their beds, sat up, and grunted.

The rising bell was usually rung twice at St. Frank's. A short, preliminary round, so to speak, and then a final one. It was almost unheard of for any junior to get out of bed at the first sound of the bell. But, on this occasion, matters were different.

In less than a minute almost everybody in the dormitory knew that the absentees had returned to the fold. Fellows jumped out of bed, and they proceeded to shake us vigorously.

I was seized as I lay in bed, and yanked into an upright position. Sir

Montie was bowled right out; and Tommy Watson, in the middle of a delightful dream, was deprived of his bed-clothes.

Handforth and Co. fared no better. And we were fully awake within a very few seconds, and pandemonium reigned.

Questions by the hundred were hurled at us. Everybody collected round our beds, and everybody wanted to know all about it. Rumours had been spread about the school during the previous day—rumours which had become certainties later on. It was known, for example, that Naggs and Fordley had been captured, and that Handforth had had a large part to do with that capture. But no details had been told, and now the Remove was anxious to know the absolute truth.

"Out with the yarn, Nipper!" said Pitt briskly. "We're dying to hear all about it, you know!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Tell us all about your adventures!"

"What kind of grub did you get up there?" asked Fatty Little.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Always thinking about grub, Fatty!" I grinned. "Well, the grub was first-class—absolutely top-hole."

"I thought so," said Fatty. "I've heard that Lancashire is a good place for a chap with a decent appetite. I shall have to take a trip there one of these days."

"Dry up, you ass!" exclaimed De Valerie. "We want to know about Naggs and that other rotter. And is it true that Handforth did something marvellous?"

"Of course it's not true!" grinned Owen major. "As if Handforth would do anything marvellous! I expect he made an ass of himself!"

"Rather!"

"That's more likely!" said Grey.

"I'll bet he caused an endless amount of trouble!"

"As it happens, my sons, Handforth has done something!" I broke in. "He acquitted himself well, as the novelists say. He covered himself with glory, and before long you'll know all about it. If I tell you the facts now, Handy will only repeat them later on, so you might just as well wait until he spins the yarn!"

"Rats! I don't believe it!" said Armstrong. "It's all rot to suppose that Handforth did anything wonderful! I'll guarantee that he made a mess of every-

thing up in Lancashire. He must have hindered Mr. Lee all along the line, and——"

"Hold on, Handy—hold on!" I exclaimed, grasping Handy's arm. "There's no need to get excited——"

"I'm going to punch that rotter's head!" roared Handforth. "If you think I'm going to stand here and listen to him insulting me, you've made a bloomer!"

"Put it down to his ignorance!" I said soothingly. "These chaps want to hear the yarn, and it's up to you to tell them. But I propose we all get dressed first, and then you can tell all the chaps out in the Triangle."

Of course, Handforth did not give it a thought. He did not seem inclined to wait a moment, and he got busy on the job straight away. He told the fellows exactly how he had got on the track of Mr. Naggs, how he had got into that house at Brentlowe by a ruse, and how he had defeated Naggs and Fordley single-handed.

Needless to say, during the recital of this story Handforth did not belittle his own efforts.

It was the same after breakfast.

Everybody Handforth met was told the story. He made a point of telling everybody in the school, from the smallest fag to the biggest Sixth-Former, and there was no holding him back. If anybody refused to listen he would punch their noses.

There was no doubt that Handforth was suffering from a very bad attack of swelled head. He was insufferable, and, as a consequence, the fellows, before the end of the day, were thoroughly sick of Handforth and everything he had done.

The story was known throughout the school well before midday. But this did not deter Handforth; he repeated the yarn again and again, and he never forgot to mention how smart he had been—how astute.

"You can't even speak to the chap!" complained Christine, of the Collego House. "He seems to think we're all beneath him—so much dirt! He walks about the place like a fighting cock, and if anybody happens to call him an ass, he's up with his fist! Who the dickens does he think he is?"

Pitt grinned.

"There's no knowing!" he replied. "Just at present Handforth has a private opinion that he is the most im-

portant fellow in the school. Up till now it's been rather amusing, but if he keeps on the same game, there'll be trouble. You mark my words!"

"I believe there's trouble already!" chuckled Bob Christine.

They were in the Triangle, and they glanced round towards the gymnasium. They were just in time to see a form come hurtling forth. It descended upon the gravel with a bump, and a howl rang out.

The form belonged to Handforth, and he had been ejected promptly and forcibly by half a dozen Fifth-Formers, who had heard quite enough about Handforth's amazing triumph. The leader of Study D picked himself up, and glared back at the gymnasium.

"You—you rotters!" he shouted thickly. "I'll make you pay for this! I'll make you realise that you can't lay fingers on me without suffering! You seem to forget who I am——"

"Go away!" said Chambers of the Fifth, waving his hand. "Go away! Shoo! Go away! Shoo! Your presence is not required!"

This was adding insult to injury, and Handforth was about to hurl himself at the Fifth-Formers again, when he came to the conclusion that it would not be wise, so he turned on his heel, sniffed contemptuously, and walked away.

Not long after that he was bumped—and bumped, moreover, by Removites!

This was really the limit, in Handforth's opinion. But the fellows really couldn't stand him, and when he started boasting, and comparing his own ability to that of Nelson Lee, De Valerie and a few others decided that something ought to be done.

Something was done.

Handforth was bumped, he was frog-marched, and he was submitted to several other pleasures of a like description. But even this did not quell him.

Church and McClure, soon after tea, went into the common-room with long faces. They also bore decided marks of violence.

"Hallo!" said Tommy Watson. "You chaps look pretty miserable. What's the matter?"

"Oh, I'm fed up!" grunted Church.

"And I'm fed up to the neck!" growled McClure.

"Handy?" I inquired.

"Yes, the boasting, bragging bouncer!" snapped Church. "He's one

of the best chaps breathing at ordinary time, but just now he seems to be dotty. This success of his has got into his head, and it's made him another chap altogether. We can't say a word to him; we daren't open our giddy mouths!"

"That's hard lines!"

"During tea, Handforth mentioned that the butter was jolly fine, and I said I thought it wasn't up to the mark," said Church. "What did he ass do?"

"Goodness knows!" I chuckled.

"He asked me what I knew about butter—what I knew about anything?" said Church bitterly. "He told me to shut up, and he explained that his superior brains were too deeply concerned with matters of importance to be worried about butter. Then he picked up the plate, with half a pound on it, and chucked the butter in my face!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you can laugh!" said Church. "I was in a fearful state before I went up and washed. And Handy's like that all the time; we simply can't open our mouths. He's—he's awful!"

"Take my advice, my sons, and ignore him," I said. "Let him have his own way for the time being; he'll soon get over it. But the chaps are partly to blame for Handy's present condition."

"The chaps?" repeated McClure.

"Yes, of course!" I said. "Look at this morning, for example. They were all round him like flies, urging him to tell them what had happened. Of course, that set him going, and now there's no holding him back. The only way to cure him is to be indifferent. We'll pretend he doesn't exist, and——"

"Send him to Coventry?" inquired Pitt.

"No, not that," I replied. "Dash it all, that would be rather rough. My idea is to ignore him altogether when he talks about his detective ability, and all the rest of it. We'll be as pleasant to him as anything on all ordinary subjects, but detective work—nothing doing!"

"That's a good wheeze!" said McClure, brightening up. "There can't be any arguments then, and Handy will forget all about it."

But, as it happened, Handforth was destined to be cured in quite another way. And it was happening even while the juniors were discussing the matter in the common-room.

Handforth had been up to the dormi-

tory, and just as he reached the top of the stairs—previous to coming down, with the intention of going into the common-room—he ran into Fatty Little. Fatty was just going up, and the two juniors met on the landing, near the head of the stairs.

"I say, Handy!" said the fat junior, as he was about to pass.

"What is it?" said Handforth curtly.

He looked at Fatty as though the stout junior were an insect.

"I'm hard up for the minute," said Fatty Little. "I don't like borrowing money from chaps—it ain't one of my habits—but if you could lend me five bob, old man, I'd be awfully obliged. I—I didn't have much tea, and I'm a bit peckish now——"

"Oh, that's all right," said Handforth. "Come to my study in half an hour, Fatty, and you'll have the money."

"Oh, but I'd like it now——"

"Oh, would you?" said Handforth, glaring. "You'd like it now, eh? If you're not jolly careful, you fat ass, you won't get it at all! Who do you think you're talking to? You've got to do what I tell you—understand?"

Fatty opened his eyes somewhat.

"Great doughnuts!" he exclaimed. "There's no need to ride the high horse. Handy, you can go and boil your giddy five bob! I'll borrow from somebody else. I wouldn't accept it if you chucked it at me!"

"Oh, you're a young lunatic—that's what's the matter with you!" said Handforth pityingly. "I don't blame you, Fatty; you can't help it. Fellows who are born without brains can't be expected to act sensibly. As it happens, I was born with more than my usual share. When I get older, I'm going to set up in business as a private detective, and then I'll whack the whole world!"

"I think you'll never whack Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Fatty Little.

"Pouf! Why, I've whacked him already!" said Handforth. "I don't mean to be disrespectful to Mr. Lee, or anything of that sort; but facts are facts, and you can't get over them. Mr. Lee went to Lancashire to capture these two men, and he failed; he failed miserably. I went to Lancashire with the same object, and I succeeded—I succeeded in the most triumphant manner possible. Ain't that proof? Doesn't that show that I'm smarter than Mr. Leo?"

Fatty Little gasped.

"Great lobsters! You—you ass!" he ejaculated. "If you let the Head hear you saying anything like that, you'll be flogged! You must be dotty, Handy!"

"Well, ain't it true?" demanded Handforth.

"No, of course it's not!"

"It's not?" roared Handforth.

"No, you ass!"

"You—you——"

"Mr. Lee was well on the scent!" said Fatty Little loyally. "Mr. Lee came along with the police at the right moment. If it hadn't been for him, you would have messed everything up; but just because you happened to knock the two chaps out, you're claiming all the credit. And, after all, there's nothing much in what you did."

Handforth gulped.

"Nothing much?" he choked. "Why, you—you——"

"It was pretty smart, I'll admit," amended Fatty. "At the same time, you've always been famous for your punches, Handy. It was nothing to you to knock those two chaps out. Besides, you had the advantage to start with. You were under the table, and you took the rotters by surprise. It's all silly rot to make such a fuss about it!"

"I won't deal with you here," said Handforth grimly. "I'll wait until we're in the Triangle, then I'll smash you to bits. My only hat! I've never been so insulted in all my life!"

"What about your insult about Mr. Lee?"

"I haven't insulted Mr. Lee—I simply told the truth," retorted Handforth.

"Mr. Lee failed, and I succeeded. That proves, beyond question, that I'm a better detective than he is——"

"Oh, rats!" said Fatty irritably.

He was really fed up with Handforth's arrogance—with ~~Edward~~ Oswald's swank. And he moved forward abruptly, with the intention of going down the stairs. He wanted to get out of Handforth's presence—he was anxious to get beyond reach of Handforth's triumphant voice.

But Fatty was large, and he overlooked this fact for the moment. He walked forward with such briskness that Handforth had no time to get out of the way. As a result, Fatty Little's huge person collided with Handy with tremendous violence, and once Fatty Little and somebody else collided, that somebody else was bound to suffer!

In this case Handforth suffered!

He was standing at the top of the stairs, and Fatty simply butted into him, and knocked him off. Fatty had no intention of doing anything of the kind, but he was so fed-up that he didn't realise his movement. In any case, Handforth went down the stairs backwards, falling sheer for about ten stairs. He alighted on his back, turned over with a terrific howl, and then thudded down the stairs, head over heels. Fatty stood at the top gaping.

"By chutney!" he gasped. "The— the silly ass! Oh, jumping bloaters!"

Fatty stood there, frozen to the spot, for he had just seen something which thrilled his blood in his veins. There, at the bottom of the stairs, was Dr. Malcolm Stafford himself!

Nothing in the world could avert the disaster. Dr. Stafford had just reached the third stair when Handforth came tumbling down. The Head started back, amazed and shocked. And then Handforth arrived.

He arrived head foremost, and the Head went staggering back about ten paces, until he finally sat down with a terrific thud in the midst of the lobby, his gown flying, glasses falling to the floor, and smashing to atoms.

Three yards from him lay Handforth, blinking round in a dazed kind of manner.

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth blankly. "Who—who did that?"

The Head rose to his feet, not particularly hurt, but with his dignity shattered. His brow was as black as

thunder, and his eyes were gleaming with anger.

"Handforth!" he exclaimed, breathing hard. "How—how dare you? You will come to my study at once, and I shall flog you——"

"But—but——"

"Hold on, sir—it was my fault!" panted Fatty Little, coming down the stairs. "I bowled Handforth down—he couldn't help it, sir! It was my fault entirely, although I didn't mean to——"

"I want no excuses, Little!" thundered the Head. "Come to my study, sir."

And that was the end of Handforth's arrogance.

For Fatty Little got into terrible trouble. He was flogged, and confined to the punishment-room for one whole week—as a lesson for him to be more careful in future!

It was a severe punishment and rather unjust. But the Head had been hurt—not bodily, but his dignity had been very considerably jarred.

The whole school was talking of the incident, and chuckling at the way in which the Head had been bowled over. Dr. Stafford, accordingly, had acted somewhat harshly towards Fatty Little. Anyhow, Fatty was confined to the punishment room for a week, and Handforth, who felt that he was partly responsible, was greatly subdued.

However, that punishment of Fatty's was destined to provide quite a sensation at St. Frank's!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

Fatty Little's Hunger-Strike!

The famous Fat Boy of St. Frank's displeases the Head and receives a week's detention in the punishment room. At the suggestion of the school's political agitator, Timothy Tucker, Fatty elects to go on hunger-strike, with remarkable results.

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A TALE OF DETECTIVE
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. After several adventures, when he hands over to the jewellers the case which had contained the pendant, he is horrified to find it empty.

(Now read on.)

The Power of Mystery.

A STERN judge, too, Lin thought. There was not a trace of softness or pity in the set lines of his face. He inclined his head slightly, as Mr. Simmons introduced himself and explained why he had come. Which that gentleman did at great length, making quite a speech of it.

"An affair of such gravity, you see, Mr. Twyford," he said; "the total disappearance of that valuable pendant!"

"Dreadful!" ejaculated the man in grey, in a tone that was almost tragic. "I am glad that Miss Twyford was not at home when Mr. Shenstone 'phoned the appalling news, and so was spared a severe shock. I myself was quite overwhelmed!"

There was a suspicious twinkle in those keen grey eyes that hardly seemed to go with that tragic voice. But Lin was far too miserable to notice it. And it entirely escaped Mr. Simmons, who thought they were working up nicely for a fine dramatic scene in which he would have an effective part.

"Naturally. I quite understand your feelings, Mr. Twyford," he said. "And, since I am here, pray let me relieve you of the painful task of investigating this unhappy affair. This lad is sullen, and I doubt if

you could wring a word from him. But permit me to deal with him! With my—er—experience, and—er—knowledge of—er—human nature in its varied types, I venture to think that I shall speedily bring the truth to light! It may have been too flattering, but it has been remarked that I possess the insight of a born detective!"

He tried to assume a hawk-like look; but he was chubby, and it did not go well.

The man in grey seemed to have a mild attack of throat trouble, but he quickly suppressed the slight gurgling sounds it occasioned, and, with the utmost gravity, said:

"Many thanks for the offer. You are exceedingly kind! But really, I must deal with this unfortunate affair myself as best I can. I am only a happy-go-lucky slacker myself, but I know the immense value of every minute to gentlemen of commercial pursuits, and I cannot think of detaining you another moment! I can only thank you again—and bid you good-day, Mr. Simmons!"

The born detective gasped faintly. He could hardly believe that he heard aright. Told that he wasn't wanted—his services declined! But he realised that he could not do otherwise than go, and he went—badly deflated!

When the door had closed upon him the man in grey threw himself back in his chair and actually laughed. Lin was startled and amazed.

"Now, Lin," said Twyford, turning suddenly to the wondering boy, "what the dickens do you mean by going and losing that confounded pendant, and bringing that absurd ass down on me? One minute more of him would have been the death of me! Well, now that we have got rid of him let us go into this matter between us—eh, my lad? How did you lose the wretched thing? By the way, are you quite sure that it is lost?"

"I'm—I'm afraid so, sir," murmured Lin, wondering why the man asked that question, when he was holding the open case in his hand—empty.

"That's just it," said Twyford. "You were so much afraid so that you never thought of looking for it?"

Lin shook his head. True, such an idea had not occurred to him. If it had he would have rejected it as hopeless. He

knew only too well what had become of the pendant!

"Now, pockets have a bad habit of developing holes," said Twyford, as though he were just musing aloud, rather than speaking to the boy standing before him, "especially in clothes that have seen service," he murmured, his eyes leaving the boy's face and straying to the middle button of the well-worn jacket. "Once found a mint lozenge, a broken bag, and a half-sov' in the lining of an old reefer—the latter extremely welcome, for I was jolly hard-up that day!"

Lin felt something like an electric thrill run through him.

With trembling fingers he unbuttoned his jacket and thrust his hand into that inner pocket. There was a little hole in one corner at the bottom! He ran his hand over the worn lining, then around the lower hem. There was something under the lining—something hard, yet flexible, like a bit of chain!

With fingers that quivered in half-crazy haste, he tore a slit in the threadbare stuff. A shake, and there slid out into his palm the missing diamond pendant!

The reaction was almost too much for him. The room seemed to reel around him. He might have fallen, but that a strong arm was slipped over his shoulder, and he found himself seated in a chair.

"That's all right, then!" laughed the man in grey.

He took the pendant, just glanced at it, then threw it carelessly on the desk behind him; the case he still held in his hand. Lin stared at him with wonder, and something very like awe, in his eyes.

"How did you know, sir?" he breathed. "It's like—like magic!"

Twyford smiled, shaking his head.

"There is no magic in it, Lin," he said; "merely common logic—nothing more. I did not know that the pendant was in the lining of your jacket; I merely thought it might be. I read the hint in this jewel-case. I can read a lot more in it; quite a little story, in fact—or, at least, the outlines of one."

He turned the little leather-case in his hand, regarding it intently.

Lin watched him, fascinated, yet with a growing sense of fear. The man had such strange powers of digging out the truth! He might call it logic, but Lin didn't understand it at all! What else would he find out in that mysterious way? Not the whole of the miserable, shameful story! No, he couldn't—he couldn't do that possibly!

But he watched and listened in secret dread, nevertheless.

"This case tells me," said Twyford, holding the thing before him like a book from which he was actually reading, "that it has been in other hands than yours, Lin, since you took it away from here yesterday evening. Rough hands, too, that actually fought for its possession. For the catch is strained; that is how the case came open in your pocket and let the pendant

slip out. The mere motion of walking would cause it to shake down through any convenient hole and lodge itself snugly in the lining, as it did.

"So much for that. Now, as to those hands. There were more than one pair in the scramble for this case. Two, at least—no, three! And one of them was a woman's—a lady to whom the gift of a manicure set would not be inappropriate. For her thumbnail is like a talon! See! That long tear was not in this leather when you took this thing from here, Lin. The other hands belonged to men, probably; one a spare man with lean, long-fingered hands; the other a fellow of stumpy build, with big, fleshy paws."

Lin felt uncomfortable chills running down his spine.

It was so weird, so uncanny! No good trying to hide anything from this mysterious man! Why, he might have been there, at Cowl Street, last night, and seen it all himself! And it was such a horrible, degrading affair! To have it known that he came from a home where the people were not honest, and had actually tried to steal the pendant!

He flushed with shame, then went pale, and sat there in silence looking white and miserable. Kit Twyford glanced at him—it was by no means a stern or un pitying look—then, laying aside the jewel-case, fished an old blackened briar out of a big copper bowl on his desk, and, filling and lighting up, dropped into another chair, and sat there smoking in silence, as if waiting for the boy to speak, to complete the story.

The silence grew strained. Lin could not bring himself to tell that shameful tale! If only they had been strangers who had tried to steal the thing. But his own people! He did not know what to do. He could not sit there without speaking, as though he had done some guilty thing himself. And he could not get up and run away, though he longed to!

Just then the door opened and Cora Twyford came in.

As the boy looked up she greeted him with a little nod and a friendly smile. But her smile quickly faded as she saw that wretched look on Lin's face, and, turning to her brother, she said:

"Something has gone wrong, Kit! Those diamonds have done some mischief! I felt that they would! We ought not to have tried such an experiment. What has happened, Kit?"

Briefly Twyford told her, then remarked:

"But these are only the outlines. Lin is going to fill them up and tell us all. It is an interesting story, and I fancy we shall think none the worse of him when we have heard it in full."

"I am sure of that!" said Cora.

Her tone, and the smile of confidence she gave him, went straight to Lin's heart. She had a right to know all, because she had faith in him!

(Continued on page III of cover.)

After a little hesitation, he told the whole story, keeping nothing back. The only bit that he slurred over lightly was the manner of his escape from that lofty garret window. But that was the part which thrilled Cora most of all. She needed no details to understand the grim risk the boy had taken, and how narrowly he had missed a fearful death. Her expressive eyes showed how deeply she was moved; her charming face lost its colour. She stepped quickly to her brother, and, laying her hand upon his arm, said in a tense undertone:

"Oh, Kit, Kit, he risked his life for those wretched diamonds! And they were not worth saving at such a risk!"

"No; but his honour was—and he has saved that!" Twyford responded, in the same low tone, and with a glance of warm approval at the boy, who, now that he had told all the wretched story, dropped his head in shame.

Kit Twyford went to him, and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"It is all right, Lin," he said. "We understand. We know what you have been up against. They tried to drag you through the dirt, and you would have none of it—you came out clean! You are well quit of those people, my lad! Don't go back to them, and if they trouble you, let me know. Stay on at that coffee-shop; that will do very well for a time. And you need not look for a new job, because you have already found one. We want you to work for us—with us."

Lin reddened a little, and his face stiffened. His former feeling of resentment returned in full force for the moment. He did not like being taken possession of in that easy, assured manner, as though he hadn't a word to say in the matter, and he was inclined to rebel, and show this man that he would choose for himself whom he worked for.

But somehow he didn't.

"After all," he reflected rapidly, "Mr. Mysterious didn't go about this wretched business like some men would. Some would have stormed at me for losing the thing; or accused me of stealing it, and given me in charge right away. But he didn't! Instead of making a fuss he talked to me quietly, like—like a fellow's big brother, and instead of pushing me deeper into trouble, he gets me out of it. And just like magic, too! It was wonderful! I'd never have thought about looking in the lining of my jacket!"

He remained silent. The brother and sister watched him, as though they understood his hesitation, and knew how it would end.

Presently Twyford spoke.

"You may not like our sort of work at first, Lin," he said; "but you will find it most interesting, and soon you will come to love it—as we do. To-night, for instance, there is a bit of work full of the deepest interest to be done. And there is a part in it for you, Lin. Are you quite free for to-night?"

"Yes, sir," answered Lin.

"Good! Then I will give you your instructions," Twyford said.

But Cora again laid her hand upon his arm and drew him aside.

"Kit," she said, in a tone too low to reach the boy's ears, "is it right—is it right to endanger him again? Twice already he has risked his life through us, and that affair to-night may be full of danger!"

"Which you are prepared to face without the least hesitation—eh, Cora?" said her brother, with a smile. "You do not even think of it, but take it as part of our business—as it is. In our profession there are many risks, and the boy must learn to face them. And he will soon learn, for he is made of sterling stuff!"

(To be continued.)

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