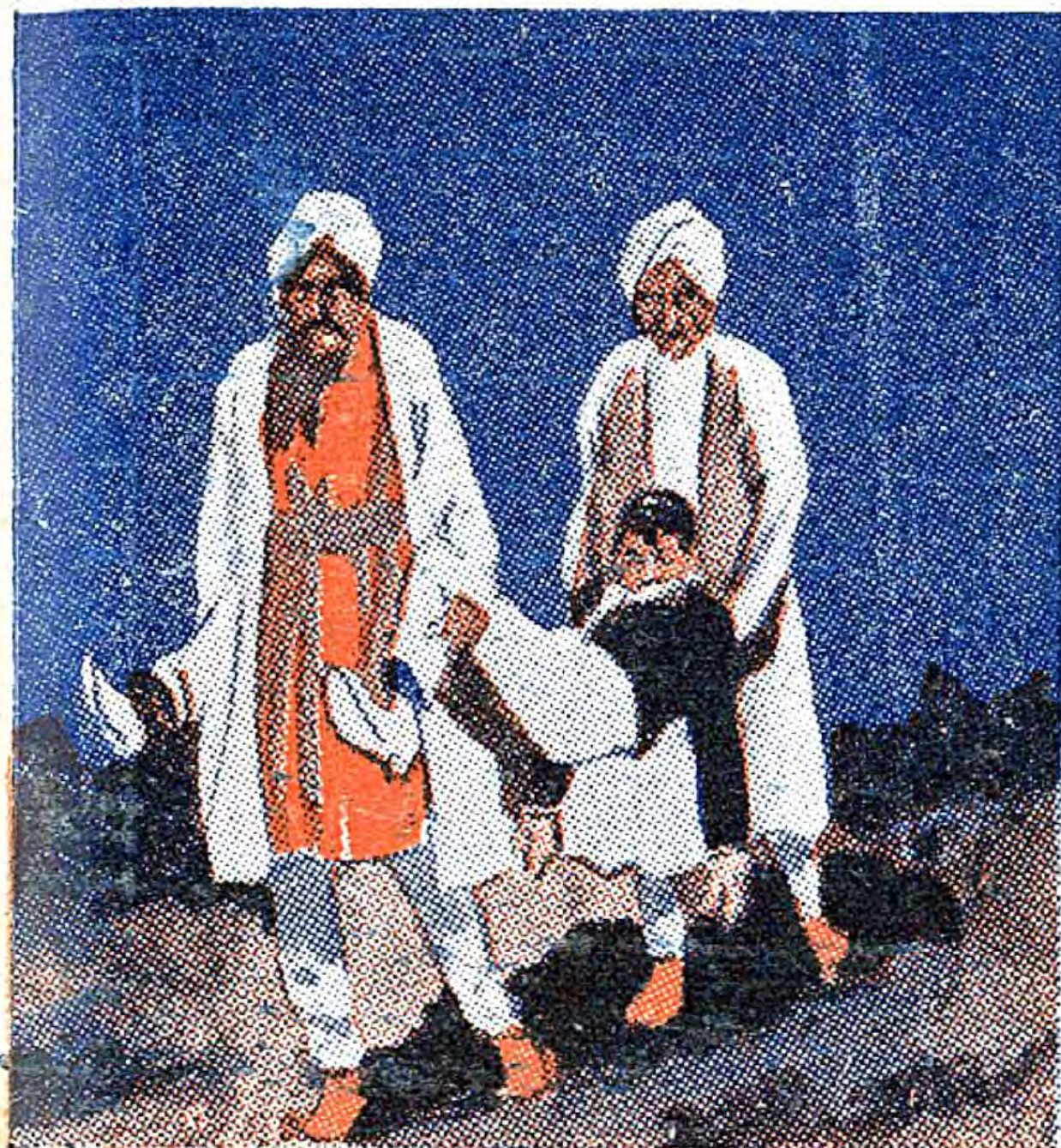


No. 315.—Nelson Lee Investigates the Clue of the Golden Idol!

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A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Australian Wonder," "The Golden Image," "The Demon Cricketer," etc. June 18, 1921.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED
THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING ADVENTURE!

MORROW, of the Sixth, opened the door of the junior common-room, and put his head into that somewhat noisy apartment.

"Bedtime, you kids!" he said briskly. "Buck up!"

"Right-ho, Morrow!"

"Just coming!"

"Well, look alive!" said Morrow, nodding. "There'll be ructions if you're late!"

Tommy Watson yawned.

"Well, I can do with bed, anyhow," he said languidly. "My hat, I'm feeling tired this evening—I suppose it's the weather. It's been frightfully hot to-day, and even now it's sultry and close."

"Stiffin', dear old boy—it is, really!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

The common-room window was wide open. Outside in the Triangle the atmosphere was hardly any cooler than within the Ancient House. The stars were shining, although they looked a bit hazy, and away in the Western sky the rich glow of sunset could still be seen.

St. Frank's had been stewing all day—sweltering under a glaring sun which had poured its heat down with tropical intensity, and everybody was feeling decidedly used up. The prospect of going up to bed was a welcome one, although

blankets would certainly be cast aside wholesale.

I left the common-room with my two chums, Tregellis-West and Watson, and we were just strolling through the lobby when I happened to notice Nelson Lee standing there, as though looking for somebody. He nodded as I appeared.

"Good-night, guv'nor!" I said cheerfully.

"Just a moment, Nipper!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "I want a word with you."

I hurried forward, leaving my chums chatting with Handforth and Co., and Jerry Dodd. Nelson Lee spoke in a low voice, so that none of the others could hear.

"Come to my study at midnight!" he said briefly.

I started.

"Eh?" I ejaculated, staring.

"I think you heard, Nipper," murmured Lee. "Come to my study at midnight. Say nothing to the others. I shall have work for you. That's all."

"Right, sir!" I said briskly. "You can rely on me."

Nelson Lee nodded, and with a cheery "Good-night!" to the others, he passed out of the lobby. Tregellis-West and Watson joined me at once.

"Anythin' important?" asked Watson.

"Oh, nothing—the guv'nor wants to see me in the morning about something," I replied vaguely.

I omitted to mention, however, that the "morning" in this instance would probably be about 12.2 a.m.—two minutes after midnight. It would certainly be morning, but much earlier than Sir Montie or Tommy imagined.

We went up to the dormitory, which was very close and stuffy, in spite of the wide-open windows, and we were only too glad to divest ourselves of our clothing and to get into cool pyjamas.

I lay on my bed, covered only with a single sheet, and I did not go to sleep immediately. Nelson Lee had said very little to me, but it had meant much. He had informed me that I was to present myself at his study at midnight, and that there would be work for me to do. This was enough.

In other words, it meant that the guv'nor had some secret job on hand—some careful detective investigation which necessitated night work, and which was to be performed in secret by Nelson Lee and myself.

I thrilled at the thought. It was some little time since we had worked together in the old way. On these occasions Nelson Lee was not a schoolmaster, and I was no longer a schoolboy. We became detective and assistant, as of old.

And the thought of it was very genial to me. It did not require very much concentration on my part to realise the subject of this investigation. I was certain, in fact, that it concerned the affairs of Jerry Dodd, of the Remove.

However, there was no need for me to waste time in thinking things over. It was now not far from ten o'clock, and I laid my head on my pillow with the firm resolve that I should awaken at midnight. I was pretty certain that I should be able to rouse myself at the required time.

It was a knack I had developed for some years, and I rather prided myself that there was no possibility of my failing. Nelson Lee was even better than me in that respect. He could awaken almost to a second, and was immediately fresh and wide awake.

My thoughts grew dim, and I dozed off. Then, almost within a minute, it seemed, I found myself sitting up. The dormitory was dark and quiet, and the school clock was booming out solemnly.

"My hat!" I muttered. "It can't be midnight already—that must be ten!"

I fetched out my watch from under

the pillow, and the luminous dial assured me that it was exactly twelve. I had slept for two hours, but it had seemed more like two minutes. With a little sigh of satisfaction I slipped out of bed, and quickly dressed, but did not trouble to don a collar.

I was feeling quite fresh, and when I stole downstairs I saw that a light was gleaming from beneath the door of Nelson Lee's study. I tapped gently upon the panels, and entered. The guv'nor looked up from his desk with a smile.

"Good lad!" he said. "Yes, close the door, Nipper."

"What's the wheeze, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I'll tell you that later; we are going out within a minute or two," was the guv'nor's reply. "I hardly expected you to be so prompt."

Nelson Lee was making up his private diary, and, having completed this task, he rose to his feet, donned a cloth cap, and we were ready to start. We sallied out into the Triangle, where the air was now delightfully cool. Overhead the stars winked unceasingly, and not a breath of wind stirred the tree-tops.

We made our way across the Triangle, and then into Bellton Lane.

"Which way, sir?" I asked.

"This way—towards the moor," said Nelson Lee. "Now, Nipper, I may as well explain to you what this expedition is, and why I have decided to go upon it at such an unusual hour."

"Good!" I said. "I've been waiting to hear that, sir!"

"I expect you have some idea of my main motive?"

"Well, I expect it's about Dodd, and those Indians."

"Exactly, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "As we are walking, I may as well go over one or two facts—it will serve to refresh your memory as well as my own. Jerrold Dodd came to the school at the beginning of this term, and there was nothing whatever mysterious about him, or his general conduct. He is, in fact, a cheerful, good-natured Colonial youngster with a particular aptitude for cricket."

I nodded.

"He's a demon at cricket, sir," I declared. "We want Dodd in the eleven——"

"My dear Nipper, it was not my intention to discuss cricket with you,"

interrupted Nelson Lee mildly. "There is something of far greater importance on hand. As I have said, Dodd was in no way different from a hundred and one other boys. Then, as you may remember, he came to us with a peculiar story about a dream—a vivid dream concerning Burmese, or Indians."

"And it wasn't a dream at all, sir," I remarked.

"No, Nipper, it was not," agreed Nelson Lee. "Dodd actually passed through the experience. He was taken by these Eastern men to a cavern, and put through a course of questioning, and so forth. By chance he brought a little golden idol away with him. He did this unknown to his captors."

"And unknown to himself, too!" I put in.

"Yes, that is quite true," said the gov'nor. "When Dodd found the little image in his pocket he was quite surprised, for he had never seen it before, and all memory of his so-called dream had vanished. Fortunately, he brought the image straight to me, and it proved conclusively that he had been placed under the influence of some strange Eastern drug."

"What was the exact effect of this drug, sir?" I asked.

"I cannot positively say, for I have had no personal experience," replied Lee.

"But it seems to me that the drug was administered by means of a tiny dart, the boy believing that he had been stung by a gnat. The drug induced sleep, but only for a short time. When Dodd awakened he was in a dreamy kind of state, and he had been removed during his period of unconsciousness. In this strange dream-state, brought on by the drug, he could remember nothing of his usual life. After the Indians had finished with him he slept once more, and when he awoke he was back in his old original place. And, not unnaturally, he believed that the whole thing had been a dream."

"Yes, I see, sir," I said. "That makes it quite plain and clear."

"When he first awoke the supposed dream was vivid," went on Lee; "but almost at once it began to fade, until, an hour or so later, Dodd had completely forgotten the dream, the Indians, and all else."

"But what does it all mean, sir?" I inquired. "What's the explanation? Why on earth should the Indians try these dodges with Jerry Dodd?"

"That is what I am trying to discover," said Nelson Lee. "I have already questioned Dodd closely, but he appears to know nothing about Burmah or India. As you know, an attempt was made during the night to burgle the school. It was an attempt to recover the golden image. A second attempt was made later, Dodd himself being approached by a man who appeared to be a poor hawker—or, rather, a dark-skinned fortune-teller. It was a trick, but it did not succeed."

"Was the man one of the Hindoos, sir?"

"He certainly was," said Nelson Lee. "And now I come to the important part. I followed this fellow—quite unknown to him. I think—and I was not exactly astonished when I found that he went across the moor, and disappeared into the old quarry. I could make no further progress without going to the risk of exposing myself. Therefore, we are now going along to the quarry to make a few investigations."

"Oh, good!" I said eagerly. "We ought to learn a few things."

We walked on for some moments in silence, both of us busy with our thoughts. I wondered what this mystery concerning Jerry Dodd could be, and I was quite certain of one fact—Jerry himself was just as much in the dark as we were.

He was a good sort, but by the other fellows he was regarded as a swotter, with no knowledge of sports. This, of course, had been a mere blind, for Jerry was forbidden to play cricket.

It seemed a ridiculous thing to me, but there was probably a certain amount of common sense in the decision of Jerry's father. A fellow who devotes his time to cricket and sports in general is not often an excellent scholar; and Jerry had come to St. Frank's expressly for the purpose of studying.

I kept thinking over what Nelson Lee had told me. I remembered Jerry Dodd's "dream," too. It seemed that there were three or four Indians—or Burmese. And why they had drugged Jerry in that peculiar way was a mystery.

What did they want with him? Why were they taking all this trouble to get him into their clutches, only to release him within an hour? It was a most extraordinary business. I could think of no possible solution.

And then I thought of the two remarkable men who were openly staying in the district—Messrs. Podge and Midge, the wonderful detectives. At least, they believed themselves to be wonderful. My own opinion would not have flattered them.

There was scarcely any secret of the fact that Messrs. Podge and Midge were staying in the neighbourhood for the purpose of keeping an eye upon Jerry—not because they wished to harm him, but precisely the contrary.

They were protecting Dodd from possible harm, and they were about as much use as a pair of film-comedy detectives. Their chief characteristic seemed to be blundering into every hole they could find.

Obviously they had been instructed by somebody to undertake this work; but Jerry Dodd knew nothing about it, and we were all in the dark. There were elements of comedy about the mystery which added greatly to its interest.

By this time Nelson Lee and I had passed the Mount—the last house before we came to the wide expanse of Bannington Moor—and, arriving on the moor, we could see some considerable way across the great stretch of gorse-covered country. The starlight was fairly bright, and the night was not absolutely dark.

"It's only a comparatively short distance to the quarry, sir," I said. "And what do you expect to find there, anyhow?"

"To tell the truth, Nipper, I have not anticipated the matter," said Nelson Lee. "I noted the exact spot where the old Indian disappeared, and I thought it would be wiser not to investigate at once, but to leave it for some future occasion. This is the future occasion. And I have brought you with me because there may be a little trouble. We never know."

I thought it was very decent of the gov'nor to have decided that way. He knew well enough that if any danger had to be faced, I should like to be there. And these Indians, although they had not proved themselves to be dangerous so far, there was no telling what their game actually was.

"When we get to the quarry we must not talk," said Nelson Lee, in a low voice. "The night is very still, and sound carries a long way. We do

not wish to give any warning of our approach."

Our movements were absolutely noiseless, for we were walking on soft grass, and we were both wearing rubber-soled shoes. And at last, almost before we realised it, we came to the edge of the quarry. It yawned beneath us, without any guarding rail, and a treacherous trap for any unwary wayfarer.

For at this particular spot there was a sheer drop of a hundred feet, and below there were rough stones. We were obliged to walk round for some distance before we arrived at a place where we could make a safe descent into the quarry.

Over on one side there were some caves and tunnels, one of these tunnels actually leading underground to the old monastery vaults at St. Frank's. And I was rather surprised when Nelson Lee took the opposite direction. I had not known that there were any caves or caverns this way.

Lee could see that I was surprised, but he said nothing. And I could not very well ask him, after that warning of his. We crept forward, foot by foot, Nelson Lee leading the way, and picking his footsteps carefully.

And so we progressed, until at last we arrived right up against the cliff face. It seemed quite blank, without any sign of an opening. It was apparently a pure waste of time for us to come. There wasn't room enough for a cat to crawl through.

"This is no good, sir!" I whispered. "Hush, Nipper! Hush!"

Nelson Lee only breathed the words; then he wormed his way forward between two boulders. It was impossible for him to get beyond, for there was no room; but suddenly the gov'nor vanished, and I caught in my breath sharply.

Pushing forward I discovered that the appearance of the rock was very deceptive. Facing it directly there was no opening to be seen; but, close against the rocks, a narrow cavity was visible—a mere slit.

Nelson Lee had pushed his way through here, and I quickly followed.

We now found ourselves in a kind of cave entrance—narrow and low, and with a rough, rock-strewn floor. The darkness was pitchy; but this was soon remedied by Nelson Lee, who produced a small but powerful electric torch.

A bright beam of light shot out.

"Is it worth risking, sir?" I whispered.

"My dear Nipper, we must see—we don't happen to be cats," murmured Lee.

I found that the place was bigger than I had at first imagined. It gave a turn to the right, and Nelson Lee paused. He cast the light of his torch upwards. It was not actually a tunnel or a cavern, but a fissure. Two rock walls rose up, meeting some distance overhead.

Nelson Lee examined the floor carefully, nodding to himself.

"Yes, we are right!" he breathed.

"Do you see? Footprints!"

He pointed, and I nodded.

Not a sound could be heard in the fissure. Everything was intensely silent and black. With the torch extinguished we might have been in the catacombs. I had never suspected the existence of this fissure.

We walked on, taking the risk of running into the enemy—for I already regarded the mysterious Indians in this light.

Quite abruptly the character of the place altered, and Nelson Lee and I found ourselves gazing into a wide, low cavern. It was empty, except for two small wooden boxes and a trace of burnt charcoal here and there. The dry, sandy floor had been disturbed, and it was clear that the place had been only recently occupied.

Over on the other side a dark hole could be seen in the rock wall, and this was evidently the entrance to another tunnel, which led further into the bowels of the earth. Nelson Lee turned his light here and there.

"The birds seem to have flown, gov'nor," I remarked softly.

"So it seems, my lad," agreed Nelson Lee; "but we must not take anything for granted. It is quite possible that this piece of ground is honeycombed with passages and caverns. We have never explored the place, and so we are quite in the dark. But do you see all this? Does it bring anything to your mind?"

I looked round, frowning.

"You mean Jerry Dodd's dream?" I said, after a moment or two.

"Certainly," agreed the gov'nor. "Dodd mentioned that he was taken to a strange cavern, after passing through the dream forest, and after being taken

across a vast plain. There can be no doubt, Nipper, that the forest was Bellton Wood, and the vast plain a stretch of Bannington Moor. We are now standing in the spot where Dodd was brought to. It was here that he encountered the mysterious gentlemen from Burmah. We are certainly getting a little nearer to the solution."

"But what about the Burmese beggars?" I inquired. "We've found their haunt, but they don't seem to be on view."

"We mustn't expect too much, young 'un," said Lee. "Our next task will be to explore this other passage, and see where it leads us."

"Good!" I murmured. "And what if we come across the Hindoos?"

"I shall merely demand an explanation," replied the detective. "There is no reason to assume that these people are very dangerous. They may probably resent our interference, but that is only to be expected."

While speaking, Nelson Lee moved forward, and together we entered the low tunnel. It went on straight for ten or twelve feet, and then a sharp corner was reached. At this point another tunnel branched out, and Nelson Lee paused for a moment. Everything was tremendously still; only our own breathing disturbed the complete silence. Lee bent down, and examined the faint marks in the soft sand.

"This way, Nipper," he murmured; "to the left. There are marks leading up both tunnels, but I rather fancy this one."

We entered the tunnel, which was very low. We were obliged to crouch down. And we had not proceeded very far before Nelson Lee came to a sudden halt, and I found him staring down into a yawning black cavern.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "This is rather unexpected."

I pushed past him until I could see clearly. He warned me not to go too close, and I understood. For there, right at our feet, gaped this dark hole, and there seemed to be no bottom to it. A narrow ledge to the left was the only method of passing the danger spot.

"My only hat!" I muttered. "It's a good thing you had the torch, sir."

"Yes, we should have plunged headlong——"

Nelson Lee came to an abrupt pause. He half turned, switching his torch

round. At the same second I fancied I heard a slight sound in the rear. Both Nelson Lee and I caught a brief glimpse of two swarthy, grim faces; then, before we could take any action, the disaster happened.

We were too late to put up any fight. I was pushed from the rear, and Nelson Lee was pushed at the same second. Utterly unable to save ourselves, we clutched at the air desperately, and plunged down into that yawning abyss.

Down we went—down—down!

Nelson Lee's torch had been jerked from his hand, and we were in pitchy darkness.

CHAPTER II.

THE ESCAPE!

S PLASH!

I hardly know what I had been expecting—but certainly not water. A fleeting glimpse of jagged rocks had flown into my mind; I had feared that both Nelson Lee and myself would be smashed to bits on the hard rocks. But no; this was not the case. We both plunged into deep, cold water, and the next moment we were gasping and fighting for breath. The inky darkness enveloped us.

Above, we could see nothing. All was dense black; no sounds came down to us. The Indians had vanished, knowing that there was no escape for us. We must have fallen about twenty feet, and we had no idea as to the nature of our wet prison.

"Are you all right, Nipper?" came Nelson Lee's voice.

"Yes, so far, guv'nor," I gasped. "Great Scott! What the dickens shall we do? The scoundrels! Pitching us down here like this! We shall drown, guv'nor—"

"We are in a tight corner, Nipper—that is absolutely certain," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I am sorry I brought you with me now—"

"Oh, rats, sir!" I broke in. "We'll sink or swim together. It's better that way. But perhaps there's a way of escape."

It was not Nelson Lee's way—or mine—to give up hope. We had been in many grim corners together, and we had come through countless ordeals. This present predicament seemed to be well-nigh hopeless. Shut in these tunnels, miles away from any human

help, we were down in a pit, struggling in deep water, and with absolutely no hand-hold. We could shout until we were exhausted, and assistance would not come. The Indians would hear us, perhaps; but they would take no notice. They had cast us down into this death-trap, and it was their object, no doubt, to finish with us for good and all.

Rescue, therefore, was out of the question. Our only hope was to help ourselves. And this, on the face of it, seemed impossible. After swimming round and round for some few minutes, we gained an excellent idea of our position.

The pit was about ten feet in diameter, being much wider here than at the summit. It formed a kind of rough circle in shape; but the rock walls were smooth and wet and slimy. There was not the slightest trace of a nitch or a cranny—nothing to which we could cling. And the water beneath us was deep—how deep we could not tell.

"It's no good, guv'nor," I gasped at length. "There's no opening anywhere, and it's impossible to climb up these smooth walls. They lean inwards, too, narrowing towards the top."

"You are right, Nipper—it is impossible for us to climb out of this pit," said Nelson Lee, treading water monotonously. "I have a rope in my pocket, but it is of no use in this hopeless position."

"The murderous scum!" I said fiercely. "They didn't give us a chance, sir—they pushed us from behind, and we didn't have a second to defend ourselves. This is going to be the finish, guv'nor—it's all up!"

Nelson Lee was silent—and his silence was far more significant than any amount of words could have been. He probably agreed with me. And so we continued to swim about, becoming colder and colder. My teeth were already chattering. And the intense darkness seemed to push down upon us.

But, automatically, we kept on moving. This had two effects—it kept us from sinking, and it caused the blood to circulate through our veins. We were by no means exhausted, although rapidly tiring. One second's thought was enough to convince me of the hopelessness of the situation. Another fifteen minutes of this useless swimming would be the finish of us. We couldn't keep it up for long. I should probably give up

first. I should sink. Perhaps the guv'nor would try to hold me up, and that would only bring the end more quickly, for I should drag him down, and we should both go under.

Our disappearance from St. Frank's would remain a mystery for all time. Not a soul had known of our expedition; no search would be made. And it might be twenty years before another human being looked down into this watery pit.

In all our experience we had seldom been in such a tight corner—such an apparently hopeless predicament. And it was all the more galling because we had not expected a disaster of this nature. Both Nelson Lee and I had been taken by surprise—we had been caught off our guard.

"It's no good!" I muttered weakly. "We can't do anything, guv'nor—we might as well give up at once——"

"Keep your pecker up, Nipper—never say die!" came Nelson Lee's soft, encouraging voice. "I don't think there's any chance for us, but while there's life there's hope. Hold still now—I'm going to dive."

"What for, guv'nor?"

"It may be fancy, but I have an idea that there is a current in this water," replied Lee. "At all events, the water is fresh and clean—certainly not stagnant, as one would expect it to be. Its source is evidently an underground spring, and I imagine that I can feel a current drawing at my feet. I mean to dive. Keep treading water until I come to the surface again."

"All right, sir," I muttered.

I felt certain that Nelson Lee was only attempting to revive my spirits, and that his supposition was merely imagination. I could feel no current, although I was compelled to admit that the water was fresh and pure.

A feeling of panic came over me when I suddenly realised that I was alone. The guv'nor had dived. After taking a deep breath he went down, with a great splash, and I was left there in the pool, without his presence to support me.

I waited.

The seconds seemed like hours. Still Nelson Lee did not come up. I went round in circles, swimming steadily and mechanically. And the panic increased in my breast. It seemed to me that five minutes had elapsed, and I knew that it was humanly impossible for anybody to

remain under water for such a length of time. All sorts of horrible thoughts came into my mind.

Nelson Lee had dived, and his clothing had caught against a projection, perhaps. He had been held down there, until life passed out of his body. And I was alone—left to my fate!

It's not often that I give up hope—but I certainly did give up hope then. It seemed such a useless proceeding to me—to keep swimming round and round in this objectless fashion. And still Nelson Lee did not come. He had dived straight down, and that was the last I had seen or heard of him.

Were it not for the intense darkness of my prison the appearance of bubbles coming to the surface would have told me the worst. The thought was rather a gruesome one, but I could not get rid of it. If Nelson Lee had drowned——

Suddenly I made up my mind.

I would dive, too. After all, it was better than keeping up this hopeless circular swimming. If Nelson Lee had been caught and trapped at the bottom of the pit it would be too late to rescue him now—I knew that. But it would be something to do—and perhaps I should bring the end more quickly.

I filled my lungs with a deep intake of breath, and dived. Down I went, into the icy water. I descended quite a number of feet, and became aware of a most peculiar sensation. I was being drawn slowly but surely to one side of the pit. The water appeared to have me in its grasp, and with a sudden throbbing of my heart I realised that Nelson Lee had been right.

There was a current!

A strong one, too, for it dragged me along in spite of my efforts. All this only took a few brief seconds, it must be understood. But it seemed much longer to me at the time. Actually, I dived, was caught in that strange current, and the next moment I felt myself against the smooth, rocky walls.

Then, in a moment, I felt myself being forced through an opening in the rocks. I was carried along in a kind of sewer pipe. My lungs felt as though they would burst, and I fought to retain consciousness. Then, when I was nearly gone, I felt myself shooting upwards. Then I spluttered and gasped, and my

lungs were filled with wonderful, life-giving air.

How it happened, I couldn't tell, but I had come to the surface again—but I was no longer in that terrible pit.

"Nipper!" a voice exclaimed. "Thank Heaven you have come!"

For a dull, dreamy second I wondered if the worst had actually happened—I wondered if this was death or unconsciousness. Then a hand grasped my arm, and pinched it so tight that I winced. I was dragged along, and then I felt rough rocks beneath me, and I struggled half out of the water and lay back.

"What—what's happened?" I muttered dazedly.

I seemed to forget things for a moment or two, then I felt something against my lips. I was nearly choked by some fiery liquid which I recognised as brandy. The spirit went down my throat, and soon I was afire with the rapid effect. My wits completely returned. Nelson Lee was beside me, and he screwed on the stopper of his brandy flask.

"Upon my word, Nipper, I thought you were never coming," he exclaimed. "I couldn't get back—the current was too strong. And I was in an agony of mind, wondering whether you would dive down and follow me through."

"But—but I can't understand, sir," I said weakly.

"Yet it is quite simple," replied Nelson Lee. "This is an underground spring—actually a flowing stream. We do not see such things on the surface, but they are always present, nevertheless. This little stream flows through the bottom of that pit. That is the current I felt. When we dived we were caught in that current, and carried through into this cavern. We may be no better off than we were before, but we have certainly been provided with a breathing space."

"It's—it's wonderful, sir," I said wearily. "Oh, my goodness! I thought it was all up with us—I thought you were dead, and—and—. My hat! I'm shivering, sir! It's not particularly warm in here."

Nelson Lee gripped my arm again.

"You are right, my lad," he said grimly. "And it behoves us to get a move on. We must keep moving or we

shall be chilled to the marrow, and that will result in influenza or pneumonia."

Without any light, our task was a difficult one. We could only feel our way. And it was a great relief to find that these rock walls were not sheer and smooth. On the contrary, we found it possible to climb up a kind of gulley, where there was plenty of hand-hold, and many rough edges. We didn't know where we were going, or what this climb would lead to, but we kept on.

And, foot by foot, we mounted. The intense darkness hemmed us in, and we could only judge our position by feeling. Now and again, as we paused, we could hear a faint trickle of water from the stream below. It came to us as though from the depths of a great canyon.

We did not lose sight of the possibility that we should soon find ourselves in one of the tunnels, and that we might come across the Indians. But Nelson Lee would now be prepared for these murderous fellows.

Our adventure had proved quite conclusively that the men from the East were grim and dangerous, and that their mission was not an innocent one. What business they could have with Jerry Dodd remained a mystery—and we did not feel like making any attempt to solve it just then.

"My hat! How much higher are we going, sir?" I asked breathlessly.

"We must be fairly near the surface now, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "Indeed, it is possible that we shall ultimately come out right on the face of the quarry cliff. That is, if we come out at all."

"That's right—be cheerful!" I muttered. "Well, I'm pretty well warmed up now, so that's one good thing. There's not much danger of us catching cold, sir."

"The main thing is to keep moving, Nipper," said Lee. "We are having a difficult task, and it is very unfortunate that we have no means of lighting our way. But if we persevere we shall probably meet with success."

We did persevere, and still we continued to mount upwards. Then we got to a point where it was impossible to go any higher. The rocks hemmed us in on all sides. For a time we believed that all hope was lost. No matter which way we crawled, we could feel no outlet.

But Nelson Lee was hopeful all the time.

"I am convinced, Nipper, that there is an exit somewhere," he declared. "The air here is quite fresh and pure—and, indeed, there is a distinct current. That proves conclusively that there must be a cavity leading to the outside."

"Yes, but it may be only a tiny hole, sir," I said gloomily.

"We must chance that, my boy."

The experience was an extraordinary one. Crouching there in total darkness, in this strange fissure in the rocks, it was hard to realise that a yawning space lay beneath us, and that a bad slip might lead to a disastrous fall.

I was wondering if we should ever succeed in our object, when I heard Nelson Lee draw in his breath sharply. The next moment he touched my arm.

"This way, Nipper," he said softly. "I think I have discovered the secret. The exit is right above our heads, and it will be necessary for us to execute a somewhat difficult climbing feat. I will go first, and see how things stand."

I couldn't see the *guy*'nor, of course, but I could feel that he was standing up. He reached with his long arms, and grasped a ledge of rock which was just within reach. If we could have seen, it would have been different. Right above our heads there was a jagged hole in the rocks, something like a trap-door. And through this Nelson Lee hauled himself.

There was very little room for him to move, and he only just managed to turn round so that he could lean down and reach one of his arms for me to grasp. It was not so easy for me to get through, for I was not blessed with Nelson Lee's tallness. However, with his assistance, I managed to scramble up somehow or other.

Then, using our elbows and knees and feet, we worked our way up a kind of shaft, not unlike a huge, uneven chimney. And at last Nelson Lee felt a draught of cool air fanning his cheeks. Almost before he knew it he found himself looking through a small hole. Stars were twinkling, and he could see the moor, and the opposite cliffs of the old quarry.

After the intense blackness of the fissure, the night seemed quite light, and Lee could see many objects which

were ordinarily invisible to the human eye. The night was calm and mild, and there was no sign of any light.

"Well, Nipper, we have succeeded so far," murmured Nelson Lee. "As I suspected, we have come out on the face of the cliff, and even now it may not be possible for us to get safely on to the moor. It would be something of a squeeze for a terrier to climb through this hole."

"Just what I thought!" I grunted. "Still, we've found the open, and that's a blessing."

Nelson Lee did not feel very confident as he tested the rocks at the edges of the little exit. To his surprise and delight, however, these rocks were loose, and almost at the first touch a large chunk fell away. A minute later the opening was large enough to allow his body to pass through.

"Splendid, Nipper!" said Lee. "We are extremely lucky."

It was rather a ticklish business getting through the opening, for the rock edge was in a precarious state, and bits crumbled away constantly. It was fortunate for us, really, that the rocks did crumble away—or we should have been imprisoned.

We found ourselves not far from the summit of the quarry cliff. A drop of sixty feet lay below us, but the cliff over our heads was not sheer, and with a little care we managed to climb up—until, at last, we stood upon the grassy moor, safe and sound and none the worse for our perilous adventure.

"Thank goodness!" I exclaimed fervently. "I thought it was all up with us, *guy*'nor."

Nelson Lee put an arm round my shoulders, and gave me an affectionate little hug.

"Now that the danger is over, young 'un, I don't mind admitting that for a period I almost gave up hope," he said quietly. "And now we must get straight back to the school, and tuck ourselves between blankets."

We set off briskly across the moor.

"I had the wind up properly when we were in that pit, *guy*'nor," I said. "I never thought we should get out alive, and here we are walking back to St. Frank's as though nothing had happened. What are you going to do about it, *guy*'nor? What action will you take?"

"I don't know that I shall take any action at present, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "This adventure has fully convinced me that our Burmese visitors are highly dangerous, and grimly in earnest in their undertaking—whatever that may happen to be. I fancy we have had enough of them for one night."

I was in entire agreement. By this time we were nearly dry, our exertions had caused us to perspire freely, and the heat of our bodies had dried the clothes on us. And there was certainly no danger of us contracting serious chills.

Our suits were in a terrible condition, and, as I was collarless, I daresay I looked a sorry spectacle. Not that this mattered a jot. We had come through our adventure with whole skins, and we were now thoroughly on our guard. The Indians would not catch us napping on a second occasion.

We found St. Frank's silent and asleep, and we crept in and made our way straight to Nelson Lee's study—the gov'nor insisting upon my taking a drop more brandy before going up to bed. His flask was empty, but there was plenty in the gov'nor's cupboard.

Nelson Lee entered the study and switched on the electric light. Then he stood in the doorway, quite still. There was something in his attitude which caused me to wonder, and I pushed past him.

"Apparently we have had visitors," observed Lee smoothly.

"My only hat!" I ejaculated.

The apartment was in a peculiar condition. Apparently every drawer in the room had been ransacked—the contents taken out, and scattered all over the floor. The cupboard had been smashed open, and even Nelson Lee's bureau was in a wrecked condition. In short, every article of furniture had suffered.

"Burglars!" I exclaimed breathlessly.

"Not the ordinary type, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "I have not the slightest doubt that our late enemies are responsible for this state of affairs."

"But—but what's the idea——"

"The golden image!" said Lee grimly. "They know that the idol is in my possession, Nipper, and as soon as they had dealt with us in the quarry, they knew that the coast was clear. So they came along—and this is the result."

"And do you think they've got the image, sir?"

"I have an idea that their search was a failure," replied Lee drily. "The image is in a safe place, and the Indians failed. Probably we shall find the bedroom in a similar condition to this."

We went upstairs, and Nelson Lee's surmise was correct. The bedroom had also been ransacked. But the golden image, which the Indians were so anxious to recover, was safe and sound in Nelson Lee's possession, for he had concealed it in a distant part of the building, in a secret cavity of his own.

"Now, my boy, you must go to bed," said Lee, smiling. "I am afraid our investigation has not proved very successful—but we know, at all events, that these Burmese fellows are dangerous. We must be very cautious in all our dealings with them in future. I rely upon you to say nothing to the other boys."

"Not even to Montie and Tommy, sir?"

"If it is necessary, you can tell them, because they can be trusted," replied the gov'nor. "But keep your own counsel as far as possible, Nipper. My main object, in future, will be to discover what connection these men of the East have with Master Jerry Dodd."

A minute or two later I stole into the Remove dormitory, and slipped into bed. The other fellows knew nothing of what had happened during these eventful hours of the night.

CHAPTER III.

THE WANDERING MINSTRELS!

JERRY DODD walked out of the Ancient House doorway with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets. There was a frown upon his usually cheerful brow, and he stared away in the direction of the playing grounds.

Then he gave vent to a deep sigh. It was a half-holiday that day, and most of the juniors were getting ready to participate in a practice match—a scratch affair between the Ancient House and the College House. It was not one of the recognised House fixtures.

"Well, Dodd, what's the matter with you?"

Jerry turned with a bit of a start, and found Nelson Lee by his side. The Australian junior grinned, his face clearing at once.

"I don't figure there's anything the matter, sir," he replied.

"Then what was the meaning of that heavy sigh a moment ago?" smiled Lee.

"I sort of couldn't help it, sir," said Jerry Dodd frankly. "By jings! When I see all the chums getting busy on Little Side, I get a kind of pain. I've got to spend the afternoon with my books, sir, and I reckon that's pretty hard."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, Dodd, I suppose it is," he agreed. "You have been getting on very well with your studies, and I am quite pleased with you. But it was your father's desire that you should confine yourself to study, and it would not be right for me to overrule Mr. Dodd's instructions."

"That's good hearing, sir," said Jerry Dodd eagerly. "I guess you're not like the Head—he won't let me take a hand at cricket, although I figure I'm pining away for a good game. It's real hard lines, sir."

"Well, my boy, perhaps matters will be improved before long," said Nelson Lee, patting the junior on the back. "Stick to your studies, and do your best. You must not blame Dr. Stafford for banning you from cricket, for the Head is only carrying out your father's instructions. If I can bring about any alteration, I will do so."

"That's first-class of you, sir," said Jerry. "Say, I kind of like you, sir."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"That's the style, young 'un," he said easily. "And don't forget that when you are in trouble, just come along to my study."

The detective passed on his way, leaving Jerry looking out across the Triangle in a thoughtful mood. Then, with another sigh, he turned and went to his study, and was soon busy with his books, setting himself to the work with all his heart and soul. It was the only way of obtaining peace.

He loved cricket better than anything else in life. It was breath to him; he was only really happy when he was engaged in some open-air sport, and cricket was his favourite game. At St. Frank's he was barred from all sports, for his father had decided that he should devote his time to indoor study.

Jerry was a conscientious fellow, and

he was respecting his father's wishes with grim earnestness. He had progressed with his studies in an astonishing manner, and was now well up in all his subjects. He had a faculty of putting himself whole-heartedly into anything he did, and, although studying went against the grain, he persevered. But it was cruel for him to be debarred from playing cricket in his spare time.

While he was "swotting" away in Study F, I came out of the Ancient House with Tommy and Sir Montie. We were all immaculately attired in white flannels, and I was carrying a cricket bat under my arm. The match against Christine and Co. would soon be commencing, and we were eager to be on the field of operations.

"This match is really to give some of the outsiders a chance to see what they can do," I remarked. "I've got an idea that Gristh is pretty good at bowling, and this afternoon he'll be put to the test. There's Armstrong, too—he's been showing up well in the batting line during the last week or two. If any of the fellows prove worthy of playing for the school, they'll get their caps."

"It's jolly hard to find decent cricketers," said Tommy Watson, shaking his head. "Everybody's still talking about the match with Bannington, and the way we won by the skin of our teeth. It was a ripping match."

We crossed the Triangle in the glorious sunlight. A faint breeze was blowing, and the weather could not have been better for our afternoon's programme. I was feeling quite fit, except for a slight stiffness of the joints. My adventure of the previous night had left no harmful results. Now, in the broad daylight, it seemed like a dream—I could hardly realise that Nelson Lee and I had been in such dire peril.

"I was thinkin' it wouldn't be a bad idea to give Owen major a trial at bowlin'," suggested Sir Montie. "He's fairly tricky, you know, an' with a little encouragement I think he might blossom out into a useful——"

Tregellis-West paused in the middle of his sentence. He removed his pince-nez, turned, and gazed in the direction of the main gates. For his speech had been interrupted by a most peculiar sound. It certainly came from the gateway, but when we looked, nothing out of the common was visible.

"Begad!" said Montie. "Whatever is the matter over there?"

"Sounds like old Cuttle having a fit!" suggested Watson.

Josh Cuttle was the school porter, and I thought it most unlikely that he was having a fit near the gateway, as Watson humorously suggested. The sound which floated across to us increased in volume, and I did not fail to recognise the twanging of a banjo. It was accompanied by a hoarse, foghorn-like sound.

"A musical entertainment, by what I can hear," I suggested. "Suppose we stroll over and have a look. Handforth and Co. seem pretty keen, anyway. There's Pitt going there now, too. Quite a crowd is collecting."

Handforth, Church, and McClure, of Study D, were already at the gateway, and Reginald Pitt, Fatty Little, and two or three others were strolling in the same direction. We crossed over, and then suddenly we came within sight of the perpetrators of the weird sounds.

Two extraordinary figures were standing just outside the gateway. They were minstrels, apparently, but remarkable specimens of that tribe. One was an enormously big man, attired in gaily striped cotton trousers, a short white jacket with enormous red buttons, and a white top-hat which was altogether too small for him. A tremendous blue bow was at his neck. His face was inky black, and a great mop of curly black hair crowned his head.

His companion was of a very different type—a boy, it seemed. He was exceedingly small, attired in just the same way as his large friend, with black face, woolly hair, and a white topper. It was somewhat difficult to see him, however, owing to the fact that he was behind a banjo nearly as large as himself. With this instrument he was struggling manfully, producing sound which was possibly meant to be music.

The big man was singing to the accompaniment of the banjo. What the song was it was difficult to tell, and, as a musical pair, the minstrels were a ghastly failure. But they certainly caused quite a deal of amusement. I came to a halt directly I caught sight of them.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "How frightfully common, dear old boys! Things are gettin' into a bad state for us to have these shockin' fellows strummin' for pennies outside the gates!"

I chuckled.

"My dear ass," I said, "can't you recognise who they are?"

Both Montie and Tommy stared hard.

"How the dickens can we recognise them when they've got their faces all blacked up?" asked Watson. "I suppose they're a couple of wandering minstrels, and perhaps they've mistaken St. Frank's for a pub!"

"You ass!" I grinned. "They're Podge and Midge!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" gasped Watson. "So they are!"

We all smiled as we brought to mind the comical pair who had been in the district for some little time. Messrs. Podge and Midge, the world-famous sleuths, had been hanging about St. Frank's for the express purpose of keeping their eyes upon Jerry Dodd, although why they should have undertaken this task remained a mystery. They had apparently been instructed by someone to do so, and it could hardly be said that they had made a success of their venture.

So far they had fallen into several bad blunders, and they had only succeeded in making themselves look ridiculous. But they were a persevering pair, and I jumped at once to their game now.

It was a half-holiday, and they wanted to be on the spot in order to keep their eyes open, in case Jerry Dodd should go out. For some peculiar reason, Messrs. Podge and Midge wanted to follow Jerry wherever he went. Perhaps they wanted to guard him, in case of possible danger.

"The prize duffers!" I grinned. "Of course, they think they're disguised, and that we sha'n't see through the wheeze. By Jove! They're asking for it—they're simply yelling for it, my sons!"

"For what?"

"Why, to be spoofed, of course!" I replied. "I'm an easy-going chap, and I can't allow an appeal of this sort to pass unnoticed. These wonderful detectives have come here asking for trouble. It would be too bad if we didn't give them some. We're going to be kind to them, my children. Just leave it to your Uncle Nipper, and Messrs. Podge and Midge will be provided with the case of their lives!"

Meanwhile, Handforth and Co. were criticising the efforts of the two musicians.

"Pretty awful!" said Handforth candidly, in a voice which was plainly

audible to the perspiring minstrels. "Did you ever hear such a ghastly noise? What shall we do—get the hose-pipe and give them a wash?"

Church nudged his leader.

"Dry up, you ass!" he muttered.

"Why should I?" asked Handforth loudly. "Do you think we're going to stand this horrible noise? If these fat-heads think they're going to get pennies, they've made a bloomer. Now then, you men, clear off! The best thing you can do is to bunk while you've got the chance!"

The fat minstrel bowed.

"Spare a copper, young gents," he puffed thickly. "We're the wandering minstrels, we are, always ready to oblige with a song and a dance. Just tell us your requirements, young gents, and we'll do our best."

"Hear, hear!"

"Sing us 'Swanee'!" grinned Pitt.

The minstrels obliged, and the result was so dire that everybody howled. Handforth, the amateur detective of the Ancient House, stood quite close to Messrs. Podge and Midge, and his wonderful brain failed to penetrate the disguises.

The sleuths were fully convinced that these disguises were absolutely perfect, and that they were safe from recognition. If everybody had been like Handforth, they would certainly have been safe.

Church and McClure dragged their leader back.

"Can't you see, you ass?" muttered Church.

"See what?"

"Don't you recognise 'em?"

"They've never been here before!" said Handforth. "How can I recognise—"

"Oh, my goodness! And you call yourself smart!" groaned Church.

"Don't give the show away—they're those blessed detectives we saw the other day! Podge and Midge, the deadliest sleuths on earth!"

Handforth's mouth opened, and he gasped. Then, in a second he pulled himself together, and nodded. Considering that he had such short notice, he did it very well. He looked at Church and McClure calmly.

"Yes, of course," he said, with careless ease. "Do you think I didn't know it?"

"Why, you—you spoofer—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I rather pride myself that my eyes are pretty keen. Of course they're Podge and Midge—any ass can see that! They must be on the track of something. Jolly good disguises, too! It takes a chap like me to penetrate 'em. You can't diddle me!"

Church and McClure looked at one another, and said nothing. They knew Handforth, and they were not surprised at his attitude. Until they had pointed it out, he had been in total ignorance of the pair's identity; but it was just like him to claim the credit of having made the discovery.

The disguised sleuths were struggling valiantly to render "Swanee" in a commendable manner, much to the amusement of the crowd. And just then Jerry Dodd strolled into view. He was wearing a blazer with glaring red stripes, and a straw hat with a band of similar description. He came nearer, and Mr. Podge almost paused in the middle of his song.

They had come here for the sole purpose of watching Jerry, and here he was. They felt convinced that their ruse had been successful. The Australian junior remained for some few minutes, and tossed some coppers to the minstrels. This led many other juniors to follow his example.

Then Jerry turned, and walked out of sight. Mr. Podge breathed a sigh of relief a moment later. For Jerry Dodd was again in sight, and now he pushed his way through the crowd with his back to the minstrels, and set off up the road.

His departure had an immediate effect upon the musicians. They scrambled their coppers together, bowed before the grinning audience, and hastily went across to two bicycles which were lying against the opposite hedge.

The juniors yelled as the quaint pair made several unsuccessful attempts to start. It was rather a wonder that Mr. Podge's bicycle withstood the strain; but at length he succeeded in riding off. And Mr. Midge, in spite of the big banjo, followed his companion's example.

They went off up the road, leaving a trail of dust behind them, and most of the juniors went off to the playing fields, and thought no more of the matter.

But Messrs. Podge and Midge only

waited till they had turned the corner—and then they were out of sight of the school gates. Then, quickly dismounting, they pushed their bicycles through a big gap in the hedge, and took cover in an adjoining meadow. The figure of Jerry Dodd, with his red-striped blazer and straw hat, was still in view. Jerry was strolling leisurely up the lane, taking the direction of the moor.

"Good!" said Mr. Podge, as he and his tiny companion dropped their bicycles against the inside of the hedge. "Success has crowned our efforts, Mr. Midge."

"Undoubtedly!" said Mr. Midge. "But we must hasten, Mr. Podge—there is not a moment to lose. We must not let the boy get out of sight."

"Have no fear—we are capable of picking up the trail whenever we wish to do so," puffed the fat man. "But I will agree, Mr. Midge, that it will be better for us to hasten our steps. Our disguises are perfect, and they have not been detected. Our object has been achieved, for we have seen Dodd, and we know his direction. And not one of the other boys have guessed our real object."

While speaking, Mr. Podge had been tearing off his minstrel's garb, which was worn over his usual clothing. He now stood revealed, attired in a light check suit with a red waistcoat, and all his clothing appeared too small for him. Mr. Midge, on the other hand, was practically lost in his own suit.

Then Mr. Podge produced a large bottle from a hand-bag which had been lying behind the hedge. The bottle probably contained a spirit solution, for a swift application of this liquid by means of a handkerchief resulted in a removal of the black from their faces. Altogether, Messrs Podge and Midge did not take more than four minutes to become themselves. It was a creditable performance—although their faces did look somewhat grimy.

"We are ready," said Mr. Podge. "And now we will go on the track. It is our duty to follow the boy, and to protect him from all harm. And we have never been known to fail, Mr. Midge. Come!"

Mr. Midge followed without a word. He trotted behind his big companion in very much the same way that a terrier trots behind his master. And they were both agreeably surprised to observe that Jerry Dodd was still in sight.

The figure in the red blazer could be distinctly seen up the road. He was walking along slowly, deeply immersed in a book. And the two trackers kept well behind, ready to dodge into the hedge if the occasion demanded.

Their calculations were somewhat upset by the fact that their quarry soon left the road, and plunged into a thick little spinney, which came right down to the lane. Jerry Dodd, in short, completely vanished. It was quite an unexpected move.

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Midge. "We must hasten, Mr. Podge!"

The fat man snapped his fingers.

"No human being has ever been known to beat us," he declared. "It will be child's play for us to follow his tracks through the spinney. We are both experts in the art of following trails!"

"Undoubtedly, Mr. Podge, undoubtedly," murmured the little man.

They hurried on. But when they got opposite the spinney there were so many gaps in the hedge that it was quite impossible to determine which one their quarry had used.

And then, while they stood there, rather uncertain, they were suddenly rooted to the ground. A long-drawn-out, agonised scream came from the spinney. It was a sound which caused Mr. Podge to turn pale, and which made Mr. Midge tremble visibly.

The scream died away, and a deadly silence reigned.

"Did—did you hear that, Mr. Podge?" asked Mr. Midge faintly.

"It was a scream!" said Mr. Podge, with a grim note in his voice. "Undoubtedly it was a human scream. My ears are never deceived, Mr. Midge. The boy has met with trouble. We must investigate."

"Undoubtedly, Mr. Podge, undoubtedly."

They burst through one of the gaps, and advanced into the little wood with an air of exaggerated caution. They had not proceeded far before they were brought to a standstill. A long-drawn-out moan sounded just away to the left. They gazed at one another fearfully.

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Midge feebly. "What—what was that?"

Mr. Podge did not answer. He burst through the undergrowth, and then he abruptly came to a halt, staring before him with horrified gaze. And Mr.

Midge, peering through also, uttered a little squeal of terror.

A shocking sight met their gaze.

A little dip lay just in front of them, its bottom covered with long ferns. And there, in the midst of the ferns, lay a human figure—a figure which Messrs. Podge and Midge instantly recognised by the red striped blazer and the straw hat.

It was lying face downwards among the ferns, quite motionless, in a strange, unnatural attitude. And, protruding from the shoulder blades, was the handle of an enormous dagger. The weapon had been driven in to the hilt.

"Good gracious!" puffed Mr. Podge faintly. "This—this is terrible!"

"We have failed, Mr. Podge—oh, we have failed!" wailed Mr. Midge. "It was our duty to mount guard over this boy, and to protect him from any harm. And he has been murdered within ear-shot—struck down by some dastardly miscreant who is even now within this wood!"

Mr. Podge pulled himself together.

"Perhaps the boy is not dead!" he said shakily. "We will examine him—"

"Look, Mr. Podge—look!" gasped the little man, clutching at his companion's jacket.

Mr. Podge turned, half-fearful, wondering what fresh horror would meet his gaze. And he turned a shade paler as he stared at him from between the parted branches of a small sapling.

It was a face which would have raised comment anywhere—a face adorned by a big black beard, bushy eyebrows, and a villainous scowl. The branches were parted further, a hand came into view, and the two startled sleuths could see that the hand held an enormous revolver.

"Aha! I have the pair of you now!" exclaimed the stranger, in a fierce tone.

"One step, and I will shoot—I will let daylight into you! Beware of Blackbearded Dan, the Detective's Dread!"

"Upon my soul!" panted Mr. Midge feverishly.

"Up with your hands, or you will get lead poisoning!" went on Blackbearded Dan harshly. "You have seen what happened to the kid—so obey my orders, or you will share the same fate! I'll riddle you so much that you'll look like two pieces of gauze!"

"You—you murderous scoundrel!" said Mr. Podge, pulling himself together,

and advancing. "Do I care for your threats? Pah! We are brave men, and we have faced fire before now. We are Podge and Midge—the men who know no fear!"

"Quite so, Mr. Podge—quite so!" said Mr. Midge, shivering.

Mr. Podge moved forward, and Blackbearded Dan vanished. Apparently, he had no intention of carrying out his threats. The two wonderful detectives could hear him moving through the trees.

"He has taken flight, Mr. Midge!" said Mr. Podge, with renewed courage.

"Our very appearance has alarmed him! Come! We will arrest the murderer of young Dodd! Justice must be done!"

Mr. Podge forced his way through the bushes. He caught sight of Blackbearded Dan almost at once. The latter dodged away, and moved round in a circle—until, at length, he returned once more to the little hollow, where that grim form in the blazer was lying, with the dagger protruding from the shoulder blades.

Mr. Podge was now in full chase, with Mr. Midge trailing behind. And, just at that moment, Blackbearded Dan tripped on a root and fell headlong. He lay still for a moment, moaning. And Mr. Podge, taking all his courage in his two hands, pounced upon the rascal with a puff of triumph.

"Now, you murderous rogue, I've got you!" said Mr. Podge victoriously. "In the name of the law, I arrest you—Good—good heavens!"

Mr. Podge came to an abrupt halt, and he stared dazedly at his prisoner. The latter's long macintosh had come open, revealing cricketing flannels. His beard had gone askew, exposing a clean, hairless chin.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blackbearded Dan. "Hands up!"

He thrust his weapon fully into Mr. Podge's face. And it was now quite obvious that the huge revolver was nothing more formidable than a pea-shooter, so designed to look like a real pistol.

"What—what does this mean?" gasped Mr. Podge.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Yells of laughter came from all sides. And, looking up, Messrs Podge and Midge were somewhat staggered to find a number of grinning faces peering through the bushes on all sides. Blackbearded Dan had removed his marvellous disguise, and stood revealed as—myself.

I grinned calmly to the dumbfounded sleuths.

"Just a little joke, Mr. Podge," I said sweetly. "Sorry to give you a scare, Mr. Midge. But as you came to St. Frank's asking for a ragging, we thought we might as well oblige. Mind you don't lose the trail!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Podge looked at Mr. Midge, and they both breathed hard. It dawned upon them that somebody had been impudent enough to spoof them. They realised that there was something in the nature of a joke here. Then Mr. Podge's gaze fell upon that still form in the blazer. He frowned heavily.

"Boy!" he thundered. "How dare you? Do you realise that you are joking and laughing in the presence of—death?"

I looked horrified.

"Death!" I panted, reeling back.

"Yes, you heartless young rascal—death!" puffed Mr. Podge. "The form lying there is that of Master Jerrold Dodd. He was murdered not more than ten minutes ago—and you can do nothing better than play your silly jokes at such a time."

I wept.

"Oh, Doddy—poor old Doddy!" I wailed. "He's gone, never to come back!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I looked up reproachfully.

"You unfeeling asses!" I said hoarsely. "Have you no hearts? Can't you see Dodd lying here—dead? Come and help me turn him over, so that we can have a last look at his dear old face!"

The juniors, still grinning—to the intense disapproval of Messrs. Podge and Midge—came down into the depression. Then we turned over the still form in the blazer, and dragged it out of the ferns.

"Poor old Doddy!" I said sorrowfully.

"Oh-oooooh!" sobbed the juniors.

Mr. Podge opened his mouth, turned pale, then changed to crimson. He stared fascinatedly at the form in the blazer. It was not human at all! Instead of a face, there was—straw! Straw was sticking out of the armholes—straw protruding from the trouser-legs!

The truth was out—the "dead body" of Jerry Dodd was a dummy.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the sobbing chorus.

But the sobs were sobs of uncontrollable laughter. Mr. Midge looked quite

scared, and he edged away. Mr. Podge puffed himself out, and bestowed a look upon us that ought, strictly speaking, to have shrivelled us up on the spot.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Boys!" thundered Mr. Podge. "How—how dare you? Do you realise that you have had the audacity to play a trick upon me—me! Good heavens! This is too much! I shall——"

But his words were drowned in the fresh yells of laughter.

The two celebrated crime investigators looked dignified—at least, they attempted to do so. But dignity, under such circumstances was not only difficult, but practically impossible.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Podge!"

"Good old Sexton Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have nothing to say to you!" shouted Mr. Podge stiffly. "I have never been so insulted in all my career, and I can promise you that you will suffer dearly for this impertinent piece of foolery."

"Undoubtedly, Mr. Podge—undoubtedly!" said Mr. Midge heatedly.

I grinned at them.

"Only a joke, gentlemen," I explained. "You see, you came to St. Frank's in those queer disguises, and we simply couldn't help spoofing you. If it's of any interest, you may like to hear how it was done?"

"I wish to hear nothing from you, sir!" puffed Mr. Podge severely.

"Nothing whatever!" said Mr. Midge, pushing his head forward and looking more than ever like a bird, with his thin, beak-like nose. "You must realise who we are, and it is just as well that you should know that we never make mistakes—we never get on false trails, and we never fail in our investigations!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cases investigated while you wait!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Estimates free!"

"No charge for delivery!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Steady on, you chaps!" I grinned.

"You see, Mr. Podge, I put on that red blazer, and lingered about the lane so that you'd see me after you got rid of your disguise. Some of the chaps had come on in advance, by another route, and they prepared the dummy. I think I did that scream pretty well, and it only took me a couple of ticks to adopt the



After taking a deep breath the guv'nor dived, and I was left there alone, without his presence to support me.

character of Blackbearded Dan, the Detective's Dread!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And Jerry Dodd is hard at work in his study," I concluded sweetly. "He'll probably be there all the afternoon, so if you're thinking of any more minstrel stunts, take my advice—forget 'em!"

Mr. Podge frowned upon me in a magisterial manner.

"Boy, I have nothing further to say to you!" he puffed fiercely. "Come, Mr. Midge, we will remain here with these young reprobates no longer—we have received enough insults at their hands! Pah! I am disgusted! What boys are coming to now-a-days is quite beyond my comprehension."

"I agree, Mr. Podge—I agree," piped Mr. Midge.

And together the famous pair stalked out of the little clearing, and wended their way back to the lane. Their retreat was not rendered more orderly by the fact that sounds of hysterical laughter floated out to them from the spinney.

Messrs. Podge and Midge had scarcely covered themselves with glory.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CLEVERNESS OF BUD.

BUD thrust his head out of the stable doorway, and gave a welcome little whinney. He stamped his hoofs with delight, and his ears were pricked forward in keen anticipation. But out in the stable yard nobody was to be seen.

It was early morning, and the breakfast bell for the junior school would not ring for another hour. Only one or two fellows were out of doors, and these were cricket enthusiasts, taking an early turn at the nets.

Round here, at the rear of the Ancient House, everything was quiet and orderly. The stable yard was empty, but Bud, Jerry Dodd's sagacious little pony was all agog with expectancy. As a matter of fact, he had heard from afar, a peculiar whistle—the whistle which he well knew.

It came again, and Bud once more whinneyed in reply. Then Jerry Dodd's sturdy form came into view round the angle of the building. He gave a cheery hail, and Bud lowered his head, and generally behaved in a manner which revealed his delight.

"Here we are, old son," said Jerry cheerfully, as he arrived at the stable. "How goes it this morning? I figure we're going to spend a little time together, chum."

Bud pushed his nose forward and rubbed against his master's shoulder and head. They were great friends, these two, and Jerry was the only fellow at St. Frank's who had such a pet. Indeed, he had refused to leave Australia until he received permission to bring Bud along with him.

Within a very short time the pony was harnessed and ready for a trot. His harness was spick and span—of beautiful quality and glittering. Jerry tipped one of the ostlers regularly in a liberal way to keep the harness in good order and to look after Bud as he would look after a child.

"Now we're going to have a bit of sport," declared Jerry. "We've got a good hour, old chum, and we'll make full use of it. What's the matter with going for a romp over the moor? Couldn't do better, eh?"

Bud tapped his foot impatiently upon the cobbles, and looked round at his master with expectant ears, and with his eyes glowing. It was quite astonishing what amount of expression the pony could get into his eyes.

Jerry Dodd saw no reason why he should not go to Bannington Moor for a ride. The place had no significance to him. The Indians had certainly taken him to the moor on two occasions; but Jerry was unaware of this, having been under the influence of a mysterious drug at the time.

He mounted on Bud's back and trotted serenely out of the stable yard and along round the building into the Triangle. One or two juniors were already about, and they looked at the Australian boy with envious eyes.

"Lucky boulder!" said De Valerie. "We can't all have ponies and go out for rides before brekker. Some fellows seem to have all the fun!"

"Rather!" agreed Owen major enviously.

Jerry Dodd smiled cheerily as he saw the juniors looking at him.

"Mind you're back in time!" said Hubbard.

"Don't you worry, chum, we're only going for a little trot," said Jerry. "Just up the lane and—— By jinks!"

The morning was not very sunny, the

sky being overcast and a fair breeze was blowing. Jerry Dodd's hat had been suddenly lifted off his head and carried away on the breeze almost to the wall of the College House.

"Righto! I'll get it!" said De Valerie obligingly.

"Thanks all the same, but Bud will do the trick, I reckon," smiled Jerry, dismounting. "He's great guns at fetching things."

The juniors stared.

"Rats!" said Owen major bluntly. "You can't kid me, Doddy! It's all bunkum to say that you can send that pony across the Triangle to fetch your roof!"

"Think so?" smiled Jerry. "Well, we'll see!"

He turned to the pony who was standing near by, quite mock and well-mannered.

"Say, Bud, there's work for you," said Jerry quietly. "Look round for my hat and bring it here. Savvy, old chum? Hat—my hat!"

The pony cocked his ears intelligently, swung round with a sudden, unexpected movement, and trotted across the Triangle. He went in two or three directions aimlessly, and then suddenly made a bee line for the College House wall.

"Good boy!" murmured Jerry. "He's spotted it!"

The juniors watched wonderingly. Bud went straight up to the hat, seized it with his teeth, and then came trotting serenely back. Arriving next to Jerry, he held it out with almost human politeness.

"Thanks, old man!" said the Australian boy.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed De Valerie blankly.

"My goodness! The pony's a wonder!" declared Owen major. "I thought you were spoofing when you said he'd really fetch your lid!"

Jerry grinned and mounted, and a moment later he trotted out of the Triangle and into the lane. He turned off and went up the road in the direction of Bannington Moor. He didn't quite fancy going towards Belton village. There were only the ordinary roads out that way, whereas, on the moor, he could romp about as he chose.

One or two spots of rain fell at intervals, but Jerry took no notice of

these. And he was quite right, for there was not much likelihood of a shower. By midday, probably, the sun would be fully shining.

"Right-ho, old boy; you can let her go!" said Jerry abruptly.

Bud bounded forward at once, and was soon tearing down the lane at a sharp gallop. They left a cloud of dust behind them. Bud was only too glad to let himself go, for he dearly loved a canter in the early morning.

They soon passed the Mount, and after that it was not long before the wide expanse of the moor came into sight. Bud was trotting again now, and taking things easily. The last hedges would soon be left behind, and then the open heath would be on all sides.

Jerry was leaning forward to say something confidential to his four-footed friend when he straightened up abruptly, and quickly brought his left hand round so that he could see it.

"By jinks!" he muttered.

He had felt a sharp prick near his wrist—an unaccountable sting, like that of a vicious insect. And, to his surprise, he saw something sticking into his skin—something which looked like a long, straight thorn.

He plucked it out quickly, and as he did so he remembered an incident which had occurred some days before. He called to mind the fact that Nelson Lee had extracted a drop of blood from his neck. This was not the first time that he had felt an uncomfortable sting; but now he had the explanation in hand.

A tiny, pin-like dart!

"I guess I'll show that to Mr. Lee later on," he muttered.

He slipped it into his waistcoat pocket. And, almost unconsciously, he put his wrist to his mouth and sucked at the insignificant wound. It was throbbing slightly, but not enough to really hurt.

A tiny drop of blood was drawn out, and Jerry wiped it off with his handkerchief. He repeated this operation once or twice, and now saw that the skin in the immediate vicinity of the prick was inflamed and slightly swollen.

"Golly! I wonder what it can be?" he murmured, puzzled.

But he thought nothing more of it just then, and rode on. He was soon on the moor, and he allowed Bud to

have a good romp. Then Jerry became aware of a peculiar feeling in his head. He seemed to be dizzy, and this was most unusual for him. He did not remember having been dizzy in his life before—at least, not in this peculiar way.

"Say, Bud, there's something wrong," he said, as he pulled at the reins. "I can kind of see two of everything, and I reckon—By jings! I feel almighty queer! I—I can't understand—"

His voice trailed away, and without any warning he sank forward on to the pony's neck. He became quite limp, and sagged sideways while the pony was still trotting. Then he tumbled headlong off, and rolled in the grass.

Jerry Dodd remained quite still.

Bud knew that something was wrong at once. He turned round, his ears fully on the alert. He approached his master slowly, his head bent down, his sensitive nostrils twitching.

The pony started back after a moment, and whinneyed.

But Jerry Dodd made no sign, and remained in a crumpled heap on the ground. And at that moment, two strange figures came into view from a clump of trees. They were dark-skinned men—Indians or Burmese. And they ran with stealthy, gliding footsteps towards the fallen boy.

Bud took alarm at once, reared excitedly once or twice, and then galloped away from the spot. He came to a halt after a while and looked round. Jerry Dodd was being carried swiftly by the two Indians towards the old ruined mill which stood close by. The men from the East gave no thought, apparently, to the pony, for they did not once glance in his direction.

Bud seemed to be uncertain, but, at last, he made up his equine mind, and trotted swiftly towards the road. Once there, he did not look back, but went along at a speedy, steady trot.

He went past the Mount without slackening, and so on round the bends in the direction of St. Frank's. A farmer's cart hove into view, driven by a labourer who looked with much astonishment at the riderless pony. Bud sped past as though under a rider's full control.

At last he came to the gateway of St. Frank's. Two or three juniors

were standing there chatting. Bud swerved in abruptly, causing the juniors to scatter with some alarm. They had not been expecting anything of this nature.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth.

"Why, it's Bud—Jerry Dodd's pony!" ejaculated McClure.

"Yes; but where's Doddy?" asked Church.

They looked out into the lane, but there was no sign of Bud's owner. Meanwhile, the pony went straight towards the Ancient House. As it happened, I was standing there at the moment, chatting with Nelson Lee. We had been talking about the cricket, but we both turned as we heard the shouts from the gateway.

"Hallo! What's the meaning of this?" I exclaimed. "Jerry's pony without Jerry himself!"

"Begad! Perhaps there's been an accident!" said Sir Montic, who was standing near by. "I trust that Dodd hasn't met with disaster—I do, really. He's a frightfully reckless fellow, you know!"

The pony came up to us and whinneyed. Then it pawed the ground impatiently, its ears on the alert. Nelson Lee regarded the animal keenly, and I noticed that a frown was upon the gov'nor's brow.

"I don't like this, Nipper," he said, in a low voice.

I looked at him sharply.

"Why, do you think something has happened?" I asked. "Those Indians—"

"Dodd is an excellent rider, and he is not the kind of boy to let his pony come back to the school in this way," interrupted Lee. "I'm afraid that Dodd has either met with an accident, or—"

The gov'nor paused significantly.

"Foul play?" I suggested.

"Yes, Nipper," said the detective grimly. "We must inquire and find out which way Dodd went, and we may be able to discover—Dear me! The pony is acting in a remarkable manner. Is it possible—"

Nelson Lee paused, and we watched Bud with interest.

He made that same peculiar sound, turned abruptly, and trotted off towards the gateway. After he had covered half the distance he paused, looked

round, as though waiting for us to follow. Finding that we did not do so he came trotting back. Then he repeated the whole performance.

"By jove!" murmured Lee. "The clever little fellow! Don't you understand, Nipper? He's asking us to follow him—he will lead us to the spot where he lost his rider! That can be the only explanation of his conduct."

"Well I'm dashed!" I exclaimed. "I didn't think a pony could be so brainy!"

"How frightfully interestin', dear old boy!"

Nelson Lee made up his mind quickly.

"Come!" he said. "This may be of the utmost importance—we must go at once! I ought to have warned Dodd not to venture out alone. I had intended doing so, but I had no idea he had any plans for this morning, so early."

"Shall we come, sir?" asked Tommy Watson eagerly.

"Yes, you and Montie; but nobody else," replied Nelson Lee briskly.

We were now walking sharply across the Triangle, and Bud gave a whinney of satisfaction. We reached the gateway and found that the pony was making off up the lane in the direction of the Mount.

Half the Remove would have followed us, for the juniors were now quite excited; but Nelson Lee turned.

"I'm sorry, boys, but you can't all come," he said sharply. "It is possible that Dodd has met with an accident—if so, I am capable of dealing with the matter. You must not follow."

"But we might be able to help, sir," said Handforth.

"I am sorry, boys," said Lee again. "You must not come."

"What about those other chaps, sir?" demanded Hubbard indignantly. "They're going!"

"Why can't we come along, sir?" shouted Handforth.

Nelson Lee did not trouble to say anything further. He had given his instructions, and he knew the boys would not dare to disobey them. And they all remained out in the road, just against the gateway, looking up the lane excitedly, and with great interest.

"Of all the giddy games!" said Handforth warmly. "Forbidding us to go! Dodd may have met with a

terrible accident, and we can all help. It's a bit thick being barred like this!"

"Rather!"

"Those chaps of Study C get all the giddy favours," sneered Gulliver.

While they were talking in this way we were following Bud up the road. The clever little animal was doing exactly as Nelson Lee had surmised—he was leading us to the spot where he had lost his rider.

We went at the double, realising the urgency of the matter. Every now and again, Bud paused and looked back, as though to make sure that we were following him. He was in a great haste and we could see that he was filled with anxiety and impatience. The bond between the pony and Jerry Dodd was an affectionate one.

"I'm afraid something jolly serious has happened, sir," said Watson anxiously. "Fancy Bud coming back riderless! Perhaps he shied at something, and Dodd was thrown on his head against some stones——"

"There is no sense in making surmises, Watson," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Before long, perhaps, we shall arrive at the truth. I trust that the matter is not so serious as appearances seem to indicate."

We went on, and, at last, the moor came within sight. Bud did not hesitate at all—he knew his path—he was under no misapprehension as to the exact spot where his master had fallen.

And, very soon, that place was reached.

Bud came to a halt and stood quite still. He gave another little whinney, as though he were just telling us of his anxiety. Then he looked round, with his ears at attention. But there was no sign of any living soul upon the moor.

"Well, that's about the cleverest thing I've ever seen a horse do," I exclaimed enthusiastically. "The animal's a marvel! To bring us right out here in this way—just like a dog!"

"Yes, but what's the good of it?" asked Tommy Watson. "We're no better off, that I can see. There's no sign of Dodd here, and we might just as well have remained at St. Frank's!"

"It certainly seems like it, dear old boy," agreed Sir Montie. "But there's no telling. Perhaps we shall find something that will serve as a clue."

Nelson Lee was already on his knees, closely examining the ground. I went down beside him, and looked, too. At first I could see nothing out of the common. But Lee pointed and I began to understand.

"Do you see these weeds, Nipper?" asked the gov'nor softly. "Many of them are bruised and broken. Something heavy has been lying here recently—or perhaps it was dragged along the ground. This is certainly the spot where Dodd fell."

I nodded.

"Yes, I can see that, sir," I said. "But how can we tell what's happened to him? Bud's jolly clever, but he isn't able to show us what occurred to Dodd after he fell to the ground. And why did he fall? The grass here is quite smooth, and it is hardly likely that Bud stumbled——"

"I don't think for a minute that an accident took place," said Nelson Lee. "It was something different, Nipper—something more sinister. If Bud had the power of speech he could probably give us some very useful information."

"But, as it is, we're done!" I grunted.

"By no means, Nipper," said Lee grimly. "There are many indications here that Dodd was half-dragged, half-carried along—yes, in this direction. Ah! I do not think we shall be far wrong if we have a look in that old mill. It may save a lot of time to search there at once, without going to the trouble of laboriously following the trail. We will try, at all events."

We hurried towards the mill, and entered somewhat diffidently. It was in a state of partial decay, with yawning holes in the walls, with the woodwork rotten and broken, and with many windows completely absent.

The lower floor was empty, and one glance up the short ladder was sufficient for Nelson Lee. There was a trap-door there, and it was closed—being bolted on the lower side.

"Do you think he's upstairs, sir?" I asked.

"No—he is not!"

"But they may have shoved him there, and bolted the trap-door——"

"My dear Nipper, you have failed to use your eyes," interrupted Lee.

"Every step of the ladder is coated with dust—and that dust has not been disturbed for weeks, by all appear-

ances. Nobody has passed up that ladder recently."

"By Jingo, sir! I hadn't looked at that," I said.

Lee was already gazing upon the floor intently. And there was no lack of information there. There were all sorts of signs that the place had been occupied within the last hour. One or two blades of fresh grass were jammed upon a stone—having apparently come from a boot. And there were other signs of a similar nature.

But Jerry Dodd was not there.

The Australian junior had completely vanished!

CHAPTER V.

JERRY ON HIS METTLE!

JERRY, in the meantime, had been undergoing a somewhat curious experience.

The first thing he remembered after falling from his pony was a dreamy kind of sensation that he was in a small boat in a very choppy sea. It seemed to him that he was being rocked up and down continuously.

He felt half-asleep, and the motion was not altogether unpleasant. So, for a time, he allowed things to go on as they were, without troubling to open his eyes, or to think. But gradually, as his senses fully came back to him, he felt an instinctive desire to know what was taking place.

He opened his eyes slightly, for it seemed an effort for him to raise his lids in the usual way. And he discovered that he was not in a boat as he had first supposed, but in the grasp of two swarthy gentlemen of decided Indian appearance.

One had hold of his feet, and the other his armpits. And he was being carried in this fashion as rapidly as possible, and his captors were making in the direction of an old ruined windmill, quite close at hand.

Jerry opened his eyes wider, and it was possible for him to do so without the Indians seeing this. For the man in front of him had his back to the junior—and the other one, of course, could only see the top of Jerry's head.

All the junior's wits came back to him quickly—indicating that the drug had had very little effect. As a matter of fact, Jerry was almost himself again

now. He could understand why. He had extracted all the stuff from the tiny puncture during the first few seconds—or, if not all of it, the main portion.

The effect had been sufficient to make him drop from his pony. That had only happened a few minutes earlier, and now he was almost recovered. But he took no immediate action. He was curious. He wanted to see who those men were, and what they were doing with him. He felt that he would be able to escape whenever he chose.

At last they arrived at the mill. Jerry was bundled inside, and placed in a heap upon the floor. The Indians kept clear of the doorway, speaking together in low tones. Jerry wondered what they were up to.

If he could have seen outside he would have understood.

Away in the distance a large motor-lorry was coming across the moorland road—probably on its way to one of the outlying villages with supplies for the village shops. The Indians had seen this lorry at once, and had hastened into the mill to get out of sight in time. It was most unusual for traffic to pass along this road.

The lorry passed by, and was soon lost to view by a clump of trees which intervened. And now the Indians wasted no further time. After speaking together for a moment or two, they bent over Jerry, and picked him up again. The junior still pretended to be unconscious. He felt that it was better for him to do so—for he would be able to find out what these strange men were up to.

Furthermore, he was not confident that he would be able to escape. He was in full possession of his wits, it was true, but he still felt rather dizzy. And these men, as he well knew, were provided with peculiar weapons. Another of those little darts would have dire effects.

Jerry considered the matter carefully and calmly.

Even if he wrenched himself away he might not be able to run—the dizziness might be too great. Even if he could run, it was more than probable that the fleet-footed Indians would out-distance him. Then, again, they could puncture him with one of their deadly darts—not deadly in the sense that they

were fatal, but certainly those darts were better avoided.

Upon the whole, therefore, Jerry thought it would be unwise for him to make any attempt to escape at this particular moment. Perhaps he would be able to choose his time later on, when things were more favourable.

His captors were quite certain in their belief that Jerry was fully unconscious. They paused for a rest now and again, crouching low upon the ground. And not once did they examine the junior. They took it for granted that he was in a stupor, and oblivious of his surroundings.

And so, in this way, the journey progressed.

It was not such a very long one, after all, although it seemed so to Jerry, at the time. There were a good many pauses for rest, and this took up a certain amount of time. But, at length, Jerry knew the truth.

The Indians came to a halt on the edge of the old moor quarry. They were evidently intending to descend there, and to take Jerry with them. Needless to say, Jerry had no intention of allowing his captors to carry out this part of the programme.

At this point the descent into the quarry was steep, although easy enough to negotiate with a certain amount of care. There was a long slope leading right down from the moor to the bottom of the quarry. This slope was fairly smooth, and composed of soft, sandy ground.

The Indians talked together for a short time, and then bent down to lift Jerry up before commencing the descent. And the Australian junior considered that this was a very favourable opportunity for him to start something on his own account. According to his ideas the dark-skinned gentlemen had had things their own way for too long.

Before they could lay hands on him he sprang to his feet.

He felt just a little unsteady, but full of confidence. The Indians uttered surprised cries, and started towards him.

"I reckon it's my turn now, my coppery beauties!" shouted Jerry grimly. "This is where I get the laugh on you!"

Crash!

His right fist shot round, and landed squarely in the chest of the foremost Indian. The man staggered back, lost

his foothold, and plunged over the edge. Jerry didn't waste a second. He turned like lightning.

Biff!

Before the second Indian could be aware of it he received a similar blow to his companion. He partially recovered himself, but it was too late. Jerry obligingly gave him a final shove, and he went over the edge after the other.

It had all happened in a few seconds, and Jerry Dodd stood there, looking down. His two late captors were slithering and rolling and tumbling headlong in the soft, sandy ground—pitching down in swift flight to the bottom of the quarry, utterly unable to stay their descent.

They were in no danger, of course—although they probably received minor cuts and grazes. Jerry had chosen his time well. If he had attempted to escape sooner, he would probably have failed.

"By jingo," he exclaimed, with a chuckle. "I reckon it's a darn pity that there ain't a crowd hanging around here to look on! It's one of the funniest things I've seen for many a day!"

He waited until the Indians arrived at the bottom. Then, having seen them pick themselves up, dusty and torn but unhurt, he turned his back on the quarry and ran swiftly across the moor. It was his intention to go back to the old mill—for he believed that he would find Bud somewhere in the vicinity.

Once or twice he looked at his wrist, but there was now very little sign of the tiny puncture which had caused all the trouble. He was feeling quite fit again, too. The dizziness had passed.

It had been rather a curious experience, and it had a big effect upon Jerry. He knew, now, that these Indians were actual beings, and not the mere phantoms of a dream. For some reason or other he was menaced by these peculiar strangers.

Why they were after him he couldn't imagine, and he didn't, particularly care. He decided that he would say nothing to the other fellows. Possibly he would not be believed or he would be told that he had been dreaming.

He was rather surprised, therefore, when he caught sight of several figures away in the distance, near the old mill. Bud was standing by. Jerry came to a

halt, lifted his voice, and gave vent to a shrill call.

The pony gave quite a jump, looked round, and then came galloping across the moor to his master. Its affection for Jerry was most marked, and the junior greeted Bud with a hug. The pony caressed his master lovingly.

"Good old man!" said Jerry. "I thought you wouldn't be far away. Now, chum, there's no need to get excited—everything's all right. Hold still—that's the way!"

Jerry leapt lightly into the saddle, and then cantered serenely along the moor towards the figures—who were now approaching him.

Needless to say, these figures belonged to Nelson Lee, Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, and myself. We had seen Jerry Dodd almost as soon as he had seen us. We recognised his sturdy form at once.

"Splendid!" said Nelson Lee. "Master Jerry evidently possessed sufficient ingenuity to elude his captors unaided. I shall be quite interested to know what actually happened."

"Good old Jerry!" I exclaimed heartily.

The Australian boy came trotting up just then, and he smiled at us with all his old good humour. There was no indication that he had met with any accident.

"Say, chums, how did you figure that I was around this quarter?" he asked, as he dismounted. "I didn't expect to see you, Mr. Lee," he added. "I've just been out for a little ride before breakfast."

"And, during that ride, you met with some misfortune," said Nelson Lee. "Through some cause you fell off your pony, and probably became unconscious. You were then carried into the old mill by two men—Indians, I suspect—and from there you were conveyed towards the quarry. Am I correct?"

Jerry opened his eyes wide.

"Sure, sir," he said. "Were you watching?"

"No, I was at St. Frank's."

"By jings! Then how did you know?"

"It was not very difficult for me to piece two and two together," replied Nelson Lee smilingly. "And I must congratulate you upon the wonderful

sagacity of Bud. Your pony is a clever little animal, Dodd."

"Sure thing, sir," agreed Jerry heartily.

"Why, don't you know what he did?" asked Watson.

"No."

"Considering that Dodd has only just appeared upon the scene, he could not know," said Nelson Lee. "Your pony came back to St. Frank's, my boy, and, as plainly as though he could speak, asked us to accompany him back to the spot where you fell. He led us directly here, and we were just wondering what could have happened to you when you appeared in sight."

Jerry affectionately patted the pony's neck.

"Say, he's got brains, sir!" he exclaimed proudly. "I reckon this pony is sort of human. He's sure the cutest little piece of horseflesh one could find!"

"Rather!" said Tommy Watson.

"And now, Dodd, I want you to explain what happened; what caused you to fall from the saddle?" said Nelson Lee. "Do not try to keep anything back, but tell me the whole truth."

"Sure, sir," said Jerry. "Well, to cut it as short as possible, this is what caused all the darn trouble!"

He poked about in his waistcoat pocket for a moment, and finally produced a long, thin, thornlike object. It was almost black, and was evidently made of some very hard wood, with a point as sharp as a needle.

"Dear me!" said Nelson Lee. "Let me see, Dodd."

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNEXPECTED VISITOR!

NELSON LEE took the little dart, and held it gingerly between his finger and thumb. We looked on with interest.

The gov'nor took from his pocket a small but powerful magnifying lens. Through this he examined the dart with greater care, and at length he looked up and nodded. He placed the dart in a small metal box.

"Quite interesting, Dodd," he said. "The point of the little object was coated with a most peculiar drug, and I gather from the fact that you are in

your usual health, that the dart did not actually enter your flesh."

"Yes, it did, sir."

"Oh, indeed!" said Lee. "I cannot quite understand, Dodd. According to all my knowledge of this drug—according to the investigations I have made—you should have been unconscious for at least an hour."

Jerry Dodd nodded.

"Maybe that's right, sir," he said. "But I wasn't asleep when the thing happened. No, sir! I guess I was all awake. It seemed to come from nowhere and stuck in my wrist. I plucked it out at once, guessing that its point contained a heap of concentrated sleep mixture. I slipped it into my pocket, and then sucked the little pinprick."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "You acted with commendable presence of mind, Dodd. Did the process result in a drop of blood appearing?"

"Yes, sir, and I wiped that off," said Jerry. "So I don't figure much of the poison got into my blood. All the same, I kind of got dizzy and fell out of the saddle. I didn't remember anything more for a time; until I had a kind of notion that I was in a rowing-boat, steering a course over a choppy sea. Then I found that the rowing-boat was two men, and they were carrying me by the arms and feet."

"So I guessed," said Nelson Lee. "You pretended to remain unconscious?"

"That's the idea, sir," replied Jerry. "I thought it was the best thing I could do; I didn't want any more doses of that slumber stuff. These men were Indians—Hindoos, or something like that. And they took me into the mill."

"For what reason?"

"Well, I guess it was to avoid being seen," replied the colonial junior. "I heard a motor-car or a lorry coming by, along that road. I guess the Indians didn't want to be spotted just then; so they took cover in the mill."

"And afterwards?"

"I was taken out and carried over towards the quarry," replied Jerry. "I didn't figure on making the attempt to escape just then, because I was still a bit shaky, and I didn't want to make any mistake."

"So you waited?"

"Sure, sir. I waited until we got to the edge of the quarry," smiled Jerry Dodd. "Then I kind of woke up, gave

the Indians a gentle tap each, and sent them slithering down the steep slope. Say, they didn't have a chance!"

"Begad! That was frightfully cute of you, old boy," said Sir Montie.

"I wish you'd have been there, chums," grinned the Australian boy. "By jings! It was worth seeing! They went rolling down like a couple of sacks of corn. Of course, they weren't hurt—the ground was too soft for that. But I guess I got rid of them at the best time; and here I am just the same as ever."

"You behaved with coolness, astuteness and ingenuity," said Nelson Lee. "As it happens, Bud's journey to St. Frank's was unnecessary—since you have succeeded in getting free without assistance. But it may not occur like that every time, Dodd; and I must warn you to be very careful."

"Careful, sir?" said Jerry curiously. "But what's the idea?"

We were now walking slowly along towards the lane, with the intention of getting back to St. Frank's at once. Nelson Lee had a thoughtful expression on his face, and he patted Jerry Dodd on the shoulder.

"I am afraid I cannot answer your question, my boy," he said. "I do not know why these Indians are after you, and what their ultimate object can be. But there can be no doubt that some kind of peril assails you from this quarter. It is obvious that you know nothing of the matter yourself, and it is quite certain that I am in the dark. But possibly these matters will adjust themselves. Sooner or later we shall arrive at the truth."

Jerry passed a hand wearily over his brow.

"Say, it's got me fair puzzled," he confessed. "Indians! After me! I reckon they must be mistaking me for somebody else! I never met an Indian before I came to England—except that Rangoon merchant who came to see my dad on the ranch. It's a queer mix-up, sir."

"Yes, Dodd, it is certainly a mystery," agreed Nelson Lee. "I want you to pay attention to my words and to give me a promise. You must not come out alone—particularly in the direction of the moor. This morning's experience proves that these strange enemies are constantly on the look-out

for you and that they are ready to take advantage of the slightest opportunity. So you see, my boy, it is essential to your own safety that you should remain within the school property."

Jerry looked dismayed.

"But that's not necessary, sir!" he protested. "Do you mean that I'm gated?"

"By no means," smiled Nelson Lee. "I am giving you no orders, Dodd; I am merely advising you to be cautious. In future, if you wish to venture out, I want you to take one or two companions with you; for these Indians would never dare to approach you if others were present. You understand?"

"Golly! That means I require a kind of bodyguard!" exclaimed Jerry. "Say, that don't seem to suit me, sir. But if you want me to give a promise—well, it's yours, sir. Your head's better than mine, and you know best. Every time, sir. But I wish I knew who these darned fellows were, and why they are getting busy in my direction. This eastern magic stunt don't suit my temperament at all."

We were now well on the road to St. Frank's, and very shortly afterwards we arrived—to find all the juniors indoors, partaking of breakfast. Jerry Dodd's adventure was not made public, of course; there was no reason why everybody should be talking about the matter.

The story he told was quite true. Everybody wanted to know why Bud had come home riderless and what had happened to Jerry. He merely explained that he had fallen from the pony near the moor, and Bud had come straight home. Later, Jerry had come upon Nelson Lee and myself and the others. The whole matter was dismissed by the fellows at once.

When I went into Nelson Lee's study just before dinner, I found him busily engaged with the microscope. He was examining some tiny glass slides, each one of which contained a minute speck of something.

"What's the idea, sir?" I asked.

"I am merely pursuing my inquiries, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "I am pleased to say that I have been able to identify the particular drug which has been injected into Jerry Dodd's blood on more than one occasion. It is harmless enough, but has a most peculiar

effect upon the victim. It induces a brief sleep, followed by a trance-like period. While in this condition the victim will obey all orders without question—his will-power has been conquered. It is a drug peculiar to India, and I don't think it has any English name."

"And who are the men who are doing all this, sir?"

"I am afraid I cannot give you any answer to that, Nipper," replied Lee. "I can only say that I shall pursue my investigations closely, and before long I hope to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. By the way, it is quite possible that I shall need your help before so very long."

"It's yours, sir," I said eagerly. "What do you want me to do?"

"I cannot tell you just now; but when I have my plans fully completed, I will tell you all about them," said the detective. "Will you be ready on Saturday?"

I grinned.

"Not likely, sir," I replied promptly. "It's the Helmsford match on Saturday."

"Oh, I see; cricket naturally comes before all else," smiled the gov'nor. "Are you playing at home or away?"

"At home, sir," I said. "The Helmsford juniors are coming here to wipe us up—that's their idea. But if we can only keep up our proper form, we shall open their eyes. There's Jerry Dodd, too; we'd love to have him play for us."

"I'm afraid——"

"Oh, come on, gov'nor, there's the honour of the school to think of," I said. "Jerry's a wonderful cricketer, although most of the chaps here believe him to be a duffer. They think he doesn't know a cricket bat from a tennis racket. But I know different; he's as hot as mustard."

"Obviously," said Nelson Lee drily. "The Bannington match proved that."

I started.

"The Bannington match!" I echoed. "But Dodd wasn't playing, sir! It was Tucker who made——"

"Come, come, Nipper, you needn't try to hoodwink me," chuckled the gov'nor. "The boy who put up such a splendid performance certainly looked like Timothy Tucker; but that was merely an indication that your art of make-up has not suffered during the last

few months. I rather fancy the whole school knows that the boy was not really Tucker. But they are in the dark regarding his real identity."

"Do you think he was Dodd, sir?"

"I do not think anything about it; I know that he was Dodd," said Leo smoothly. "And you must not take such liberties again, Nipper. The Head, fortunately, has no suspicion that the trick was played, and I shall not give him any information. It is very hard on Dodd that he should be forbidden to play——"

"And hard on us, too," I put in.

"I can quite understand your feelings, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "It is not Dr. Stafford's fault, however. The Head is merely carrying out the wishes of the boy's father. If at all possible, something will be done between now and Saturday, and if Jerry can obtain permission I shall be only too delighted to see him on the cricket field."

I took this as a hint, and later on I told Jerry about it. I explained that it would be a good idea for him to go along to the Head and ask for permission to play in the Helmsford match. He had asked for such permission before, and had failed to obtain it. Perhaps things were now different; perhaps he would be able to persuade the Head.

After dinner Jerry Dodd strolled out into the Triangle, his intention being to go over to Little Side and watch the practice. He was rather tired of studying, and he wanted a change.

But almost immediately afterwards he received a big surprise.

A stranger came striding through the gateway. He was a big, well set-up man, clean shaven, with a deeply bronzed complexion. He was about thirty-five years of age, but rather younger looking in appearance. He walked with a springy stride, and it was clear to anyone with a sense of observation that he was a trained athlete.

He was attired in light tweeds, and carried a mackintosh and a small handbag. Jerry Dodd stared at him for a moment, and then caught his breath in sharply. The next second he was tearing across the Triangle.

"Uncle Bill!" he shouted delightedly.

"By jings! This is a surprise!"

The stranger came to a halt, and grinned.

"Hello, Jerry! I've soon found you!" he said genially, as the junior rushed

into his arms. "Steady on, young 'un! Steady on! You're looking fine, and —"

"But, say, I didn't know you were coming!" exclaimed Jerry breathlessly. "What does it mean, Uncle Bill? I didn't even know that you were in England!"

Mr. William Dodd sighed.

"And I was kidding myself that I was famous," he said regretfully. "Why, Jerry, haven't you seen my name in the papers?"

"I don't read the papers, uncle."

"Well, you take an interest in cricket—"

"I haven't read anything about cricket since I came to St. Frank's," interrupted Jerry. "I've sort of given it the slip. But say—have you come over to England to play cricket?"

The visitor smiled.

"Well, considering I'm a member of the Australian team, and that I'm booked to play in the test matches—well, I kind of reckon that I'm in England to play cricket," he replied calmly. "I've already played in Yorkshire, and at Kennington Oval, and other places, and I don't think I put up such a bad show."

Jerry eyed his uncle proudly.

"A member of the Australian team!" he exclaimed. "By jings! What an honour! Say, Uncle Bill, it's great of you!"

"And as it was an odd day, I thought I'd run down and see how you were getting on, young fel'," went on Mr. Dodd. "I'm a bit disappointed that you knew nothing of my performances in England. They say I've done fairly well."

A crowd had collected round by this time, and they were listening eagerly.

"My hat!" muttered Pitt. "It's Doddy's uncle—and he's a member of the Australian team!"

"A giddy celebrity!"

"One of the wonder cricketers!"

"And his blessed nephew doesn't know cricket from football!" grinned Owen major.

Mr. William Dodd turned.

"Well, youngsters, I am pleased to see you all!" he said. "What do you think of Jerry as a cricketer, oh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

All the juniors laughed at the joke.

"I don't quite catch on!" said Mr.

Dodd. "Hasn't Jerry done some great things since—"

"Say, uncle, cut it out!" muttered Jerry. "I've got things to explain!"

Uncle Bill caught on at once, and didn't proceed any further. And very shortly afterwards he was alone with Jerry Dodd in Study F. Tom Burton, and Conroy minor were both on the playing fields.

"Now, my lad, what does it mean?" asked Mr. Dodd grimly. "What's this mystery about cricket? According to all my knowledge, you are one of the most promising players Australia has ever sent from her shores. Yet, at the very mention of cricket, your companions laugh at you."

Jerry nodded.

"They kind of think I'm a duffer," he said.

"But why? Haven't you shown them what you can do?"

"Not exactly," said Jerry. "They think I can't play."

Uncle Bill stared.

"Think you can't play?" he repeated blankly. "What on earth—"

"The dad arranged it all for me," said Jerry bitterly. "Before I came across he fixed it up with the Head here that I shouldn't play cricket—I've got to spend all my time studying, and reading books. Dr. Stafford won't let me play cricket for the eleven, and so I don't play at all!"

Uncle Bill frowned.

"Rot!" he said bluntly. "We'll soon put a stop to this game, Jerry, old fel! Forbidden to play cricket! Why, it's as bad as forbidding a man to drink water! And why? What's the reason of it?"

"I've already told you, uncle," said Jerry. "My dad told me that I couldn't play in England, and that I was to spend my time in learning things."

"Huh! That's just like your father!" grunted Uncle Bill. "As pig-headed as a mule, and always up to something fresh. He makes up his mind in a hurry, and there's all sorts of trouble. He sent you over to England before we knew anything about it. But it's news to know that you can't play cricket."

Jerry's eyes sparkled.

"There's a big match on Saturday," he said eagerly. "Do you think you could fix things up, Uncle Bill? Could you see the Head, and obtain his permission for me to play in that match?"

The visitor from Australia smiled.

"That permission is already obtained!" he said calmly. "You can take it from me, Jerry, that you'll play in that match. The Headmaster won't be able to keep to any of his bans while I'm around here. I'll soon put him straight."

"Oh, thanks awfully, uncle!" said Jerry Dodd, gripping his visitor's hand. "You've made me as happy as—as I used to be, by jings! It'll be just lovely to show these fellows what I can really do!"

His face was glowing, and he now looked forward to the match against Helmford College with lively interest. Would he be able to play? That was the burning question. Certainly things did not turn out exactly as Uncle Bill and Jerry had anticipated.

But the Australian junior did play—he played a wonderful game. And it will be my duty to set down all the facts at full length in due course. And that match, as we were shortly to find, was to be a match of destiny!

THE END.

In Next Week's Story:

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THE pleasant white island of Malta, which lies and boils in the water like an egg during the summer months, is a delightful place of resort during the winter; consequently the members of the gun-room mess of his Majesty's battleship *Amazon* welcomed with the greatest satisfaction the news that they were to remain for some weeks in Valetta harbour, instead of going to Syracuse, as was originally intended.

"I say, you fellows," exclaimed Tom Rodney, as he burst into the gun-room just before dinner, "there is to be a sailing race to-morrow morning between our boats and the boats of the *Illustrious*. I'm going to sail the starboard whale-boat. The course is three miles straight out to sea, round a tug that will be used as a mark-boat, and back to the harbour."

Having thus delivered himself, Midshipman Rodney sprawled on a cushioned locker until such time as the soup appeared and his very excellent appetite could be appeased by a dinner such as the middies of the days of Nelson would never have believed it possible could be served in a gun-room mess.

"I shall be in charge of the first cutter!" exclaimed "Pug" Maltby, the fattest midshipman in the Mediterranean Squadron. "I'll bet you a dinner at Ricardo's that we whop the *Illustrious* at boat-sailing, gun-drill, or cricket."

"Invite me to that dinner, Pug," called out Dick Fielding.

"You must go over to the *Illustrious* if you want that bet taken up," said Tom Rodney. "We all believe in our own ship, of course. 'A ship is known by her boats' is an old saying in the Navy."

"Don't see what they want to have sailing-races for," murmured Bankswell languidly. "This is an age of steam and electricity. My governor has promised to send a motor-launch out here for me—"

"Oh, shut up, Bankswell!" interrupted Graham, an assistant engineer. "It makes me tired to hear you talk!"

Before Bankswell could think of a suitable retort the soup was placed on the table, and the dinner began.

Horatio Bankswell was a tall, languid youth, the son of a rich brewer, who had

been made a baronet, and, on the strength of his father's wealth and title, put on a lot of "side," and aped what he considered to be the manners of the aristocracy. The result was that he made an ass of himself. However, there is no room for snobs in the Navy, and if the nonsense wasn't knocked out of him before he became a sub-lieutenant he would probably retire from the Service.

"Are they going to trust you in charge of a boat to-morrow, Bankswell?" asked Fielding.

"Don't know, I'm sure," replied Bankswell, "and I don't care. If there is anything of a breeze we shall get drenched to the skin in an open boat. I take no interest in sailing-races, and if I can get leave I shall go on shore during the morning."

"You are rather like an oyster," put in Rodney drily. "You seem incapable of taking an interest in anything outside your shell, which in your case is—self!"

"Keep your opinions till you are asked for them," said Bankswell, flushing angrily.

This little skirmish passed off with a laugh, and was forgotten in a few minutes by everybody but Bankswell. He had an unfortunate habit of brooding over any remark or incident that gave him offence, until it assumed in his mind an importance which the circumstances did not warrant.

Thus on the following morning the fact that Rodney had insinuated that he was selfish and conceited—for so he interpreted his remarks—still rankled in his mind, and he determined to "get even with him" on the first opportunity. Much to his disgust, he was put in charge of the gig in the sailing-race; but, on reflection, it occurred to him that here was an opportunity of spiting Tom Rodney.

He knew very well that Rodney was keenly anxious to win in the whale-boat competition, and he believed he saw a way of spoiling his chance.

There were a dozen boats competing, six from each ship, and they approached the starting-line according to their class. Separate starts were to be made in turn by the different classes, a rough-and-ready handicap, the gigs and whale-boats first—being the smartest class, for there were not any dinghys competing—then cutters, and lastly the big launches.

Bang! went the gun, and away went the first four boats, the gig and whale-boat of the *Amazon*, steered respectively by

Tom Rodney and Bankswell, and the gig and whaleboat of the *Illustrious*. The breeze was fresh and blowing in from the sea, so they had to tack out to the mark-boat.

The *Amazon's* gig was a racer; and, although she was not so smartly handled as the whale-boat, she was a few lengths ahead when they got out to the mark, while several of the other boats were also close upon them.

"We shall gain on the run home!" cried Tom to his crew. "Ease away the sheets!"

They rounded the mark-boat with a rush, the gig only a very short distance ahead of them. Suddenly there was a shout from the gig. Bankswell leaned over the gunwale, and appeared to be making a grab at something in the water. The gig swung up in the wind right athwart the whale-boat's bows, and in an instant the latter boat had smashed into her before Tom could possibly do anything to avert the collision.

So far as those two boats were concerned the race was done, for both had sustained slight damage. The first cutter flashed by, with Pug Maltby at the tiller.

"That lubber isn't fit to sail anything better than one of his father's beer-tubs!" Pug shouted. "Is he trying to drown himself now?"

The words were spoken laughingly, for Maltby had seen Bankswell splashing about in the water, though, as he knew he could swim, he thought he was merely in for a ducking. He had pitched overboard when boats collided.

But, as a matter of fact, his splashing was a desperate struggle to keep himself from sinking. The sail had come down by the run when the whale-boat crashed into the gig, and the yard had struck him on the head, partially stunning him. Tom Rodney saw that he was struggling for his life, and, without a moment's hesitation, dived into the water and swam to his assistance. The boats had drifted some distance away from him.

Tom was successful in saving him, although Bankswell was sinking for the second time when he reached him. It was not until they got back on board the *Amazon* that Bankswell recovered consciousness. He was carried down to a spare berth, to be attended to there by the surgeon, but just as he was being lifted out of the whale-boat he caught Tom's hand in his, and whispered:

"I must see you alone as soon as possible; it is important. Don't forget!"

An Assassin of the Sea.

IT was late that evening before Tom Rodney had an opportunity of seeing Bankswell alone, but he managed it while the commander and his attendant satellites were going the "rounds" at nine o'clock.

"How are you getting on, Bankswell?" asked Tom, as he entered the berth.

"I'm all right now, thanks," replied Bankswell, "except for a bit of a pain in the head. I—I hardly know how to thank you, Rodney, for jumping in to save me—"

"Never mind that," interrupted Tom; "you would have done the same for me. But how was it that you shot up across our bows? Wilson says you dropped the tiller overboard. How on earth did it come unshipped?"

"I did drop it overboard—purposely," said Bankswell, "just to give me an excuse for fouling your boat; and I gave the rudder a sharp jerk over when I pretended to be making a grab in the water for the tiller. I wanted you to lose the race. I have been a beastly cad to do such a thing, and I am heartily sorry now. But there is something of more importance that—that I want to speak to you about."

"What is it?" asked Tom wonderingly. "Since I have been in Malta," continued Bankswell, "I have made the acquaintance of a foreign chap—a gentleman I believed him to be—who seemed to take a great interest in the Navy. I met him first at the Continental Hotel. Two days ago I had to go up to the admiral's house and fetch a copy of some secret orders regarding the fleet manoeuvres that are to take place in a few days time."

"A supposed attack on Malta by an enemy's fleet," said Tom. "But the *Amazon* is to remain in harbour, I believe."

"I know," went on Bankswell. "The orders were in a sealed envelope. On the way back I met this foreign chap—Count Sternberg he called himself, but I expect that was an alias—and he asked me up into his rooms to have a glass of wine. I ought not to have gone, as I was on duty—but I went. I am certain the wine was drugged, for I came over awfully faint all at once, and for about ten minutes or so I was unconscious of my surroundings. When I came to, the 'count' was bending over me, and seemed awfully troubled at what he called my 'illness.' I got away as quickly as I could; though I did not suspect anything wrong until I got outside. Then I noticed that the seal of red wax was of quite a different shape! The device was the same though. But I am certain the envelope had been opened and resealed; and the fellow must, by some means or other, have got possession of a duplicate of the admiral's private seal."

"Have you mentioned this to anybody else?" asked Tom quickly.

"No. I was afraid to. Of course, the fellow must have thought the secret orders referred to something of far greater importance than fleet manoeuvres."

"Where is this pretended count now? Have you called at his rooms since?" asked Tom gravely.

"I made inquiries the next day," said Bankswell. "He was gone."

"I don't think anything would be gained by reporting the matter officially now," said Tom. "Anyhow, I must talk the

matter over with some of the other fellows of the mess. I've got an idea that your precious count knew quite well what he was up to, and that he has got hold of some information which he particularly wanted; but I'll see if we can't out-manceuvre him."

The night was dark and cloudy, with a moderate breeze out of the north-east, which caused a fairly heavy surf to break on the rocks about Ricasoli and St. Elm Point. It was an ideal sort of night for a torpedo-boat attack, and the seven or eight of these terrible and deadly craft were stealing through the darkness towards the north of the grand harbour. Searchlights from the men-o'-war, that were moored in the harbour, and from the forts of St. Elmo and Ricasoli, swept the sea, but failed so far to reveal the presence of the destroyers and torpedo-boats. Across the harbour entrance, about half a mile in width, a steady stream of light was poured so that not the smallest of boats could by any possibility enter unseen.

Six long, gaunt shapes were creeping stealthily along under the shadow of the land. They were destroyers, and their mission was to sink as many ships as possible in the harbour, though they should be sent to the bottom themselves during the attack. The idea of the manœuvres was that a portion of the fleet was bottled up in the narrow-necked harbour by our enemy's squadron, and a torpedo-boat attack was to be made to see if it were possible for them to damage this bottled-up fleet.

Four pairs of keen eyes were watching the shadowy destroyers as they crept past towards Point Ricasoli. The watchers were Tom Rodney, Jimmy Howe, Graham, and Pug Maltby, and they were crouching down in a small motor-launch that pitched and rocked uncomfortably, perilously close to the foaming line of breakers.

"Six destroyers have passed by!" said Graham.

"Here comes another!" exclaimed Maltby. "There are only six of our destroyers taking part in the manœuvres, I know. This seventh one—"

"Is the one we are expecting," interrupted Tom, with sufficient emphasis. "And it isn't a destroyer at all, only an ancient torpedo-boat, tricked out with a painted canvas projection astern to increase her length and give her the general appearance of one of our destroyers. Look through these glasses. When the sea beats upon her stern you can see the canvas and frame-work bend right in."

The motor-launch was now rushing through the water at racing speed, heading straight for the mysterious destroyer, which was only going at a moderate rate. In three minutes they were alongside.

A couple of dark figures ran to the torpedo-boat's quarter, as Rodney made a cut with an axe at the black canvas "petticoat" which projected over the stern and

ripped it right down. A guttural oath, which sounded distinctly German, came from one of the men on the deck. An order was shouted hoarsely from the conning tower, and three more men came running aft.

"Follow me, boys!" cried Jimmy Howe, as he leaped on to the stranger's deck, revolver in hand.

The others were up almost as soon as he, and the next instant the quartette of Amazons were in the thick of a wild melee.

The quartette "rushed" the conning-tower and drove the officer and quartermaster out of it. Tom Rodney seized the wheel.

"Run her on to the rocks, Tom!" cried Jimmy Howe.

Tom jammed the wheel over, and the mysterious torpedo-boat rushed forward to her doom. There was a fearful crash, a chorus of yells and shouts from the engine-room, and the deafening hiss of escaping steam. Tom was flung against the side of the conning-tower and sank down, stunned and bleeding. When he recovered consciousness, about ten minutes later, Pug Maltby was kneeling by his side, bathing a cut in his forehead.

"The cowards made a bolt for it directly after the boat struck!" explained Pug, in answer to Tom's question; "and they have collared our motor-launch. We had our hands full and could not stop them. But we've got four prisoners; three Maltese, who were in the engine-room, and the fellow who was wounded."

To what Navy the mysterious torpedo-boat belonged, was never discovered, for of the four men who were captured the three Maltese stokers could only state that they had been engaged a few days previously and were taken off to the torpedo-boat in a steam-launch. All orders were given to them in English, though they were quite certain there was no Englishman on board. The fourth man died from the effect of his wound, remaining obstinately silent to the end. Neither the officer nor any of the crew wore any distinctive uniform. But the dastardly errand on which the torpedo-boat had been sent was clear enough. There were torpedoes in her tubes ready to be discharged, and each torpedo was fitted with its war-head—i.e., the explosive head which is never used in manœuvres! In the rush of the mimic torpedo attack, she would have slipped into the harbour with the British destroyers, discharged her loaded torpedoes, and perhaps sent a battleship to the bottom! In the confusion, following such a terrible calamity, she could have slipped away in the darkness, and it would have been supposed that by some fatal oversight, a war-head, instead of a dummy one, had been fitted on to one of the torpedoes used in the night manœuvres.

But the dastardly plot had been frustrated by the sharp wit of a middy.

THE END.

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