

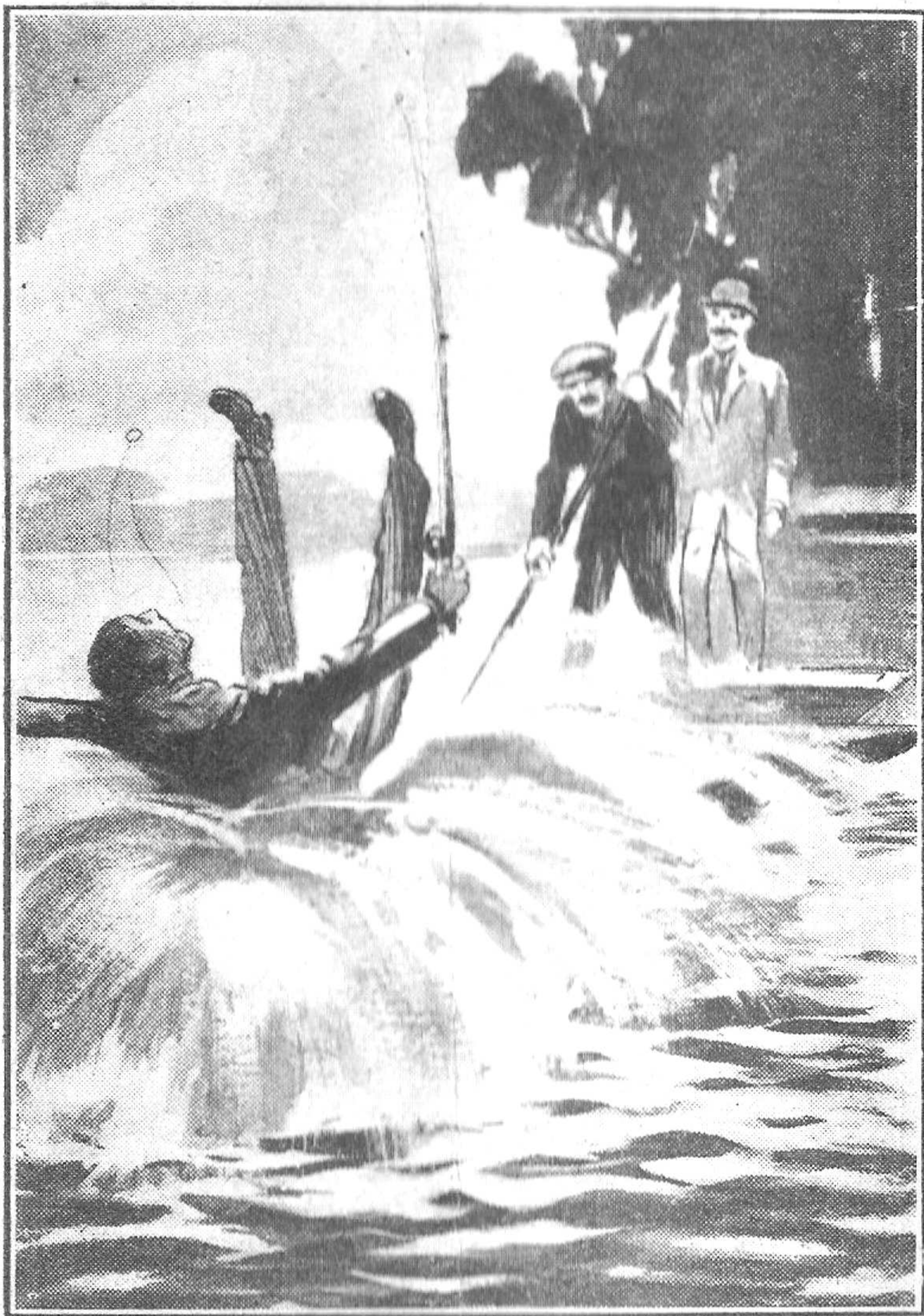
"THE MAYFAIR MYSTERY!" Baffling Detective Problem Story of
NELSON LEE—Begins This Week!

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THE MYSTERY OF THE 6.10 LOCAL

A Thrilling Long Complete Story of School Life
and Detective Adventure at ST. FRANK'S College.



The punt swerved round, and Archie staggered back with a wild cry. Instead of sitting in the punt, he sat very gracefully in the River Stowe.

Mystery of the 6-10 Local!

A Grand Long Complete
Story of School and
Detective Adventure,
featuring Nelson Lee,
Nipper, and the Boys of

St. Frank's. By the Author of "Fullwood's
Fortune," "The Price of Folly," "The Clue
of the Bent Spike," and many other fine
stories.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED)
THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.

CHAPTER I.

ARCHIE, THE ANGLER!

"YOU don't think much
of it?"

"Well, no, sir."

"In other words,
the scheme is somewhat dashed?"

"I should certainly describe it as
being unwise, sir."

"That's bally rotten, Phipps—
absolutely!"

Archie Glenthorne screwed his
monocle more firmly into his eye,
and regarded his valet languidly. They were
in the elegant junior's study in the Ancient
House at St. Frank's.

It was evening—a somewhat chilly October
evening—and a cheerful fire was burning in
the grate. Archie was lounging in an
attitude of supreme repose on a big Chester-
field, and Phipps was standing near by.

From down the passage, came the sounds
of strife—two or three howls, a roaring voice
now and again, and a few thuds. This kind
of thing was quite usual in the Remove
passage of an evening. Probably the bulk
of the noise was proceeding from Study D,
which was the abode of Handforth & Co.

But here, in Archie's den, all was peace-
ful and quiet.

He had created a precedent at St. Frank's
by bringing his own valet and having a study
and a bed-room all to himself. But no-
body minded, for Archie was a genial, good-

tempered sort, and it was quite impossible
to be cross with him. As a rule, Phipps had
a pretty big handful.

"Yes, Phipps, it's rotten!" went on
Archie. "The fact is, I'd rather set the
old heart on the angling stuff. I mean to
say, it's so bally healthy, and what not!
And dashed interesting, too!"

"I should hardly say so, sir."

"Oh, come, Phipps!" said Archie. "In
other words, come! In fact, pray be sen-
sible! The idea, old bird, is to buzz down
the river, taking things bally easy in one
of those jolly old punts. You gather the
scheme?"

"I think so, sir."

"Well, there you are—that's it!"

"But, if I may say so, sir—"

"Wait!" interrupted Archie, holding up
his hand. "The young master has not
finished. The brain wave burst upon me
like a pretty decent flood. You know what
I mean, Phipps. It absolutely entered the
old bean, and it bowled me over. A chappie
can't stand too much at once."

"I quite understand, sir."

"So there you are," said Archie. "There
was the idea, and I thought it would be a
pretty decent scheme to get it going—that
is, to have a good old stab at it!"

"Angling, sir, is quite an excellent pas-
time while the weather is favourable," said
Phipps. "Of course, there are some
enthusiasts who are hardy enough to sit
out in the pouring rain for hours on
end—"

"Not really?" asked Archie, staring. "But, I mean to say! How perfectly foul! Squatting out in the wetness, and all that sort of rot! It's enough to make a chappie pipped to the most frightful degree!"

Phipps nodded.

"I fancy it would have such an effect on you," he agreed. "But when a person really becomes enthusiastic over angling, he does not mind a few discomforts. I should suggest, therefore, that the proposition should be abandoned."

Archie toyed with his monocle.

"I don't like it, Phipps—I mean to say, the blood of the Glenthornes rises in opposition," he said firmly. "The fact is, once I get hold of a real fruity scheme—well, there's absolutely no rest until the thing's positively in operation. So it's got to be done. That, as it were, is final."

Phipps shook his head.

"I am very sorry to see that you are so firm," he went on. "I should like to point out, sir, that it would not be advisable to go fishing just now."

"But, dash it all, that's bally absurd! Kindly allow yourself to talk sensibly, old bird. Fish, as it were, buzz up and down the river at all times of the year. The

fish don't stagger away for a few months, what?"

"Not exactly, sir," said Phipps. "But the weather is hardly suitable for fishing—"

"Angling, Phipps—angling!"

"Just as you like, sir," said Phipps imperturbably. "You could not stand the exposure to the cold winds and rain, and it would be most unwise to go to the expense of purchasing rods and lines—"

"But, dash it, expense is nothing, Phipps," said Archie. "Absolutely nothing. It's a matter that doesn't worry my gearbox in the slightest degree."

"I am aware of that, sir," said Phipps. "At the same time, I do not like to see you spending money needlessly—"

"Phipps!" said Archie, with dignity. "Phipps! You will kindly allow me to use the old backbone as I deem fit! I mean to say, it's a bit thick—not to say steep—when a chappie's valet starts waltzing round him and telling him about cash! It absolutely pains me to tick you off, laddie, but there you are! Kindly realise that I can do as I bally well like!"

Phipps was accustomed to this kind of thing.

"Very well, sir, I'll say no more," he murmured.

"Good—the thing's settled," said Archie. "I positively hate these fearful upsets, my dear chappie. To return to the angling stuff. With regard to the weather, that doesn't worry me at all. Absolutely not. And the scheme now is to buzz round, and purchase a frightful lot of impedimenta. What? I mean to say, that's rather good, Phipps! A somewhat priceless word!"

"Just the word to express your meaning, sir," said Phipps. "I understand, then, that you desire me to purchase everything necessary for the purposes of angling?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Here's a tenner, Phipps, and you can let yourself expand, as it were."

"I do not think I shall need so much money, sir."

"Well, it's best to have it—one never knows," said Archie. "A chappie waltzes into a shop, buzzes round, looking at this and that, and before he knows a bally thing, the old cash-box is empty! You've got to buy rods, lines, a huge quantity of bait, and a few nets!"

"Nets, sir?"

"Don't these fishing chaps have nets?" asked Archie vaguely.

"Not for angling, sir," said Phipps.

"Well, you know best—it's quite all right," said Archie. "Hurl yourself into Bannington to-morrow morning, and collect the good old materials. It's a half-holiday to-morrow, and I want to somewhat surprise the natives. That is to say, I'm going to cause a most fearful sensation among the lads of the village! You grasp the idea, Phipps?"

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"Quite, sir."

"Then kindly retire," said Archie, lying back. "The fact is, I want to indulge in a few winks. I want to enjoy a portion of the good old dreamless. To be exact, the young master would repose!"

Phipps glided silently out of the study.

"The chappie's a positive marvel!" murmured Archie drowsily. "He comes—he goes! Just like a dashed ghost! What I should do without Phipps, I don't know. The old tissues fairly quiver at the thought!"

And Archie lay back, and calmly went off to sleep.

And the next day, while all the fellows were busy at morning lessons, Phipps went over to Bannington, and made the necessary purchases. He was quite against the idea, but it was useless to argue with Archie. He had given his instructions, and it was Phipps' duty to obey.

But he was by no means lavish. He purchased an inexpensive rod, and only laid out a comparatively small amount on line, hooks, bait, and other necessary tackle. He had well over six pounds left out of the ten by the time he arrived back. And even then he had brought some first-class stuff with him.

Archie, in the meantime, had come out from morning lessons, and was lounging about the Ancient House steps. A search had failed to find Phipps, and he came to the conclusion that the man had not returned.

I came out of the Ancient House with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. Handforth & Co. were near by.

"Well, laddies, what about it?" asked Archie.

"Eh?" I said "What about what?"

"Well, the fact is, I was just exercising the old gear-box," said Archie. "What do you chappies think of the good old bloater for tea? What?"

"Not much!" said Watson.

"That's rather frightful!" said Archie. "The fact is, I was thinking about catching a few. I suppose they must be a dashed lot better when a chappie yanks them up on his old line!"

"What the dickens are you talking about?" demanded Handforth.

"Bloaters, dear old scout!"

"I know that, but you're dotty!"

"Oh, absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean to say, absolutely not! Kindly cease from being so dashed personal! I was just broadcasting a few hundred priceless invitations for you lads to join me in the jolly old bloater. To be exact, I mean to buzz down the river this afternoon, with the red and blue!"

"What, fishing?" grinned Reggie Pitt.

"Absolutely!"

"And you expect to catch bloaters?"

"Absolutely twice!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "Pray

explain the reason for these bursts of ribald merriment! A chappie goes to a shop, and staggers forth laden with bloaters. But it must be a fearful lot better to catch the bally things out of the river! Of course, I don't know much about these things, but——"

"My dear ass, bloaters are smoked!" I explained.

"What?"

"They're herrings—smoked!" I grinned. "And you can't catch herrings in a river—they're salt water fish."

Archie looked at me somewhat dazedly.

"Do you know, that's frightfully interesting!" he said. "It never struck the old bean before! Of course, I don't eat bloaters as a rule—absolutely not! But I thought, as it were, that it would be a most priceless kind of occupation for the afternoon. I mean to say—— What-ho! What-ho! Observe the genial laddie in the offing!"

Archie nodded towards the gateway, and we turned.

Phipps had just appeared, and Phipps was very obviously carrying parcels which contained all the necessary implements for the purpose of angling. He walked up, smiling.

"Good!" said Archie. "In fact, bally good! Phipps, you're a priceless peach, so to speak. These, I presume, are the impedimenta?"

"Yes, sir."

"Kindly remove the wrappings, and expose the various bits and pieces for the young master to view. The fact is, I'm dashed curious. I've heard of chaps going down the river angling, but I've never done the deed."

We all stood round, grinning, while Phipps undid the parcels. Other fellows came up, and stood looking on. A really excellent fishing-rod came into view, and some of the juniors uttered exclamations of admiration and envy. Everything necessary for the sport was there, including a good selection of hooks and a quantity of bait. Phipps had also purchased a handbook. He thought this would probably be necessary for Archie.

"Well, I mean to say, this is all perfectly ripping!" said Archie. "No doubt, Phipps, you were obliged to delve somewhat steeply into your own resources. Kindly mention the amount, old horse, and I'll refund!"

Phipps held out his hand.

"I have six-pounds-three-and-fourpence change, sir," he said.

"No!" said Archie. "That, of course, is quite imposs. I mean, out of a tenner? My dear Phipps, it absolutely couldn't be done! A chappie can't go sliding down the old river with only four quids' worth of material!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I did not think it necessary to incur further expense, sir," said Phipps.

Archie pocketed the change dubiously, and then gave all his attention to the rod and line. He commenced pulling the things

about rather unwisely, and almost before he knew where he was, a considerable mesh of line encircled him.

"I should advise you to be very careful, sir," said Phipps.

"Dash it all, I know what I'm doing!" said Archie. "Pray refrain from interfering, laddie! I must admit that the whole bally contrivance seems to be somewhat complicated, as it were. Whoa! I say!

Gadzooks!"

Archie staggered, as he tripped. He made a wild grab at the air, and then collapsed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This—this is absolutely poisonous!" murmured Archie, sitting up. "I mean to say, the good old tweeds, don't you know! I must remark that the ground is not only damp, but positively grimy! And—Yaroooooh!"

"What's the matter now, Archie?" chuckled Pitt.

"Something, as it were, bit me!" said Archie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bit you?" I grinned.

"Right in the thigh, don't you know!" said Archie, scrambling up. "I mean to say, it's somewhat thick and fearful when a bally insect comes crawling up a chap's thigh, and shoves its old teeth—"

"You ass!" chuckled De Valerie. "You sat on a fish-hook!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My only sainted aunt!" gasped Archie. "It seems that angling is not so dashed simple, after all! I mean—Yoochoo—yow! I mean to say—Release me, laddies! Release me! I'm in a most fearful predicament!"

A couple of hooks had just entered Archie's finger, and the next moment he was tripping about, entangled in the lines, and it was only by a piece of extraordinary luck that he didn't smash the rod into atoms.

We went to his rescue, and after a bit of a struggle, we succeeded in extricating him. Then we got everything together neatly, and Archie watched us in a wondering kind of way.

"The fact is, darlings, you're most deucedly smart," said Archie, beaming round. "Now, I couldn't do that, you know! Absolutely not! But it's all right—I've seen—I've grasped the old trend!"

"You think you'll be able to manage now?" asked Pitt.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "And this afternoon I'm going to trickle down to the river, and come back laden. That is to say, I shall be positively overburdened with salmon, sardines, and what not!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Archie passed indoors with his famous fishing tackle. But even he didn't guess what queer things were to occur that afternoon!

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGERS!



Phipps hovered about uncertainly.

"I might suggest, sir, that it would perhaps be advisable if I accompanied you," he said tentatively. "I am free for this afternoon, and I shall be quite willing to—"

"Not at all, Phipps—to be quite exact, not at all!" interrupted Archie. "There is absolutely no necessity for you to worry the old bean. The young master will be quite serene."

"Some of the other young gentlemen will be with you, perhaps—"

"That is to say, no!" said Archie. "I shall stream down the river positively alone. The fact is, Phipps, I was glancing at the jolly old book of rules. A dashed interesting volume, Phipps."

"I thought you would like it, sir."

"Every time, laddie," said Archie. "And it distinctly says that when a cove goes fishing he must have absolute quietness. It seems that the fish get kind of scared if a whole crowd of blighters buzz round. So it's up to me to go stealing down by myself."

"I trust you will be quite safe, sir?"

"The words, Phipps, imply that you are afraid that I shall be incapable of managing the good old punt!" said Archie with dignity. "Kindly allow such a preposterous nosh to fade. Absolutely!"

"Very well, sir, I will say no more," said Phipps.

He glided away, and Archie sallied forth.

He was attired in a Norfolk suit, a soft hat, and he was carrying everything necessary for his afternoon sport. He had a huge satchel which was capable of holding about twenty times the amount of fish that Archie was ever likely to catch. But he was wondering if it would be large enough.

According to Archie's ideas, he merely had to throw his line into the water, properly baited, and the fish would struggle amongst themselves in order to get hooked.

Archie was quite likely to have a serious disappointment. And before the afternoon was out he would probably be disillusioned regarding the charms of angling. But we all live and learn.

He emerged into the Triangle, looking rather important—and feeling rather important. It was very seldom that Archie indulged in any sport of this kind. As a rule, he spent his afternoons—that is, half-holidays—lounging in his own study, reading, or sleeping.

But when he got an idea firmly fixed into his head, he always pushed it along. And now he was full of enthusiasm for the river. His great ambition was to come back with enough fish to supply the whole Remora for tea.

He thought it would be rather a priceless

idea to go from study to study, presenting the juniors with various kinds of fish. And so he set out with great hopes. The juniors grinned enormously, and they chipped him in an unmerciful manner. But Archie was quite accustomed to this kind of thing.

"That ass will go and drown himself before he's done!" said Handforth, frowning. "He's not safe to be in a boat by himself!"

"He's going in a punt!" said Church.

Handforth glared.

"I never knew such chaps for quibbling!" he snapped. "What's the difference? A punt is a boat, isn't it? But, if anything, a punt's more difficult to manage than an ordinary dinghy."

"I'm not worrying, anyhow," said McClure. "If Archie wants to go fishing, let him! I thought it would be a good idea to build a bicycle-stand this afternoon. There's no football on, and the weather's all right. Will you give me a hand?"

"I don't mind," said Church.

"Rot!" said Handforth firmly. "Fancy wasting time on a fatheaded bicycle-stand? We're going out—along the river. It wouldn't be a bad wheeze to land on Willard's Island, and have a look round. We haven't been there for some time, and I've got an idea that there might be something interesting."

Handforth was always full of hare-brained ideas, and Church and McClure had great difficulty in keeping him in check. But once he got a notion firmly fixed in his head, it was quite beyond the capabilities of his chums to drive it out. They resigned themselves to a ramble for the afternoon.

Archie, in the meantime, had arrived at the boat-house. He was the only fellow who desired to go on the river that afternoon, for there was a fairly cold wind, and it was hardly the weather for boating.

And angling was not a popular sport at St. Frank's at this time of the year. Not that these things troubled Archie when he was fairly on the go. His enthusiasm generally lasted until his eyes had been opened. Then he cooled off. Some lucky junior in the Remove would find himself the possessor of a really good fishing outfit by tea-time.

Archie selected a punt, and managed to get it down the river. He was not so helpless when he was alone, and when things had to be done. And presently he was out on the river.

"This, as to speak, is the life!" he murmured.

He managed the punt with skill and accuracy, and the Removites would have been surprised if they had seen him. Archie had been in punts before, and he was not such a duffer.

But angling was new to him. He had not tasted of its delights, and of its doubtful pleasures.

He decided that he would pole down below Willard's Island, and then tie up in the middle of the stream. It was rather deep there and the fish ought to be plentiful.

Archie had no idea as to what kind of fish he would catch. He was very hazy about fresh water fish—as was evidenced by the fact that he had had some idea of hooking bloaters.

But he was quite convinced that he would make a big haul.

He went down the river quite well, using his punt-pole with excellent judgment. Once or twice he was tempted to stop, as he noticed a likely stretch of water. But he kept to his original plan to drop below Willard's Island.

This idea rather appealed to him, because all the water there was really his father's property. Willard's Island, a considerable stretch of countryside beyond, was on Col. Glenthorpe's estate. And it seemed rather nice to Archie that he would be able to fish in the family waters, so to speak.

He rounded the island in good style, and then he observed that a punt was already anchored in mid-stream, in very much the same spot where he had mentally decided to stay.

"Dash it all!" he murmured. "Some-what thick, and all that! I mean to say, it absolutely upsets a chappie's calculations, etc.! But I suppose the bounders are enjoying the jolly old sport, so I mustn't barge in!"

He looked keenly at the two occupants of the punt—for the little craft contained two men. They were sitting there, quite comfortable, munching sandwiches. Near them were two bottles of beer, upon which Archie looked with severe disapproval. The fact that the beer was present at once labelled this pair as undesirable.

Not that Archie was a teetotaller. In his father's home he had always indulged in a little wine on festive occasions. At the same time, he considered it shockingly bad form to expose one's self in public armed with beer bottles. It savoured of the common. And anything common was distasteful to Archie's sensitive nature.

The two men were fishing. Their rods were projecting over the side of the punt, and the little floats rode placidly upon the surface of the water. The men were not local inhabitants, but entire strangers. Archie judged them to be Londoners—and not of the best type, either.

They watched him approaching, and ceased eating.

"What-ho!" said Archie genially, feeling that he was called upon to pass some remark. "How goes it, old things? Biting, what?"

"It's all right, young shaver—there's nothing much doing," said one of the men. "Hallo! Are you fishing, too?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "The fact is, I'm going to deprive the old river of its entire stock, don't you know. I've got bait, and lines, and hooks, and all the rest of the good old material."

"You'd better not anchor anywhere near us!" said one of the men. "And look out!"

Mind what you're doing! Don't disturb our lines!"

"Frightfully sorry, and all that!" said Archie, poing farther away. "The fact is, I thought I was quite clear, don't you know!"

"Then you'd better think again!" said the man unpleasantly.

Archie drifted farther on.

"To tell the truth, the chappies are a pair of poisonous blighters!" he told himself. "To be absolutely exact, they're two coves of the lowest order! Absolutely! Keep the old dig., Archie, and ignore them!"

He proceeded to do so. Having dropped a hundred yards lower down the stream, he set about his preparations for anchoring. It was not much good going lower, for the water became rather shallow, and the current was more swift. To his idea this would not be so favourable for fishing.

So he proceeded to effect an anchorage.

Then he observed that one of the strangers had risen in the punt, and was waving to him. He paused in his work, and gazed upstream. The man shook his fist at Archie in a manner which could not be misunderstood.

"Clear off, you young bounder!" he shouted.

"I mean to say, what?" ejaculated Archie.

"You can't stay there!"

"But, dash it all——"

"We're not going to have any confounded schoolboys near us!" shouted the man aggressively. "If you don't shift from there we'll come down and move you! Understand?"

Archie opened his mouth, and gasped.

"This, as it were, is somewhat near the edge!" he exclaimed warmly. "These beastly beasts have gone beyond the limit. Absolutely. And this is where I stay. This is where I absolutely come to rest!"

He ignored the men, and finally anchored.

The two fellows were still shouting, but Archie took no notice. He proceeded to get his fishing tackle ready, and acted as though he was quite oblivious of the common strangers.

He considered that it was beneath his dignity to even answer. But a few moments later the punt with the two men came down stream. Both the strangers were standing up, and they looked very angry.

"Didn't you hear us?" shouted one wrathfully.

"Absolutely!"

"Then why didn't you move, you little whelp!"

"Well, that, I mean to say, is too dashed fearful for words!" exclaimed Archie stiffly. "Kindly understand, you bally rotters, that I don't allow anybody to call me a little whelp! It's absolutely beneath a chap's dig., and so forth——"

"You'd better cut out that idiotic talk!" snapped the man. "We were on this piece of the river first, and we're not going to be

interfered with by a young worm of a school-boy! If you don't shift at once, we'll make you!"

Archie felt that he was called upon to assert himself.

"I don't want to be frightfully nasty, and all that, but kindly remember that you started the fearful battle!" he said. "I come down the river, blithe and peaceful, and what do I meet with? What, I ask you, do I meet with? A couple of lads in mid-stream, who proceed to hurl vast and varied assortments of insults! Now that, to be absolutely frank, is not only fearful, but bally near approaching——"

"Look here, we don't want to hear your talk any more!" interrupted the spokesman of the pair. "We'll give you a last chance. Are you going to clear, or not? Answer me that!"

"Not!" said Archie firmly. "Absolutely not!"

"You little puppy!" roared the man furiously.

"That, don't you know, is positively the limit!" said Archie. "Puppy, you know! A chap's blood may trickle through his brains fairly evenly for a time, but when he gets an insult like that, it fairly surges up! I should like to know if you chappies have got a permit!"

"Permit?"

"Absolutely."

"Don't talk nonsense——"

"Not at all!" said Archie. "I didn't intend to bring the subject up, my dear old sportsmen. But when it comes to being called a puppy, something's got to be done. Something, as it were, has absolutely got to be set going! And I want to know if you frightful rotters have got a permit?"

"No, we haven't!"

"Then, laddies, I must request you to stagger forth into the next county!" said Archie, with dignity. "The fact is, this portion of the river is the absolute property of Col. Glenthorne. And I must say, in passing, that you've got a huge quantity of nerve to exert the old bellows at me!"

The two men glared.

"And who the thunder may you happen to be, my young spark?" demanded one of the men. "How is it that you're such an important person?"

"Nothing of the kind," replied Archie. "Absolutely not! I'm not saying that I'm important. But I happen to be Col. Glenthorne's son. In other words, all this river here is my pater's property. And you must admit it's a bit thick for a couple of bally strangers to order me off!"

The two anglers looked at one another, and for a moment or two they appeared nonplussed.

"Don't take any notice of the kid, Percy!" said one of them.

"Do you think I believe it?" snapped the other. "You can tell that fine yarn to the first mug you meet, my lad! Your father owns the river! That tale won't wash!"

"Dash it all!" said Archie. "Gadzooks! So you absolutely stand there and call me a frightful liar?"

"I do!" said Percy. "I'm fair sick of all this talking. We're disturbing all the fish, and we shall be lucky if we get a catch now! The best thing you can do is to clear—quick! And we won't stand any more nonsense! So shift, my young spark—and look alive!"

"I absolutely, positively refuse!" said Archie firmly.

"Oh, do you?"

"Absolutely!"

"You little cub!" shouted the man, adding a few oaths. "We'll soon show you whether we're in earnest or not!"

"I say!" gasped Archie. "You awful blackguard, don't you know! Using language like that! I mean to say, you're absolutely polluting the waters! The bally old fish will die in shoals!"

But the men took no notice. Percy was certainly the more aggressive. And he took his punt-pole, and pushed it against Archie's craft. Then, with all his strength, he heaved.

"Whoa! My only sainted aunt!" gasped Archie.

Splash!

It was unfortunate that Archie was just bending at the time—with the intention of sitting down. The punt swerved round, and Archie staggered back with a wild cry. And instead of sitting in the punt, he sat very gracefully in the River Stowe.

He went right under, and rose to the surface gasping and spluttering. He was in no state of fear, but he was tremendously angry—mainly because his suit was utterly ruined. And Archie detested getting soaked through.

"That's for coming saucy!" said Percy, with a sneer. "Now you can swim ashore. Come on, Alf—we'll get back to our old place."

They poled up the river, leaving Archie struggling. He had been carried down by the current, and was already some little distance from his punt. He considered that it would be better to swim ashore.

For, even if he got to the punt, it would be no good. He would have to run back to the school at full speed, for the chilly wind would leave him with a bad cold unless he kept his circulation on the go.

And it so happened that Handforth & Co. appeared on the towing-path. They had heard that yell of Archie's floating round a bunch of willow trees. And Handforth came to an abrupt stop.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "Did you hear that?"

"Rather!" said Church. "It sounded like Archie!"

"It was Archie," roared Handforth. "The poor chap seems to be in difficulties. Come on, we'll go and rescue him!"

Handforth dashed away, and, with Church



"I must admit that the whole bally contrivance seems to be rather complicated, as it were," remarked Archie. "Whoa! I say! Gad-zocks!"

and McClure at his heels, he rounded the clump of willows.

And he came within sight of Archie Glen-thorne—who was out in mid-stream, and striking out for the bank. The punt with the two men in it was also visible, but Handforth took no notice of it.

"All right!" he yelled. "I'm coming!"

Handforth ripped off his jacket and cap.

"Hold on!" gasped Church. "There's no need for you to go in, Handy. Archie seems to be all right—Hi! Oh, you silly chump!"

Splash!

Handforth dived in, and struck out with

a terrific amount of spluttering and noise to the spot where Archie was visible. Archie himself was quite an excellent swimmer. And, although the water was deep, he was making for the bank with good, even strokes.

He vaguely wondered why Handforth had plunged in, and certainly didn't seem to realise that the leader of Study D was coming to his rescue.

Archie just reached the mud near the river bank when Handforth grasped him by the back of the neck. Handy himself was pretty well puffed, and roaring like a grampus.

"All right, old son!" he gasped. "I've got you!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean to say, kindly release me, old horse! What, as it were, is the scheme?"

"Don't talk—don't struggle!" spluttered Handforth. "I've got you! If you struggle you'll probably get drowned! That's right—I'll soon have you ashore now!"

"Well, to be exact, I'm dashed!" ejaculated Archie blankly.

It suddenly dawned upon his mighty brain that Handforth was rescuing him. And the humorous side of the situation penetrated into Archie's wits. It was rather rich that Handy should come to his rescue when he didn't need rescuing—and richer still that he should arrive when Archie was actually climbing out.

They struggled up the bank, and flopped down in the grass.

"Good!" panted Handforth. "I thought I'd get you, old man! I don't want to boast, and say that I've saved your life, but you were in a fearful position before I yanked you out!"

"Absolutely not!" protested Archie. "It's frightfully decent of you, old son, to hurl yourself in to the rescue. Bally self-sacrificing, and all that sort of rot! Pray accept a few yards of thanks——"

"That's all right," puffed Handforth. "I couldn't see you drown!"

"But, well—the fact is, I was quite all serene, dear one!" said Archie mildly. "However, we'll let that pass. Observe those fearful cads out in the punt! Their names appear to be Percy and Alf—ghastly names, absolutely."

"What about them?" asked Church, bending over.

"The poisonous rotters pushed me into the water," said Archie, as he scrambled to his feet. "Without any exaggeration, dear chappies, they actually pushed me into the wetness! The most fearful act I have ever seen! The awful coves ought to be deposited in chokey for about fifty-seven years!"

"But why did they do that?" asked McClure.

"It simply can't be done, laddie!" replied Archie. "I mean to say, not now! The tissues are somewhat frosty, in a way of speaking. In other words, prudence is yelling with considerable force that I must

hie me away to the jolly old school. Fresh clothing is required, so to speak. I'll tell you all about it later."

"Yes, and you'd better go, too, Handy!" said Church.

A moment later the pair were hurrying off to St. Frank's. And the two men in the punt grinned derisively.

Who were they, and what were they doing in this district?

CHAPTER III.

A LITTLE FLUTTER!



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD looked round carefully.

"Come on!" he said. "All safe now!"

Gulliver and Bell, his faithful chums, followed him quickly into the back entrance of the Wheatsheaf. This was a prosperous inn lying on one side of the big Market Square in Bannington. It was a resort for all the local farmers and other agricultural yeomen of the district. And it was particularly full this evening, because it was market day, and the town was filled up with farmers from all sides, and all outlying villages.

Most of the business of the day was over, and the sturdy countrymen were gathering together for a chat and a glass before returning home. The Wheatsheaf was a kind of club on such occasions as this.

And it was because of the crowded conditions that Fullwood & Co. felt safe in entering the place.

On any ordinary afternoon they would have been very conspicuous, and they wouldn't have risked it. But to-day it was quite secure. There were such crowds about that they would not even be noticed in the throng.

They were wearing light overcoats over their Etons, and they all sported trilby hats. Fullwood's was a velour. They hardly looked like schoolboys, and they were quite safe.

Under normal circumstances, the Nuts of the Remove would not have ventured into a public-house in daylight. But it so happened that they were very short of cash. They were, in fact, extremely hard up. Gulliver and Bell had practically nothing, and Fullwood was in possession of about seven shillings, and to him, such a sum was a mere trifle.

Only a short while ago Fullwood had got himself into serious trouble by visiting the Helmford racecourse, and losing some money which did not belong to him. But Archie Glenthorne, in the kindness of his easy-going heart, had got Fullwood out of that mess—although he disliked Ralph Leslie intensely. Archie had half-hoped that Fullwood would profit by the lesson.

And Fullwood had—for a few days. He had been a changed fellow at first. He had declared to his chums that he would

have nothing more to do with horseracing. It was a mug's game he had proved it. And he wouldn't touch the thing any more.

But by the end of the week he had laughed at his own resolutions. He had confided to Gulliver and Bell that he was an ass, and that having a little flutter now and again added a zest to life.

After all, a leopard can't change his spots.

Fullwood had received a nice, substantial tip from his liberal pater. It was a fiver, to be exact, and the sudden possession of the money had changed all Fullwood's good resolutions. The very same day he telephoned to a Bannington bookmaker, and had a bet on a horse. He risked a pound—and the pound went.

The next day he bet another pound—and lost that, too. Then, in desperation, he had placed a bet of thirty shillings a couple of days afterwards, hoping to get back his losses. But that thirty shillings had gone, too.

Even this did not convince Fullwood of the utter folly of betting money on a horse-race. He was morose and savage, and talked a great deal about his rotten luck. He only had about a pound left now, and it seemed that his whole fiver would be wasted.

But that morning he had made a last plunge, and had gone over to Bannington before breakfast on his bike. He had seen Mr. Billy Monks, the bookmaker, and had placed a bet on with him. He had laid out fifteen shillings.

And this afternoon, to Fullwood's delight, he had learned that his horse had won, at three-to-one. This meant that he would get two-pounds-five-shillings, in addition to his stake. He had to draw three pounds altogether.

And such is the temperament of those who back horses, that Fullwood was in the seventh heaven of delight. He considered himself wonderfully lucky, and gleefully told his chums that backing horses was a fine game. And yet, if the matter was analysed, it could be easily seen that he had lost a great deal over a pound! But he was only too glad to get a portion of the money back.

And, being practically stony, he couldn't wait. So he had come to Bannington at once, knowing full well that Mr. Billy Monks would be in the quiet back-parlour of the Wheatsheaf at about tea-time.

That was why the Nuts of the Remove had taken the risk. They meant to collect the money, and then go for a decent feed in the little Japanese cafe in the High Street.

"Do you think it's safe?" whispered Gulliver, after they had entered the rear passage of the Wheatsheaf.

"Safe of course it's safe!" said Fullwood. "Of course, we stand a certain amount of risk, but that's nothing. We can't expect to have everythin' in this world. I wonder if Billy is here yet?"

They opened a door, and passed into a little parlour. This was more or less of a private room, but the landlord of the Wheatsheaf knew Fullwood & Co., and he did not object to them coming, for they usually did business, and spent money. They very often played billiards.

The parlour was almost empty, and after Fullwood & Co. had been there for a few moments, they were left quite alone.

"Well, this is no good!" growled Fullwood. "He doesn't seem to be here, an' there's nobody to ask. I've a good mind to go into the saloon."

"Don't you be an ass, Fully," said Bell. "There might be some of the people from Belton in there—old Holt, for example. If he spotted you, he'd report to the Head at once."

"An' I'd deny it, an' get up a good alibi!" replied Fullwood calmly. "Still, it's not worth taking the risk."

From where they stood in the parlour they could hear the numerous voices of the farmers in the saloon bar. The parlour was not actually a separate room, but a kind of rear portion divided off. There was a wooden partition, which did not reach to the ceiling. And so the babble of voices came over quite clearly and distinctly.

"Confound it!" muttered Fullwood.

And just then the door opened, and a small, dapper little man marched in. He was very neat in appearance, attired in a blue serge suit, a soft hat, and a mackintosh. He looked like a commercial traveller. As a matter of fact, he was Mr. Billy Monks, the bookmaker.

"Hallo, old man!" he said cheerily, nodding to Fullwood. "Come to draw your little amount, eh? I must say you're pretty prompt on the job!"

"I'm hard up!" said Fullwood pleasantly. "I suppose you don't mind payin' now?"

Mr. Monks' shifty eyes looked from one junior to the other. At close quarters he was not so prepossessing, and he betrayed his real character. He was one of those bookmakers who are by no means honest. And Fullwood was rightly anxious about his money.

"Well, I don't usually pay up like this—it's not business!" said Mr. Monks. "I don't do business in public-houses."

"Oh, but look here, we're quite by ourselves!" said Fullwood.

"Oh, all right—just this once!" said the bookie. "But remember—you mustn't make a practice of it!"

He brought out a pile of silver and notes, and counted out three pounds to Fullwood. The latter took it gratefully. He had been half fearing that he wouldn't see the money at all.

"Anything for to-morrow?" asked Mr. Monks, who evidently didn't like parting, and wanted to see some of the cash back.

"No, not for to-morrow," said Fullwood. "I don't fancy anythin'."

"Right you are!" said Mr. Monks. "And

don't forget that I can't do business like this any more. It's like your nerve to come here."

He passed out with a nod, and Fullwood grinned.

"Well, we've got it!" he said.

"I thought the rotter wasn't goin' to pay up!" said Gulliver.

"He'd have heard somethin' from me if he'd refused!" exclaimed Fullwood. "Well, we'd better be goin'. By gad! What's the row over there?"

There was a noise coming from the other side of the partition. A much louder voice than usual was making itself heard, and Fullwood & Co. paused for a moment before taking their departure.

"Come on—all of ye!" exclaimed the gruff voice, in hearty accents. "I'm Bobby Woodstock—known over the whole countryside. It's on me, gentlemen. Order what you want, and I'll foot the bill!"

There was an answering chorus of voices.

"Don't think I've had too much—I've hardly touched a drop yet!" exclaimed Mr. Woodstock loudly. "But when I've had some luck I don't mind treating everybody. So give any orders you like."

"He seems to be a genial sort of bounder!" grinned Fullwood.

"Oh, come on!" said Gulliver.

"No, wait a bit."

The voices from the other side of the partition, in the saloon bar, were still loud.

"Feeling very generous, to-day, aren't you, Mr. Woodstock?" said somebody.

"I reckon you'd feel generous if you'd had my luck!" said the farmer. "I can tell you gentlemen, that I'm as happy as you like!"

"Come into a fortune?" asked another voice—which, as a matter of fact, was the voice of Percy—the angling gentleman who had treated Archie so atrociously.

"Yes, that's just it—although I don't know that you could actually call it a fortune," replied Woodstock. "Still, I've had some luck. Come into ten thousand pounds."

It was quite obvious, in spite of Mr. Woodstock's assertion to the contrary, that he had already been imbibing somewhat freely. He was a well-known character in Bannington—the owner of one of the out-lying farms, and he practically lived in the Wheatsheaf on Wednesday afternoons.

Fullwood & Co., would have liked to see over that partition. If they could have done so, they would have seen Archie's two unpleasant acquaintances lounging against the bar. They had come in a short time previously, and were rather amused at Mr. Woodstock's volubility.

"What's your's, sir?" asked the farmer.

"Why, bless me! You're strangers—both o' you! Pleased to meet you, gentlemen! Staying in the house?"

"Well, no," said Percy. "Just visitors—from London."

"Always pleased to welcome visitors!" said the farmer jovially. "I'd like to know your names, gents."

"No objection," said Percy. "Mine's Mason, and my pal's name is Pratt."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Mason—glad to meet you, Mr. Pratt!" said Mr. Woodstock.

"That's it! Whisky? Good! Two double whiskies here, miss!"

"My hat, he's goin' it!" murmured Bell. "The silly old ass! I've seen him here two or three times—a red-faced bounder who looks as if he swills pints every day."

Mr. Woodstock was still merry.

"Yes, gentlemen," he said, addressing the whole saloon. "Ten thousand pounds! A nice little sum, eh? And I've been in difficulties, too! Farming ain't what it used to be in the old days. It's as much as a man can do to keep his place going in these hard times. And I don't mind telling you all that I had to borrow a thousand from old Roper."

There was a general laugh.

"It's all very well to laugh at it, but borrowing money isn't a paying game!" declared Mr. Woodstock. "I'd paid some off, too—and yet, when I settled up to-day, I had to give the old rascal over a thousand pounds—one thousand and fifty-five pounds, to be exact. But he's cleared off, thank goodness!"

"That's the style, Mr. Woodstock," came the hearty tones of the landlord. "Yes, I will, thanks! I'll have a drop of Scotch!"

"Treatin' the giddy landlord now!" murmured Bell. "I say, let's clear out!"

But still Fullwood lingered.

"So you've paid old man Roper over a thousand pounds, Mr. Woodstock?" asked one of the men from London. "Not in cash, eh?"

"Yes, in cash—notes!" replied Mr. Woodstock.

"So the old fellow will have a tidy sum to carry home to Caistowe to-night," said the landlord. "He usually takes two or three hundred by the six-ten. But to-day he'll have something like fourteen hundred! I wouldn't like to go about with a hand-bag containing all that money in cash!"

"It's a bit risky!" said Mr. Mason.

"Darned risky!" agreed Mr. Pratt. "But how do you know the old fellow's going by the six-ten?"

"Always takes that train!" said the landlord. "He's done it for years. Mr. Roper's a well-known man about these parts. Lends money to the farming gentry—and business people in the town, too. Wednesday is his big day. It's market day, you see, and he comes round collecting all his payments. It's a fine game, by the look of it. He always goes home with a bag full!"

"Yes, the six-ten local is a pretty rich train!" chuckled Mr. Woodstock. "That is, on Wednesday evenings. But it'll be a lot richer than usual to-night—with all that money of mine in Roper's bag."

The talk of the saloon went on—and was a very fair example of the foolish gossip of men who have partaken of more than is exactly healthy for them. They were by no means drunk, but, at the same time, they allowed their tongues to run loose. And men in that condition can do a lot of harm—men who are ordinarily quite cautious and level-headed.

"What do you think of it?" said Fullwood. "Over a thousand quid in a hand-bag—in cash, too. I'm blessed if I'd like it shouted about a pub!"

"I don't suppose Roper will like it, either!" said Bell. "But he's not here, an' so he can't be worried about it. In any case, it's nothing to do with us. I say, Fully, it's past five already! I want some tea!"

And the Nuts of the Remove cleared out. Little did they imagine what the result of that rash gossip in the adjoining saloon was to be!

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE SIX-TEN LOCAL!



"**B**EGAD! We shall have to hurry, dear old boys—we shall, really!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West made that remark as we walked along Bannington

High Street. I had come into the town with my chums during the afternoon, and we all decided to return to Bellton by the six-ten local.

This was, of course, our usual train when we did not go by road. The six-ten, in fact, was the only train we could conveniently catch. The next did not leave until just after seven, and that would be a bit too late for calling over. All the St. Frank's fellows knew the six-ten.

Handforth & Co. were in the town, too. They had come because Handforth found it necessary to buy a new tie, to say nothing of some boots. He had soaked himself to the skin by diving to Archie's "rescue." He didn't really need any more things, but he convinced himself that they were necessary.

And so he dragged his chums into Bannington, and they had made a number of purchases. They were coming along just behind also bent upon catching the local train for home.

"It's all right, Montie—you needn't worry," I said. "We shall catch the train all right, she's always a minute or two late, anyhow."

"We can't rely on it, dear old fellow," said Tregellis-West. "I've generally noticed that when a fellow relies on a train bein' late, it steams in on time. An' when he's in a frightful hurry, the train is fearfully late!"

I chuckled.

"That's just the way of things," I said. "I wonder what the commotion's about now? I'm blessed if Handforth isn't always up to something?"

A considerable noise was coming from our rear. As a matter of fact, Handforth had just spotted Fullwood & Co. The three Nuts of Study A were strolling up towards the station, and they were looking very pleased with themselves. They had had an excellent tea, and Fullwood's pockets jingled. Gulliver and Bell knew that they would have a good share of the cash.

"We shall catch the six-ten train all right," said Fullwood. "That's the train old Roper's goin' by—with his thousand quid an' more! Who is the chap! I've heard his name before, you know."

"He's a moneylender—lives in Caistowe, I believe," said Bell. "Oh, confound it! There's that interferin' rotter of a Handforth comin' up."

Handforth came up.

"Well, what are you chaps looking so jolly pleased about?" he demanded bluntly. "I'll bet you've been backing horses again!"

"Mind your own business!" snapped Fullwood.

"That's as good as saying you have!" snorted Handforth. "Come on, you chaps—we'll fight these rotters on the spot! It'll be rather a good wheeze—we shall make 'em lose their giddy train!"

"It's our train as well, you ass!" said Church.

"By George, yes!" said Handforth. "So it is! But still, if we're quick, we can do it in time——"

"Clear out of the way, an' don't be funny!" growled Fullwood. "We're not goin' to miss that train!"

Handforth planted himself in front of Fullwood, and pushed a big fist into Ralph Leslie's face.

"See that?" he roared. "That's what I give to chaps who back horses! Just one word, my son, and I'll slaughter you!"

"I don't want to argue with you," said Fullwood uneasily. "Don't be an ass! You don't want to start a row, I suppose? There's only about a minute for the train, an' we shall all miss it if you mess about."

"He's right, Handy," said Church. "Buck up!"

Handforth rolled up his sleeves.

"This cad called me an ass!" he said firmly. "I'm going to punch his nose!"

"I didn't call you an ass!" howled Fullwood. "I told you not to be one! I didn't mean it—I'm anxious about the train——"

"Blow the train!" said Handforth, who was longing to get a punch in.

"Look here, are you deliberately tryin' to pick a row?" demanded Fullwood fiercely.

"I haven't done anythin' to you. An' I don't see any reason why I should walk home because of your tommy-rot!"

"My what?" asked Handforth.

"You—you blitherin' idiot!" howled Fullwood rashly. "I can hear the train now! Get out of the way—"

Biff!

"Yarooo—hoo!" roared Fullwood wildly, as he staggered back. "Ow! You—you cad! Just wait until—"

"I'll give you another taste in a minute," threatened Handforth, with relish. "So you'd call me a blithering idiot, eh? I didn't mean to pick a quarrel, but I just wanted to show you what I think of bounders who consort with bookies!"

"It's a lie!" snarled Fullwood.

"I say!" gasped Church. "Do come on! That train's due, you know!"

They were near the station now, and there was really no need for hurry. For a glance had told Church that the local was not in. However, it was better to hasten Handforth up—or he would never get on the platform.

Handforth breathed hard.

"A lie, is it?" he said grimly. "All right, my son! That's as good as calling me a liar! I've told you before that I don't like doing this—but it's a duty! It's up to me to give you a lesson! Take that!"

He lunged forward, but Fullwood dodged back.

"Look out!" roared Gulliver.

Crash!

Fullwood had not seen where he was going. He couldn't, very well, for he was rushing backwards in order to avoid that lunge. And he charged full tilt into a grimy gentleman who was carrying a sack of coal.

He had just lifted it from a coal-cart which stood against the kerb, and the destination of the heavy sack was a coal-shoot close against one of the walls of a small cottage.

Fullwood hit the coalman fairly in the centre, and the unfortunate merchant crumbled up like a pricked bladder. The sack of coal shot downwards, mouth first. And the next second disaster happened.

Fullwood received a hundredweight of coal on the top of him.

"Yow—yrrrrh!" he hooted. "Gug—gug—brrrrh!"

"Oh, goodness!" gasped Church.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Fully!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A yell of laughter went up.

Fullwood was transformed in a second. That coal was dust—sheer coaldust. It was a special sack, obviously, and the inky stuff poured down in a flood over Fullwood's head and shoulders.

He was lost in a dense cloud of blackness, together with the coalman. Gulliver and Bell just managed to skip clear. Handforth & Co. had seen the coming danger, and they were well out of the zone.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Puzzle—find Fullwood!" grinned McClure.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look out—here comes the train!" shouted Tommy Watson.

We had been watching the little scene. We had practically no sympathy with Fullwood. Even if he didn't deserve this treatment at the moment, he deserved it for many past misdeeds.

The train was certainly coming in, and we hurried into the station. Handforth wanted to linger, but his chums dragged him off. And they hastened on to the platform, and got into one of the rear compartments.

"That's the way!" said Handforth, with a grin. "I think that was rather neat, the way I made that coal buzz over Fullwood!"

Church and McClure stared.

"I thought it was an accident," said Church. "You tried to punch him, and he backed into that giddy coal merchant!"

"Of course, I saw the coal chap there," remarked Handforth. "I guessed what was coming!"

His chums decided to let it go at that. To disagree would be to start an argument—and an argument in a small railway compartment was decidedly awkward. There was no way of dodging.

In the meantime, Fullwood was staggering about the pavement outside the station. Gulliver and Bell were hovering in the vicinity. And they gasped as they gazed upon their unfortunate leader.

Fullwood was like a nigger.

He was surrounded by clouds of coaldust, and every time he moved, fresh clouds floated out from him. Fullwood was in a shocking condition. Coaldust was down his neck, in his pockets, his shoes were filled, and he was half-choked.

His hair was gritty and awful, and his mouth was smothered. Every time he closed his teeth he set them on edge. The unlucky leader of Study A was sneezing every second.

"Buck up, Fully!" said Bell urgently. "Train's in!"

"How the deuce—tish-oo!—how the deuce can I go for the train—tish-oo!—like—like this!" spluttered Fullwood faintly. "By gad! I—I—tish-oo! That cad will have to—tish-oo!"

The coalman extricated himself from the sack.

"You dratted young varmint!" he raved. "I'll have the police on ye for this 'ere! Look at that there coal! It serves ye right for—"

"Quick, Fully!" gasped Bell. "Come on!"

Fullwood realised that it would be better to get out of the neighbourhood. People were gathering. And, besides, perhaps he would be called upon to pay for the coal.

And the very thought of going through the streets of Bannington in this condition made Fullwood shudder. There was still a faint chance that they might catch the train if they rushed. It generally stood in the station for a few minutes, while empty milk-cans were being loaded up

So Fullwood, fuming with insano rage, and sending clouds of black dust about him, broke into a run for the platform. The coalman yelled after him, and tried to give chase. But he was rather elderly, and running was not his strong point.

Fullwood & Co. arrived just as the local was starting.

"Here he comes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Make way for the Hottentot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

More by luck than anything Fullwood had succeeded in getting past the ticket-collector. The man's attention had been engaged with a porter at the moment, and Fullwood charged through the gateway.

"Here y3u are!" panted Bell, wrenching at a carriage door.

"Dive in—quick!" shouted Gulliver.

"If you do you'll dive out quicker!" said Handforth grimly. "You're not coming in this compartment, my sons!"

Bell let go the handle, and grabbed the door of the next compartment—which, fortunately, was empty. The train was already moving out of the station, and the guard was shouting angrily.

The door opened, and Fullwood & Co. tumbled in. Gulliver and Bell got themselves black and grimy with contact with their leader. Fullwood was now looking worse than ever.

He was usually such a dandy. But his collar was streaky, and his face was in the same condition, where the perspiration had run down. He was such a sight that his chums stared rather dazedly.

"You—you look awful, Fully!" said Bell huskily.

"You fool!" snarled Fullwood. "I feel ghastly! Oh, I'll get even with that rotter before long! It was his fault! I didn't know that rotten coalman was just behind me —"

"I yelled a warnin' to you," said Gulliver.

"Yes, when it was too late!" snapped Fullwood. "Oh, my hat! I—I feel absolutely rotten! When the train gets into Belton I shall jump over the railings. I'm not goin' through the bookin' office like this!"

"Yes, an' you'd better scoot like the dickens up to St. Frank's," advised Bell. "If you don't those cads will be there first and half the Remove will be waitin' to see you come in!"

Bell's surmise was shrewd. For, as a matter of fact, Handforth was talking on the subject at that very moment, in the next compartment.

"We'll make the chaps roar!" Handforth was saying. "We'll buzz like lightning to the school, and have a regular crowd waiting to welcome Fully! By George! He'll be the laughing stock of the school!"

They chuckled, and the train thundered and roared into the Edgemore tunnel.

"Why this railway exists, I don't know!" snorted Church. "No lights in the carriages,



"Don't talk—don't struggle!" spluttered Handforth. "I've got you! If you struggle you'll probably get drowned!"

yet—and it's nearly dark! And in the tunnels everything's like ink!"

"It'll match Fullwood, anyhow!" chuckled McClure.

The train was speeding through the tunnel in pitchy darkness. Then, at last, it emerged, and laboured up the gradient towards the straight stretch which led into Belton.

The evening was very light, to tell the truth. The sky was perfectly clear, with a golden sunset, tinged with red. And a big moon was low on the horizon. By the time the sun's last light had gone the moon would be shining in full brilliance. It was exceptionally clear for October.

The application of the brakes told the juniors that they were practically in the little station. Church glanced out of the window on the off-side, and looked up the train. He had no particular reason for doing so—but it is nothing for a boy to lean out of a carriage window as a train is running into a station.

And Church gave an exclamation.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "I say! Look here, you chaps! There's one of the doors swinging open! First-class, too!"

Handforth and McClure squeezed their heads out.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "Something must have happened!"

"Looks like it!" exclaimed McClure excitedly.

The train pulled up jerkily in the station. Handforth & Co. leaped out just as I was leaving a compartment a few doors ahead. I looked round as Handforth gave a yell.

And I noticed that a grimy figure streaked across the platform and dodged over the railings into the adjoining goods yard. It was Fullwood, and I wasn't surprised that he should make his exit from the station in that way. I grinned. But I was puzzled at Handforth's excitement.

"Don't make all that noise, Handy!" I said, as he rushed up. "What on earth is the matter—"

"Something's happened in the middle of the train!" gasped Handforth. "There's a door swinging wide open! I believe somebody's committed suicide, or something! Or perhaps some chap fell out—"

"Quick!" roared Church. "Porter—porter! What's the use of a porter if he doesn't appear? Oh, there's the guard!"

There was quite a commotion on the platform. I could see at once that something had certainly agitated Handforth & Co. The guard came up, looking suspicious. He knew schoolboys, and didn't trust them.

"Now then—now then!" he said gruffly. "What's all this shindy about?"

"Don't start the train yet!" shouted Handforth. "There's a carriage door swinging wide open on the other side of the train!"

"What's that?" said the guard sharply. "Look here, young man, if you're trying to be funny—"

"It's the truth, I tell you!" panted Handforth. "I'll show you the carriage!"

He hurried along the train, with Church and McClure. And the guard followed, looking rather alarmed. It was his duty to see that everything was all right with the train—and it appeared that something was wrong.

There were only one or two other passengers who had alighted at Belton, including Williams, Dr. Brett's chauffeur. We knew him well. And these people paused and stared as the juniors went along the train.

"What's the excitement, Master Nipper?" asked Williams.

"Blessed if I know," I replied. "Handforth's fancy, I suppose!"

But I was wrong. For just then Handforth gave a yell of horror and consternation. He was staring fixedly into a first-class compartment. The guard roughly pushed up, and he stared, too.

"Good heavens!" he gasped hoarsely.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE TUNNEL?



"WHAT'S wrong?" I asked, running up. "Somebody in a fit, or something!" said Handforth excitedly. "Stand back, you asses! One of you had better

rush off and fetch the stationmaster."

The stationmaster was already on the

spot. He was not the usual type of stationmaster, but a man of about fifty who also performed the duties of booking-clerk, too. The only other employees at the station were an aged porter and a young assistant-clerk.

The guard had got the door of the first-class compartment open, and I could see in. There was the figure of a man huddled up on the floor. And, far more significant, I saw a patch of something dark beside him.

The guard entered the compartment, and bent over the still form.

"Better get some help—quick!" he rapped out, turning a white face. "There's been foul play here! The man's been half killed! He's got a terrible wound on the side of his head!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Perhaps I can help," said Williams, jumping into the compartment. "That's right! You come as well, Mr. Spence!"

"Keep back—keep back, please!" shouted Mr. Spence, the stationmaster. "Don't crowd round, boys!"

By the time he got into the carriage the guard and Williams had managed to get the still form into a sitting posture. The man was elderly, with a fringe of grey beard. Blood was smeared over his face, and he looked deathlike. He was dressed in old-fashioned black clothing.

"Why, it's old Roper!" exclaimed the guard suddenly. "I might have known it! He's always on this train of a Wednesday! Old Tom Roper, from Caistowe! Poor beggar! He's done, I'm afraid!"

"Better carry him into the waiting-room," said Williams. "Then I'll rush for the doctor. Fancy old Roper—Quick! Where's his bag? He had over a thousand pounds in it—in cash!"

"Good heavens!" gasped the stationmaster huskily.

They looked over the compartment, but there was no bag to be seen.

"He had it when he got into the train!" said the guard. "I saw it plain—he stopped to have a word with me on Bannington platform. Seemed in the highest spirits, too. But he never carries such a sum—"

"He did to-night, I tell you!" exclaimed Williams quickly. "I was in the Wheat-sheaf at tea-time. Everybody there was talking about it. One of the farmers had paid him a lot of money in one lump, and he had it all in his bag! About fourteen hundred pounds! He's been robbed! Attacked and robbed!"

"That's about the size of it," said the guard. "But we're wasting time—and I can't keep my train waiting here all the evening! Help me to carry the poor old chap into the waiting-room. You rush for a doctor!"

Gulliver and Bell had heard a good deal of what had passed. They were bursting to declare that Williams' statement had been correct. But they dared not. They could not

admit that they were in the Wheatsheaf, too.

They knew well enough that this was a case of robbery with violence. But how had the crime been committed? At which point of the short journey had the robber attacked the old man? And how had he escaped from the moving train?

I turned the whole thing over in my mind in a few seconds. As they were carrying the unconscious form down the platform I made my mind up. Williams had hurried off for Dr. Brett by this time. And the young booking-clerk had been instructed to round-up P.c. Sparrow without delay.

"Look here," I said, turning to my chums, "I'm going to tell the guv'nor!"

"Mr. Lee?" said Watson quickly.

"Yes!" I declared. "This case seems to be pretty deep, and the guv'nor will be interested. I'll rush off at top speed; you needn't come. And I'll bring the guv'nor back with me."

"Good wheeze!" put in Church. "Mr. Lee is needed, I reckon! Sparrow's about as much use as a chunk of wood!"

I was off like the wind, and by a piece of luck I met Hal Brewster outside the station. The River House fellow had his bicycle with him, and I borrowed it on the spot, with only a hasty word of explanation.

I reached St. Frank's in record time, and rushed into the Ancient House at full speed. A number of juniors wanted to know what on earth was the matter, but I didn't stop.

I went straight to Nelson Lee's study, and burst in. The guv'nor was sitting at his desk, writing.

"Good gracious, Nipper!" he said, frowning. "What is the meaning of this burst of excitement——"

"I want you to come at once, sir!" I panted. "There's a man been attacked and robbed on the local train from Bannington! We found it out at Belton, and he's been carried into the waiting-room!"

Nelson Lee looked at me sharply.

"Do you know who the man is?" he asked.

"His name's Roper, sir——"

"Roper!" echoed the guv'nor. "Yes, I have heard of him—a moneylender, who lives at Caistowe——"

"That's right, sir," I broke in. "Well, he was carrying over a thousand pounds this evening in cash, too! The money's gone!"

As quickly as possible I described what had occurred. And while I was doing so Nelson Lee kicked off his slippers and donned his boots. Then he seized a hat and went to the door.

"We will go to the station at once," he said crisply.

"I knew you'd be interested, sir," I said, with enthusiasm.

He had his bicycle out in no time, and then we sped down to the village, and the station. Everything seemed fairly quiet

now. The train had gone, of course. A small knot of people stood outside the booking-office, but this was closed to the public.

Watson and Handforth and the other juniors were outside with the crowd.

But Nelson Lee and I were admitted at once by the junior booking-clerk; he knew Nelson Lee, of course. We passed through on to the platform, and then went to the little waiting-room.

The gas was lit, and the apartment was full of people.

Dr. Brett was bending over the form of old Tom Roper, and he was just fixing a bandage. The stationmaster was talking with Williams and the village constable—the latter making clumsy notes.

Dr. Brett glanced round.

"Oh, hallo, Lee!" he said gladly. "This is splendid! Just the very man! This seems to be a job after your own heart. We've wired for the police to come from Bannington, but I daresay you'll do a bit in advance."

"Is the man badly hurt?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Well, not so seriously as we first thought," replied the doctor. "An ugly bruise, and slight concussion, I believe. He ought to come round soon, and then, perhaps, he'll be able to give you a few details."

"We're in the dark so far, sir," put in the stationmaster. "It's a rare mysterious business. Maybe you can make something of it. We can't understand how Mr. Roper could have been attacked. There was no sign of the rascal on the train."

"That is not surprising," said Nelson Lee. "The thief's main object, I should think, would be to get away with all speed with his booty."

"But he must have left the train while it was running, sir," objected Spence. "There wasn't any stop between Bannington and here."

"I do not think the speed of the train would deter a man who had the nerve to commit this robbery," said Lee grimly. "Is it an established fact that Mr. Roper was carrying over a thousand pounds?"

"Yes, sir," said Williams. "I know it for certain."

"The guard saw the old fellow's bag, I hear," put in Dr. Brett. "There was no bag in the compartment."

"Have you searched the unconscious man's pockets?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir; we thought it as well," said Spence. "But there's no money on him, bar a few odd pounds and some silver."

"H'm! Then it certainly seems that the big sum spoken of was contained in a hand-bag," said Nelson Lee. "But we can really know very little about that until Mr. Roper recovers consciousness. As far as I know, he seems to be a pretty well known character in this neighbourhood?"

"Well known!" repeated Dr. Brett. "I should say he is!"

"A moneylender?"

"Yes; but hardly of the type one pictures in one's mind," replied the doctor. "Roper is a kindly old soul, in his own way. He makes a fair profit out of his money, just the same as other people make a fair profit out of their goods. I've frequently heard that he's let people off the last few payments of a debt, if they were in bad straits. Not at all like the moneylender of fiction."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I think Mr. Roper had other activities?"

"Oh, yes," said Brett. "As a matter of fact, he had a good many irons in the fire," said the doctor. "He's got an interest in two or three local businesses, and some of his capital is sunk in some shipping at Caistowe. On the whole, old Roper's a pretty wealthy individual—taking everything into consideration. Not really rich, as riches go, but very nicely off."

"And I understand that he always went to Bannington on a Wednesday afternoon?"

"Always, sir," put in the stationmaster. "I haven't known him to fail once during the last five years. As regular as clockwork in his habits. I daresay he'll go next Wednesday, too—if he gets over this in time."

Dr. Brett smiled.

"Oh, he'll be all right by next Wednesday," he said. "You see, Lee, Mr. Roper goes on a Wednesday because it's market-day, and the town is chock full of farmers, and it's mostly to the country folk of that kind that he lends money. And on Wednesday he has no trouble in meeting all of them, and collecting his interest, or other payments. It saves him a long round through all the outlying districts. Quite a cute dodge."

"Yes," agreed Lee. "As far as I can see, there can be little doubt that some during rascal got to know of this money, and planned to waylay Mr. Roper on the train. And it is almost certain that the actual assault took place in the Edgemore tunnel!"

"Why are you so sure of that?"

"My dear man, there is no other favourable part of the line," said Nelson Lee. "Mr. Roper seems to be a powerful sort of man, in spite of his age, and he would be quite a difficult customer to tackle, and so his assailant probably came upon him in the darkness."

"You'll soon see, anyhow," said Dr. Brett. "He's showing signs of coming round now."

"Excellent!" said Lee.

"Half the town knew about that extra lot of money, sir," put in Williams. "There was a lot of talk about it in the Wheatsheaf. The fools! They ought to have known better! But that's usually the way when men get too much into 'em!"

"You were there?"

"I went in for about ten minutes, sir."

"And what is this talk you refer to?"

"Why, some half-drunken farmer, sir," replied Williams. "A man named Woodstock

"Oh, I know him!" put in Dr. Brett. "A

regular toper. I was called over to his place once, and found him absolutely dazed with drink. And yet when he's sober I understand that he's one of the most genial old fellows you could wish to meet. It's a pity how some of these men spoil themselves with drink."

"It is that, sir!" agreed Williams. "Well, this Mr. Woodstock was telling the whole saloon-bar that he'd come into a lot of money—his brother died, or something like that. Anyhow, he was fairly rolling in it, according to what he said, and only an hour before he had paid Mr. Roper over a thousand pounds."

"In one lump sum?" asked Nelson Lee.

"So he said, sir—and in cash, too," replied Williams. "Of course, Mr. Roper wouldn't have said a word about it, you can bet. And Mr. Woodstock wouldn't, either, if he had been sober. He was telling everybody that he'd borrowed a thousand pounds a month or two earlier to keep his farm going. Then this windfall arrived, and he was able to pay the loan off in one go."

"I can quite understand such talk going on in the Wheatsheaf," said Nelson Lee dryly. "That, of course, is the whole crux of the matter. Somebody heard this talk—they knew Mr. Roper would be going on the six-ten train—and so it was planned to rob the poor old chap. No doubt the culprit is a local man, who is fully acquainted with Mr. Roper's habits."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but that doesn't really signify!" said Williams. "I noticed a couple of fellows in the bar were strangers from London, I believe. As a matter of fact, I've seen them in Bellton, too, just lately. They heard all this talk about Mr. Roper—and knew that he was travelling on the six-ten local."

"That is quite an interesting point," said Nelson Lee.

"Two men have been seen about here?" I put in. "Did you ever happen to see them near the river, Williams?"

"That's where I did see them, Master Nipper," said the chauffeur. "Fishing, they was."

"Then they must be the same two rotters who upset Archie's punt!" I declared. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if they're at the bottom of this—"

"Splendid!" said Dr. Brett softly. "That's right—that's right! Quick, Lee! He's coming round!"

Nelson Lee stepped sharply over to the injured old moneylender.

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE ON THE TRACK!



MR. THOMAS ROPER looked round him dazedly.

Five minutes had elapsed, and during this time Dr. Brett had been applying restoratives. And at last the semi-stupor had left the patient, and an ex-

pression of intelligence came into his eyes. The blow on his head was a nasty one, but not at all serious. The skin had been badly lacerated, causing a flow of blood—and this had made it appear that the case was far more serious than it actually was.

We could see that Mr. Roper was a wiry-looking man, and a keen, active light swept into his eyes as he took in all his surroundings. He stared round the waiting-room, from one to another of us.

"What's all this—what's all this?" he asked, rather uncertainly. "Good gracious me! I—I don't seem to remember—Has something happened?"

"Yes, Mr. Roper—don't upset yourself!" said Dr. Brett gently. "Take it quietly, and you'll soon be all right. How's your head feel?"

Mr. Roper put up a quivering hand to the thick bandage.

"My head?" he muttered, frowning. "It's aching—it's aching very badly. But I—I can't seem to grasp—"

He suddenly paused, and a startled expression leapt into his eyes.

"Yes—yes!" he said quickly. "The tunnel! I know now! Somebody sprang at me—I struggled—and then—and then—I can't seem to remember. I don't know what happened."

"It's all right—but you mustn't excite yourself!" exclaimed Dr. Brett. "I'm afraid we shall have to leave matters until later, Mr. Lee," he added, turning. "If he gets excited it might have some bad effect—"

"I'm feeling all right—much better now!" interrupted Mr. Roper, sitting forward. "Don't hold me—don't hold me! Bless my soul! I'm not a baby! What's the matter with you?"

"Really, Mr. Roper, you mustn't try to sit up—"

"Oh, indeed!" said the old fellow, with a fiery gleam in his eyes. "You needn't tell me what's happened—I know! I've had a knock on the head. But it's hard enough—it can stand a few knocks! I'm all right now—and you can keep your hands off, please! Goodness gracious! It's very kind of you doctor—very kind indeed! But you needn't talk any nonsense about me getting excited. You might think I was dying, by the way you're all staring at me."

Dr. Brett laughed.

"It seems I've been concerning myself rather unduly," he said dryly.

"Of course you have!" declared Mr. Roper. "What's the policeman here for?"

"I reckon I'd like a few details about the robbery, sir," said Sparrow heavily. "That's what I've come about—and the inspector from Bannington is due by the next train. We thought you might be dyin', sir—"

"Robbery!" said Mr. Roper sharply. "Good heavens! You—you don't mean—"

He tried to struggle up, and looked round sharply and searchingly.

"My bag!" he said shrilly. "Where's my bag?"

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Roper, that your bag was not with you when we found you in the compartment," said the station-master. "It seemed pretty clear that you'd been attacked and robbed—"

"My bag wasn't there?" said old Roper hoarsely. "Oh, it's terrible—terrible! So that's why I was hit in the darkness! They took my bag! What's the good of police? Why can't the police do something?"

"I don't reckon we can do much until we know what's been lost!" said the village constable in an aggrieved voice.

"If you'll keep calm, Mr. Roper, it will be much better," said Dr. Brett. "This gentleman here is Mr. Nelson Lee. He came down from St. Frank's on purpose to look into the matter."

"Eh—eh?" said the old fellow. "Mr. Lee?" He looked at the guv'nor keenly. "I've heard of you, sir—yes, yes, of course! You're the big detective, aren't you? The police won't do anything—so perhaps you can. The scoundrels! The rogues! They took my bag! They've robbed me!"

"Then there were two assailants?" asked the doctor.

"How do I know?" snapped Mr. Roper. "There might have been three—or there might only have been one. I can't see in the dark, can I? I was struck on the head before I could even struggle out of the seat!"

"I should like you to tell me exactly what took place, as far as you know, Mr. Roper," said Nelson Lee. "And to begin with, perhaps you will tell me the exact amount of money you had with you upon entering the train at Bannington?"

Mr. Roper looked at the guv'nor fixedly.

"One thousand four hundred and thirty pounds," he said, in precise tones. "Oh, yes! It sounds a lot! It was a lot—the biggest sum I ever carried. And every penny of it was in cash—currency notes and silver!"

"No Bank of England notes?"

"A few—about thirty-five pounds' worth."

"Were these currency notes new issue?"

"No—no!" interrupted Mr. Roper. "You mean, have I got the the numbers? I haven't. If that thief gets away with them, they'll never be traced. It's cash—just as good as gold in the old days! I've always thought Woodstock was a fool! Took a fancy into his head to pay me in one lump—and all in currency notes! Bah! I was a fool, too, to take it! I ought to have had a cheque instead!"

"It would have been far safer, Mr. Roper," said Nelson Lee.

"Safer—of course!" said the old fellow. "But I'm a greedy kind of miser—yes, I'll admit it! When I saw the notes, I wanted them—and so I agreed. And this is what I get for my pains."

"Well, we come to the fact that all this money is in cash, and is not capable of being traced," said Nelson Lee. "I presume the notes were put up in bundles of hundred?"

"Yes—that's generally the way," said Mr. Roper. "I'll guarantee it was Woodstock's doing. I heard that he'd been talking. And the whole town got to know. And so some scoundrel got into the same train and robbed me!"

"Did you have a compartment to yourself?"

"Yes—I always travel first-class so that I can be sure of privacy," replied Mr. Roper. "Not that the accommodation is worth the extra money. The railway carriages are a disgrace to the company."

To talk in this way was only Mr. Roper's little custom. One would judge, from his own words, that he was a very miserly individual. Actually, he was quite the contrary. He was generous, and contributed largely to the Caistowe charities. And he was well-known throughout the surrounding districts as being kind-hearted and extremely lenient.

"I understand, then, that you entered the train quite alone, and you had your bag with you?" asked Lee.

"Yes—yes."

"Did you place the bag on the seat, or in the rack?"

"It was close beside me, on the seat," said Mr. Roper. "I sat reading the evening paper at first—until it strained my eyes. A fine railway company, not to provide lights when it's nearly dark! If the train had been lighted, I shouldn't have been robbed! I shall claim damages——"

"Yes, yes, of course!" interrupted Lee gently. "You sat reading until the failing light made it impossible to continue. Please tell me what happened then, Mr. Roper?"

"Why, only a few minutes later we entered the tunnel," said the old man. "I had no suspicion of anything happening. But, quite suddenly, I felt a big draught, and at first I thought the window had dropped. Then a hand came groping out of the darkness, and caught hold of me. It gave me a big start, because the darkness was intense, and I knew that I had been alone in the carriage."

"You are quite certain that you were alone at the start of your journey?"

"Haven't I got eyes?"

"I mean, there are spaces under the seats," said Lee quietly.

"Yes, yes, so there are!" said Mr. Roper.

"To be sure. But I looked! Oh, yes—I looked! I don't travel with over a thousand pounds and take the chance of somebody being under the seat! That's why I never dreamed of any danger! No, this scoundrel must have come in through the door. His hands clutched at me, and then, as I was struggling up, I seemed to see a terrible

flaring light, and I was aware of an intense agony for a second. Then—then I found myself here."

Nelson Lee nodded thoughtfully.

"It is very much as I suspected," he said. "Well, Mr. Roper, I will do everything I can to recover this money for you——"

"Do—do!" said Mr. Roper. "I will reward you well, Mr. Lee—although I don't suppose that matters to a man like you. I want that money back—I'm not crippled if it goes—but I don't see why some confounded rogue should go about spending my money!"

"Will you give me a few details concerning this bag?" asked Lee.

"An ordinary handbag, Mr. Lee—brown, and rather worn," said the other. "I'd had it in use for years, and was very fond of it. It was locked, and the notes were inside, most of them being in bundles of a hundred pounds. Oh, yes, and there's something else. I don't suppose it matters—but I might as well tell you! One of the notes had two blots of red ink at the right hand corner. Another was torn across, and stuck up with stamp edging. And another note was muddy on the back. Still a fourth one was badly torn on the left hand side. I noticed these as I was running through them. Notes like that ought to be withdrawn!"

"The information may prove to be of the utmost value," said Nelson Lee, making a few notes. "And now, Mr. Roper, as I have heard all that is possible, I think I will see about an active investigation."

"Can I come with you, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, if you like."

I could see that P.C. Sparrow was looking rather depressed. He felt very much in the background, for he had been almost ignored.

And we were just about to leave the waiting-room when the stationmaster uttered an exclamation.

"Sakes!" he exclaimed. "The train's about due!"

"And the booking-office ain't been unlocked, sir!" said the junior clerk, startled. "Nobody won't have time to get their tickets!"

"We'll keep the train waiting," said Spence indifferently. "It doesn't matter much at a time like this, anyhow."

"One moment, stationmaster," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Is this the local train from Caistowe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then it must be the same train that carried Mr. Roper on the outward journey?"

"That's right enough, sir."

"Splendid!" said the gov'nor. "Do you think you could manage to hold the train up for about five minutes? There are one or two little investigations I want to make, and I can't make them while the train is in motion."

Spence nodded

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"It can be managed all right, sir," he said. "The train don't go beyond Bannington this trip, and it's of no importance if it doesn't get in until a quarter of an hour late.—I shall have to report to the Superintendent—but he'll understand, especially if you see him, sir."

"You can rely upon me to make things quite all right, stationmaster," said Lee. "Kindly delay the train for five minutes at least. There may be one other little favour that I shall ask. We will see."

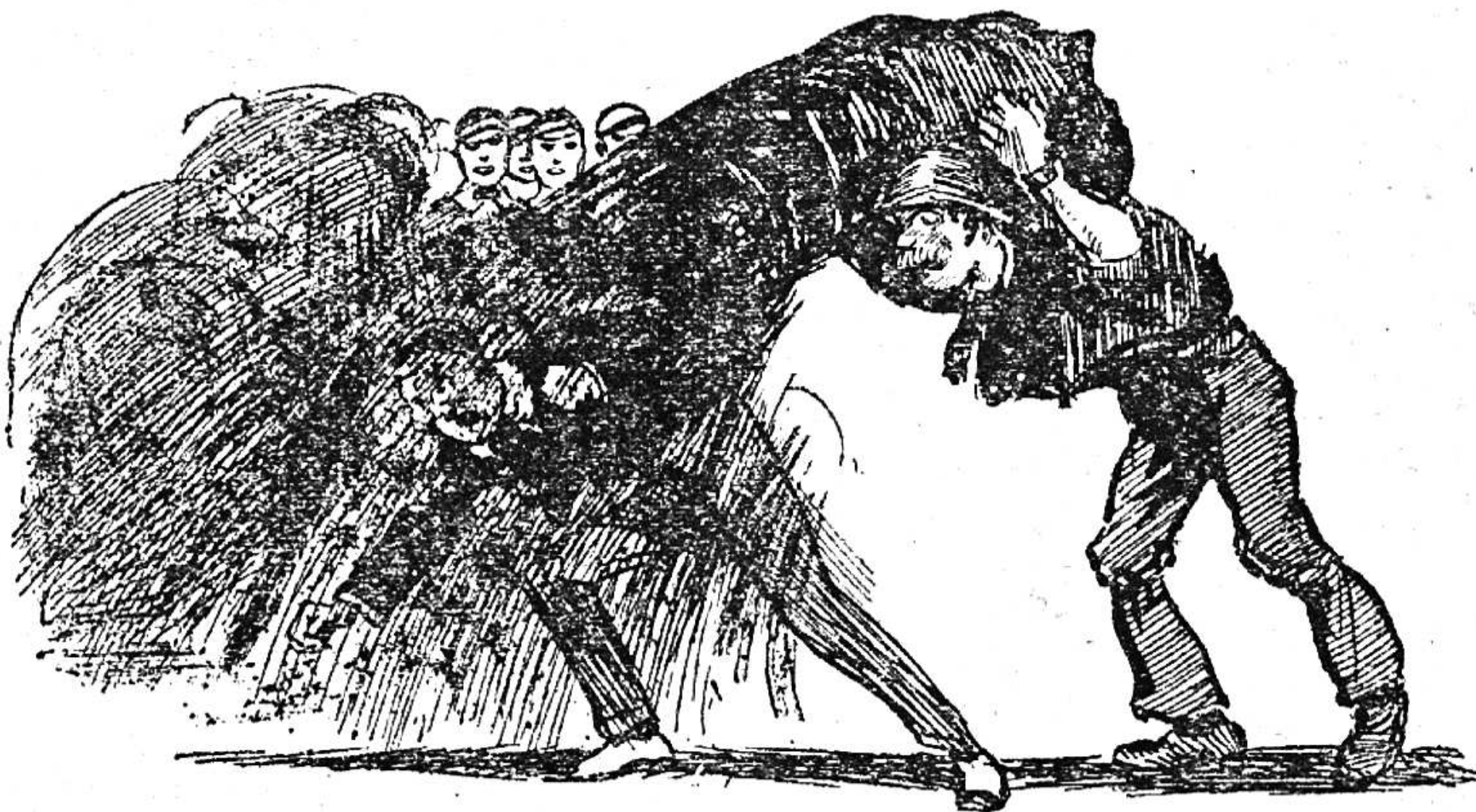
We went out on the platform, and by now it was nearly dark—that is to say, the last tinge of the sunset had gone, and the moon was shining in full glory. And as we stood there, the headlights of the approach-

"First of all, I'd like to see the compartment which Mr. Roper occupied," said the guv'nor. "You needn't worry about the delay. Spence has given me at least five minutes."

"Oh, that's all right, sir!" said the guard. "It don't matter if she stops here ten! As long as we can crawl into Bannington some time to-night, it'll be O.K. Now, this is the compartment, sir. Of course, I locked the doors—until the cleaners can clean up that mess. Besides, I thought the police might want to see it."

"Quite right," said Nelson Lee.

We entered the compartment. The light was now burning in the roof—a dismal kind of a flicker which was of very little use-



The sack shot downwards, mouth first, and the next second Fullwood received a hundredweight of coal on top of him.

ing local train came into view round the curve.

By this time the booking-clerk had opened the office, and was dealing with the rush. This consisted of two passengers—all the rest of the people were merely idle folks who wanted to know about the "tragedy."

The train drew up against the platform, and the guard jumped out of his van before the train stopped. He instantly made inquiries about Mr. Roper, and was greatly pleased to learn that the old fellow was nearly himself again.

Nelson Lee seized hold of the guard at once. He pressed five shillings into the man's hand, and from that moment the guard was our slave. He hovered about, touching his cap every time the guv'nor spoke. Possibly he expected another tip later on, and he was quite likely to get it.

Nelson Lee did not rely upon it, but pulled a powerful electric-torch out of his pocket.

I held this, and flashed the light upon the floor.

There was that ugly stain of blood there, but very little else to be seen in the compartment. Upon the side of the door there was a slight scratch, but this might easily have been there before the attack upon Mr. Roper. The main reason for Nelson Lee's investigation did not lie here.

He opened the other door of the compartment, and then paused.

"Let me see!" he said. "The position is now reversed, of course—I mustn't forget that. On the other journey the near side of the train would be the off side. So we will look upon this footboard to begin with."

I don't want to make things confused, so I'll refer to the off side of the train just

as it had been on the journey from Bannington to Caistowe. We were now looking out upon the footboard. And although I could not see much, Nelson Lee seemed quite keen.

"Yes, yes!" he murmured. "There can be no doubt that the assailant occupied the next compartment. As soon as the train entered the tunnel he got out upon the footboard, swiftly came to this door, and entered Mr. Roper's compartment. He then committed the assault, and seized the bag."

"And what did he do after that, sir?" I asked. "That's the question. Do you think he went back?"

"No—he did not go back."

"Why are you so sure, sir?"

"Because the offside door was found open when the train entered Bellton station," replied Nelson Lee shrewdly. "If the man had left the compartment by that door he would have closed it. But he was in complete darkness, remember, and in his haste to get away, he forgot that he had left the door open. He couldn't see it, because of the complete blackness of the tunnel."

"By jingo, that's a pretty cute deduction, sir," I said. "So you think he got out of the train on the near side?"

"Undoubtedly."

"But how could he, in the tunnel?"

"Of course, he could not do it in the tunnel," said the guv'nor. "But one moment—I daresay he risked it. There is not much space between the train and the near side wall. But the door opens, as you can see, so that the force of the wind would tend to keep it closed. He probably squeezed out, pressing himself against the side of the train. Then he closed the door. But we will soon make certain of this by examining the footboard."

We went to the other side of the train, and dropped down upon the line. Then Nelson Lee brought his torch to bear upon the footboard. And he at once uttered a keen exclamation.

"Excellent—excellent!" he muttered.

Most trains, as I daresay you will have noticed, have two sets of boards—the lower set hardly ever being used. Consequently, this lower board becomes extremely dusty and grimy. And now, as we looked at it, we could see distinct marks there—footprints—but only the marks of the toes. There were no heels, and they pointed inwards.

"Yes, exactly as I anticipated!" said Nelson Lee crisply. "You see what happened, Nipper? The man squeezed through the doorway, as I said, and after closing the door, he lowered himself along foot by foot. Here are the tracks—and they lead to the end of the carriage."

"But what was the idea of that, sir?"

"To avoid being seen when the train came out into the daylight," replied Lee

keenly. "The Edgemore Tunnel, I know, is very widely built, and there would have been plenty of room for the man to do as I have outlined. But it was necessary for him to work very rapidly."

"Rather, sir," I said.

Having got to the end of the carriage, he crouched there. He could only have done this with one object. He jumped."

"While the train was going at full speed?" I asked doubtfully.

"Yes," said Lee. "'Full speed' does not mean very much on this local train. It was probably doing less than twenty miles an hour—for, you remember, there is a gradient after the tunnel."

"By jingo, yes, sir!"

"He realised that it would have been very risky for him to remain on the train until it was near Bellton," went on Nelson Lee. "He dared not do that. And I have a kind of recollection that there is some boggy ground beside the line near the Edgemore cutting. We must go there, Nipper—it is necessary to make an examination on the spot. But even if we succeed in finding that our deductions are quite correct, we have still to learn the identity of this rascal, and it may be a most difficult matter to lay him by the heels."

And Nelson Lee turned to the guard, who was standing near by.

"All right, guard—we're ready now!" smiled the guv'nor. "We won't keep your train waiting any longer. By the way, do you think you could manage to pull up somewhere about the middle of the Edgemore cutting—that is, about half-a-mile from the tunnel."

The guard grinned.

"Easy enough, sir," he said. "I will tell the driver."

"Thanks—and divide this between you!" said Lee, slipping a ten-shilling note into the guard's hand. "As soon as we have dropped off I will flash my lamp, so that you needn't delay any longer than is necessary."

"We can wait a bit if you like, sir," said the guard obligingly. "I mean, how will you get back, sir?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I don't think I can impose upon your generosity to that extent, guard," he said. "I shall probably want to stay in the cutting for about half-an-hour—and by that time the people at Bannington will be wondering what on earth had happened to you. We can get back quite easily across the fields."

"Right you are, sir," said the guard. "Thank 'ee, sir!"

And a few moments later we puffed vigorously out of the station, bent upon a close investigation of the Edgemore cutting.

CHAPTER VII.

A FEW DISCOVERIES:



"RIGHT away, guard!"

R

I grinned.

Nelson Lee was flashing his torch.

The train had come to a stop a few moments later in the cutting, and now Lee was

giving the signal, showing that we had alighted in safety. The engine gave a shrill, sharp blast, and commenced puffing. The train slowly rolled away, and went down the line towards the tunnel. We stood upon the permanent way, left utterly to ourselves.

"This is one advantage of being on a branch line, Nipper!" said the gov'nor pleasantly. "We can play about with the trains very much as we like, providing we take the preliminary caution to administer palm oil to the guard. Such things would not be possible on a main line."

"No, sir," I grinned. "But now we're here, what's the next move? Personally, I can't see very much to hope for?"

"You always were an impatient young beggar," said Nelson Lee. "It is quite likely that we shall find practically nothing to reward us for our pains. On the other hand, there is a distinct chance that we shall be lucky."

We stood there, feeling very isolated and alone. In the distance we could still hear the rumble of the train, but very soon this died away, too.

We were standing right in the cutting, and the great sloping banks of grass reached up on either side of us. We could see the wooden fences at the top, with clumps of trees here and there. And down on the permanent way, all was still and very quiet.

"Where do we start, sir?" I asked.

"On this side, against the down line," said Nelson Lee. "That is, we shall work towards Bellton. I don't think the thief jumped from the train at a nearer point than this. The ground as far as this is very hard."

"It's hard here, too, sir."

In the moonlight we could see everything very distinctly. The moon shone right into the cutting, and revealed the grassy banks, and the gleaming steel rails. And we commenced walking briskly in the direction of Bellton. And we kept our eyes well open.

After a bit, the nature of the ground changed somewhat. It was not quite so hard, and became more level on this side of the cutting. And there were little depressions filled with puddles of water.

"How's this, sir?" I asked. "We haven't had much rain lately."

"No, but the water drains down from these high banks," said Nelson Lee. "I think the pools become much bigger further on."

And he was right.

We had only progressed about a hundred yards when we came upon quite a large marshy kind of pool. It was five or six yards long, by three or four yards wide. And here we paused, and made a very careful examination of all the edges.

But there was not a trace of footprint.

"Drawn blank!" I said shortly.

"Yes, Nipper—we must try again."

We walked further on, and came to another of those patches. And this one, if anything, was even larger. It was not exactly water, but thick mud, with a kind of green slime on top. And even in the moonlight we could see that the surface appeared to be curiously disturbed.

Nelson Lee flashed his torch out.

"Ah," he murmured. "This looks distinctly hopeful!"

"My hat!" I exclaimed.

For, without a doubt, there were clear marks here. Something heavy had recently fallen into the big patch of morass. It was comparatively near to the track. An easy jump out from the train, and anybody would be able to land in the centre of the soft mush.

In a few moments we found clear footprints in the grass—and they led straight upwards to the top of the embankment. All round that muddy pool there were marks of the grass being trampled down. It was all so obvious that one glance was quite sufficient.

I took in a deep breath as I looked at the gov'nor.

"Well, it's pretty clear that your reasoning was sound, sir," I said. "And they were ripping deductions, too——"

"Nonsense, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee. "They were childishly simple. A village constable could have arrived at the same conclusions."

I chuckled.

"I'd like to see old Sparrow doing it!" I grinned. "He'd take five years to find out that the thief left the train by the near side footboard! And as for this, he'd never make such a discovery!"

"You seem to be very elated, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "But our troubles are by no means over yet."

"Why, we've only got to follow these footprints——"

"Precisely—but how far will they lead us?" asked the gov'nor. "There are hard roads beyond—tarred roads, and I rather fancy we shall not be able to follow the trail very far. However, we will see."

"By jingo!" I exclaimed. "I've got an idea!"

"Well?"

"Boz!" I said.

"Boz!" repeated Lee.

"That little dog of mine!" I said eagerly. "The poor little beggar is kept in the kennels behind the Ancient House, and he hardly ever has anything to do. Old Cuttle exercises him, but he'd simply love some real work. Suppose I dash to St. Frank's.

fetch him, and come back here? And then if we can't follow the trail, he'll get on the scent."

"The suggestion is quite an excellent one, Nipper, but we will wait a bit," said Nelson Lee. "We shall be going in the right direction, however, and so no time will be wasted."

We had finished on this particular spot.

For we knew, without any doubt, that Mr. Roper's attacker had dropped from the sixteen local at this particular spot. He had taken a certain amount of risk, but his judgment was evidently good.

By dropping here, he had got himself into a terrible condition of mud and wetness, but he had saved himself from injury. To jump down upon the hard ground would be very foolhardy. Such a thing would probably have resulted in a broken leg—and perhaps even a broken neck.

The thief had preferred to get muddy—and I didn't blame him.

He had paused for a little while, obviously to clean himself. For the grass had been torn up in great tufts for some little distance. And there were marks of mud everywhere.

We had not finished on the spot, as I had first supposed, for Nelson Lee commenced searching round with the most careful scrutiny. He moved almost every tuft of grass.

"What are you looking for, sir?" I asked curiously.

"Anything."

"Anything, sir?"

"My dear Nipper, when a man drops from a train, and alights in more or less of a heat, there is an excellent chance that something might fly from his person," said the gov'nor. "In fact, I'll guarantee that nine out of ten would leave some little memento behind them. It is quite possible that our unknown friend searched well, and that our own efforts will be fruitless. But you never know."

We kept up the search for fully ten minutes. And I was just beginning to get fed up with it, when I saw something gleaming between two little patches of weeds—and quite a long distance from the spot where the man had dropped. It seemed to me to be sheer waste of time to look there.

"Hallo!" I exclaimed keenly. "What's this?"

I picked the thing up, and then drew my breath in.

The object was a small, gold charm which had apparently been worn at the end of a watch chain. The link was torn completely in half. Nelson Lee took it from me, and his eyes were gleaming.

"Just such a thing as I was searching for," he said. "When the man dropped, he struck the muddy patch with such force that this was torn away—no doubt it was

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ADVENTURE

caught by some part of his clothing—possibly a jacket-button. Anyhow, it flew off, and it may prove to be a valuable clue.”

“And what do we do now, sir?” I asked.

“We shall mount the slope of the cutting, and see if it is possible to follow this man,” said Nelson Lee. “I doubt very much if we shall succeed, but it is just as well to make every effort.”

It was rather a laborious climb, but, at length, we arrived at the wooden fence. Looking down, the railway track was now far below us, the metals gleaming like thin, white ribbons in the moonlight.

And while we were standing there a goods train came rumbling by, destroying the sense of loneliness for a few minutes. So far we had followed our quarry's tracks without trouble.

The grass was long, and he had left a trail which even Handforth could have followed.

And upon the top of the fence there were some muddy marks. We scaled it, and found ourselves in a meadow. This helped us again, for the grass was still long, and the marks left by the man were clearly defined.

“He was a bit of a fool to come over here, sir,” I remarked.

“I have an idea that the thief was something of an amateur, Nipper,” said Nelson Lee.

“Then he was a pretty good amateur,” I declared.

“It did not require very much skill to commit such a crime, Nipper,” Nelson Lee reminded me. “Agility, yes—and daring, to say nothing of nerve. But skill hardly enters into the matter.”

“I suppose you're right, sir,” I admitted. “All sorts of people knew about the money, and it was only necessary to get into the next compartment to old Roper—although he had to take a chance there, because the compartment might not have been empty.”

“It was not much of a chance,” said Nelson Lee. “The first-class compartments on a local train are very seldom occupied. The man, I say, was an amateur, and he probably concluded that he'd been so clever that he did not even think of covering up his tracks here. He was quite sure that he would be able to defeat all possible attempts at discovery.”

“That's what it looks like, sir,” I agreed. “Hallo, we seem to be getting into a road here. Yes, by jingo, it's a lane.”

We had reached the end of the meadow, and passed through a gap. And now we were in a quiet, little country lane where the leaves were lying thickly upon the ground. The place was very secluded.

“H'm!” grunted Lee, looking up and down. “This is where we come to the end of our trail, young 'un!”

“Oh, rats!” I said. “Don't you think we can follow the chap any further?”

“My dear boy, just look for yourself!” said Nelson Lee. “Here we have a hard

road, with myriads of fallen leaves. To follow any trail here is well nigh impossible. I doubt if even a black tracker himself could do it. For the wind has only died down since the moon rose. Since the man was here, the leaves have been disturbed—they have been blown about in all directions. And the road beneath is like granite.”

I scratched my chin.

“Yes, we're dished!” I said. “Well, the only thing is for me to dash to St. Frank's, and get Boz.”

“No, you need not trouble,” said Nelson Lee quietly.

“But we want to follow the trail, sir!”

“I rather fancy I can follow it without the assistance of your little dog,” said Nelson Lee. “It is not necessary for me to stick to the foot tracks any longer. In fact, Nipper, I have a distinct idea that I shall be able to lay my hands upon this cunning gentleman before the evening is out!”

I stared.

“But—but you don't know who he is, sir?” I gasped.

“No, I do not.”

“But you must have some idea——”

“Well, I will admit that I am a little suspicious concerning certain people,” said Nelson Lee vaguely. “I think, my lad, that I can now dispense with your good services. You had better go back to St. Frank's, and wait until I turn up.”

I grunted.

“Well, that's dirty!” I declared indignantly. “Look here, sir, I've come with you all this way, and it's a bit thick——”

“My dear Nipper, it is quite useless for you to protest,” broke in the gov'nor gently. “I don't want to be too blunt, but your presence from this point onwards would be quite a hindrance.”

“That's quite blunt enough, anyway!” I growled. “I suppose you'll say I've been a hindrance all the time.”

“Come, come, Nipper!” chuckled Lee. “It's not like you to talk in that way. You know very well that you have been quite helpful. But I have certain plans in mind which must necessarily be put into operation alone. So if you will make your way back to St. Frank's I shall be quite pleased. It is only a comparatively short walk, for Edgemore is near by——”

“Dash it all, I know the way home, sir,” I interrupted. “Well, all right—I suppose you know best. But it's a bit rotten for me. Look here, if I guess the culprit, can I come with you?”

The gov'nor laughed outright.

“I don't know the culprit myself, so any guesses on your part will be quite futile,” he replied. “And it is a most unsafe principle to rely upon guesswork, Nipper.”

“Well, look here—I'll bet anything you like that those two strangers did this job!” I said grimly. “They plotted it together, and one of them carried it out. Those two

men who chucked Archie into the river this afternoon."

"Quite possibly," agreed Lee.

"Do you think so, too, sir?"

"Well, not exactly," replied Lee vaguely.

"As I have already told you, Nipper, I make no idle conjectures. There is more than a chance that those two men are the guilty parties——"

"Sure you don't suspect old Woodstock?" I ejaculated.

"Good heavens, no!"

"But it might be him!" I put in. "Couldn't he have got up that yarn about coming into a fortune? Couldn't he have spoofed being drunk? Then, afterwards, he went and pinched the thousand quid back, and so got himself out of Roper's debt in one fell swoop. How's that?"

"Upon my soul, Nipper, it is extremely fortunate that you are not criminally inclined," laughed the gov'nor. "If you can think of such an outrageous scheme with such facility, it indicates that your brain is a most cunning one. But I do not think Mr. Woodstock is precisely the type of gentleman who would cling to the footboard of a railway train."

"No, I suppose not!" I admitted. "Well, I'm fed up with this! It's a bit thick, gov'nor, treating me like this. When do you think you'll be back?"

"I may be home by bed-time, and I may not be home until some unearthly period in the small hours. So don't expect me."

And, with this very unsatisfactory statement, I was obliged to content myself. I said good-bye to the gov'nor, and marched off home as briskly as possible. Having passed through the tiny hamlet of Edgemore, I took the footpath to St. Frank's, and when I arrived in the Triangle I felt rather astonished.

I had not glanced at my watch, and I had been half-expecting to find most of the fellows in bed. It seemed ages since we had left Belton station. And yet, actually, it was still comparatively early in the evening.

Most of the juniors were at their prep. But Handforth & Co. met me in the lobby. I had been expecting this. It was rather too much to hope that I should not come across Handforth.

"Well?" he demanded eagerly.

"It's all right—the gov'nor's on the track of the criminal," I said. "I wanted to be with him, but he wouldn't let me go."

"He ought to have had me there!" said Handforth. "Of course, if I'd been on the spot, he wouldn't have sent me back——"

"No," I interrupted. "You wouldn't have gone at all, so you wouldn't need any sending back."

"You—you funny ass!" snorted Handforth. "As a matter of fact, I was thinking about going out on an investigation. I've been thinking the whole thing out, and I've got it as clear as daylight."

"When it's very foggy, I suppose?"

"You idiot!" howled Handforth. "This

is what happened. There were two men hidden underneath the seat of that compartment. Suddenly, they jumped out, shoved their fists into old Roper's face, and told him to put up his hands. He refused, so they dotted him on the napper—— Hi! Where are you going?"

"I'm escaping!" I said, walking away.

"But I was telling you about——"

"Exactly!" I said. "But you're about a thousand miles out of the truth, Handy, and it's a bit tedious. Take my advice, and chuck it up. You'll do a lot better if you play marbles!"

Handforth gave one fearful roar, and charged into the Remove passage after me. But when he turned the corner I had gone. And Handforth's wrath oozed away with surprising suddenness as he observed that Mr. Crowell was striding down the passage.

Handforth turned back, breathing hard.

"All right—he'll see!" he exclaimed grimly.

"If my deductions don't turn out correct, I'll eat my boots!"

Church and McClure grinned.

But they made no remark. Silence was golden.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EXPOSURE!



THE Wheatsheaf was rather crowded.

It was not far from closing time, and the saloon-bar was thronged with people. And practically the sole topic of conversation was the serious assault which had been committed upon Mr. Thomas Roper.

"Well, I reckon it's taught old Tom a lesson!" said the landlord. "In future, maybe, he won't go about with such big sums of money on him. I've told him time and again that it was risky."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Mr. Billy Monks, the bookie, as he lounged against the bar. "I've come from race meetings before now with two or three thousand, and nothing's ever happened to me!"

The landlord nodded.

"I can believe you!" he said, with conviction. "There's not a race meeting you don't attend but what you don't come away with your pockets bulging! If ever this house fails, I shall become a bookmaker! It's money for nothing all the time!"

"Oh, is it?" said Mr. Monks. "What about when we pay out?"

"You pay out once in a blue moon!"

They were only chaffing one another, and the conversation soon turned back to Mr. Roper. Close against the bar were the two angling acquaintances of Archie—Mr. Mason and Mr. Pratt.

They were both looking rather flushed, and had evidently been drinking a good deal.

"In my opinion, the thing was done by a professional crook!" said Mr. Mason. "A job like that couldn't be brought off by anybody else. Over a thousand quid, mind you! That was a nice little haul for somebody."

"Rather!" said Mr. Pratt. "We don't get no bits of good luck of that kind!"

The landlord looked at them coldly.

"Good luck," he repeated. "The fellow won't think it's good luck when he's serving time! You needn't think the thief will escape; I've heard that Mr. Nelson Lee's on his track."

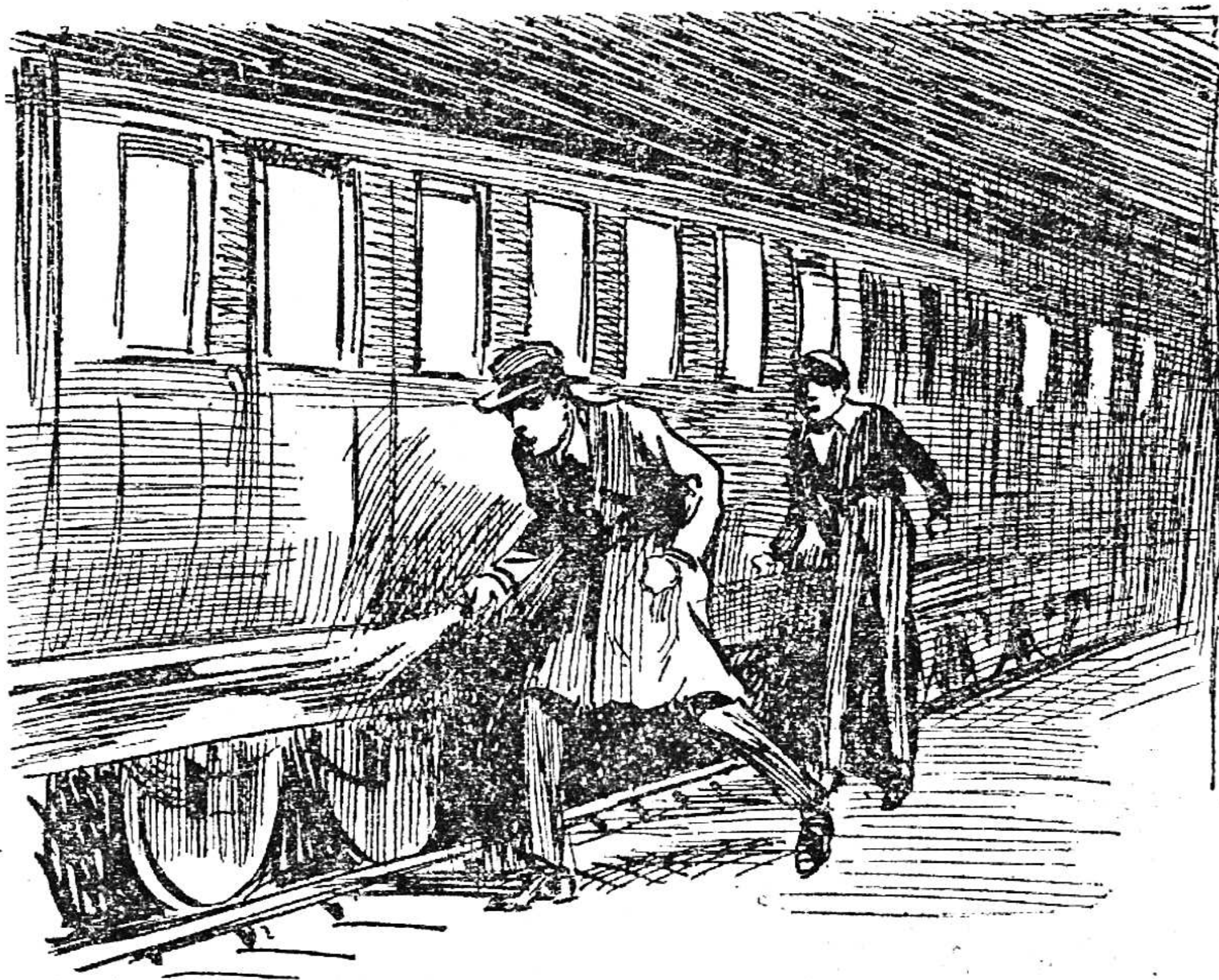
"Eh? What's that ye say?"

An old farmer sitting on one of the benches behind a mug of beer looked up. He had not been very interested in the conversation

"You can take it from me that Mr. Nelson Lee's a cute guy," he said. "That school-master stuff is only a blind. When it comes to a big case, he's on it like a shot. This affair of old Roper ain't big enough for him."

"Oh, I don't know," said the landlord. "Anyway, I heard that he's promised Roper that he'll try and get the money back."

"Ay, and so he will!" said the grizzled old farmer. "Them as stole the money 'ad better look out! This 'ere Mr. Lee is wass'n all the police put together, so they say. Not that 'e ain't overrated. I don't suppose he's



Then Nelson Lee brought his torch to bear upon the footboard. And he at once uttered a keen exclamation. "Excellent—excellent!" he muttered.

till now. There was a queer look in his eyes, as though he was half scared.

"It's all right, old 'un!" said Mr. Pratt. "Haven't you heard of Mr Nelson Lee?"

"Ay, I have that!" said the old countryman.

"Well, he's taken up this case, according to the landlord!" said Mr. Pratt. "Not that it'll make much difference. I don't believe these yarns about the man. Who is he, anyway? Nothing but a schoolmaster!"

Billy Monks shook his head.

half so clever as some of the official fellows; but he ain't hampered by any rools!"

"Good for you, grandfather!" chuckled Monks. "I'm a bit fed-up with the whole thing. Hang Roper, and his money, too! He ought to think himself lucky he wasn't put right out."

"And so ought the man who did it!" said Mr. Pratt. "I reckon he's the lucky one. He's cleaned up over a thousand quid, and gone away. I reckon he must be in London by this time, chuckling like old boots."

"Well, let's have another drink and change the subject!" said the bookmaker. "I've done pretty well to-day, so I don't mind being a bit liberal. What will you 'ave, gents?"

Monks pulled out some money, and tossed a pound note on the counter.

The old farmer lumbered across to the bar, and picked up the note.

"What's the game, old 'un?" asked Monks, turning on him.

There was a quick scuffle, a gasp, a couple of sharp clicks, and Mr. Billy Monks staggered back, white to the lips, with handcuffs over his wrists. It was one of the quickest jobs imaginable.

The bookmaker was shivering all over, and he stared round wildly.

"What—what's the meaning—of—of this?" he stuttered.

"It seems, Mr. Monks, that I must arrest you on suspicion of being concerned in the assault upon Mr. Thomas Roper!" said the old farmer, in a smooth, even voice. "Please don't make a fuss, or attempt to struggle. It won't do you the least amount of good."

The landlord leaned over his bar, gasping.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he exclaimed. "Lor! What a cute disguise!"

The old farmer blew a shrill blast upon a whistle, and almost within fifteen seconds the doors were flung open, and Inspector Jameson appeared with two constables.

"This is your man, Jameson," said the "countryman" quietly.

"Bless my soul, Mr. Lee, but you were remarkably quick!" exclaimed Inspector Jameson.

"Yes; luck was with me."

"Lee!" exclaimed Mason incredulously.

"Are—are you Mr. Lee, sir?"

"Yes!" said the detective calmly.

Everybody in the bar was staring at him with the utmost astonishment. His make-up was so perfect that he looked the part to the life. For half an hour he had been sitting in the bar, and hardly anybody had looked at him. He had not aroused any suspicion.

But now he relinquished his prisoner to Inspector Jameson, and he also handed over the pound note which he had picked up from the bar.

"This note has, as you will see, two distinct red-ink blots upon it!" he exclaimed. "It was one of the notes contained in a bundle which Mr. Roper had in his possession. I have no doubt, inspector, that a very brief search will result in the recovery of the other notes."

"We'll soon see, sir," said the inspector.

"Look here!" shouted Monks wildly, as he recovered from the first shock. "Look here! What's the meaning of this? You're mad, all of you! I never touched the old man's money! Not a penny of it! And just because that note's got two red-ink blots on it, it doesn't mean to say that——"

"I am not relying upon the red-ink blots alone, Mr. Monks," interrupted Nelson Lee

smoothly. "I observe that you have been unfortunate enough to lose a little gold charm from your watch-chain."

Monks stared down with sudden alarm.

"Oh! Yes—yes!" he said confusedly.

"It dropped off yesterday——"

"It was there at tea-time!" put in the landlord.

"I—I mean——"

"Perhaps this is the article?" said Nelson Lee, holding up the little charm. "Can you identify it, landlord?"

"Why, certainly," exclaimed the landlord promptly. "Monks has been wearing that on his chain for the past two months."

"Thank you," said Nelson Lee. "That point is very valuable. I do not think it is necessary to go into the matter further now. Monks will be able to use any defence he chooses."

"You—you infernal busybody!" snarled Monks, his little eyes blazing with hatred. "How did you know?"

"Better be quiet, young man!" put in the inspector. "I suppose you know that anything you say may be used in evidence against you——"

"D'you think I care?" shouted Monks wildly. "I've got no earthly—I know it! You've collared me, and the first thing you'll do is to search my rooms. Well, the money's there, so that's saved you one anxiety! But how did this confounded schoolmaster find out about that charm?"

"It was, surprisingly simple," said Nelson Lee. "I found it close by the railway line, where you jumped from the train."

"And I didn't know it!" exclaimed Monks, breathing hard. "I didn't even know that the cursed thing was gone!"

"It is always wise to be very careful," said Lee. "However, you are not a professional criminal, Monks, and so we cannot expect you to look after all the details."

Monks calmed down.

"Look here, don't take me away yet," he growled. "I want to talk to these gents. I've got something to say——"

"Sorry, but you'll have to come," said Inspector Jameson.

"I want to know why Lee dropped on me?" demanded Monks. "How is it he came straight here? How did he know that thing was from my watch chain?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I had really no idea that it was from your watch chain, Monks," he replied. "But, having convinced myself that the whole thing was the work of an amateur, I put two and two together. I was more and more certain that the crime had been committed by somebody who had been present in this bar when Mr. Woodstock told the company in general that Mr. Roper would be carrying an extra large sum."

"Well?" said Monks.

"I further believed that the man was a local resident, and that his first move would be to return to the Wheatsheaf, with the object of making everything appear normal."

For, if he stayed away, that would cause comment. I therefore adopted a suitable disguise, and was prepared to watch."

"You—you—"

"Now then!" growled the inspector. "That's enough!"

"Fortunately, you were in the bar even before I entered," went on Nelson Lee. "I noticed the missing charm from the chain at once, but I decided to delay action for a short while. I will admit that I was quite surprised when I saw that note with the ink stains. For it was really one chance in a thousand whether that particular note appeared. Of course, your arrest would have followed just the same, in any case."

Monks was taken away, cursing loudly.

And everybody else in the bar crowded round Nelson Lee, asking all sorts of questions. They were filled with admiration for the extremely smart way in which the detective had brought off this coup.

But to Lee himself the whole thing was trivial.

And at last he made his escape, only just in time to avoid two enterprising local reporters who arrived on the scene.

Nelson Lee went straight to the establishment of Mr. Isadore Morris, the gentleman who kept the wig shop in the High Street. On more than one occasion Lee had dropped in upon Isadore to effect a disguise. And when he emerged soon afterwards, he was his own immaculate self again.

His first move was to go straight to the police station, where he found that all the money had been recovered, with the exception of a matter of fourteen or fifteen pounds.

And the telephone had been busy, and Mr. Roper—who had been taken to one of the Bellon inns—had been told of the recovery of his money.

"Well, that's all right," said Nelson Lee. "I shan't trouble Mr. Roper to-night, but I might run down and see him to-morrow."

"I should like to congratulate you, Mr. Lee, upon the way in which you captured Monks," said Inspector Jameson rather grudgingly. "I dare say we should have got the man in time, but we're not quite accustomed to your hustling methods."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"My dear Jameson, it was so simple that it now appears to be almost childish," he said. "The money was taken, and the criminal acted very crudely. He left so many indications behind him, that his exposure was inevitable. And yet, curiously enough, he considered himself to be perfectly safe. I had a good start on you, remember, so the odds were all in my favour."

"That's true enough, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, brightening up. "All the same, I want to thank you for your help. I'm a bit surprised about Monks. I've known him for some time. He's never given the police any trouble at all, and has generally kept quite within the law in his betting activities. I

didn't think he was the kind of man to commit robbery with violence."

"It was the result of a sudden temptation," said Nelson Lee. "That, of course, is quite clear. Perhaps he had thought of the matter on many occasions. I do not think he planned it this evening. He must have pondered over the possibilities on many different evenings. He knew that Mr. Roper always went by that train, and he had figured out that the coup could be brought off without much trouble. But the prize was not worth the risk."

"And then, to-night, he found that the old man was carrying over a thousand," said the inspector. "Yes, I see. He decided that he would chance it, because if he succeeded, he would be a thousand pounds the richer. But what a fool! A good paying business in his hands, and he goes and throws it all away like that!"

"There is no accounting for the criminal mind, inspector," said Nelson Lee. "I strongly suspect that Monks was partially under the influence of drink when he committed his foolish crime. Well, good-night, Jameson. I'm off."

And Nelson Lee left the police-station, and set off towards St. Frank's. He intended to walk the distance. But it so happened that Dr. Brett came shooting by in his car. He pulled up at once, and hailed Lee with enthusiasm.

"I say, is it true?" he asked, as he leaned out of his seat.

"It all depends upon what you mean?" smiled Lee.

"Hang it, man, about the Roper affair!"

"Well, it's quite true that the culprit is now in the hands of the police," said Nelson Lee. "And it is equally true that Mr. Roper's money has been recovered."

Dr. Brett stared.

"Man alive, you're a wonder!" he declared flatly.

Nelson Lee told him not to be ridiculous, and climbed into the car. And they bowled towards Bellon at a smart pace. The doctor insisted upon taking Lee right up to the school.

"I shall see Roper before turning in, and I'll take him the news personally," said the doctor. "He's a decent old stick, and I'm jolly glad that things have turned out all right."

At last Lee was able to get away, and he entered the Triangle. It was just bedtime for the juniors, but I was hovering about the Triangle, hoping against hope that I might hear something of the case.

And then I saw the guy'nor.

I rushed across to him, and grabbed his arm.

"Well?" I asked breathlessly.

"My dear Nipper, there's no need to get so excited!" he smiled. "No doubt you will be interested to hear of my little adventure. When I have explained you will readily understand how impossible it was for you to be with me."

"But what about the thief, sir?" I asked.

"He is at present languishing in a cell!"

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "You've been pretty quick, sir."

"If you start any nonsense, Nipper, I shall get angry," said Lee gruffly. "Everybody seems to think that I've done something wonderful—and yet it's an absolute trifle."

"I'll bet the thief was one of those anglers!" I said.

"You shouldn't bet, Nipper—it's risky," smiled the gov'nor. "The thief, if you want to know, was a certain foxy-looking gentleman who has been carrying on the business of a bookmaker, and he is known as Mr. Billy Monks."

"Well, I'm blessed!" I exclaimed. "I never thought of him as the culprit!"

"No?" said Lee.

And he told me exactly what had transpired, and how the arrest had been effected. I listened with great interest.

"And what about those two anglers, sir?" I asked.

"Well, what about them?"

"I thought they were somehow connected—"

"It merely proves, Nipper, that it is always unwise to make conjectures," interrupted Nelson Lee, smiling. "The two men

you named were merely in the Wheatsheaf for the purpose of attending to their thirst—which certainly seemed to need a great deal of care."

"Then they're not crooks at all?"

"They might be—but I have no evidence of it," said Nelson Lee calmly. "They are certainly an unpleasant pair, and Bannington will be all the better when they return to their natural haunts. Personally, I think they are merely two Londoners of an undesirable type who have unfortunately selected Bannington as a spot for late holiday-making. And now, Nipper, we will dispense with the whole subject. And there goes the bell, which means that you must retire."

When I went in I was feeling supremely elated. But after the others had gone to sleep, Fullwood leaned out of bed, and called softly to his chums. Bell was asleep, but Gulliver wasn't.

"Hallo!" he whispered.

"I say!" said Fullwood. "It's a jolly good thing we collected our money before tea! If we'd left it until to-morrow there'd have been nothin' doin'! You can't draw cash from a bookie when he's in chiekey!"

"By gad, no!" breathed Gulliver. "I hadn't thought of that."

And the Nuts went to sleep, congratulating themselves.

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

Readers are invited to write to the Editor on any matter of interest concerning this journal or themselves, and should address their communications to The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

MY DEAR READERS,—Once more Nelson Lee figures very prominently in our long, complete story, and his capture of the train thief was a neat piece of work. Next week, to give a little variety, you will hear more about the Juniors, and how they get Phipps out of a difficulty, in a fine, long, rollicking story, "THE REMOVE TO THE RESCUE!"

A New Feature.

A special feature of this number is the first part of a grand detective mystery story of Nelson Lee, "THE MAYFAIR MYSTERY!" It is a story that will set you all

thinking and wondering, until you read the solution in next week's instalment. Many of you might like to try your hand at amateur detecting. Here is an opportunity, for you have ample material to form a theory that will test your powers of deduction.

A Forthcoming Competition.

With regard to these detective problem stories, I hope to announce very shortly details of a competition, in which I shall offer a few prizes to readers who send in the best solution of another story now being prepared for you. Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

Nipper's Magazine

No. 47,

EDITED BY NIPPER,

October 14, 1922.

MY DEAR CHUMS,—Many of you probably remember those two quaint individuals, Messrs. Podge and Midge, private detectives. It is some months since they have been seen hovering around St. Frank's. We were talking about them the other day, and Bob Christine suggested writing a story round them for the Mag. At the risk of being tracked by these sleuths, I have agreed to publish a laughable skit on them next week, entitled, "The Case of the Spotted Spider!"—Your old friend, NIPPER (The Editor).

HOW TO KEEP YOUR BICYCLE FIT

A Few Hints by BOB CHRISTINE

BEING a keen cyclist, I am well fitted to write a few paragraphs on this subject. I hope everybody will accept the advice I am taking the trouble to offer. I am assuming, of course, that you have got a bicycle.

With the roads in their present muddy condition, it is somewhat difficult to keep your jigger spic and span. I know of one very certain way to prevent mud and wet getting at your bicycle. Thoroughly clean it, keep it well dusted, and wrap the bright parts up in greasy rags. And never take it out. This is about the only certain way of preventing it getting muddy.

With regard to punctures, it is far better never to get any. But I have noticed some tyres with cuts, corns, etc., that fairly make one weep to look at them. How they continue to hold air is a mystery. I am in the happy position of being able to tell you an absolute preventive for punctures. Use solid tyres.

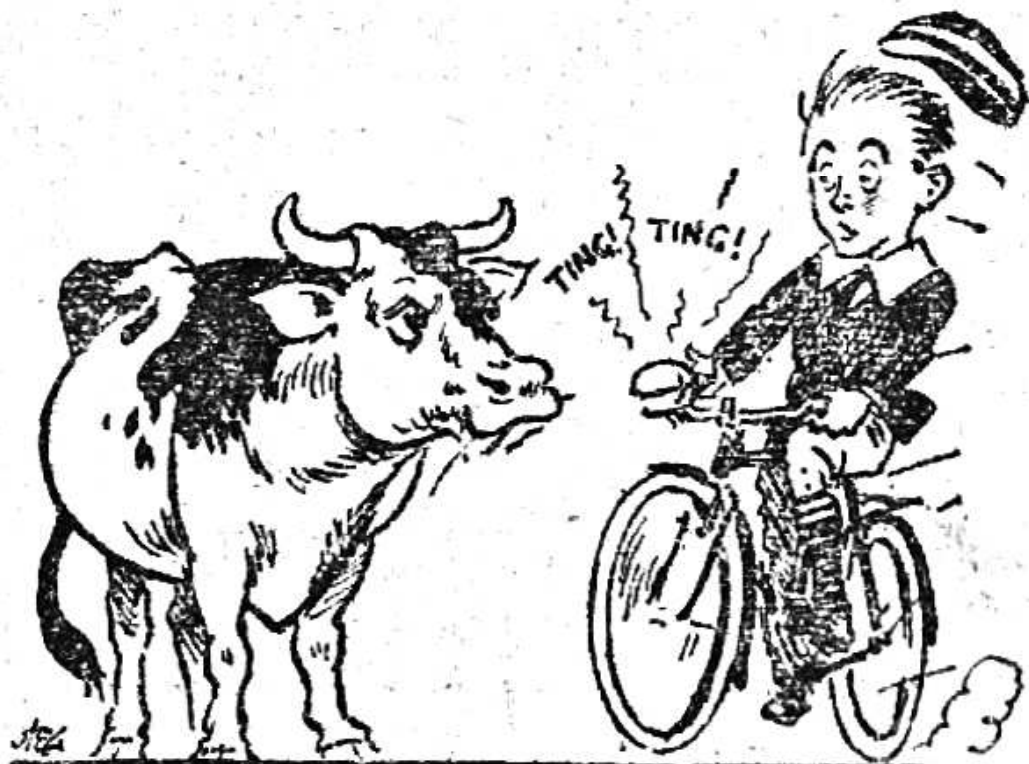
Don't allow any nuts to become loose, as if these fall off while riding it is just possible that you will fall off, too. Nuts may be small things, but they are very important. And a cracked nut on your spindle may result in a cracked nut on your shoulders.

It is always a very difficult matter to keep nickel-plating bright. In this damp weather, rust quickly forms. It is very galling for a chap to find his handle-bars or pedal cranks spotted with red rust. I have long since discovered that there is only one remedy. Let the blessed thing get rusty, all over, and then you don't care. A spot or two will worry a chap—but a lot is of no importance.

Lamps are a very important article on a bicycle. I can safely recommend acetylene

lamps for giving a good light and lots of trouble, to say nothing of a good, sound niff. That's the great advantage of a gas lamp—you can always smell it on your bike, even in the dark. If you can't get much light, don't unscrew the bottom, and investigate with a match. You'll probably get the light in one go. But there is a certain advantage in this, because you'll have no further trouble with the lamp. Scrap iron sells at a fairly decent price.

Oil lamps, on the other hand, are very simple. They don't give so much light, but they are more reliable. But don't copy Handforth's example, and use petrol. The practice is too expensive. Burning oil is quite cheap, and has the double advantage of being useful for frying kippers or pancakes as a beginning. It is just as useful for your bike lamp after it is used out as a frying medium. And this system has a certain charm because when cycling you obtain a pleasant smell of cooking.



A good bell is important. Never fail to ring it if you see anything in the way.

A good strong parcel carrier is an essential feature of any good bicycle. It always comes in handy for giving another chap a lift, but if he is heavy it will probably give him a drop after a while. Straps are sometimes quite useful, but as these generally get lost, it is always safer to carry some good string. A hank of string in the pocket is worth dozens of straps left in the bicycle shed.

I could give any number of hints regarding pumps, cycle clips, chains, gear-cases, and other accessories, but I haven't got room, and so I'll conclude by reminding you that a good bell is very important. Never fail to ring it if you see anything in the way—unless you happen to be insured by one of the newspapers.

MR. CROWELL'S LAPSE

By JACK GREY.

IT was rather muggy that morning in the Form Room, and the air seemed particularly close. Anyhow, I yawned once or twice as I sat at my desk, and was a bit startled when Mr. Crowell came up, and patted me on the shoulder.

"Feeling drowsy, Grey," he asked kindly.

"Nun—no, sir!" I gasped. "I—I—"

"Nonsense, Grey!" said the Form-master. "I can see quite well that you are tired. You are quite at liberty to have a short nap, if you wish. The geography lesson is of no importance."

I started, and the other fellows stared, too. As a rule, Mr. Crowell was jolly hot stuff during lesson time, and wouldn't allow any of us to slack if he could help it. To invite me to take a nap was rather staggering.

"I mean to say, a somewhat priceless scheme," observed Archie, from his corner. "As a matter of absolute fact, laddies, I'm dashed drowsy myself. About forty of the best and brightest would help to restore the wasted tissues, as it were. What about it, old bird?" he added beaming upon Mr. Crowell.

"Certainly, Glen-thorne!" replied Mr. Crowell pleasantly. "If you wish, you may bring one of your easy chairs into the Form-room, in order to make your repose more comfortable."

"Absolutely!" said Archie, letting his monocle drop. "I mean to say, miracles, and all all that sort of thing! Kindly gather round, laddies, and shake me slightly. I feel, don't you know, that things must be wrong!"

Mr. Crowell laughed.

"You are rather surprised, boys?" he enquired. "To tell you the truth, I am feeling very happy this morning, and I should like you to share my happiness. We will dispense with work just for one occasion."

"Oh!"

"No work at all, sir?"

"No work at all!" beamed Mr. Crowell. "We will thoroughly enjoy ourselves—and as a commencement we will sample a few of these."

The Form-master, to our amazement, proceeded to open his desk and take out box after box of chocolates, cream fondants, Turkish delight, and other choice confections. We looked on in dumb wonder.

"I have another little surprise for you, boys," went on Mr. Crowell. "If you open your desks, you will find that there is a little present within. You have been so well behaved this term that I felt you deserved some recognition."

I opened my desk wonderingly, and then drew my breath in sharply. For there, just inside, lay a really beautiful gold watch and chain. I couldn't believe it at first, but when I examined it I found that it was solid eighteen carat, hall-marked.

The other fellows were shouting with joy. Handforth found a ripping folding camera in his desk. Reggie Pitt had a gold-mounted fountain pen; Nipper was the lucky owner of a scarf-pin mounted in diamonds.

And Fatty Little's heart was filled with glee to find that his desk was crammed full of jam tarts and doughnuts. All the other fellows had valuable presents, and they examined them in a dazed kind of way.

And, meanwhile, Mr. Crowell stood looking on at us with an expression of benevolent enjoyment.

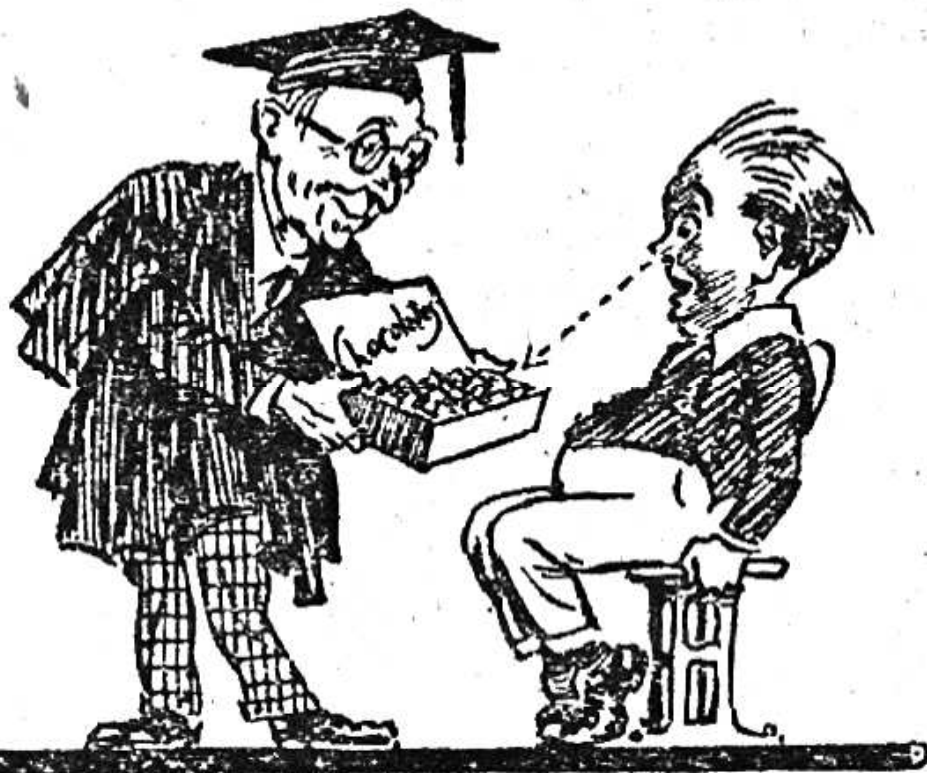
"The fact of the matter is, boys, I have kept a little secret from you," he said. "I learned early this week that I have inherited nearly half-a-million from an uncle who died in South America. And my good fortune is so great that I felt I had to share it with you. Now we will enjoy

these sweetmeats."

He came round, passing the box of chocolates. I took one, and put it in my mouth, and I was just biting into it when I felt a sharp pain on my knuckles. I started, and everything seemed to go blurred.

"Outrageous!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell acidly. "How dare you, Grey? Before lessons have been progressing ten minutes you have the audacity to go to sleep! You will write me fifty lines for inattention!"

I gasped, and blinked round. Of course, I knew it was too good to be true. But why does a fellow's dream always end up at the most interesting point?



Mr. Crowell came round, passing the box of chocolates. I took one and put it in my mouth.

NEXT WEEK!

THE ADVENTURES OF PODGE AND MIDGE,
DUD DETECTIVES.



PART ONE.

"HALLO, Lee! I'm glad to see you!"
 "How are you, Deerhurst?
 This is the first chance I have had
 of speaking to you."

"Yes, I've been dancing most of the time. I've had enough of it now. I rather expected to find you here, Lee, though I believe you don't care for social affairs."

"No, not as a rule, my dear fellow. But I could not well refuse an invitation from the duchess. Since I saved her reckless young nephew from the clutches of a black-mailer several years ago, without any scandal, she has always included me in her list of guests when she has given a reception."

"A dear old lady, isn't she? I am very fond of her, and she was a great friend of my father's."

It was a warm night in July, towards the close of the season, and the hour was fairly late. In front of the palatial residence of the Duchess of Saxe, in Grosvenor Square, Mayfair, was stretched a crimson awning, with a strip of crimson carpet beneath it. To right and left were long rows of private cars, waiting until they should be called for. At the edge of the pavement a servant in the ducal livery, with powdered wig and yellow stockings, was talking to a couple of constables, who were there on special duty, while on both sides of the awning were gathered a crowd of curious people.

Within the big mansion, in the spacious ball-room, hundreds of guests were dancing to the strains of an orchestra, under the brilliant clusters of light, and many more were standing in groups around the wall. They comprised the cream of Society, and the tall and stately Duchess of Saxe, still a beautiful woman in spite of her grey hair, was the greatest aristocrat of them all.

It was a waltz they were dancing, and the music ceased just after the brief conversa-

tion between Nelson Lee, the famous detective, and Lord Deerhurst. The dancers dispersed, and there was a merry chatter of voices.

As the hostess was moving towards one of the doors, fanning herself, an agitated housemaid approached her and spoke a few words in a low tone. For an instant the Duchess of Saxe grew very white.

Then, observing Lord Deerhurst and the detective, she made a furtive sign to them, and they unobtrusively followed her and the maid from the room, and across the wide hall to the foot of the staircase.

"I fear something terrible has happened, Mr. Lee," the duchess said tremulously. "It is fortunate that you are here. I can scarcely believe it, but I have learned from the maid that—that—" Her voice faltered. "You tell them, Wilson," she bade.

"It is quite true, sir," declared the maid, addressing the detective. "I went to my mistress' room, only a few moments ago, and found a man lying there dead. He must have been dead, for his eyes were shut, and there was blood on him."

"Is he one of the guests?" Lee asked.

"I can't say if he is or not. I didn't look at him closely. I was too frightened. Come, sir, and I will show you."

The orchestra struck up again as the little group of four ascended the staircase. They went along a corridor, and stepped through an open door into the Duchess of Saxe's bed-chamber, where they beheld a startling sight by the rosy glow from a shaded lamp.

On the floor, a yard or so beyond the doorway, with blood trickling slowly from a bullet-hole in his left breast, was a man in evening-dress, with a dark moustache and a pointed beard. A revolver that was fully loaded was clenched in his right hand, and near him lay an air-pistol of the most modern type.

There were no signs of a struggle. All was in order. One of the windows was open, the sash raised to a height of several feet, and a gentle breeze was stirring the curtains. The duchess shuddered, and put her hands to her eyes.

"By jove, it's murder!" Lord Deerhurst said in a low tone.

Nelson Lee nodded. Having sent the housemaid away, bidding her hold her tongue for the present, he knelt by the prostrate man. He first made sure that he was dead, and then, after gazing intently at him for a moment, he plucked off his beard and moustache, revealing his clean-shaven features.

"Good heavens, he is a friend of mine!" he exclaimed. "This is John Houghton, a private detective, of Warwick Street, off Regent Street!"

"That is who it is," the Duchess of Saxe said in horror. "I recognise him now. As uninvited persons have recently committed thefts at balls and receptions at private dwellings, I employed Mr. Houghton to come here to-night as a guest, and watch the people."

"He was to have remained on duty downstairs, I presume?" Lee continued.

"Yes, Mr. Lee, in the ballroom and the refreshment room."

"Yet he met with his death up here. I see one of the windows is opened. Did you leave it like that this evening?"

"Yes, I remember that I did."

"I wonder if anything of value is missing?"

The Duchess of Saxe, who had partly regained her self-control, grew very white again. Hastening to a large wardrobe, she grasped the handle of the door and pulled it open.

"It has been forced!" she gasped. "The lock is broken, and the wood is splintered! A thief has been here!"

She glanced above her, and, raising her arm, she thrust it over the edge of the shelf at the upper part of the wardrobe, and fumbled within. She turned round with consternation on her face, and a wild look in her eyes.

"My diamond necklace!" she cried. "The necklace that was a gift from my dead husband! It is not there! It is gone, case and all! It has been stolen! I had meant to wear it to-night, but I changed my mind and wore my emeralds instead! Oh, if only I had——"

Her voice choked, and she sat down on a chair, with tears in her eyes.

"You will recover the necklace for me, won't you?" she implored. "You must, Mr. Lee! I wouldn't have lost it for the world! I will give almost any price to get it back! Oh, what a terrible thing this is! Mr. Houghton murdered, and my precious jewels stolen!"

Lord Deerhurst and the detective glanced at each other in dismay. The Saxe diamonds stolen! The famous necklace, of the largest

and purest stones, which was valued at forty thousand pounds, and had often been mentioned in the papers. From greed for it John Houghton had been ruthlessly murdered.

There he lay, his lips sealed for ever. Not from him could any information be had relating to what had occurred while revelry held full sway below. There seemed to be a note of mockery in the merry strains of music that floated from the ballroom.

"It is almost wicked of me to be complaining about my diamonds when poor Mr. Houghton has been shot," said the Duchess of Saxe. "But none like them can be had, and I badly want to get them back."

"You will," Lord Deerhurst assured her. "Mr. Lee will recover them for you. You can rely upon his skill."

Nelson Lee had examined the door of the wardrobe, which had been forced with a sharp instrument, and he was now standing by the open window. Beneath and beyond him, visible in the murky gloom, was a strip of lawn, bordered by trees and shrubbery, which stretched to a comparatively low wall that separated the garden from a mews.

"The police will have to be fetched, of course," the duchess resumed, with a heavy sigh.

Nelson Lee turned round.

"No, not yet," he said. "There is no hurry, and it would be a pity to spoil your reception, madam. Will you and Lord Deerhurst wait here, please? I shall not be long."

With that the detective left the room, and, having quietly descended the back stairs, he let himself out of the house by a side-door, and took from his pocket a box of wax vestas. For fully a quarter of an hour he was engaged in his investigation, moving here and there with a lighted match in his hand, and when he returned to the bedchamber he was carrying a jewel-case of soft, grey leather.

"Oh, that is mine!" the Duchess of Saxe exclaimed. "But are the diamonds——"

"No, they are missing," Nelson Lee interrupted.

As he spoke he put the case on the table. He snapped the lid up, and pointed to a couple of greasy marks that were stamped on the satin lining within.

"Look!" he bade.

"Finger-prints, by Jove," said Lord Deerhurst.

"Yes, and very distinct ones," Lee replied. "They are the finger-prints of the thief, of the man who shot John Houghton."

He paused, and told briefly of his investigations. He had discovered on the lawn in the garden a double trail of footprints, very faint and made by the same person, that reached from the wall of the dwelling to the wall of the mews. And it was in a clump of shrubbery that he had discovered the empty jewel-case.

"The deductions were so obvious," he

continued, "that I believe I can pretty well construct what happened. The thief may or may not have been an expert crook. I am inclined to think he was. At all events, he was familiar with the neighbourhood, and he knew of the famous diamonds, and of the exact location of the Duchess of Saxe's bedchamber. Having got access to the garden from the mews, he climbed nimbly by the rough surface of the masonry to the open window, and into the room. Instinct or knowledge guided him to the wardrobe. He forced it open, and took down the jewel-case.

the shrubbery, because it was too bulky for him to conceal on his person. He then fled as he had come, scaling the wall of the mews, and walking quietly through the street at the end of it. Fortunately, however, he left impressions of the prints of two of his fingers on the satin lining of the case as he took the diamonds from it."

"It is very fortunate," said Lord Deerhurst. "You have a very valuable clue, provided the man is a regular crook who has been in the hands of the police."

"Exactly," Lee answered. "I shall prob-



On the floor, a yard or so beyond the doorway, with blood trickling slowly from a bullet wound, was a man in evening dress.

"Meanwhile, some slight noise made by him had been heard by John Houghton, who was on duty below, and probably in the hall. His suspicions were aroused. He crept upstairs, and the sound of the forcing of the wardrobe-door led him here. He stole quietly into the bedchamber, his revolver in his hand, and almost at once he was shot with the air-pistol by the thief, who may have heard his approach and was waiting for him. John Houghton fell with a bullet in his heart, and the noise was muffled by the music in the ballroom. The thief hurriedly descended by the wall, and, having put the necklace of diamonds into his pocket, he threw the empty case into

ably take the jewel-case to Scotland Yard, and have the impressions compared with the collection of finger-prints that is kept there."

"I don't know much about such things," said the Duchess of Saxe. "Do you mean that if the thief was to be indentified by his finger-prints, Mr. Lee, he would be found and arrested, and hanged for the murder of poor Mr. Houghton?"

"Yes, in all likelihood he would soon be caught," Nelson Lee replied.

"And my diamond necklace would be recovered?"

"It might be. I couldn't promise that, though. Stolen jewels are quickly disposed

or. But your diamonds are unique, and you may get them back some day." Nelson Lee glanced at his watch. "The hour is late, and the dancing has ceased," he went on. "Pull yourself together, madam, and go downstairs to bid your guests good-night. Don't tell any of them what has occurred. They will learn of it from the morning papers. I will lock the door of your bed-chamber, and go to Scotland Yard to report the crime, and have the police sent here to remove the body. You can come with me, Deerhurst, if you like," he added.

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE, and his young assistant, Nipper, rose at their usual hour the next morning; and while they sat at breakfast, talking of the affair of the previous night, the news of the theft of the Duchess of Saxe's famous diamonds, and the murder of the private detective, was spreading throughout London.

Lee had meant to go down to Scotland Yard, where he had left the empty jewel-case with Inspector Lennard. He had no more than risen from the table, however, when there was a call at the telephone. He conversed briefly with some person, and, dropping the receiver, he turned round with a startled countenance, and spoke a few words to the lad.

"I sha'n't be long," he added. "If Mr. Lennard should call, as he may, have him wait for me."

With that Nelson Lee left the room. He descended the stairs, put on his hat, and hastened from the house. He hailed a passing cab in the Gray's Inn Road, and less than a quarter of an hour later he got out of it in Warwick Street, a short thoroughfare that was parallel with Regent Street.

Having paid the chauffeur, he entered a tall and dingy old dwelling, and mounted the staircase to the first floor, where he opened a door with a brass plate attached to it, and stepped into a room that was finely furnished.

It was one of the two offices occupied by John Houghton, and the latter's clerk, a youth of the name of Harry Carson, was waiting here for the detective.

"Isn't it a terrible thing, sir?" he said, his face twitching with emotion. "I read of it in a newspaper as I was coming along in a 'bus. Mr. Houghton murdered by some crook! I could hardly believe it. It has broken me all up, for he was an awfully good sort, and I'll never find another employer like him."

"Yes, it is a very sad and tragic affair," said Nelson Lee. "It was a great shock to me. Mr. Houghton was one of my oldest friends. But what of the burglary you mentioned?"

"It's quite true, sir," Harry Carson answered. "Come, and I'll show you."

The two entered a smaller room that was

the private office of John Houghton, and Nelson Lee's curiosity was roused at once by what he saw. A window that was at the rear of the building, and was a yard or so above the level of a flat roof, was partly opened, and a pane of glass had been shattered.

The lid of the private-detective's big roll-top desk had been forced, and letters and papers and bundles of documents had been taken from drawers and pigeon-holes, and were scattered loosely over the floor.

"I made the discovery when I got here half an hour ago," said the young clerk. "I thought of fetching the police, and then it occurred to me that I had better ring you up on the telephone, and ask you to come. It is strange that a burglar or burglars—there may have been more than one—should have broken in here, for they couldn't have expected to find anything worth stealing."

"Was there no money in the desk?" Nelson Lee asked.

"No, sir, not a penny."

"Has nothing been stolen? Can you tell?"

"Yes, there is one thing missing, and that is Mr. Houghton's private notebook, in which he was in the habit of writing about mysterious cases he was working on."

"Are you sure it has been stolen, my lad?"

"Yes, sir, I am. It was in the desk when Mr. Houghton shut it last evening, but it isn't there now, and it isn't amongst the papers on the floor. I have searched everywhere."

"Then it has certainly been carried off," said Nelson Lee. "And to get possession of it was the motive of the burglar. I dare say there was only one. You are a shrewd fellow, Carson. What would you suggest?"

"I'll tell you what I think, sir," the youth answered in a low tone. "It was the man who did the murder at the Duchess of Saxe's residence that broke in here during the night and stole the notebook."

"Why? For what reason?"

"Because he was a crook known to the police, and he must have expected that Mr. Houghton had been on his track, and had made notes about him which would implicate him in the crime."

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders. He had formed the same conclusion himself, a plausible one under the circumstances, and he deeply regretted that the notebook should have been stolen.

"You may be right," he said. "At all events, Carson, don't speak of your theory to anybody else. And don't mention my visit. After I am gone fetch the constable, and report the matter to him. As for your employer, you may be sure that I will spare no efforts to bring his murderer to justice. The case is in my hands, and I will have assistance from Scotland Yard."

With that Nelson Lee departed, thinking of what he had learned. He drove back to

the Gray's Inn Road in a cab, and when he had gone upstairs to his consulting-room he found Inspector Lennard there with Nipper.

"Ah, here you are!" said the inspector. "I have news for you."

"It is good news, I dare say," Nelson Lee replied, as he sat down.

"Yes, it is. The impressions on the lining of the jewel-case correspond with a set of finger-prints which are in our collection at Scotland Yard."

"And the man? Who is he, Lennard?"

"He is Monty Drake, Lee."

Inspector Lennard smiled, and twisted the ends of his moustache. He had expected the announcement to be a surprise, and it was. Nelson Lee gave a slight start, and he and Nipper glanced at each other in blank stupefaction.

Monty Drake, a member of a gang of clever and cunning crooks, who had operated in London, and had committed a number of audacious crimes, before they were broken up some few years ago. There had been six of them in all—this man, Drake, Pug Maxley, Ginger Smith, the bantam, Larry Burke, and Mike Mullingar.

When finally hounded to earth by the sleuths of Scotland Yard, the two former had escaped from the trap, and the others had been arrested, and ultimately sent to penal servitude. In the course of the next few months it was stated in the newspapers that Pug Maxley had been shot in Petrograd by Bolsheviks, from whom he had tried to steal some of the Russian Crown Jewels; and that Monty Drake, having gone ashore at Port Said while on his way to India, had been stabbed to death in a native gambling-den.

So the police had believed, and not without reason. But now Monty Drake had turned up, very much alive, and, meanwhile, his old comrades had served their sentences and been released.

"I suppose there is no doubt whatever?" Nelson Lee said to the inspector, after a brief pause.

Inspector Lennard shook his head.

"None," he answered in a scornful tone.

"Finger-prints are finger-prints."

"Then it must have been Monty Drake who stole the Duchess of Saxe's diamonds, and murdered John Houghton?"

"It certainly was, Lee. You can take my word for it."

Nelson Lee nodded. He was satisfied, knowing that the infallibility of the collection of finger-prints kept at Scotland Yard by the Bertillon system was not to be questioned.

"How long have the other four members of the gang been out of prison?" he asked.

"For the last six months or so," the inspector replied. "I dare say they are somewhere in the East End, though I have no knowledge of them. Some of our C.I.D. men tried to keep them under surveillance after their release, but they soon lost track of them."

"I think Monty Drake must be in touch with his old pals."

"I haven't much doubt of it, Lee."

"So if we should succeed in tracing the crooks, we will have a good chance of arresting Drake?"

"Exactly," Inspector Lennard assented.

"That's my idea. Scotland Yard has the case in hand, of course, and it isn't likely we will need any assistance from you."

For an instant Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"You may possibly be glad to have it," he calmly remarked. "I shall certainly not sit idle. John Houghton was my friend, and if you don't bring his murderer to the gallows, I will. However, you try to find the gang of crooks, and I will do the same."

"And what of the stolen necklace, Lee? I believe you promised the Duchess of Saxe that you would recover it?"

"I made no definite promise. I may be able to recover the diamonds, and I may not. If you want them, arrest Monty Drake, and search him. I dare say the jewels are still in his possession."

"You will have your little joke. I can't see that fellow Drake being caught in a hurry, Lee. But he won't get out of the country, for a strict watch is being kept on all of the Channel ports. I saw to that last night. And now I must be going. I only came to tell you that the finger-prints had been identified."

The inspector having departed, Nelson Lee lit a pipe, and leaned back in the depths of his big chair. He sank into a brown study, and was presently roused from it by Nipper, who was standing by a window, looking down into the crowded and noisy street.

"Here is Lord Deerhurst, gov'nor," he said. "He is just getting out of a cab."

CHAPTER III.

NELSON LEE had a liking for Lord Deerhurst, who was the fourth baron of that name. He was a tall and handsome man, between thirty and forty years of age, very fair, with a heavy blonde moustache, and he was unmarried. He lived rather extravagantly, and had a narrow little house in Mount Street, Mayfair, that was sandwiched between two large and imposing ones.

He went everywhere in Society, and frequently gave exquisite dinners at his bijou residence. There were rumours of his engagement to the daughter of a Scottish duke, but it had not been confirmed yet.

"You at home, Lee!" he exclaimed, as he shook hands with the detective on entering the consulting-room. "I thought you would be up and doing, hard on the track of the thief and murderer."

"Why did you think that?" Lee inquired.

"You ought to be able to guess," said Lord Deerhurst.

"You have had some information, I presume?"

"Yes, that's right. I know everything. It

wasn't in the morning papers. Not about the identification, I mean. But as soon as I had had my breakfast I cabbed straight down to Scotland Yard, and they told me there that the finger-prints in the jewel-case were those of Monty Drake, a former member of a gang of daring crooks. There were six of them altogether. Four were caught two years ago, and they are now at liberty again, after serving terms of penal servitude. Monty Drake and another man, called Maxley by name, succeeded in escaping from the police, and getting out of the country. And some months later the newspapers stated that both had been killed, one in Petrograd and the other at Port Said."

"Did they give you all that information at Scotland Yard, Deerhurst?"

"No, they didn't. I knew it before."

Lord Deerhurst paused. Taking a cigar from a box on the table, he lit it, and dropped into a chair.

"I have come to offer my help," he said abruptly.

"To offer your help?" Nelson Lee repeated in surprise.

"Yes, exactly," said Lord Deerhurst. "I want you to let me assist you to find and arrest the man who shot John Houghton, and stole the Duchess of Saxe's diamonds."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"I am. Perfectly serious, my dear fellow."

"But you have had no experience in that line."

"No experience?" murmured Lord Deerhurst, stroking his blonde moustache. "Haven't I had any? You ought to know better. Cast your mind back two or three years to the time when we spent a September week-end at Sir Rufus Blundell's place in Yorkshire. Do you remember the night when the other guests went to bed early, tired after a long day's shooting on the moors, and you and I sat alone by the fire in the library, talking and smoking?"

"Of course," Nelson Lee assented. "I recall the night distinctly. Go on."

"Then you should also remember my telling you, on that occasion, that for a considerable period I had been in the Secret Service in a small way."

"So you did, Deerhurst. I clearly remember now. It was stupid of me to have forgotten. I don't think you gave me any particulars, though. At that point, if I am not mistaken, you fell asleep in your chair."

"I believe I did, Lee. Blundell's whisky was very potent."

Lord Deerhurst laughed—his mellow, rippling laugh—and puffed at his cigar for a moment.

"I'll tell you the story now," he continued. "It's nothing to shout about. In the middle of the war, after the collapse of Russia and during the Bolshevik reign of terror, a friend of mine in Whitehall—he is dead now—insisted that I should join him

in an enterprise which appealed to me. He spoke several languages, and so did I. He belonged to the Secret Service, and he got me an appointment as assistant to him. At that time there were in London Bolshevik agents with plenty of money, whose object was to bribe unemployed workmen, and men of the criminal classes, to commit deeds of violence. It was believed by the Government that these agents had got a strong hold over the gang of crooks of which Monty Drake was a member, and Pug Maxley was the leader, and the duty assigned to my friend and myself was to keep the gang under surveillance.

"We shadowed them for months, under various disguises, living in the slums of the East End. As far as we could judge, there was nothing doing between them and the Bolshevik agents, and at length we abandoned our task. But meanwhile I had gleaned a lot of valuable experience. I had seen the crooks day by day, mingled with them in public-houses and gambling-dens, and learned what their favourite haunts were. That was before the gang were rounded up by the police, and I heard no more of them until I read in the papers of the arrest of four of them, and the escape of the other two." Lord Deerhurst paused. "There you are, then," he resumed. "What do you think of my qualifications?"

"Admirable!" Nelson Lee declared. "It is new to me, this story of your experiences in the Secret Service. Any man who has done what you have done, who has been in close contact with the gang of crooks for days and weeks, should be of great assistance in this matter."

"I think so myself, if I may modestly say so. By Jove, Lee, I had the art of quick-changing to perfection! I was twelve different persons a dozen times a day. It was fine sport. I have popped into an alley disguised as a lascar, in calico drawers and jacket, with one of those embroidered pill-box caps on my head, and popped out again a few minutes later as a blue-chinned hooligan with a belt with a brass buckle round my waist, my throat muffled in a coloured handkerchief, and a greasy old cap pulled over my eyes.

"So you'll let me help you, eh? I'm as keen as mustard on it. Of course, the game of Monty Drake's death was false, for the collection of finger-prints at Scotland Yard doesn't lie. I believe I can get on the scoundrel's track, as I don't doubt that he has joined his former pals. I should like to have a hand in the recovery of the Duchess of Saxe's diamonds. The dear old soul is terribly upset."

"Very well, Deerhurst. Search for the gang, by all means, and report promptly to me if you should learn anything."

"And what will you and Nipper be doing?"

"I am not sure. I may try to find out if the diamond necklace has been disposed of to some fence."

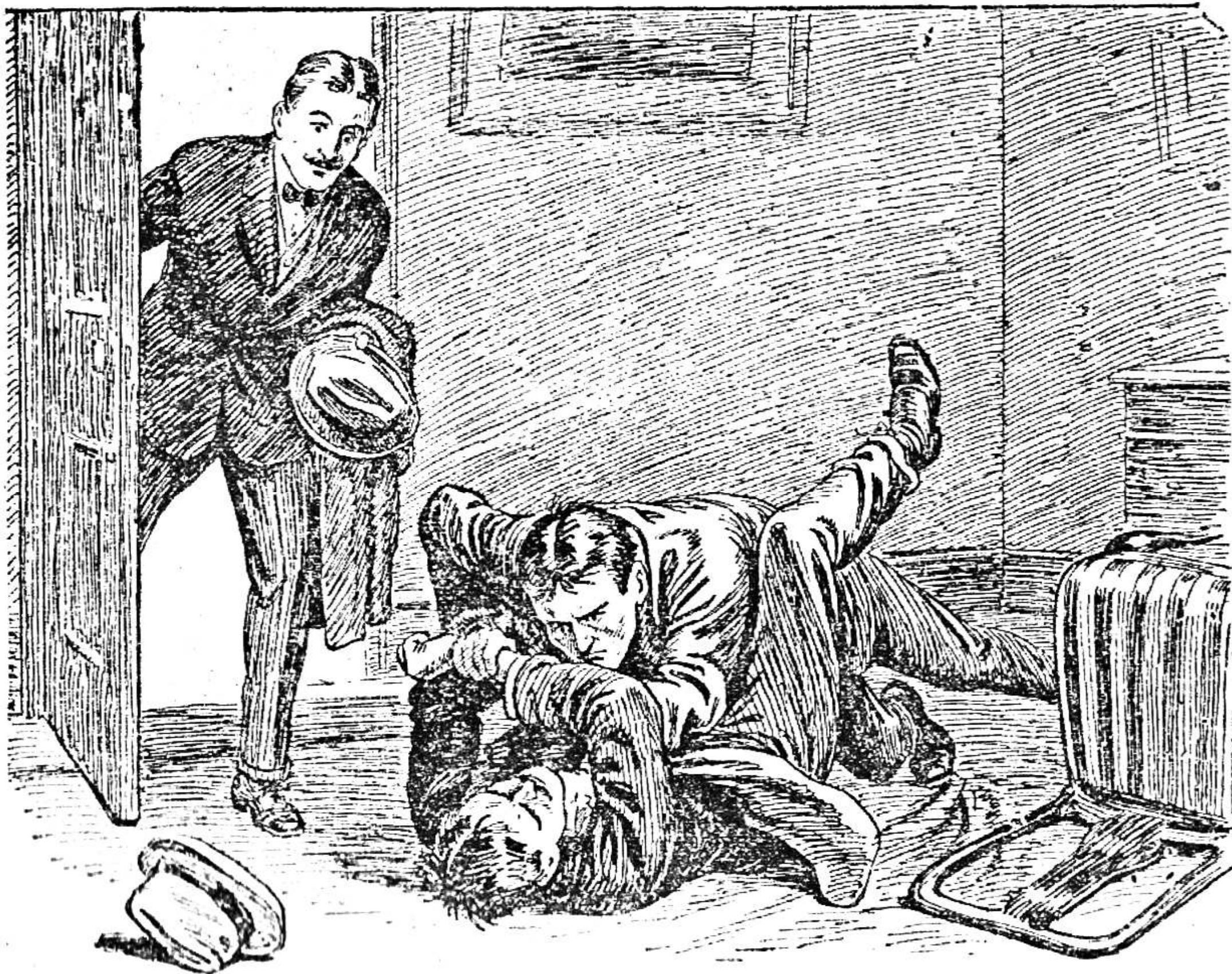
"Right you are. And now I'll be off. I kept a lot of the old things I wore when I was working in the Secret Service. They are somewhere at home, and when I have raked them out I'll put them in a bag, and go to the East End and get cheap lodgings. Whitechapel and Limehouse and Shadwell will be my hunting-ground. And this evening I'll probably be dining at some chop-suey restaurant with a lot of crooks and chinks. I shall enjoy eating stewed birds-nests and bamboo sprouts again."

When Lord Deerhurst had gone, after

recently on his track, and that he had put down in writing some information that might lead to his arrest after the murder."

"I don't doubt it myself," Nipper replied. "Drake must have come straight on from Grosvenor Square to Warwick Street. But what are you and I going to do while Lord Deerhurst is working in the East End?"

"I have been thinking of that," said Nelson Lee, with an absent look in his eyes. "I don't suppose you have forgotten Solomon Lazarus, the pawnbroker and fence, who had a place in Shadwell."



The two men grappled, swayed, and fell. Over and over the floor they rolled, crashing into furniture.

some further conversation, Nelson Lee paced to and fro for a little time, a pipe in his mouth. He was pondering some problem. At length he sat down, and briefly told his young assistant of what had occurred on the previous night at the offices of the private-detective in Warwick Street, and of what he had learnt from the clerk.

"I am almost positive that it was Monty Drake who broke in and stole the necklace," he continued. "He recognised the man he had shot, in spite of his disguise. He suspected that Houghton had been

"No, certainly not. He was a cunning old rogue, wasn't he?"

"He was, my lad, and he had dealings with Pug Maxley's gang of crooks. That fact has given me an idea. In the first place, it is to be presumed that Monty Drake has taken up with his former accomplices again, and that he has offered to divide amongst them a share of the proceeds of the diamond necklace. In the second place, assuming that I am right, Drake will dispose of the diamonds to Solomon Lazarus."

"I dare say he will, guv'nor. That is likely enough. Didn't you tell me a few months ago, though, that the old pawnbroker had left Shadwell?"

"Yes," that's right. I learned from somebody that he had removed his business to another part of London. Where, I don't know. But it will be easy for the crooks to find out where Solomon Lazarus is, and it should not be much more difficult for you. To-morrow you will go to Shadwell in disguise, and start your inquiries there."

"And what if I should find the pawnbroker?" the lad asked. "Can you imagine him giving you any information?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I will try a game of bluff with him," he replied. "As soon as he lays eyes on me I shall know whether or not the diamond necklace is in his possession. Cunning rogue though he is, he will give himself away to me, as he has done once or twice before. If he should have the necklace, that is." Lee paused, and tapped his pipe on his heel. "It is a three-cornered game," he said. "What with Lord Deerhurst and Inspector Lennard, and ourselves. I rather think that his lordship will track Monty Drake down, and that you and I will recover the Duchess of Saxe's diamonds. You might paste those clippings in the scrap-book, Nipper," he added, "while I write a couple of letters. And then we'll go to luncheon at the Trocadero, for a change."

CHAPTER IV.

AT eight o'clock on a wet and misty night, several days after the robbery at the Grosvenor Square mansion and the murder of John Houghton, an old Jew was seated on a stool before a high desk, in a cramped little office, busily writing in an account-book. He was a bent and wizened little man, but strong and wiry for his age. As he sat there in a hunched attitude, beyond the light cast by a green lamp, he looked like a huge and repulsive spider, with his shaggy grey beard and moustache, and wisps of grey hairs hanging to his ears.

Behind him was a safe, and a door to his left gave access to his shop, which was still open for business, though the light was burning dimly. The shop was at the bottom of a gloomy court in Hackney, and at the other end of it stretched a dark and quiet street of squalid dwellings.

Having finished his writing, the old man put the volume on a shelf and climbed down from the stool. It was late. He would close the shop now, as there would be no more business.

He stepped from the office to the outer room, and at the same instant the front-door was opened, and there walked in a tall, clean-shaven man, who was respectably dressed. Having shut the door, he came straight forward, and what sickly light there was shone on his face as he stopped by the counter.

The Jew, who was on the other side of it, stared open-mouthed at the man, and drew a deep breath. Fear glittered in his eyes, and he fairly quaked in his boots. Then he was himself again, bland and obsequious.

"How are you, Mr. Lee?" he said, rubbing his hands together as if he was delighted. "This is the first time you have called at my new shop. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, sir?"

Nelson Lee smiled grimly.

"You can give me the Saxe diamonds, Lazarus," he quietly replied.

"The Saxe diamonds?" Solomon Lazarus repeated, in a tone of well-feigned surprise. "The diamond necklace that was stolen from the Duchess of Saxe? You can't be serious, sir? You are joking with me."

"It is no joke. I am positively serious."

"But—but I have no knowledge of the jewels, Mr. Lee. I read of the theft, and if anybody had brought the necklace to me I would have detained him, and sent for the——"

"Come, Lazarus, don't lie. You can't deceive me. Cunning old rascal though you are, you gave yourself away the instant you recognised me. I saw the fear in your eyes, and saw you tremble like a leaf."

"Oh, no, sir! You are wrong! I have nothing to fear! I am an honest man, and you should not accuse me of——"

"No more nonsense, Lazarus. I know that you have the diamonds, and it will be the worse for you unless you produce them at once."

"I tell you again, Mr. Lee, that you have made a mistake. Do you think I would be such a fool as to——"

With that Solomon Lazarus reached for his pocket, and whipped out a revolver. But by then Nelson Lee had darted like a deer over the counter, and, clutching the old man's wrist, he wrenched the weapon from him. The two grappled and fell, and as they were fighting on the floor, the Jew raving and cursing in a fury, Lee gave a sharp whistle.

It was a signal to Inspector Lennard, who had been waiting outside in plain clothes. He darted into the shop, and hastened to the detective's assistance, and after a short and desperate struggle Solomon Lazarus was overpowered, and dragged by his captors into the office at the rear, where he dropped into a chair, gasping for breath.

There was no fight in him now. He sat there limply, shaking with terror, a gleam of sullen rage in his eye.

"Has he got the necklace?" asked Inspector Lennard. "Are you sure of it, Lee?"

Lee nodded. He searched the Jew, who offered no resistance, and when he had taken a bunch of keys from him he found one that fitted the safe, and then unlocked and opened the steel door. On a shelf within lay a small and bulky sack of chamois skin.

Lee pounced on it, and, bringing it to a

table, he poured from it a heap of big diamonds, that seemed to fill the gloomy office with a blaze of white, bluish fire.

The Duchess of Saxe's stolen jewels had been recovered, and the credit was partly due to Nipper, who had, with difficulty, traced the pawnbroker from Shadwell to Hackney.

"By Jove!" murmured the inspector. "What a sight!"

"Don't be hard on me," pleaded Solomon Lazarus. "I will confess, Mr. Lee. I will tell you everything if you will promise not to arrest me."

"You will confess without any conditions, you rascal," Nelson Lee declared, turning to the trembling old man. "Listen to me. Several years ago, before Pug Maxley's gang of crooks were broken up, you had dealings with them."

"I—I may have had, sir," the Jew faltered.

"You know that you had, and so do I. Who brought the diamonds to you?"

"A stranger, Mr. Lee. A man of more than middle age, heavily built, with a greyish moustache."

"When did he come?"

"On the evening of the day after the robbery and murder in Grosvenor Square, sir."

"You knew that it was the Duchess of Saxe's necklace he offered to you?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"How much did you give him for the diamonds?" Nelson Lee continued.

"A thousand pounds, sir," Solomon Lazarus replied. "It was all the cash I had. I told the man I would send the necklace over to the Continent to be sold, and would afterwards give him a thousand pounds more."

"Was this man one of the gang of crooks?"

"No, sir, not to my knowledge. I didn't recognise him, though I knew all of Maxley's gang. And he didn't say what his name was."

"I put it to you that he was Monty Drake, the man who sold the jewels?"

"He didn't look a bit like him, Mr. Lee. Not as he was when I knew him."

"I believe you are lying, Lazarus. Be truthful if you expect any leniency."

"I have spoken the truth, sir. Honest, I have. That the man may have been one of the gang of crooks, perhaps Monty Drake himself, I won't deny. But if he was he must have been disguised, for he appeared to be an entire stranger to me. I have told you all I can."

"Have you seen any of the gang since you moved to this neighbourhood, Lazarus?"

"I haven't laid eyes on one of them, Mr. Lee. Not for the last three or four years."

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders, and glanced at Inspector Lennard, who nodded. He doubted the truth of the Jew's statements concerning the man with whom he had dealt, and so did Lee.

But he did not care to press for further information. He was sure in his own mind that the man had been Monty Drake. Solomon Lazarus was wringing his hands in grief.

"My money!" he whined, with tears in his eyes. "My precious money! A thousand pounds gone, and nothing for it! I'll never be such a fool again!"

Nelson Lee looked at him in contempt. He swept the heap of diamonds into the chamois skin sack, and slipped it into his pocket.

"You are a sly old bird," Nelson Lee said sternly, "and you have fooled the police so often that it is time you did a stretch of penal servitude. I will let you off on this occasion, though, as we have recovered the necklace. Take my advice, and be honest in future, or you will find yourself at Dartmoor. Come, Lennard," he added, "let us go."

Solomon Lazarus stared as if he could not believe that he had heard aright. He had not expected any leniency. He mumbled a few words of gratitude, but there was a scowl in his eyes as he watched Inspector Lennard and the detective pass through the shop and out to the court.

"You're a queer chap," said the inspector, when they had reached the street. "You ought to have arrested that old scoundrel. Why not?"

"There is very good reason," Nelson Lee replied. "Very likely the man who took the necklace to Lazarus—I believe he was Monty Drake—will call again for more money, and if so he will probably be traced to his lodgings. For I intend to have Nipper set watch on the pawnbroker's place, and he will begin his task to-morrow morning."

"I see," Inspector Lennard assented. "It is not a bad idea."

For three or four hundred yards they walked along the sombre, deserted street, and they had no more than turned into a thoroughfare that was as gloomy, and led towards a main street, when five men who wore masks of black crepe dashed out at them from a dark doorway.

There was no chance to offer any effective resistance. A blow from one of the men sent Inspector Lennard staggering, and a second one landed him on the pavement on his back, where two of the men pinned him tight, one clutching him by the throat in a suffocating grip.

Acting as quickly, the three other men had flung themselves upon Nelson Lee and downed him.

He fought hard, but against such odds he was helpless. He, too, was pinned fast, unable to call for help, in spite of his desperate struggles; and while he lay there one of his assailants fumbled in his pocket, and pulled out the chamois skin sack containing the diamond necklace.

"I've got it!" he said. "Now be off, boys! Quick!"

With that he and his companion let go

of the detective, and jumped up, as did Inspector Lennard's assailants. In a trice they had all taken to their heels, and were running in different directions.

Lee slowly rose, hatless and dishevelled, and drew his revolver. There was nobody in sight to shoot at. The five masked men had completely disappeared, scuttling like rats into neighbouring alleys and passages. Not one of them could be seen. But from somewhere in the neighbourhood, faint yet distinct, a voice shouted:

"You've had a warning, Mr. Nelson Lee! It will be death next time!"

Lee could not tell from which direction the voice came. He was in a cold passion, stung by his defeat. The inspector had scrambled up from the pavement, and was leaning against the railings of an area, feeling a lump on his jaw.

"The scoundrels!" he spluttered. "The infernal scoundrels! And they've all escaped! What of the diamonds?"

"They're gone," Nelson Lee replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"Gone?" Inspector Lennard cried in consternation. "The Duchess of Saxe's necklace! What hard luck! It must have been that gang of crooks!"

"I don't doubt it."

"And Monty Drake must have been one of them, Lee."

"I haven't any doubt of that either. I believe Drake was the man who robbed me of the jewels."

It had all happened very suddenly and swiftly, and with scarcely any noise. No alarm had been raised. No constable was approaching. Here and there a head was thrust from an open window, and that was all.

"It has been an unlucky night for us," the inspector declared, as the two walked on. "That the gang of crooks set a trap for us is certain. But I can't account for it. Can you?"

"Yes, I think I can," Nelson Lee answered. "As I am not disguised, I was recognised by one of the crooks while we were on our way to the pawnbroker's place, and he suspected where we were going, and why. He hurried away, and fetched the rest of the gang. They arrived in the vicinity as we were coming out of the court yonder, and, guessing that we had compelled old Lazarus to give up the diamonds, they lay in wait for us around the corner."

"I dare say you are right, Lee. It is a plausible explanation. We will have to start afresh. Monty Drake has the diamonds and not he or any of the crooks will go near old Lazarus again. It will be useless for your boy to keep the shop under surveillance."

"I'm not so sure of that. After the fright Solomon Lazarus had to-night, Lennard, it is not likely he will have anything more to do with the gang. But in the course of several days one or two of them,

perhaps Monty Drake himself may pay a visit to the Jew. That is why I shall have Nipper keep watch."

They had turned into a bright and noisy thoroughfare now, and presently they reached Mare Street, where they did not have to wait long to pick up a cab.

"By the way, I suppose you heard what that fellow shouted at you after the crooks had fled?" said Inspector Lennard, as they were spinning westward.

"Yes, I heard him distinctly," Nelson Lee replied.

"You know what the words meant," the inspector continued. "The gang have learned that you intend to track them down and they will kill you if they can. They're capable of it."

Lee nodded.

"I am not afraid," he said, in a tone of scorn. "They are cowardly curs, those fellows. It will be as well for me to be on my guard, though," he added. "I sha'n't run any unnecessary risks, Lennard, and I will see to it that Nipper doesn't either."

CHAPTER V.

FOUR days had passed since Nelson Lee and Inspector Lennard had recovered and lost the Duchess of Saxe's diamond necklace. Nipper, who had lodgings at Hackney, and was playing the role of a newsboy while watching the shop of Solomon Lazarus, had stayed away from home.

And Lord Deerhurst, who was working in disguise in different parts of the East End, had not communicated in any form with the detective, which implied that as yet he had not met with any success. As for Scotland Yard, Inspector Lennard had not been heard from either, so it was to be presumed that he and his men were as much at fault as was Lord Deerhurst.

On two mornings, at an early hour, Nipper had rung up his master on the telephone, and informed him that so far his task had been fruitless. But there had been no message from the lad on the morning of the fourth day.

Nelson Lee had waited for hour after hour, not leaving the house, while his anxiety had steadily increased. He barely tasted his supper, for he had no appetite. He was too restless to read or to sit still.

He wandered about the consulting-room, puffing at a pipe; now pacing the floor, and now stepping to a window to gaze into the street, while he listened in vain for a call at the telephone. And at length, with a heavy sigh, he dropped into a lounge chair, an absent look in his eyes.

He was greatly worried, apprehensive of the worst. Why had he not received a message from his young assistant during the day? What could it mean?

"This suspense is almost unbearable," he said to himself. "What can have hap-

pened to Nipper? Has he shadowed one or more members of the gang from the pawnbroker's shop, and, through carelessness, been trapped and caught by them? I am terribly afraid that such is the case. What am I to do? What can I do? I haven't the remotest idea where to search for the lad, and it would be useless for me to go to Solomon Lazarus, for he wouldn't be able to give me any information. I'll wait a little longer, and then I'll ring up Lennard. It is barely possible that he may know something."

It was ten o'clock now, but what with the incessant clanging of tram-cars, and the throbbing of cabs, and the rumble of other vehicles, the Gray's Inn Road was almost as noisy by night as by day.

At length, in spite of his apprehensions, drowsiness stole upon Nelson Lee. He sank back in the depths of the big chair, and was on the point of going to sleep when, roused by a creaking sound, he opened his eyes and sprang to his feet.

The door had been softly pushed open, and standing in the room, with a revolver in his hand, was a well-dressed man, who had a beard and wore a mask.

He did not utter a word. At once he levelled his weapon and fired at Lee, who would have been hit had he not quickly ducked and dodged.

The bullet grazed his shoulder, and the next instant, before a second shot could be fired, he leaped upon the man, wrenched his revolver from his grasp, and seized him.

"You murderous scoundrel, I've got you!" he cried.

The sharp report had been muffled by the noise in the street. The two men grappled, and swayed and fell. Over and over the floor they rolled, crashing into furniture, their hot breath steaming on each other's faces, eyes glaring savagely into eyes.

Nelson Lee was the stronger, but as he was getting the better of his assailant he struck his head on the leg of a table, and thus lost his advantage. Still he fought on, dizzy with pain, and his strength was failing him when he heard a cab stop below, and heard footsteps rapidly mounting the staircase.

"Help!" he called faintly. "Help!"

The footsteps paused on the landing, and into the room dashed a tall, shabbily dressed man with a brown moustache and a sickly, mottled complexion.

"Just in time!" he exclaimed.

The detective's assailant instantly broke from him, and, as Lee rose, he let fly at him, and sent him tumbling on to a couch. Then, with a blood-curdling oath, he swung round on the man who had just come on the scene. He dealt him a staggering blow, and as quickly hit him again, hurling him backwards over a chair.

He now took to flight, and after him went Nelson Lee, who followed him down and out of the house, and for a hundred yards or so along the Gray's Inn Road.

But the scoundrel outstripped his pursuer. He gained rapidly on him, and when finally he disappeared in the darkness Lee abandoned the chase.

On entering the room he found the man who had come to his aid sitting limply in a chair, with bruises on his forehead and on his cheek; and now, to his amazement, he recognised him in spite of his dyed moustache and the grease-paint that had been rubbed into his features.

"By Jove, it's Deerhurst!" Nelson Lee cried.

Lord Deerhurst could not speak at first. He was almost in a state of collapse. Lee hastily fetched a whisky and soda for him, and when he had emptied the glass a tinge of colour crept into his pallid face.

"Thank you, old chap," he said huskily. "I'm nearly all right now."

"I don't think you are," Nelson Lee replied. "You had better wait before you speak."

"No, I must tell you at once, without delay. I have located the gang of crooks, at a house in the East End. I was there to-night, and close to them, listening to their conversation. I learned that they had caught your boy, Nipper, and had him a prisoner in the house, and I learned also that a few minutes before one of the gang had set off to the Gray's Inn Road to shoot you. On hearing that, I slipped away, and picked up a cab. I told the chauffeur to drive as fast as he could, but the scoundrel who meant to shoot you got here first, and he was getting the better of you when I arrived. Your boy is in danger of his life, I'm afraid. The gang spoke of Lord Deerhurst pausing for breath. 'Ring up Scotland Yard,' he added, 'and have Inspector Lennard come on here immediately with a lot of his men. I'll guide them. Be quick, Lee. I know where the crooks are, and I dare say we'll be in time to arrest the whole gang, and save Nipper, and get the Duchess of Mave's diamond necklace.'"

(To be continued.)

The Editor will be pleased to hear from any reader who has a theory to offer concerning the disappearance of the Duchess of Mave's diamond necklace, and who murdered Mr. Houghton.

There are several clues in the above episode which should enable the reader to elucidate the mystery. Since to point out these clues would supply the key to the solution of the problem, the amateur detective must look for them himself, and in this respect he is no less privileged than Nelson Lee, who has no other clues to work on than those which are open to the reader to discover.

At the present development of the story, Nelson Lee has doubtless already unravelled the mystery and formed certain plans, which will be described next week, together with the exciting incidents culminating in a brilliant denouement and ending to an amazingly clever story.

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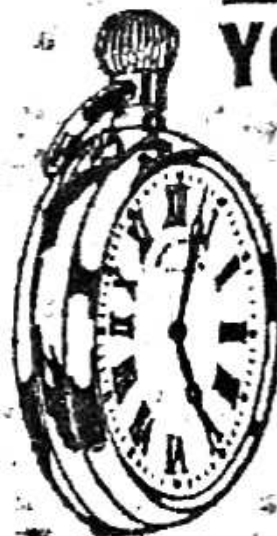
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