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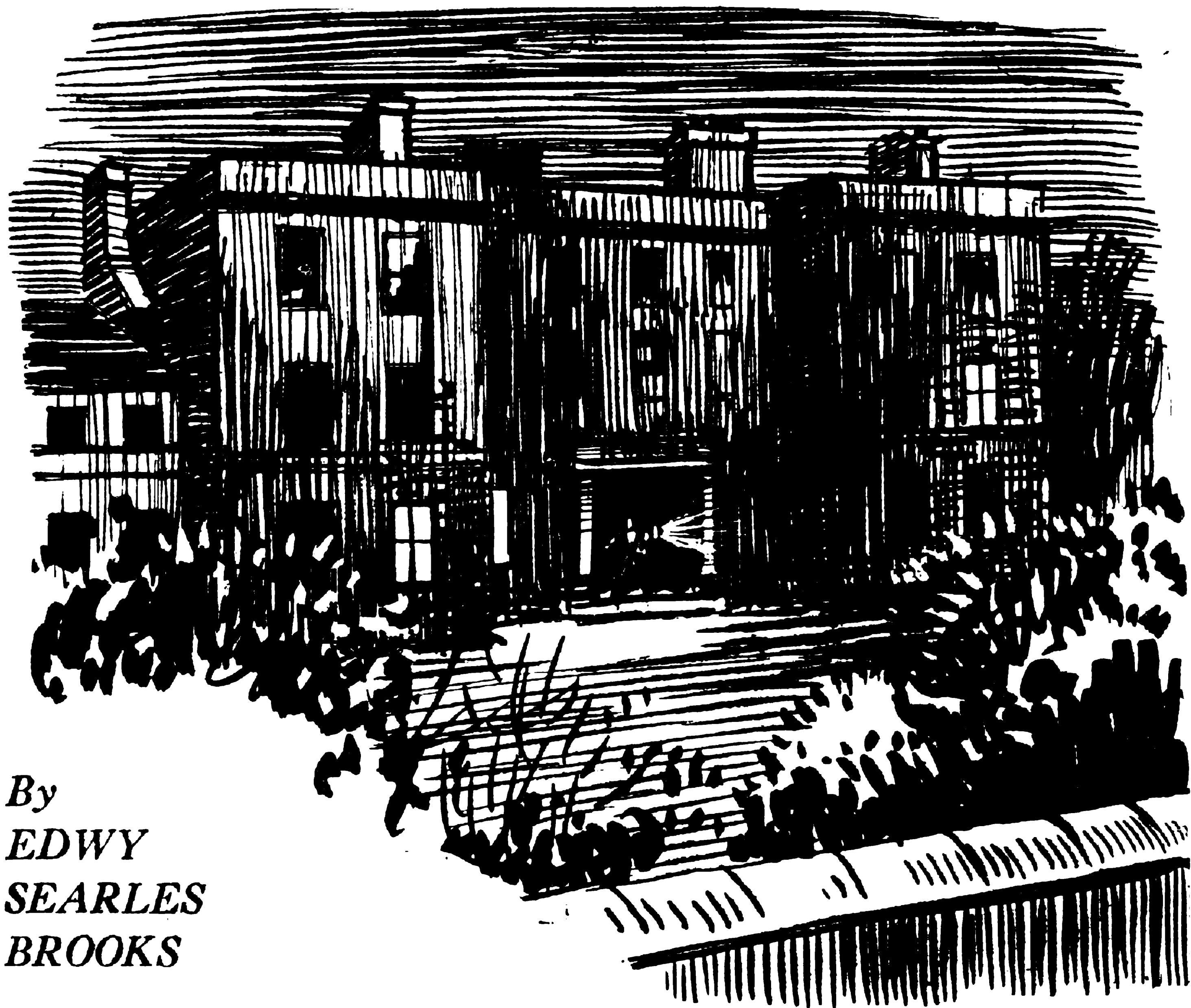
OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

January 2nd, 1932.



*St. Frank's sensation : six Fourth-Formers vanish without trace !*

# *The* HOUSE *of*



By  
**EDWY  
SEARLES  
BROOKS**

## CHAPTER 1.

### The Train Wreck!

**"DISAPPEARED?"**

"Yes!"

"Joe Spence?"

"Like a puff of smoke," said Handforth impressively. "Vanished—gone, without leaving a trace."

The compartment was full of Removites, and the train was speeding on its way between Helmford and Bannington. Most of its passengers consisted of St. Frank's boys, bound for the old school for the winter term.

It had been a noisy journey so far; for everybody had been talking about the exciting adventures of the Christmas holidays. This particular compartment contained not only Handforth and Church and McClure, of Study D, but Nipper and

Tregellis-West and Watson, of Study C, with Archie Glenthorne and Alf Brent and two or three others to fill in the odd spaces.

"Yes," said Edward Oswald Handforth, gratified with the impression he had made. "I saw it in the evening paper last night. What do you make of it, you chaps?"

All the Removites knew Joe Spence, the stalwart son of the station-master at Bell-ton. Joe was a cheery sort, and he was one of the best of the local footballers.

"It was only a small paragraph," went on Handforth. "It seems that Joe went to Caistowe to play a match the other day, and not a sign of him has been seen since."

"It's funny," said Nipper, frowning. "Didn't he play in the match?"

"Oh, yes. When he started off home it was snowing hard, and as he had lost

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# SECRETS!

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Secret doors and concealed stairs, leading to a labyrinth of mysterious tunnels and unknown caves—the lair of a gang wanted by the police.

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a train, and would have to wait nearly two hours for the next, he decided to walk. He went off into the snowstorm—and vanished."

"Rats!" said Church sceptically. "You are not going to tell me that a chap lost himself on the short walk home from Caistowe to Bellton—and a chap like Joe Spence, too, who was born and bred in the district, and knows every inch of every lane."

"It was snowing hard——"  
"What if it was?" interrupted Church. "We're not in the Alps, are we? What's a snowstorm in Sussex? I'll admit we had some exceptionally heavy snow at Somerton Abbey, but that was unusual.

The Caistowe road wasn't snowed up, was it?"

"No," admitted Handforth grudgingly. "As a matter of fact, there was only about an inch of snow that particular evening."

"There you are, then," grinned Church. "We know you, Handy! Trying to make a mystery out of nothing!"

"Me!" roared Handforth. "I tell you, I saw it in the newspaper!"

"Well, if Joe Spence disappeared, he disappeared of his own accord," commented Tommy Watson. "That's pretty clear. He must have had some reason of his own

for going away. Chaps do that sometimes."

Handforth looked crestfallen.

"It seems that Joe had had a quarrel with his father before he went off to the football match," he admitted. "Mr. Spence thinks that might have had something to do with it."

"I thought it would turn out to be a mare's nest," grinned Church. "Joe has probably gone off to an uncle, or an aunt. He'll turn up all right. He's not the fellow to act the goat. Of course, he may have had a sudden impulse, and got aboard a ship at Caistowe."

"By George! That's an idea," said Handforth, nodding. "By this time he may be in Australia!"

"I said a ship—not a record-breaking aeroplane," sniffed Church. "It only happened a few days ago, ass!"

"Well, Spain, then—or Portugal," said Handforth. "Why quibble over trifles?"

Conversation became difficult, for the train was passing another—a heavily-laden goods train. The rattle and roar was terrific, and Nipper, nearest the window, glanced out into the dull winter's afternoon.

He was just in time to see something extremely startling.

Jolt-jolt—bang!

The sound actually came afterwards, but it seemed to Nipper that everything happened in the same flash. He saw one of the goods waggon rock violently, and it shot through his mind that the waggon had probably fouled some points at that spot—the points being frozen. The waggon, which was laden with enormous iron girders, considerably overhanging the end, swung round with horrifying deliberateness towards the train.

"Look out!" yelled Nipper frantically.

He flung himself away from the window, grabbing Handforth, opposite, at the same second.

Cra-a-a-sh!

The air was full of hideous noise—the splintering of glass, the crashing and smashing of woodwork, and the raucous shriek of metal.

The carriage rocked ominously, and, from below, came the intensive grinding of the brakes. The boys, so lighthearted and happy a second earlier, were dumb with alarm and consternation. Miraculously enough, none of them was hurt. Nipper was more shaken than any of the others, for had he not leapt from his seat he would certainly have been killed.

With a final jolt the train came to a standstill, and Handforth was the first to fling open the carriage door and leap to the ground. He stared, he closed his

eyes, opened them again, and stared harder.

"Great Scott!" he gurgled. "Oh, thank goodness! It's—it's not so bad, after all."

He, like the others, had imagined the train wreck to be a catastrophe of the most alarming magnitude, and had expected to discover a scene of utter chaos, with many of his school chums badly injured. Great was Handforth's relief when he saw that his worst fears were not justified.

The damage done was not extremely serious. That truck containing the iron girders had struck one carriage, splintering and shattering the roof, but before the truck could do any further damage it had toppled over on to its side. The carriage behind that in which Handforth and Nipper and the others were travelling was derailed. The boys had had a narrow escape. The goods train was half-wrecked; trucks were strewn all over the permanent way in a wild confusion of twisted steel and smashed woodwork.

Enquiries up and down the scene of the disaster revealed that none of the passengers or the train crew had suffered beyond a severe shaking up or a few bruises.

The one uncomfortable result of the wreck was the fact that there would be an interminable delay. There was.

Practically two hours had elapsed, and darkness had descended, before a relief train rescued the stranded passengers and took them on to Bannington.

## CHAPTER 2.

### Trouble with the Fourth!

"BURRRRRH! Let's hope the local soon gets going!"

Handforth shivered as he spoke. Everybody, in fact, was cold and hungry and weary.

Owing to the general disorganisation of the line, the "local" was held back, and the boys were glad to see the train standing on the opposite platform, ready. It was five o'clock, and normally the boys would have been partaking of tea in their respective houses at St. Frank's by now.

Nipper found that he had five minutes to spare, so he dodged into the public telephone-box on the platform—Tregellis-West and Watson and Handforth & Co. gathering round. Nipper quickly got through to St. Frank's, and he was speaking to Nelson Lee, his guv'nor—and, incidentally, the headmaster of the school.

"So that's why we're late, sir," said Nipper, after he had briefly explained.



"Nobody hurt, and even those chaps who were shaken are O.K. now."

"I am glad to hear this, Nipper," came Nelson Lee's voice. "It was very thoughtful of you to ring up and reassure me."

He omitted to mention that the railway authorities had already informed him of the accident and had added that nobody had been hurt.

"Thought I'd better ring up and let the gov'nor know," said Nipper, as he left the box. "Hallo! The train looks pretty full. Why didn't you chaps bag some seats?"

"We were waiting for you," said Watson.

"We don't want any seats, anyhow," said Handforth. "It's only a ten-minute journey, and it won't hurt us to stand. The main thing is to get going!"

The guard was blowing his whistle and waving his flag.

"Stand away from the train, there!" shouted a porter.

"Rats!" roared Handforth impolitely. "Do you think we're going to miss it? Here we are! This one'll do."

He wrenched open a door, and six indignant Fourth-Formers yelled in unison that there was no room. The Removites took not the slightest notice. They piled in, helter-skelter, for the train was already on the move. They managed it somehow, and the porter, running beside the train, slammed the door.

"Young rips!" he shouted wrathfully. "Asking for trouble—that's what you are!"

The compartment was not only full, but crowded. Eight other Removites, in addition to Nipper and Handforth, had managed to squash in. And the original occupants were inclined to object.

"Pity you can't find a carriage of your own!" said Turner, of the Fourth. "You Removites think you can barge in——"

"Oh, dry up," interrupted Handforth, giving Turner a playful push on the face.

A playful push from Handforth was devastating. Turner, howling, slithered down, and was lost amidst a tangle of legs.

"You leave us alone!" roared Page, hitting out wildly.

Thud!

His fist caught Handforth on the nose, and Handforth roared with unexpected pain.

"All right!" he shouted hotly. "If you Fourth-Formers want a fight, we'll give you one! Back up, Remove! Smash 'em!"

Nipper would have kept the peace, but the other Fourth-Formers—Harron, Freeman, Dallas and Steele—were fighting

desperately. And when Nipper received a stray punch on the side of the jaw, he decided that Handforth's idea was a good one.

As the train rattled along, the scene in that particular compartment was hectic. The fight lasted about two minutes. The result was a complete victory for the Remove.

The six Fourth-Formers, sadly battered and dazed, were sorry that they had raised any objections. One after another they were held down, and their wrists and ankles were bound with their own handkerchiefs—and other people's handkerchiefs when their own ran out. Mufflers were bound round their faces, so that their indignant gasps and shouts were stifled.

"It's about time you Fourth-Formers were put in your place," said Handforth breathlessly. "By George! That's an idea, too! Why shouldn't we shove them under the seats?"

It was no sooner said than done. The six victims were bundled unceremoniously beneath the seats. It was a tight squeeze, but the Removites did not mind in the least. Muffled gurgles came from below, but there was now plenty of room for the victors. There were seats for all.

"Just in time," grinned Nipper. "Here we are at Bellton."

The brakes had been applied, and the train was slowing down to enter the quiet little country station.

"I say," exclaimed Handforth, his eyes twinkling. "Why not leave these fat-heads under the seats? We might just as well begin the term properly—by working off a good jape on the Fourth."

"Don't you think we've already worked it, old man?" asked Nipper.

"I mean a real jape," retorted Handforth. "If we leave 'em in the train they'll go on to Caistowe!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The train doesn't go any farther than Caistowe, so they're bound to be found there," continued Handforth, grinning. "There won't be a train back for hours—so they'll have to walk, or be late for calling-over!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The gurgles from beneath the seats became more and more frantic; and the Removites yelled with amusement.

"Perhaps they'll all disappear on the way home—like Joe Spence!" suggested Church cheerfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The train, with a grinding of brakes, had jolted to a standstill.

"So long, you poor fishes!" sang out Nipper. "See you later—after you've had a brisk walk."



"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the victorious japers, yelling with laughter, tumbled out upon the frosty platform. The door was slammed, and the unfortunate Fourth Formers could do nothing. They tried to wriggle out, so that they could show themselves—in fact, they did succeed in wriggling out from under the seats—but they were too late. The train was on the move. They were booked for Caistowe—and a long, weary walk home!

### CHAPTER 3.

#### Adventures by the Way!

THE laughing Removites forgot their hilarity as they crowded towards the exit at the booking-office; for they came face to face with Mr. Spence, the station-master. And the change in Mr. Spence rather shocked them.

"Oh, I say," ejaculated Handforth, remembering.

Mr. Spence was usually so genial, so jolly; now his face was haggard, his shoulders were drooping, and he looked an ill man.

"Heard anything about Joe?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"What's the latest, Mr. Spence? Joe's all right, isn't he?"

The station-master's face lit up for a moment.

"It's kind of you to ask, young gentlemen," he said gratefully. "It's mighty nice of ye. No, there's no news. Nothing."

The train was puffing its way out of the station; some fags were yelling noisily; but just round here, where Mr. Spence and the boys were standing, a silence fell.

"It wasn't like my boy, to run away," said Mr. Spence suddenly, his voice becoming almost fierce. "The police can do nothing; they tell me that Joe might have stowed himself away aboard a ship. Two left Caistowe that night. But it's rubbish. Joe never cared for the sea. And why should he run away?"

It was clear that the station-master was repeating things he had already said a hundred times.

"Wasn't there a bit of a row, Mr. Spence?" asked Nipper.

"A row? Between Joe and me?" said the unhappy man. "Ay, there was a row," he added bitterly. "More's the pity! I wish these newspaper men would mind their own business! Joe and me did have a row, if ye can call it a row. Which ye can't!" he added fiercely. "Faugh! It was nothing. He said something to upset his mother—cheeked her, in fact—and I gave him a piece of my mind. And I told him that when he came back from the

football match, I'd punish him. But, lor'! What's that? Joe knew that it was only a storm in a teacup."

The boys were silent.

"Now he's gone," muttered the station-master. "Where? How? He didn't run away! I'll swear that!"

"Then what could have happened to him?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"Heaven alone knows," said Mr. Spence huskily.

They left him feeling thoroughly uncomfortable. Handforth vowed, there and then, that he would devote all his energies and all his brain power to solving the riddle.

Meanwhile, the luckless Fourth-Formers had managed to free themselves.

Nipper had intended passing on a casual word to the ticket collector, so that that individual would have a message sent to Caistowe. But the encounter with Mr. Spence had caused Nipper to forget the matter.

Freeman was the first to wriggle out from under the seat. He freed his hands, and, tearing the scarf from his face, he hobbled to the nearest door and wrenched at the window-strap.

"Hi! Stop!" he yelled, thrusting out his head.

But it was no good. The train was clear of the station, and nobody heard. Freeman's voice was hoarse and cracked with excitement, and it did not carry far. He fell back into the carriage, and unfastened his feet.

"The rotters!" he said, glaring out into the cold night. "My only sainted aunt! Wait until Corky hears about this! We'll take it out of the Remove!"

Some shuffling sounds, and a few gurgles, reminded him of his fellow sufferers. He dragged them out, and in less than a minute they had all freed themselves. For the next few minutes the carriage rang with a combined, concentrated gnashing of teeth, and a hymn of hate generally. The sum total of it all was that the Fourth would, without the loss of a moment, exact a dire and terrible vengeance for this outrage.

Then somebody noticed that the train was slowing down; the brakes had been applied.

"Pull yourselves together," said Turner hastily. "We're there!"

"No, we're not—we're not!" growled Page, putting his head out of the window. "I thought we hadn't got to Caistowe yet. There's a signal against us, or something. The service has gone to pot to-day."

A train, coming from the opposite direction, rattled past, and Page backed away.





Hardly able to believe their good fortune in escaping injury, Handforth & Co. leapt from the wrecked train and gazed upon a scene of smashed woodwork and twisted steel.

Kenneth  
Brook

He was in time to see Freeman opening the opposite door.

"Here, I say! What's the idea?"

"Let's jump out!" said Freeman quickly. "We shall have to walk home, anyway—and this'll save us a couple of miles! We're not half way to Caistowe yet, and we've only got to cross a couple of meadows——"

"By jingo! He's right, you chaps!" yelled Harron. "Come on! This'll dish those silly Removites."

"Hold on!" said Turner hurriedly. "We don't want to do anything dotty. There may be a train back, after all——"

"Rats! The evening train has just passed us," said Page. "Didn't you see it? There's not another for hours."

"By Jove! That's true!"

"Come on!"

Without further hesitation, they tumbled out upon the permanent way, which, owing to the frost, was as hard as rock. Freeman, who was the last to leave, was thoughtful enough to close the door.

They were only just in time, for the train started off a second later. The six Fourth-Formers found themselves in absolute darkness—with an uncomfortable feeling that they were stranded.

"I'm not sure that we did the right thing," grumbled Dallas, who was a small, studious junior. "Where the dickens are we, anyhow? Where's the road?"

"Perhaps we'd better walk back along the railway?" suggested somebody.

"No fear," said Turner, peering down the shallow embankment. "Look! There's only a low fence. We'll cross these meadows, and we'll soon come to the road."



And in the gloom of the winter's evening, they set off.

## CHAPTER 4.

### A Helping Hand!

**B**Y the time they had crossed the first meadow their eyes were accustomed to the gloom. The evening was not so dark as they had first believed. A few stars were twinkling overhead, playing a game of hide-and-seek with the feathery clouds. Visibility was improved by the white frost which covered the ground.

"We're all right," said Turner, as they skirted a ploughed field. "This is easy! We've only got to get across this field, and then a short meadow, and we shall strike the road. We came this way on a paper-chase once."

"I believe you're right," said Page, nodding.

They were so pleased at the unexpected shortening of their walk that their spirits were comparatively high. They shelved their anger against the Remove japers.

Sure enough, after another two or three minutes, they broke through a hedge, and jumped down upon the familiar Caistowe-Bellton road. They were just a little over half-way from the village—which meant that they were about two and a half miles from St. Frank's.

After their wearisome wait of the afternoon, following the smash, this brisk exercise was not unwelcome. They strode along in fine style.

"I'm hungry enough to eat sawdust——" began Freeman.

"Hallo! What's this?" interrupted one of the others.

They had just turned a bend, and, about a hundred yards ahead, they could see the headlamps of a car. But the car was not on the road—it was very much off it, being, in fact, in the ditch.

"The railway's not the only place where they have accidents," said Steele, who was lanky and loose-jointed. "I say! We're not going to stop here, are we? We're late enough already."

"Dash it!" said Clement Turner, who was a thoroughly decent sort. "If these motorists are in trouble, the least we can do is to offer them a hand."

Steele was selfish—as the others well knew—and his objections were ignored.

At close quarters the Fourth-Formers discovered that the disabled vehicle was a closed van—one of the small commercial type. There were two men hard at work with crowbars and a jack. The men paused in their work as the six boys came

within range of the lights, and stood looking on.

"Need a hand?" offered Turner generously.

The men glanced at one another and grinned ruefully.

"Well, we do need some help," said one of them. "But I don't know as you boys can do much. The bus is pretty well stuck."

"Took a sudden skid on this frosty road, after we come round a corner," said the other man. "Must be a bad patch just here. We're strangers in the district, you see."

"Yes, took a load of stuff to Caistowe—from London," said the first man. "I say, Jim, if the young gents get along that other side and lift, we might be able to shift her. What do you think?"

"It won't do no harm to try," replied Jim.

The boys set to with a will, and after a good deal of heaving and wrenching and struggling, the van shifted. Then, with the engine started up, and with the boys using all their efforts, the van slowly emerged from the ditch. At last she stood fairly and squarely on the road.

"Mighty nice of you," said one of the men. "Thanks, young gents. I don't suppose we shall ever have the chance of doing the same for you—but you can never tell."

Turner grinned.

"You might have had a chance if you had been near the London train this afternoon," he said. "We had a bit of a smash, you know—we were stranded for a couple of hours."

He gave details of the accident—and several of the others gave additional information concerning the jape which the Removites had played.

"Still, we'll give the beggars a surprise when we turn up," said Freeman, with a chuckle. "I hope they told the railway people to have the train searched at Caistowe!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other Fourth-Formers yelled with laughter.

"What's the joke?" asked Jim.

"Why, those Removites shoved us under the seats—and they thought that we should still be under the seats when the train got into Caistowe," chuckled Freeman. "But the railway people at Caistowe will have searched the giddy train in vain. We shall have disappeared on the way!"

"Disappeared!" said Jim in a strange voice.

He looked at his mate; it was only a momentary glance, and the boys saw



nothing peculiar in it. But the other man laughed noisily.

"That's good!" he said. "So you all disappeared from the train, did you? Smart work! It was a first-rate idea to jump from the train when it pulled up between stations. Did anybody see you jump out?"

"You mean the guard, or the engine-driver?"

"No; the other passengers."

"There weren't any other passengers," grinned Turner. "Or, if there were, they were such a few that they didn't count. The train was packed with St. Frank's chaps, and they all got out at Bellton. The train was empty, except for us."

"Nobody saw us get out, anyhow," remarked Harron. "We should have seen their heads at the windows—or they would have spoken to us. No, we disappeared beautifully."

"Anybody see you on the road?" asked Jim casually.

"Not a soul," replied Turner. "Only you two men. You see, we came across the fields—and we didn't leave any tracks, because the ground is as hard as iron."

Again the two men exchanged that significant glance.

"You're right, young gents—it's a complete disappearance," said Jim, laughing. "Well, look here. One good turn deserves another. You'll have a better laugh on those rivals of yours if you get back to the school quickly, won't you? We'll run you there in the old bus, if you like."

"Only too pleased," said the other man.

The Fourth-Formers jumped at the chance.

"I say, this is jolly sporting of you," said Freeman eagerly. "It'll take us nearly three-quarters of an hour to walk—but you can do the journey in ten minutes. I say! Just think of those silly Removites' faces when we show up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jim glanced quickly up and down the road. It was perfectly black; not another human being was within sight.

"Here you are—hop in!" said Jim in a strangely hoarse voice.

He flung open the rear doors of the van, and in the gloom the boys failed to notice that those doors were rubber-lined, so that they were hermetically sealed when closed.

They jumped in, and there was plenty of room for them all.

"You don't mind if we close the doors, do you?" asked Jim briskly. "They'll flap about if we don't—you'll get plenty of air."

"Go ahead," sang out the Fourth-Formers.

Thud-thud!

The doors closed, and there was a click as they locked.

"By jingo! This is good," chuckled Freeman, out of the darkness. "Jolly decent of these chaps——"

"What's that?" interrupted Steele abruptly.

An ominous hissing sound, like an escape of gas, came to them.

"Something to do with the engine, I suppose," said Harron. "They're probably getting ready to start up——"

His words broke off, and became a gurgle. He was clutching at his throat. At the same instant the engine started with a roar, drowning the gasps and cries from the other boys.

They were all assailed by the same terrible choking sensation, and one after the other they collapsed, senseless, to the floor of the van.

— —

## CHAPTER 5.

### The House on the Cliff!

A BEAM of light from an electric torch splashed through the glass panel in the driver's box. Jim, with his face close to the glass, saw the still, sprawling figures of the unconscious boys.

"O.K.!" he muttered. "They're well off, Shorty."

The other man took a deep breath, and he was trembling visibly.

"Sort of wholesale," he muttered. "Six at a time, Jim! Schoolboys, too! Think we've done right?"

"Of course we have," said the other. "It was a chance in a thousand! Those kids vanished from the train without leaving a trace. We should have been fools to let 'em go."

"There'll be a tidy song up at the school when they fail to show up."

"Who cares? Those kids have vanished—just as though they had turned to smoke!"

The van moved off, and after a few hundred yards it turned out of the main road and took a narrow, rutty track. In the summertime this was a delightful rural lane, leading across the downs to Shingle Head—to the coastguard buildings and the lighthouse, and to one or two isolated residences which lay dotted along the cliff.

There was no attempt to conceal the movements of the van. It rattled on noisily, with headlights slashing the darkness. Presently an old-fashioned gate came into sight, on the left-hand side.



The van stopped, and one of the men jumped out and opened the gate. The van drove through.

It proceeded up a short private drive, and now a gloomy house came within sight—a quaint, old-fashioned house, which was apparently shut up for the winter, for not a light showed anywhere.

The van skirted the front of the house, went down a narrow passageway, with ornamental trellis on one side, and arrived in a paved courtyard. On one side of the courtyard was the rear of the house, and on the other side some outbuildings—garages and so forth.

The van backed up to a rear door, the engine was shut off, and the lights extinguished. As the two men were approaching the door, it opened, and a tall, dignified figure stood looking out.

"Why are you back?" asked a smooth voice.

"Let's come inside, Mr. Crowson," said Jim. "We've something to tell you."

They all went in, and, proceeding down a warm passage, they turned into a very comfortable sitting-room. A fire was blazing here, and the apartment was illuminated by electricity. A more homely scene could not have been imagined.

Mr. Crowson was a sombrely-attired individual of middle age, a man of dignified bearing. He possessed all the characteristics of a butler. Yet there was a steely glint in his eyes as he stood watching the two arrivals, waiting for them to speak. Clearly he was their master.

"We've got a load aboard, Mr. Crowson," said Shorty eagerly, after the door had been closed.

"Yes?" said Mr. Crowson gently.

"Six of 'em."

"Six!" ejaculated Crowson, surprised out of his dignified calm. "Are you mad? What insane folly is this?"

"Now, don't jump off the deep end," growled Shorty. "We know what we're doing, guv'nor—"

"When you left, an hour ago, I gave you definite instructions to drive straight to London," interrupted Crowson, his voice cutting like a whip-lash. "I told you to take no action for at least three days. Then you were to obtain two—er—recruits, at the most. What do you mean by departing from your instructions?"

The two men almost writhed under the bitterness of that tongue. It did not coincide with Crowson's appearance, for he looked so obviously a butler.

"When we've told you how it happened, you'll say that we were smart, Mr. Crowson," said Jim eagerly. "Look here, it was this way. When he turned into the

road we had a bit of a skid, and went in the ditch. Some boys came along and helped us out—St. Frank's boys. Six of 'em."

"You're not telling me that you took St. Frank's boys?" asked Crowson, startled.

He listened with mingled anger and alarm as the two men went into details. And gradually his expression relaxed.

"So you see, guv'nor, it was a cinch!" concluded Shorty breathlessly. "Them kids jumped out o' that train—and that's where they disappeared. Nobody saw 'em after that. There wasn't a soul on the road. We got 'em easily—without leaving a trace. It was too good a chance to be missed."

"H'm! I believe you are right," admitted Crowson slowly. "The van cannot be connected with the missing boys. If you leave at once, and drive to London—"

"Even if the van is suspected, there's no proof—no evidence," said Shorty. "Once the kids are safe below, they'll have gone. What do we care about the hue and cry? We're on velvet, ain't we?"

Crowson was silent for some moments. Then suddenly he nodded, and pointed to the door.

"Bring them in," he said shortly. "I'll look them over."

JIM and Shorty, who were well-dressed, respectable-looking men, hurried out to the van.

"Phew! I thought he was going to turn the kids down at first," muttered Shorty. "And that would have meant a difference of sixty quid each, Jim."

"He couldn't turn 'em down," retorted Jim calmly. "We should have had to dump the kids somewhere, and then, when they come to, they would have remembered getting into the van. Dangerous, Shorty. Far better to go through with the job. We get ten quid each for every 'recruit.' Crowson ought to be pleased. Six at a time is snappy work."

They opened the van, and the Fourth-Formers were lying just as they had fallen. Not one of them showed any sign of returning consciousness. The first one was lifted out, and the two men carried him down the passage. But they did not go into that comfortable sitting-room.

Crowson was standing in the passage, and he pressed a hidden button against the moulding. Without a sound a large section of the tiled passage floor slid out of sight. Steep stone stairs, leading downwards, were revealed, and electric lights glowed from below.





A section of the floor slid away, and the kidnapped Fourth-Former was carried down into the bowels of the earth.

The young prisoner was carried down by the two men, along an illuminated passage, and into a warm, brilliantly lit stone cellar. This cellar was old—clearly a part of the original building. But there had been some recent renovations, including the installation of electric light. The boy was laid on the floor.

The other five were carried down in exactly the same way.

They were placed all in a row. Crowson himself had a final look at the van, making sure that no identifiable object had dropped from any of the boys' pockets. The van was empty—and it looked just an ordinary, commonplace commercial vehicle. Earlier in the evening, in fact, it had arrived with a load of miscellaneous groceries.

Crowson closed the back door, went to the secret stairway, and passed down. Reaching the bottom, he touched a button. The tiled floor slid noiselessly into place, and so cunningly did it fit that only the very closest inspection would have revealed the secret.

Leisurely, calmly, Crowson went into the cellar. He examined the Fourth-Formers, one after the other. Jim and Shorty stood by, watching.

"Yes," said Mr. Crowson at length, "they're just the type. Strong, healthy-looking youngsters."

"I thought you'd say we'd done the right thing, Mr. Crowson," said Jim.

"You did not do the right thing," said Crowson, his voice sharp and curt. "You disobeyed orders, and there is never any excuse for that."

"But, guv-nor——"

"Once and for all, you must understand that I am doing the thinking, not you," said Crowson, turning his gaze from one to the other until they quailed. "It is too late to make any alteration now. The boys are here, and they must stay here. But in future you will remember that you must not act upon your own initiative. Understand that. I do not think you have done any harm in this case, but you may do irretrievable harm another time. So, if you are expecting me to congratulate you, you must go on expecting."

The men muttered and dropped their gaze; it was difficult to look at this quiet man with the hypnotic eyes.

"However, we'll say no more," continued Mr. Crowson smilingly, his whole manner changed. "We'll deal with these recruits at once."

Jim and Shorty looked relieved. Crowson went to a section of the blank cellar wall, and, as though by some hidden power, a stone block slid back, revealing a small black cavity. From this the strange butler took a little gleaming instrument. It was a surgical syringe, such as



dentists use for deadening the nerves before extracting a tooth.

Quietly, methodically, Crowson went from boy to boy, and the tiny, almost invisible needle was plunged in just behind the left ear. It was a trivial, painless operation, and over in a flash. The boys knew nothing, since they had not yet recovered from the effects of that pungent gas which had robbed them of their senses in the van.

Crowson glanced at the other two men, and he frowned.

"Don't look like that!" he said, with sudden irritation. "There's nothing to be afraid of. This is quite harmless. The recruits are ready now. You can take them."

Another of the amazing secrets of this house was revealed. Crowson touched something, and a part of the solid wall slid silently back. A cavity, like a small cupboard, was disclosed. One after the other the boys were carried in, and laid side by side.

"Take them," said Mr. Crowson shortly.

The two men entered that cupboard; the door closed upon them, and as it did so a tiny light was automatically switched on in the ceiling.

There were two ropes hanging down against the wall of this cupboard. Shorty seized one of them and pulled upon it. The cupboard, with a little jerk, commenced descending.

It was a lift!

And it went down, down, down—

— —

## CHAPTER 6.

### Missing!

**S**T. FRANK'S was in a state of cheerful confusion.

It was always the same on the first day of term. To-day, perhaps, it was a little more so owing to the disorganisation of the train service. But everybody was bright and noisy, and there was a great deal of yarning between different groups of fellows, as they related their respective Christmas adventures.

In the Ancient House, the juniors had soon settled down. After partaking of a hearty tea—a very welcome meal after that interminable delay—the boys drifted along to the Common-room, where everything was warm and bright and cheerful.

"Nearly time for calling-over," remarked Nipper, as he came in, and found the room noisy and crowded. "Any deputation from the Fourth yet?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The jape on the six Fourth-Formers was general knowledge in the Remove, and

there had been a good deal of chuckling.

"The poor beggars can't have turned up yet," said Fullwood. "Anyhow, we've heard nothing."

"They ought to have been here long ago," said Handforth, with a sniff. "They've had heaps of time to walk from Caistowe: Unless they're jolly careful, they'll be late for calling-over."

"Well, that won't matter much—to-day," said Church. "They can easily use the railway disorganisation as an excuse. I don't suppose there'll be any awkward questions. They're certain to be here soon, anyway."

Calling-over came soon afterwards. In the Ancient House, at least, there were no absentees, but the Removites soon heard rumours to the effect that six Fourth-Formers had failed to turn up. There could be no doubt as to the identities of the six.

"It's funny," said Nipper uncomfortably. "We didn't want to get the chaps into trouble. They ought to have been here an hour ago. I wonder what delayed them?"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, as a sudden thought came to him. "We were going to tell the ticket collector at Bell-ton, weren't we? What happens to that local train, after it gets to Caistowe?"

"Why, the engine is shunted around, shoved on the other end, and the train goes back to Bannington—later on in the evening," said Nipper. "Cheese it, Handy! You're not going to tell me that those fellows failed to make themselves heard at Caistowe."

"They might have been left stranded," said Handforth.

"Rot!" put in Tommy Watson. "Why, two of them were nearly free before we left the train. They could have wriggled out of those handkerchiefs long before they got to Caistowe. Anyhow, they could have got out from under the seats and shown themselves."

"That's true," said Nipper, nodding. "No need to worry, Handy. They'll turn up soon. I daresay they have done this deliberately. I'll bet they stayed in Caistowe for a feed."

"Yes, by jingo—and they're waiting for that last train back," said Church. "That's about the size of it. Too lazy to walk—and they're risking getting into hot water for being late."

This seemed a likely enough explanation—until the time came, and passed, when the last train from Caistowe should have been in. The Fourth-Formers, it appeared, had not arrived.

Over in the East House, where they boarded, there were now some unpleasant inquiries being made. Prefects were on



the warpath. And these prefects soon learned that Freeman and Turner and the others had safely arrived at Bannington. Lots of other fellows had seen them. It was even known that they had got aboard the local train.

Such inquiries as this were certain to lead to some awkward questions, sooner or later. The rumours reached across to the Ancient House, and the Remove japers began to worry.

"Blow them!" said Nipper. "If they're not here by bedtime, we shall have to own up—and that'll mean trouble."

"The rotters! I believe they're doing it on purpose," growled Handforth. "Just like those beastly Fourth-Formers! Trying to get their own back on us, I suppose."

"Well, it's a funny way to do it," said Nipper. "It's very much like cutting off their noses to spite their faces. Somehow, I can't think that they have done this deliberately. There must be some good reason for their absence."

Nobody was really alarmed. Even the japers were convinced that there would be a perfectly simple explanation of the little mystery. The East House prefects were merely annoyed. They had quite enough trials on the first day of term, without these irritating additions. The missing boys were, no doubt, having a spree somewhere, taking advantage of the general laxity of discipline—and they would probably soon turn up, cheery and smiling, expecting to bluff their way through the inquiry.

"Wait until they show up!" said Kenmore darkly.

Kenmore was head prefect in the East House, and he was not a pleasant fellow at the best of times. He reported to Mr. Goole, the Housemaster.

"H'm!" said Mr. Goole. "Very annoying, Kenmore."

"What shall we do, sir?"

"Nothing, I suppose—we shall have to wait until they come in."

Mr. Barnaby Goole was a mild, inoffensive man usually—he was a vegetarian—but this evening he was irritable. He had a cold, and a headache, and a sore throat, and if he had had his way, he would not have re-opened the school for another week, at least.

"It's nearly bedtime, sir," said Kenmore.

"Eh? Yes, yes, to be sure," agreed the Housemaster, sniffing. "I'm glad of it, Kenmore. This has been an interminable day. Quite interminable. Thank Heaven it is nearly over."

"About those juniors, sir——"

"My dear fellow, why bother me?" interrupted Mr. Goole irritably. "You are

head prefect, are you not? Wait until they come in. Or, if you wish, go out and find them. I can't be bothered with these trifles. Unless they can give you a very good explanation, I should cane them."

Kenmore went off, fuming. He had arranged a little reunion party in his study, and his guests had already arrived. This delay was exasperating.

Clang-clang!

The bell was sounding. It was bedtime for the juniors. The gates had long since been locked. And still there was no sign of the missing six.

"Something funny about it," Buster Boots was saying, to Armstrong, in the lobby. "Well, I can't stop now—I've got to dodge back to my own House. Cheerio!"

"Those silly Removites say that it was a harmless enough jape," growled Armstrong, "but I'm not so sure of that. Those six chaps have been missing since early in the evening——"

"What's that?" interrupted Kenmore, butting in.

"Hallo! I didn't know you were here," said Armstrong.

"Well, I am here," said the prefect. "What's that you were saying about those six missing chaps? A jape, eh? Who did it? When? How?"

"Dash it, you needn't jump down my throat," protested Armstrong. "I don't know anything!"

He walked off, and Buster Boots dodged out to return to his own House. Kenmore, after a moment's hesitation—he knew that it would be idle to question the juniors—turned on his heel and walked back to the Housemaster's study.

## CHAPTER 7.

### The Mystery of the Missing Boys!

"A—ER—jape?" asked Mr. Goole wearily.

"I only heard a word or two by chance, sir," replied Kenmore. "It's no good questioning the kids—they won't squeal on one another. But, by what I can gather, some of the Remove boys played a practical joke on our youngsters. I think you'd better go across and make inquiries, sir."

"I?" repeated Mr. Goole coldly. "Certainly not! Go yourself, Kenmore."

"But it's important, sir—it's bedtime," said the prefect. "The kids won't take any notice of me. You're different. As soon as you show your face they'll be scared."



"Indeed!" said Mr. Goole frostily. "And why should my face scare them, Kenmore?"

"You know what I mean, sir. You're a Housemaster, and—and—— It's getting serious, sir. Look how late it is!"

Mr. Goole, with many a grumble and growl, muffled up his throat, got into his overcoat, and went across the Triangle. The Removites had already gone upstairs, but he overtook them in the upper corridor before they had actually retired into their respective dormitories.

"Hallo, sir!" said Wilson, of the Sixth, who was the prefect in charge. "Anything wrong?"

"Yes, Wilson, there is something decidedly wrong," snapped Mr. Goole. "Six of my boys are missing, and I have reason to believe that these young scamps here can explain the matter."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, his jaw dropping. "Haven't those chaps come in yet?"

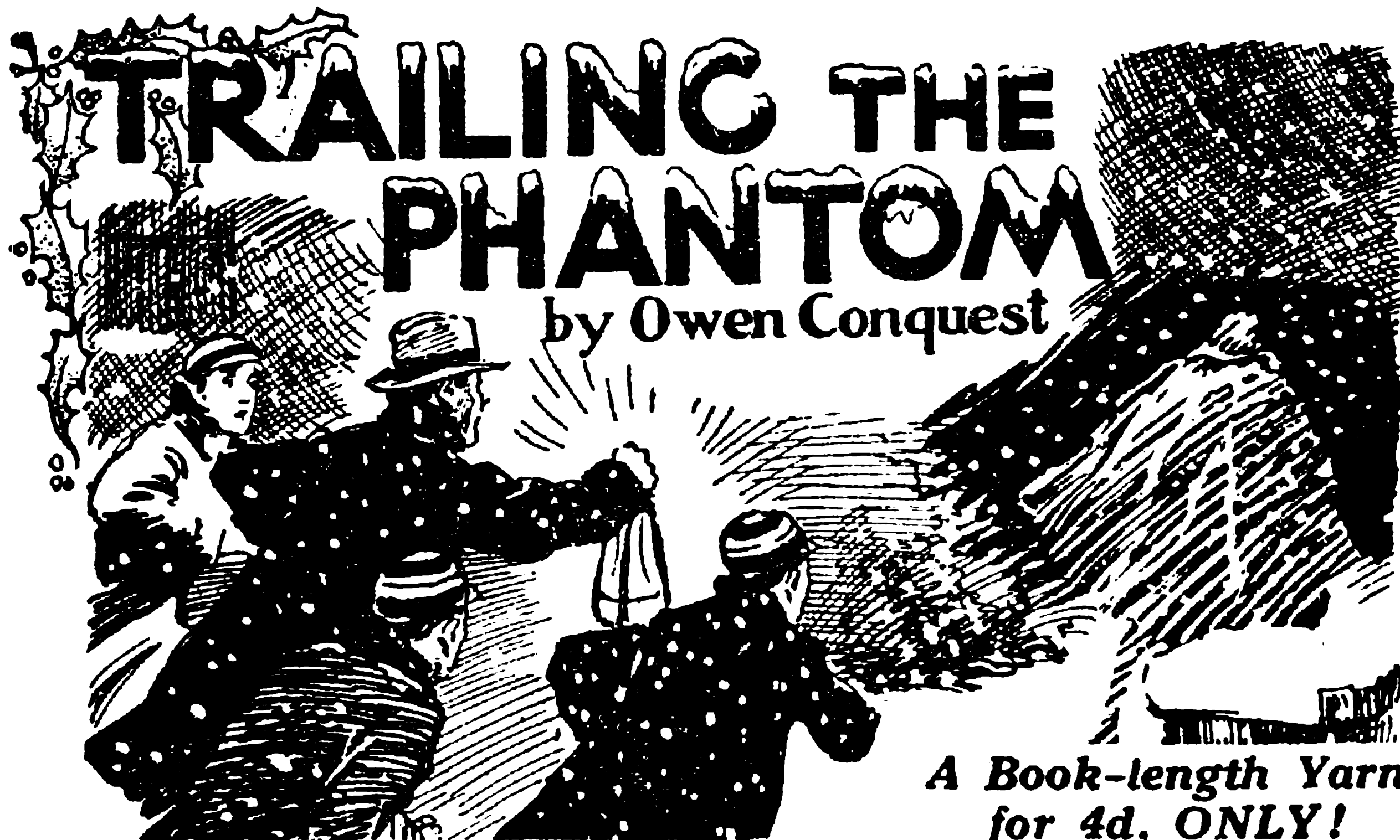
"What do you know about it?" asked Wilson sharply.

Nipper came forward.

"I think we'd better own up, you chaps," he said. "Awfully sorry, Mr. Goole, if we've caused you any worry. We didn't mean to. And I can't think that our little joke can be the reason for the disappearance of those six chaps."

"Disappearance!" echoed Mr. Goole plaintively. "Why use a word like that? It sounds most unpleasant. The boys cannot have disappeared. How ridiculous!"

"By George!" said Handforth, staring. "Joe Spence disappeared, didn't he? While he was walking back from Cais."



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towe, too! I say, it isn't possible that those six chaps——"

"Don't be an ass, Handy," broke in Nipper. "Nothing serious can have happened to them."

Mr Goole looked round unhappily.

"I do wish you boys would tell me what all this means," he complained. "I can't make head or tail of all this. What happened? Why can't you be lucid?"

"Sorry, sir," said Nipper. "It wasn't anything much."

And, briefly, he explained how he and the other Removites had had a "dust up" with the six Fourth-Formers in the local train. He told how the victims had been bound by their own handkerchiefs, and left under the seats.

"Upon my soul," said Mr. Goole, blinking. "You boys do the most extraordinary things!"

"But it was nothing, sir," protested Handforth. "The train didn't go any farther than Caistowe, and the chaps are bound to have been found there——"

"I don't agree with you, Handforth," said Mr. Goole coldly. "I regard the whole—cr—joke as a most unpleasant one. I shall have to report you to your own Housemaster. It is quite likely that my boys are still under those seats—shunted away into a siding, somewhere. If anything like that has happened, you will all get a flogging—and you will deserve it. You had better take their names. Wilson."

And Mr. Goole went downstairs, more irritable than ever. He took his troubles to Mr. Alington Wilkes, and the Housemaster of the Ancient House listened sympathetically.

"I shouldn't worry too much, Mr. Goole," said Old Wilkey, at length. "The boys will probably turn up at any minute."

"Well, unless they do, I shall have to inform the headmaster," said Mr. Goole plaintively. "And really, Mr. Wilkes, I do hate running to the Head with complaints. The whole affair is most upsetting. May I use your telephone?"

He soon got through to the station-master at Caistowe, and that worthy official listened in some astonishment to the story

"There weren't any boys on that local train when it got to Caistowe, sir," he said at last, in a firm, decided voice.

"You cannot be sure of that——" began Mr. Goole.

"Begging your pardon, sir, that's just what I can be sure of," said the station-master. "That particular train has a

two-hour wait here before it goes back to Bannington, and every carriage is opened and swept out—as soon as the train gets into the station, here. It was swept out as usual this evening, and if those boys had been aboard, they would have been found. They couldn't have been missed. Impossible. I was on the platform myself all the time, and I ought to know."

"Dear me," said Mr. Goole. "This is most extraordinary. You declare that the boys were not on the train when it arrived?"

"They certainly were not," said the station-master. "There were only about six passengers, all told, and not one of them was a boy. You must have got hold of it wrong, sir; the boys got out at Bellton, which is their proper station."

Mr. Goole hung up.

"Very strange—very worrying," he commented, after he had told Old Wilkey. "These six boys were bound and muffled, according to the story I have been told, and yet they completely vanished during the short journey from Bellton to Caistowe. They vanished, sir! Like—like a puff of smoke!"

"Which, of course, is impossible," murmured Mr. Wilkes gently. "Either my boys are mistaken, or the Caistowe station-master is mistaken."

"I shall have to use your telephone again," said Mr. Goole.

This time he got through to Mr. Nelson Lee, the headmaster. The famous school-master-detective listened calmly enough to Mr. Goole's agitated story.

"It is very annoying, but I see no reason for alarm," said the Head, at length. "There will probably be some very simple explanation, Mr. Goole. If I were you, I would go back to your House and await the boys' return. They may be there already. I know what these youngsters are on the first day of term," he added dryly. "In any case, it is far too early for alarm."

And Mr. Barnaby Goole, reassured, trotted back to the East House, where he sat in his study, grumbling and complaining, and affectionately fondling his cane.

## CHAPTER 8.

### The Awakening!

WHEN the hand-controlled lift reached the bottom of the deep shaft, Shorty had lit a powerful petrol-vapour lantern, and it was hissing softly, emitting a dazzling, three hundred candle-power radiance.



There was a door here, and all sorts of metal rods and gadgets. Shorty pulled on one of the rods, and the door swung open instantly. He stepped out into a black tunnel, where the air was cold but dry.

It was not a natural tunnel, but one of the old disused quarry workings on Bannington Moor. It was a deep tunnel, long since forgotten, for half way towards the old quarries, near the moor, the roof had caved in, and the tunnel was blocked. The St. Frank's boys, who knew the quarry workings well, had no knowledge of this particular tunnel—beyond the spot where it had fallen in.

"We'll take them one by one," said Shorty briefly.

Harron, breathing freely and easily, as though sound asleep, was seized and carried out. Jim touched a little projection of rock, and the door immediately closed to, sliding into position so cunningly that there was now no sign of a door. With that door closed, there was not the slightest indication of any communicating shaft between this old tunnel and the cellars of the house, far above.

The prisoner was carried along for some distance, and then another concealed door, identical with the first, was opened. A part of the rock was swung back, revealing a narrow tunnel at right angles. This was man-made, too—but of recent construction. All along one side ran a number of strong wooden doors. Jim and Shorty stopped at the first, and the unconscious St. Frank's boy was carried into a surprisingly-comfortable little cubicle. It was a most extraordinary place to find here.

Alongside a wooden partition which divided this cubicle from the next, there was a camp bed—narrow, but good of its kind, and provided with ample blankets. There was a chair and a little table, and on the table some cutlery and crockery ware. In a corner there was a wash-basin, with a jug of water, soap, and towels.

The prisoner was carried in, and laid upon the bed. Jim pulled on some wooden projections, and a second bed swung out from the wall above—like an upper berth in a steamer.

The two men retraced their steps, and soon they returned with a second victim. The door of the first cubicle was then locked. The same procedure was adopted with the other four prisoners. All six were accommodated in three of these little cubby-holes—two in each.

The two men then proceeded to divest the boys of all their clothes—not an easy

task, since the boys were unable to assist in any way.

Each boy was then attired in rough, serviceable undershirts and strange-looking suits—not unlike boiler-makers' overalls. These suits were of stout woollen material, drab in colour, and drawn tight by bands at the ankles and wrists. Every suit was exactly identical.

The boys' own clothes, with all the contents of the pockets, were carefully folded, parcelled, and packed away in a secret store-room. From this minute onwards the six Fourth-Formers had lost their identity.

"Well, that's that," said Shorty, at last. "Seems to me we earn our money, Jim."

"Better have a last look round and see that everything's all right," said Jim, taking the lantern.

They made a brief tour. All the cubicle doors were securely locked, and the two men, passing out of the side tunnel, closed the rock door.

The six prisoners showed signs of recovery at about the same time—eloquent proof that each boy had received a uniform dose of the mysterious needle. Turner and Page, as it happened, were placed together in one cubicle. They were study mates at St. Frank's, and firm friends. When Turner sat up on the bed he did so naturally, as though he had just awakened from a healthy sleep. He did not hold his head, or look about him in bewilderment. He was, in fact, feeling no ill-effects of any kind. Whatever the men had done to the six boys, it had not impaired their health.

Yet there was a listless, lack lustre look in Turner's eyes. He gazed round the cubicle without interest, without curiosity. Extraordinarily enough, he seemed to take everything for granted. There was a little light glowing in the rock ceiling, and it was sufficient to show Turner the quaint character of his clothing. But if he looked at his clothing, he took no particular notice.

Page was awake by now, and presently he climbed down from the upper "berth." He sat on the lower bed, next to Turner.

"Hallo!" he said, looking at Turner without a trace of interest.

"Hallo!" said Turner.

They looked at one another, but neither offered any further remark. There were no startled ejaculations, as one might have expected; no frantic inquiries as to their extraordinary predicament.

It was clear, in fact, that the boys remembered nothing of what had happened;





Somewhere in this vicinity the missing Fourth-Formers had vanished. Torch in hand, Nelson Lee searched the railway track for clues.

they did not even remember their own names, or any detail of their past life. They were, to all intents and purposes, complete strangers—and entirely disinterested in one another.

A key sounded in the door; the door opened, and a man came in. He carried a tray.

"Supper!" he said briefly.

Turner and Page looked at him dully; he looked at Turner and Page with a slight grin on his face, and he nodded.

"You're all right, my pretties," he said, as though speaking to a pair of rabbits. "Come along—it's all good, wholesome food."

He set down the tray on the table. There was bread, an ample supply of cheese, and two mugs of hot cocoa. Turner and Page went to the table, and, almost mechanically, they commenced eating and drinking.

In very truth they were like helpless rabbits!

Their own personalities were gone; they had no desire to escape; neither had they any curiosity regarding their condition. It was instinct, rather than brain-power, which told them that they were hungry, and that food and drink were necessary.

Of all the mysterious things that had happened on this eventful evening, this was by far the most mysterious!

## CHAPTER 9.

### Nelson Lee's Theory!

"**R**ATS! I can't sleep!" said Handforth restlessly.

"And you're taking jolly good care that we don't sleep, either," remarked Church, sitting up in bed. "Blow you, Handy! How do you think Mac and I can sleep with you tossing and turning and muttering, and making those squeaks?"

"I wasn't making any squeaks."

"I didn't mean you—I meant the bed," said Church tartly. "Do you know it's gone half-past ten?"

"Yes, I heard it," grunted Handforth. "I tell you, I can't sleep. I'm thinking about those Fourth-Formers. Supposing something serious has happened to them?"

"Draw it mild," protested McClure. "I expect they're in their own House—and in bed by this time."

"They're not," replied Handforth, in a worried voice. "I went and had a look from one of the front windows ten minutes ago. There's still a light in the East House lobby, and the front door's standing wide open. I saw old Goole, too, wrapped up like a mummy, and pacing up and down with a cane in his hand."

"Phew! That looks bad," said Church. Handforth commenced dressing.



"What are you doing?" asked Mac.

"Can't you see?" demanded Edward Oswald. "I can't stick this any longer. I'm going to break bounds—and have a look along the Caistowe road."

"You silly ass——"

"It's no good arguing—I'm going," said Handforth. "And you're coming with me, too. Buck up! Get into your things!"

Church and McClure reluctantly dressed. They were not at all keen on the trip, but they were worried about the missing Fourth-Formers, too, and, in any case, they did not want Handforth to go off alone. He was certain to get into trouble.

They had hardly emerged from the dormitory when they ran into a gloomy figure, which at first shrank back and then advanced.

"Hallo!" said Nipper. "What's the idea of being fully dressed?"

"I can ask you the same thing," retorted Handforth. "We're worried about those East House chaps, so we're going to sneak out——"

"Great minds think alike," murmured Nipper. "I'm on the same errand."

"There you are!" said Handforth, turning triumphantly to his chums. "Are you satisfied now? Even Nipper is off to investigate."

"I feel sort of responsible," said Nipper slowly. "It's—it's so bewildering. In fact, I don't mind telling you that I'm thoroughly alarmed. What can have happened to those chaps? You can be certain that they wouldn't stay out all this time of their own accord."

"Yes, and Joe Spence disappeared on that road," muttered Handforth.

"Oh, chuck it," said Church uncomfortably.

"Well, it's a fact, and you can't get away from it," went on Handforth stubbornly. "If one chap can disappear, so can another—or six, if it comes to that. It seems to me there's something sinister going on."

Nipper said nothing. An idea had occurred to him—a breathless, appalling idea. He said nothing of it to the others, but it had taken such a hold of him that he was forced to go out and investigate, if only to ease his mind.

"I say, you're looking groggy!" muttered Handforth suddenly.

"I'm not groggy—I'm worried," replied Nipper. "Yes, I'm terribly worried. Come on—don't stand talking here. The sooner we go, the better."

"You mean—along the Caistowe road?"

"No," said Nipper fiercely. "I mean somewhere else."

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He would not explain what he meant, and silently the four Removites crept downstairs and sneaked out into the night.

Unknown to them, Nelson Lee had been making further inquiries. He had gone over to the East House, and he had had a long talk with Mr. Goole, and had heard all the available details. Following that, he had telephoned to the railway authorities—not only at Caistowe, but at Bannington, too. He had made the most searching inquiries.

And, as a net result, he was gravely alarmed.

There was no sense in beating about the bush now. The non-arrival of the six Fourth-Formers was worrying in the extreme. It was getting on for eleven o'clock, and if they had got out of the train at Caistowe, as the Removites had planned, they would have been at the school hours and hours ago. Clearly, something had happened to them—and something drastic, too.

It was after telephoning to the railway authorities that Nelson Lee had his awful suspicion. Until then he had supposed that the missing juniors had met some friends in Caistowe, and had been persuaded to stay. But as the minutes passed, and they still failed to turn up, this explanation was not good enough.

And from the railway people Lee had heard something which started his thoughts off on a completely different angle. The local train had been pulled up half-way between Bellton and Caistowe, and had stopped there for almost half a minute.

Time enough for the boys to jump out! Yes, but in that event they should have arrived at the school hours earlier.

Lee had also been told that a train, going in the opposite direction, had rattled past the stationary local. The possibilities were ghastly. Supposing those six boys had jumped out of the train—on the wrong side? Supposing they had not noticed the other train?

In the darkness there might easily have been an appalling tragedy. Even the engine driver and fireman might not have noticed anything. Thus, a terrible tragedy could have remained undiscovered.

Nelson Lee was determined to make absolutely sure.

## CHAPTER 10.

### The Search!

**T**HE famous schoolmaster-detective had hardly let himself out of the private gate into Bellton Lane before he saw some shadowy figures. He waited. The figures came nearer.

"Just a moment, boys," said Nelson Lee quietly.

Nipper and Handforth & Co. jumped.

"Guv'nor!" gasped Nipper. "We—we didn't know——"

He paused, at a loss for words. Handforth & Co. were stunned. To be caught red-handed like this, by their headmaster, was a sheer disaster.

"Perhaps you boys will tell me why you are breaking bounds after lights out?" asked Lee sternly.

"I—we—that is—I mean——"

Handforth paused, incoherent.

"We can explain, guv'nor," said Nipper, his voice earnest. "You know it's not like us to break bounds. But we're worried about those Fourth-Formers. We played a jape on them, and they haven't turned up yet."

"They haven't, have they, sir?" put in Church.

"No," replied Nelson Lee. "The six boys are still missing."

"And we thought—— At least, I thought——" Nipper grabbed at the Head's sleeve. "Guv'nor!" he went on. "I didn't tell the other chaps, but a horrible fear came to me. I don't like to speak about it, even to you, sir! But I must go to the railway."

Nelson Lee was impressed by Nipper's tone.

"Go on," he said quietly.

"It struck me, guv'nor, that those chaps might have jumped out of the train before it got to Caistowe," said Nipper quickly. "It's only a local—it never gets up much speed. And Turner and his pals would have been reckless. And—and there's another train at about that time——"

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "You—you don't mean——"

"No, no!" muttered Church, with a shudder. "It's too horrible!"

"Nipper is right, boys," said Nelson Lee. "I have been making inquiries, and I happen to know that the local train stopped for a minute on that brief journey. And it stopped just as the other train was passing."

"Oh!"

"I do not believe that any terrible tragedy occurred, but we cannot leave the matter in doubt," continued Lee. "Those six boys have not arrived at the school, and that fact alone is alarming enough. It is very dark, and it might be morning—full daylight—before any of the railway workers go along that part of the track."

"And—and we sent those chaps to their doom," groaned Handforth.

"Come, come! There may be some other explanation," said Nelson Lee, not un-



kindly. "You boys had better go back to bed——"

"We'd rather not, sir," urged Nipper. "Please don't send us back! Let us go with you. We can't sleep. And—and we might be needed."

Nelson Lee hesitated for only a moment

"All right—you may come," he said. "In the circumstances, I will overlook this breach of the school rules. I realise that you are actuated by concern for your missing comrades. Come!"

They set out briskly. The railway-station was closed and dark when they reached it. They got on to the permanent way by the little gate at the level-crossing. There was nobody to challenge them. Walking quickly, almost running, they pressed on.

Conversation flagged; presently they just walked on silently. Overhead the stars were now twinkling brightly, and the blackness was not so intense as it had seemed when they first came out. They could see the embankment clearly, and the metals shining dully, reflecting the starlight.

"Do you—you know the place, guv'nor?" ventured Nipper, after they had covered nearly a mile.

"Approximately," replied Lee. "There is a signal three or four hundred yards ahead, and it was there, of course, that the train was pulled up. We are getting very near to the spot now, young 'uns. You had better stay behind. I will go on alone."

"But, guv'nor——"

"You heard what I said, Nipper."

Nipper made no further objection. He and the other juniors hung back. Nelson Lee walked on, now flashing a powerful electric torch in front of him. Even his iron nerve was affected. What would be revealed along this deserted permanent way?

He walked on, and he saw nothing but the gleaming track. He reached the signal, he passed it; his figure, to the boys, became tiny. Finally, with a little sigh, Nelson Lee turned.

He flashed his torch on and off—in Morse. He signalled the word "Come," and the boys instantly understood.

"He's found them!" muttered Handforth tragically.

They ran like the wind. Nelson Lee was coming back to meet them.

"It's all right, boys, our theory, thank Heaven, was wrong," said the Head quietly. "There has been no tragedy on the line."

"Oh, guv'nor, I—I thought—— We were afraid——"

"That's all right, Nipper," said Lee kindly. "I know that you must all have been very scared. But there is nothing here. This is the exact spot where the train stopped. It might be as well to have a look round while we are here."

He flashed the light of his torch round in a wide circle, and Nipper suddenly uttered a shout.

"Look!" he ejaculated.

He ran down the slight embankment, and he picked up something. Lee and the other boys gathered round, and they saw that Nipper held in his hand a tiny blue cardboard flag.

IT said much for the keenness of Nipper's eyesight that he had spotted that tiny flag in the frosty grass.

There was a crest printed upon it, with the words "St. Martin's Hospital."

"This is a find, guv'nor," said Nipper keenly.

"I must confess I don't quite see the value of it."

"It proves that those chaps did jump out of the train when it stopped," said Nipper. "But they jumped out on the right side—where it was safe. This little flag must have dropped out of Dallas' coat lapel when he took the jump."

"Why are you so sure that Dallas wore this little flag?" asked Lee quickly.

"It's hardly a clue, old man," said Handforth, shaking his head. "Anybody might have bought that flag——"

"You chaps must have been blind," interrupted Nipper disparagingly. "This little blue flag was worn by Dallas, of the Fourth. Nobody else on the train had one—and for a jolly good reason."

"That reason being?" asked Nelson Lee.

"That Dallas lives in Dulwich, sir, and St. Martin's Hospital is in Dulwich," replied Nipper promptly. "It's as easy as winking. There was a local flag-day in Dulwich to-day, and Dallas bought his flag when he started out. And here it is—on this embankment! That's proof positive that Dallas got out of the train here, at this spot."

"Yes, very sound reasoning, young 'un," said Lee approvingly.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Handforth. "I hadn't thought of it like that."

Nelson Lee was bending down, holding the electric torch close to the ground. In spite of its hardness, his trained eye detected some slight traces of recent disturbance. A stone, or a scrap of gravel, had been dislodged here and there. Some tufts of grass were bruised. The low

(Continued on page 24.)



**Handy celebrates 1932 with an uproarious special New Year's Number!**



# HANDFORTH'S Weekly

No. 37. Vol. 2.

## EDITORIAL STAFF

January 2nd, 1932.

**A HAPPY NEW  
YEAR**

**By The Editor.**

Editor-in-Chief E. O. Handforth  
Editor E. O. Handforth  
Chief Sub-Editor E. O. Handforth  
Literary Editor E. O. Handforth  
Art Editor E. O. Handforth  
Rest of Staff E. O. Handforth

**BE HONEST THIS  
YEAR**

**says Reggie Pitt.**

**T**HIS is the first new year that has ever dawned on the brightest paper in Britain—HANDFORTH'S WEEKLY. I hope it won't be the last. (Hear, hear! —E.O.H.). Because my paper is so jolly good, don't think I have an idea that it's perfect. I haven't. The paper will never be perfect until I write the whole of it myself, but as the Editor of the NELSON LEE has said that it's only sporting to give other men a show, I suppose I shall have to continue to take a back seat in my own magazine.

Of course, like every other author, I have my own special talents. Where I'm hottest is at the detective story. I'm really good at detective stories. I'm willing to own that I can't do puzzles like Nipper, or verse like Val or Fellowe. Not that Fellowe is much good. I don't give him much show in this paper. All he does is to rhyme his prose in a moony way, whereas I admit that Val is not so bad at verses.

But in what old Wilkey calls "pure prose" there's nobody at St. Frank's to touch me. That may not sound modest, but it's a fact. I don't boast of it. It's just a gift I have, that's all. And I'm going to see that my WEEKLY is well supplied with pure prose.

If I want puzzles or verse, I shall call on Nipper or Val. Tommy Watson can weigh in with his footling limericks, and Travers can put in his little epigrams, Churchy his school chat, and that ass Browne, of the Fifth, can contribute a column of rot now and again. But rest assured I shall see that plenty of my ripping work will adorn the paper in 1932. Rely on me. I won't let you down.

Your old pal,

E. O. H.

**W**HAT about making a resolution to avoid cribbing this year? You see, it's all very well to keep a crib to Virgil in your desk—everybody does that—but, after all, it doesn't do you much good, if you see what I mean.

It's all right in the Sixth, of course. If a Sixth-Form man is hung up for a phrase he can simply stroll into the school library and get Jowett's or Crawley's Thucydides, or Frere's Aristophanes or something, and nobody says a word to him. But let a Remove man go in and ask the librarian for a translated Virgil—Dryden's or Fairfax-Taylor's—and the first thing you're asked for is a master's permit.

It's rotten! That's the sort of trick they served me three times last month, and when I did get a peep at Virgil, on the pretence of looking at other books, I'd forgotten all I found out by the time I left the library.

Of course, it used to be all right to pencil the translation of the words into your Virgil each evening, in preparation for lessons the following day. But after Crowell dropped on Gresham for this and jolly well lammed him for it, he made an inspection of the books, and half the Form bagged impots. So now he's likely to drop on us at any moment, and the game's too risky.

In the circumstances, it would be a good idea for you fellows to make a resolve not to use cribs this year, but to do your prep in an honest fashion. And, by the way, as you won't be using your cribs, you might give them to me, and I'll burn them for you. That's most important. Don't forget it. I've lost my keys to Virgil and Euclid.

### Learn Latin Without Headaches!

**Latin Syntax and Accidence Explained.**

(Classes Daily.)

**Preliminary Fee - - Five Bath-buns.**

*Call or write for appointment*

**GUY PEPYS, X.Y.Z., Study Q, West House.**



## Trackett Grim's latest "Hair-raising" stunt.

# GRIM, GRUB-GRABBER!

BROKE!

"THINGS," said Trackett Grim, are very bad."

"What-ho, guv'," agreed Splinter mournfully. "We

spent our last penny on the Christmas festivities, and now we haven't a bean. And I'm as hungry as a hunter—two hunters," he added, for Splinter always spoke the truth.

"Well, we may get a case yet," said the great detective, detecting a small crumb on the table, and eating it greedily. "It is New Year's Eve to-night. All sorts of things happen on New Year's Eve. Burglars burgle and gangsters gang."

"We shan't get a case before to-morrow, guv'nor. And I shall be a living skeleton by then. I wish we hadn't bought that box of crackers and a sprig of mistletoe for Christmas."

"We had to keep Christmas in suitable style, Splinter," the detective said severely. "Just now, however, it happens that I badly need a shilling or so——"

"So do I. For a pork pie."

"Not at all. For a bottle of hair dye," said Grim calmly. "I suppose we haven't such a thing as a bottle of hair dye, Splinter?"

His assistant stared, and shook his head.

"What on earth do you want hair dye for, guv'nor?"

"I wish to disguise myself," smiled Grim. "By the way, Splinter, I believe we have a bottle of black Indian ink, which we use for secret messages. Bring it here at once."

GRIM'S DARK DEED!

GREATLY puzzled, Splinter fetched the ink, which Grim tipped into a basin of warm water.

The great detective had fair, flaxen hair; but he soon got to work on it and transformed it to an "inky" black. Splinter looked on in amazement.

"Is it an investigation, guv'nor?" he asked breathlessly. "Are you on the track of somebody?"

"No, Splinter—of something, not somebody. Have you ever heard of Montague Midgett?"

"Never."

"He is a strange character," said Grim musingly, drying his hair by holding his head in front of the fire. "Very strange. I think, Splinter," he added, with deadly calm in his tones, "we'll pay Mr. Midgett a visit at midnight to-night."

He explained no further, but sat brooding in his chair until late that night, when he suddenly woke up, put on his coat, and told Splinter to get ready.

"I am armed, guv'nor," whispered Splinter, and a revolver glinted in the moonlight.

"So am I," snarled Grim, and he showed his assistant a deadly-looking knife and fork.

MIDGETT PROVES BIG!

THEY walked a long way, until they came to a large, detached house, with lighted windows, whence came a sound of revelry by night.

"This is our destination," whispered

Grim, looking a minutes to twelve midnight."

As twelve o'clock neighbouring chime rung open and pranced down the Grim snatched off

"Ah! What gate!" shouted in, come in! I in and having a

"Not without

"Your friend

Towards morn and Splinter, file rolled home in M

"How on earth guv'nor?" asked

"Simple, my Grim. "I happe

paper an article saying that all

should be kept up faithfully observ

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"But, I don't

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## THE S LAI

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I thought I'd tr  
A clock to buy  
To stop me being  
I tried a ripping  
A clock with weigh  
But oh! the shop  
And I have got the

Too dear! Too  
I cannot buy it—  
The reason why  
They're costly,  
Can never underst  
The hour and min  
Must be of gold  
And, as such thing  
I'll get it "second

No go! No go  
The clock is not for  
In vain I sigh  
And wink an ey  
It will not do the  
For watche clock  
Were shown me at  
But, though I cou  
I couldn't get the

## NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

**Archie Glenthorne:** "I've resolved not to sleep any more. Now fade! I'm tired." (Archie is quite safe in making this resolve. It's practically impossible for him to sleep any more than he does now.)

**Vivian Travers:** "I have made a resolution not to make any resolutions, and I'm keeping it."

**Cornelius Trotwood:** "No, I've not heard anything about a Junior's Revolution, but I'm not surprised. One or two of the seniors treat us like dogs."

**Johnny Onions:** "I've resolved not to make any more sips in my slayings, but calk with tare instead."

**Guy Pepys:** "My resolution is to the effect that I will write a more famous diary than my ancestor."

**Bernard Forrest:** "I have resolved to keep away from smoking, so I am buying a very long cigarette-holder."

**Nipper:** "My resolution is to do my best to treat everybody else as I would like them to treat me. This, of course, is easier said than done."



"Treat us like dogs."

**E. O. Handforth:** "I have resolved to do nothing at school that I shan't care to remember after I have left. Of course, I've done nothing so far——" (Phew! What about your "WEEKLY"?—ED. "N.L.L.")



# OLD BORE'S ALMANAC

*Old Bore is sorry to find that 1932 is a good year for everybody. Old Bore likes disasters and earthquakes, and it grieves him to have to forecast happiness.*

**JANUARY:** Weather mostly rain. An important football match will take place early this month, and one of the teams will probably win. Snipe will be detained for laziness, and the stars indicate that Archie Glenthorne will be found asleep on an afternoon near the end of the month.

**FEBRUARY:** Weather mostly rain. A curious, flat, batter-cake, fried in a pan and eaten with lemon-juice and sugar, will make its appearance about the second Tuesday in the month. Jupiter and Saturn are in agreement on the 14th, which indicates that this day will be suitable for ornamental love-letters.

**MARCH:** The stars reveal that another kind of confectionery—a bun marked upon the top with a cross pattern—will be very much eaten on the 25th. The 27th is a good day for leaving all kinds of school, and other work, and taking a holiday. Weather mostly rainy—some wind.

**APRIL:** Weather mostly rainy. Capricorn indicates that this month is a good one for rowing clubs, and round about the end of the month, an important rowing race will take place on a river in or near London. The stars do not enable me to get any further particulars; but I judge that several valuable pieces of silver, known as Football Cups, will change hands during this month. The first day of the month will exert a foolish influence over everybody.

## ADVERTISEMENTS.

(Special rates this week: a tin of best sardines per advert., the editor being partial to said fish, and also being stony broke.)

**HAVE YOU ANY OLD BROWN PAPER?**

We will buy it from you.

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Boot and Shoe Makers,  
**BANNINGTON.**

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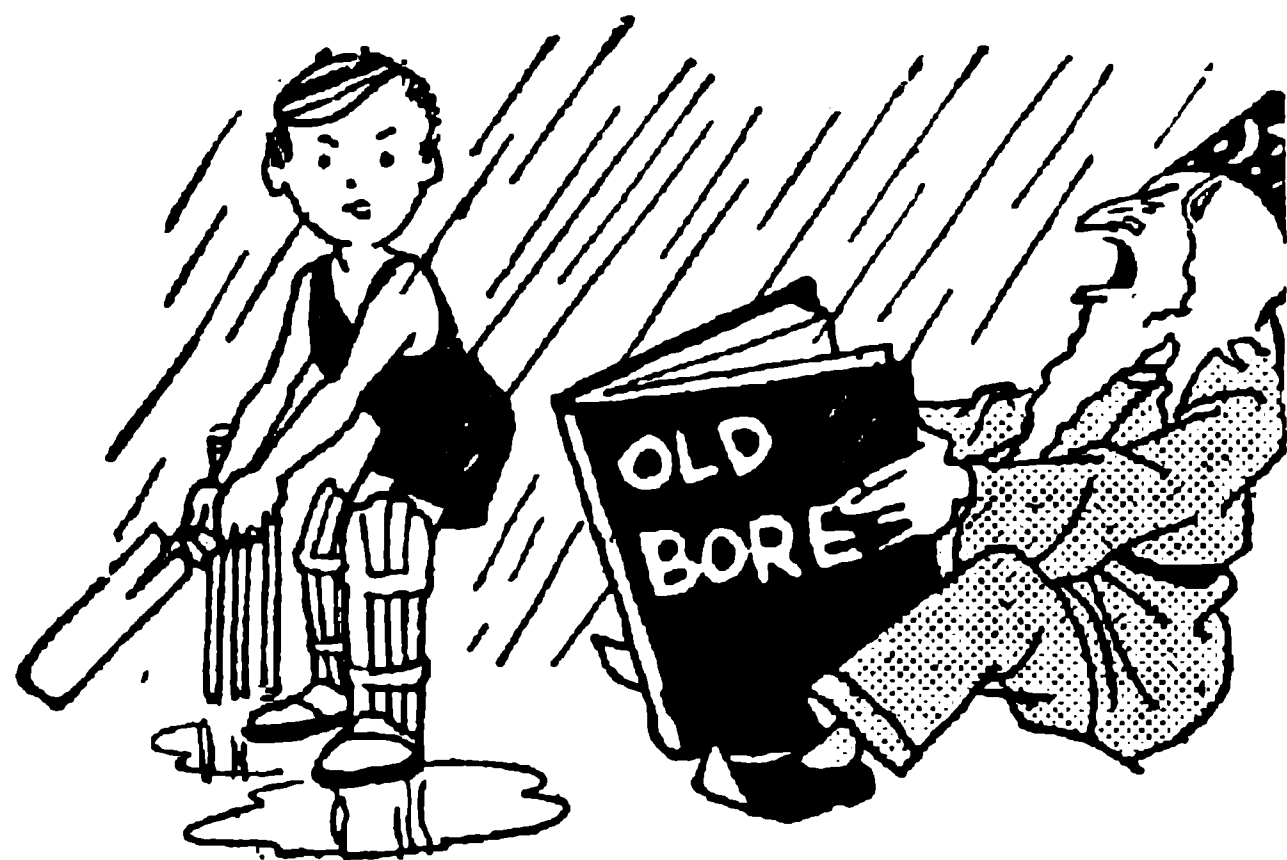
Notice.

All next week the 3 o'clock train will start at 4 o'clock instead of 5 o'clock, as usual.

**CRAWLALONG RAILWAY,**  
Bellton.

## HOW TO KEEP A DIARY.

Lock it up where nobody can get at it.



**MAY:** Cricket begins. Weather very rainy. Monday, the 16th, is another good day to take a holiday.

**JUNE:** Cricket, holidays and tennis. Weather exceptionally rainy.

**JULY:** Weather absolutely awful. Cricket will have to be played in swimming costumes.

**AUGUST:** The stars indicate that, on the 1st of this month, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to withdraw any money from the banks. Weather vile.

**SEPTEMBER:** Football restarts. Weather mostly rainy. A disaster will befall one of the teams, and they will lose a match.

**OCTOBER:** Under the influence of the stars, the politicians will conspire to chop an hour of daylight off our daily ration. Weather as usual.

**NOVEMBER:** The planets give strong indications that a good many youthful enterprises will go up in smoke on the 5th of this month. During this month, it is not impossible that somebody will remark that the days are drawing in. Weather—rain.

**DECEMBER:** There will be a good deal of illness on the 26th and subsequent days, and people will stay up late on the night of the 25th. Weather mostly rainy. Old Bore's Almanac for 1933 ready about the 31st. Order NOW.

## ALL FELLOWS WHO NEED

Cakes, buns, lemonade, ginger-pop, and other

## NOURISHMENT

have my sincerest sympathy.

**SO DO I.**

Fatty Little. Remove Form.

## DON'T READ THIS ADVERTISEMENT!

Because it isn't an advertisement really. It's only put in to fill up the paper.

## THE HANDFORTH PUBLISHING OFFICE,

printers of "Handforth's Weekly," are willing to print anything from a visiting card to a million lines of Virgil. Rates on application to the Manager, Secretary, Treasurer, Clerk and Office Boy—viz.,

**E. O. HANDFORTH.**

**CKER'S  
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(C. DE V.)



# THE HOUSE OF SECRETS

(Continued from page 20.)

fence, at the bottom, revealed other tell-tale marks—scratches, and here and there a trace of woolly cloth.

"The boys left the train here," murmured Nelson Lee. "They scrambled down this embankment, they climbed the fence, and they must have crossed this meadow."

"And it leads to the road, sir," said Nipper eagerly.

"So far, so good," nodded Lee. "But this all points to the assumption that the boys safely got to the road. In that case, why did they fail to turn up at the school?"

Handforth gulped, and the others looked at him.

"Well?" asked Lee.

"Nun-nothing, sir!"

"A thought occurred to you, Handforth," said Lee. "What was it?"

"I—I suppose it's silly, sir," faltered Handforth. "But you've heard about Joe Spence, haven't you? He walked home from Caistowe some days ago—people saw him start out. But he never reached Bellton! He disappeared somewhere on this road. He disappeared as completely as though he had evaporated!"

"It may not be as fantastic as it sounds, Handforth," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Indeed, there appears to be a direct connection between the two incidents. Joe Spence vanishes. And now six of our boys vanish. And on the same road. A thing like that cannot be sheer coincidence. But come; we may make some more discoveries."

There were no other direct traces. They crossed the meadow and found themselves in a ploughed field; they skirted this, and before long they found themselves in the road. Nelson Lee walked up and down the hedge, trying to find something in one of the many gaps which would serve as a clue. But he was unsuccessful.

Slowly, with more than one electric torch flashing, they walked towards Bellton. There was no sense in going in the other direction; for the Fourth-Formers would certainly have come this way. Whatever had happened to them, had happened on this quiet stretch of road a mile from the first outlying cottage of the village. For if the six boys had reached the village, somebody would have certainly seen them. And Nelson Lee, earlier, had made careful inquiries in Bellton.

The detective, in fact, was beginning to lose his former belief that the matter was

trivial. Some instinct warned him that he was on the verge of a startling discovery. The mysterious disappearance of Joe Spence was at the back of his mind all the time.

"Wait!" said Lee abruptly. "What's this?"

Handforth & Co. had seen nothing; but Nipper had noticed some large black drops of oil, now partially frozen, on the hard road. But it was not at these that Nelson Lee was looking; his torchlight was directed to the grass border, and to the ditch beyond. Not only was the grass torn and trampled, but there were deep furrows, freshly made.

"Looks as if a car's been in the ditch, sir," said Nipper, reading the signs at a glance.

"Skidded, I should think—and then ditched itself," nodded Lee. "It may be nothing—there may be no connection whatever between the mishap and the vanishing of the boys—but we'll have a closer look, in case."

He warned them to keep back—not to trample on the grass at the fateful spot. So they edged round cautiously, using their torches. Lee himself advanced, dropping into the frozen ditch.

Presently he picked up two opened toffee wrappers; they were quite fresh, and had obviously been lying there only for an hour or two. He held his light so that he could read the words on one of the wrappers: "Malted Milk Toffee."

"What's that, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Do you know if any of those boys had wrapped toffees?"

"Why, yes, sir—Page had some," said Church. "I heard him saying that he had bought them in London."

"Then I think we may safely regard this as another clue," smiled Nelson Lee. "And since Page was eating toffee, nothing very dreadful can have happened to him. As far as I can read these signs, the boys found a car in the ditch, and helped to get it out."

"And after that they were given a lift?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"That's just the point," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "After that—what happened to them?"

— —

## CHAPTER 11.

### The Trail of Oil!

THE clues were very slight, but it was satisfactory to have made any progress at all.

"Perhaps we have come out on a fool's errand, after all, boys," went on the Head dryly. "The car owner may have been so delighted with his rescuers



that he took them on to his home—and gave them a good time. Boys are apt to be careless of time, especially on the first day of term. It is quite possible, indeed, that their new friend assured them that he would make everything all right. H'm! I am very relieved."

Nipper looked at him straight.

"Do you mean that, guv'nor?" he asked pointedly.

"I think you boys had better return to the school," said Nelson Lee, ignoring the question. "There is nothing more that you can do, and I shouldn't like you to be out too late. Anyhow, you can sleep comfortably now. You know that the boys have not met with any tragic fate."

"But we wanted to keep with you, sir," protested Handforth.

"You'll return to the school," insisted Lee. "The chances are that you will find the missing boys there. I'll return later—after I have had a more careful look round at this spot. Good-night, boys!"

"But, guv'nor, won't you let me——"

"No, Nipper; you'll go with the others," broke in Lee. "Leave this to me."

There was no arguing with that tone; and the boys, with reluctant "good nights," doffed their caps and went back to St. Frank's.

Nipper, at least, was not fooled. He was quite certain, in his own mind, that Nelson Lee was not as free from anxiety as he pretended to be. And Nipper was right. Lee was again experiencing that "hunch" that there was something Big here. Furthermore, he had noticed something which the boys had overlooked.

There was a big pool of half-frozen oil at the side of the ditch, nearly hidden in some long grass. Near it there was a great gash in the hard ground. It was easy enough to read the signs. In skidding into the ditch, the vehicle had jarred the back axle so severely that the casing had cracked. Hence this pool of oil.

There was another result of that fracture in the casing, too; there were drops of oil distinctly visible along the road. The car, after it had moved on—presumably with the boys aboard—had left a clear-enough trail of black oil. It was unnoticeable in the ordinary way; but Nelson Lee knew what to look for. And he did not look in vain.

He walked quickly, his every sense alert.

During the Christmas holidays Nelson Lee had been really and truly in harness again, and he had revelled in the experience. He had been absorbed in a thrilling detective case, and, in fact, he had returned to St. Frank's fully resolved to remain in harness. He wondered, now, if

he was at the beginning of another adventure.

He had no real hope of following that elusive oil trail. As he walked, he saw that the drops were farther and farther apart, as the speed of the car had increased. On foot he had practically no chance——

And then, suddenly, he came to that rutty side lane which led off so unexpectedly. He had not taken ten paces beyond this lane before he discovered that there were no further oil drops. The road was so hard that the car wheels had left no marks. But that oil was a certain indication.

"Hallo, hallo!" murmured the great detective, his eyes becoming keen. "This looks interesting."

He retraced his steps, went up the lane and, sure enough, within a few yards he found a drop of that black oil. Farther on, another drop. So the car had come this way!

Lee knew that this little lane led only to the coastguard station, the lighthouse, and one or two lonely residences on the downs. It was, in fact, a blind road—it did not lead to any other village or town. That car, having gone this way, must needs come back—unless it was still somewhere up there.

The possibilities were intriguing.

Lee walked faster now. There was no need to search the road as he progressed. The car could not have turned off on either side. He extinguished his torch, and walked on in the darkness. Presently, on one side, he caught a glimpse of a deeply-recessed gate. Beyond lay a dark, deserted-looking house.

The detective walked past that gate at first, scouting the possibility that the car could have gone that way. For he knew that this residence was Crag House, which was the property of Admiral Sir Rodney Carrington. Lee had met the admiral and he knew him to be a man of sterling integrity and honour.

Then a thought came to the detective, and he retraced his steps. With extreme caution, he held his torch close to the ground, so that the range of the light was limited. And there, right under the gate, was a small pool of semi-frozen oil!

NELSON LEE pursed his lips in an inaudible whistle.

So the car had entered by this gateway. It had gone along the drive to Crag House. For the first time Lee had half a suspicion that he was on the wrong track.



It was inconceivable that the six Fourth-Formers could be here, at Crag House. Admiral Carrington—long since retired from the Navy—was away for the winter. He made a practice of going away every winter. And he always shut up his house. But that was the point. Was it possible that some unauthorised person

Lee knew the folly of indulging in guesswork. He was after facts. The car had entered this drive—so he entered the drive, too. He might as well follow this trail to its finish.

Once clear of the trees, he found himself within better sight of the house. It was, he knew, a delightful place in the summer-time—a quaint, picturesque, fine old mansion. In the blackness of the winter's night it looked sinister, and even forbidding.

"Queer," muttered Lee, frowning.

That car had come here, but it was out of the question to suppose that the six boys could be here. What reason could they have for staying in an empty house—even if they had come in the first place, which in itself was improbable?

Of course, the car may have gone again, although this wasn't likely, considering the condition of the back axle casing. Lee came to the conclusion that he had been following a false trail. The boys had helped to get the car out of the ditch, but something must have happened to them after that—after the car had gone on its way.

He found himself concentrating upon Admiral Sir Rodney Carrington. A queer little old man, genial enough, and a bachelor. Not a recluse, by any means, for in the summertime Crag House was a place of big house-parties, Sir Rodney entertaining on a large scale.

He was away now—in Madeira, or the South of France, or Italy. During his absence, he always closed Crag House, leaving only his butler in charge. Nelson Lee had not met this individual, but he had heard that the butler's name was Crowson.

"Oh, it's absurd," murmured Lee impatiently. "There's nothing wrong here. As I read it, Crowson was on his way home from Caistowe, and had a skid. The boys helped him out of the ditch, and that was the end of the incident. I am not only trespassing here, but making a fool of myself."

Yet, for some inexplicable reason, he was reluctant to drag himself away. That dark house, with its sinister aspect, fascinated him. He wanted to creep closer, to make a more careful inspection. His

instinct urged him on—and reason told him that he was wasting his time.

Still undecided, the detective edged his way across a smooth lawn, so that he could obtain a glimpse of the rear quarters. Suddenly, he had a sensation as though a hidden hand had clutched one of his ankles. He half tripped—and knew the truth. There was a wire down there—cunningly, cleverly concealed. A trip-wire!

Zurrrrrrrh!

His skin tingled. Vaguely from the house he heard the sound of an alarm-bell. That trip-wire, then, was no ordinary one! It connected with the house—it set off the alarm!

In a second, every one of Nelson Lee's flagging interests were revived. There was something queer about Crag House!

But he had no intention of being caught there—trapped in the garden. He glanced round quickly. It was too far for him to run back to the road, for it meant crossing a portion of the drive, almost in front of the house. But there was a wall not twenty yards from him. It was a fairly low wall, unlike the walls on the other sides of the garden.

He leapt lightly over the hidden wire, and ran like a hare. Just before he reached the wall he heard the sound of a door opening—he heard murmuring voices.

He rose up in a clean leap, intending to get on the other side of that wall, and crouch down. Over he went—and then it was that he experienced one of the greatest shocks of his career. For on the other side of the wall there was—nothing!

Too late, he realised that this side of the garden overlooked the sheer cliff. The wall had been built on the very edge!

It was impossible for him to save himself. He was over, and he was plunging down—down!

## CHAPTER 12.

### The Secret Cave!

**I**N the appalling seconds which followed—seconds which seemed like minutes—Nelson Lee did not consider his stark peril. He was filled with fury at his own gross folly.

If only he had paused to think for a mere second before jumping, he would have remembered that the admiral's residence was perched on the very cliff edge. It was a veritable landmark from the sea. People pointed it out from the end of the pier, at Caistowe. The cliff here was sheer. And below, rocks; cruel, jagged, murderous rocks!

Nelson Lee was falling—falling—  
Splash!





Nelson Lee leapt over the wall—and found himself falling through space. Down he hurtled, down to the jagged rocks far below.

water did not worry him much; he was as fit as a fiddle and as hard as nails. He swam strongly, making for the black rocks farther along, where a little headland jutted out. The cliffs were not so steep there; he would be able to get ashore, and climb up.

The sea was calm, and the waves were lapping almost musically against the rocks. Once ashore, he could climb up, and the exercise would keep his circulation going. Then he could trot to the school and change—

Something attracted his attention. There was a shadow on the water, moving, like some monstrous creature, edging nearer and nearer to the tiny cove which was invisible from above, but which was caused by a jagged cleft in the cliff at the base—a black, uneven cave entrance.

Nelson Lee trod water, and he stared. He experienced a sensation of bewildered amazement. That black shadow was not a monstrous sea creature, but a boat! He could feel, rather than hear, the subdued throbbing of its powerful motor.

The craft was low and squat, and its deck was almost completely covered, not unlike a submarine. But the boat was not a submarine; it was a motor craft of some kind, peculiarly designed. It carried no lights, and now, as it edged nearer and nearer towards the black cave entrance, the throb of its engines grew less and less.

"This is remarkable," murmured Lee. "By James! It was worth falling over the cliffs for!"

For he knew that Crag House was not the innocent residence it pretended to be! That trip-wire had given Lee his first hint. Now the suspicion had become a certainty.

This great cave penetrated the rocks immediately beneath Crag House. And here was an unauthorised craft, without lights, edging its way into the cave. Nelson Lee could not have dropped into the sea at a more opportune moment.

The shock of plunging feet first into the icy-cold sea was such that for a second Lee half-believed that death had come. Then, as he broke surface and struck out, the water clutching at him with an icy grip, he knew the truth.

The tide was in—and instead of striking the rocks, he had plunged harmlessly into the sea. It was only a miracle that he had fallen feet first, instead of flat.

"Fool! You don't deserve it," he muttered.

He sent up a prayer to Heaven for his unexpected salvation. The coldness of the



Luck was with him. He was making discoveries!

No longer was he intent upon reaching the rocks, so that he could climb ashore. This opportunity was too good to be missed!

As the mystery craft merged into the blackness of the cave Lee changed his direction, and he swam noiselessly and easily in its wake. He could now faintly detect the odour of oil fumes

The coldness of the water was gripping him, but he fought against the numbness. Had not his muscles and sinews been as hard as iron, he could not have withstood the chill of the wintry sea. His determination, too, came to his help. He *must* swim into the cave, and see what was going on!

Like a fish he edged his way into the calm water of the cave. At low tide, no doubt, this entrance was just shingle and seaweed. Now, with the water high, the boat had been able to worm its way right inside, under the overhanging crags.

The detective felt himself lifted gently by the swell as it surged leisurely into the cave. The water was gurgling and swishing against the rocks, close at hand. Lee kept close to this rock wall, and ahead of him there was nothing but impenetrable blackness. It was like the interior of a catacomb. Yet, somewhere ahead, that queer craft had slithered its way in, and it was obvious enough that the pilot knew his way.

Suddenly a beam of white light shot out from the far interior of the cave. Lee halted, clutching at a rock support. The light was from a powerful electric lamp, and it focused itself upon the black, shining hull of the mystery craft.

"All right—coming!" said a voice.

There was something grotesque about that voice. Nelson Lee knew that the speaker had only uttered the words in an ordinary tone, but the rocks of the cave echoed and re-echoed the words fantastically, until they boomed like dull thunder.

"Coming—coming—coming!" came the echoes, with the weirdest of effects.

Lee could see two figures now; they were moving along a wet, spray-soaked ledge of rock which ran down one side of the cave. One man held the electric lamp, and the other was throwing a line. A man on the boat caught the rope, made it fast, and the craft was drawn closer and closer to the ledge.

"All right, she's fast," said one of the men.

"She's fast—fast—fast!" echoed the cavern thunderously.

Lee swam nearer, as noiseless as a fish. Only his head was showing above water, and he was well beyond the range of the light. Those men on the ledge had no inkling of his presence.

"Bit early, aren't you?" somebody was asking.

And now, curiously enough, there was no echo. Lee had passed that spot where the echo was noticeable.

"Yes—sea's as smooth as a lake," said the man on the boat. "Infernally cold, though. Got something to warm a fellow? Good!"

Nelson Lee, in that icy water, felt that he could do with a "warm," too. He reached round to his hip pocket, and dragged out his flask, which he had purposely brought with him, in case of need, when setting out to look for the missing Fourth-Formers. A strong pull of brandy helped a lot.

And then he waited, determined to take this investigation still further.

## CHAPTER 13.

### Disobeying Orders!

MEANWHILE, four shadowy figures lurked about the garden wall of Crag House. Nipper, to be exact, was grossly disobeying Nelson Lee's orders, and Handforth & Co. had not been slow to follow his example.

They had rebelled at Lee's instructions. They had not meekly gone back to the school. Nipper was convinced, in his heart, that Nelson Lee had scented danger, and it was for this reason that he had sent the boys home.

They went obediently enough—but they only went as far as the bend. Here it was that Nipper turned quickly upon Handforth and Church and McClure.

"Hold on, you chaps!" he whispered tensely. "We're stopping here."

"What?" ejaculated Handforth, his voice thick with excitement. "You don't mean——"

"Do you think I'd leave the guv'nor alone?" hissed Nipper. "He's smelt something, my sons!"

"Eh?"

"He doesn't want us to get into any trouble, so he's sent us off home, thinking that we would go like good little boys," continued Nipper. "Well, we're not going. I'm not going, anyhow. Perhaps you chaps had better slip away."

"Do you know any more funny jokes?" asked McClure tartly.

"We'll stick together, then," agreed Nipper. "But for goodness' sake, Handy, keep that voice of yours down."



"What voice of mine?" demanded Handforth aggressively.

"Crumbs!" groaned Nipper. "There you go already! Don't speak—don't even whisper! If the guv'nor suspects that we're hanging about he'll drop on us, and he won't give us a second chance."

This effectually silenced the impulsive Edward Oswald.

Nipper cautiously peered round the bend, and he was an unseen watcher as Nelson Lee continued his search along the grass bordering the road. Presently Lee came towards them, shining his torch on the ground ahead of him.

"Look out!" warned Nipper. "He's coming this way! Quick! We'd better buzz through this hedge, and we can follow him after he has passed."

"Good wheeze," said Church promptly. "Then we can trail him, eh?"

They did so. They were surprised when they saw their headmaster branch off up the little lane which led to the cliff and the lighthouse. Nipper was the first one who jumped to the truth.

"That giddy oil!" he breathed. "Don't you remember, you chaps? The gear-box, or the back axle, must have been leaking. There's a trail of oil. I expect, and the guv'nor is following it."

"I say!" murmured Handforth breathlessly.

Keeping track of Nelson Lee was not so easy now. For the detective, having entered upon that ratty lane, extinguished his torch. The boys were obliged to proceed with the greatest of caution. Fortunately, they had come out wearing rubber-soled shoes, so they made no sound as they walked.

They were helped when Nelson Lee reached the gate of Crag House, for they saw the tiny gleam of Lee's torch as he held it close to the ground. It was immediately after this that they lost him completely.

They crept nearer and nearer, and, in the gloom, they could see the shadowy gateway.

"Listen, you chaps," murmured Nipper. "Stop! Don't make a sound."

They all stood like statues.

"He must have climbed over this gate," whispered Nipper. "He could not have gone on, or we should be able to hear his footsteps. He's in these grounds somewhere."

"What is this place?" asked Church softly.

"I'm not sure, but I believe it's Crag House," replied Nipper. "Belongs to some big pot—a baronet, or somebody."

"Mr. Lee couldn't have gone in there,"

said McClure. "Don't be silly! Why should he climb over people's gates——"

"Hush!"

Nipper led the way to the wall, and he was the first to scramble up. He perched himself at the top, and tried to penetrate the gloom. The others climbed up beside him. They could see nothing—hear nothing.

Then it was that Nelson Lee struck against the trip-wire. All four boys heard his smothered exclamation; and they heard, too, the faint jingling of the bell somewhere within the house.

"What's that?" asked Handforth huskily.

"It seems to me that the guv'nor touched something, and he's set off an alarm," whispered Nipper tensely. "I say! This looks funny to me! Don't move, you chaps—stay where you are!"

"Look!" said Church, with a catch in his voice.

They all saw Nelson Lee's figure running. Like a hare it went across the lawn; it rose at the low wall on the other side, and it vanished. So quickly did Lee run, so silently did he leap over that wall and vanish, that the whole incident had a smack of unreality. It might have been a ghost, instead of a man, taking that leap.

And Nelson Lee had only acted in the nick of time.

For, three seconds later, two figures appeared from the house, and one of them was carrying an enormously powerful storm-lantern, which sent forth blinding rays of white light. The garden, in a moment, was transformed. The gloom vanished as though by magic.

"Duck, you chaps," whispered Nipper. "Don't move; they may hear us if we jump down. And it would mean a lot of awkward questions if we were collared."

They crouched low, their hearts thudding heavily.

THE two men advanced across the garden, one holding the lantern, and the other grasping a heavy stick.

They were talking together in low tones, and every now and again they paused. The lantern would be held high, and the men would peer round.

The four boys scarcely dared to breathe. They did not analyse their feelings, but they were certain that they suspected Crag House of containing some ugly secret—and a secret, moreover, connected with the missing Four Formers.

Otherwise, why had Nelson Lee come here? On the face of it, there was nothing tangible to justify those suspicions. The boys had neither seen nor heard anything which



could be regarded as sinister. Yet Nelson Lee's swift and successful effort to conceal himself was significant. Lee was suspicious, too!

"— seems to be nothing," came the low voice of one of the men. "What do you make of it?"

"A rabbit, I suppose, or perhaps a cat," said another voice. "It's happened before. Anyhow, there's nobody here."

Nipper breathed more freely. The men did not intend to make an intensive search. In fact, after another general look round, they moved back towards the house. They disappeared round an angle of the building, the reflection of light from the lantern showed for a moment, and then utter blackness shut down. There came to the ears of the boys the sound of a closing door.

"Well, that's that," murmured Nipper, easing himself.

"Phew! I thought they were going to spot us," said Handforth.

Nipper dropped lightly to the ground, and the others followed his example.

"What's the idea?" asked Handforth breathlessly. "We're on the wrong side."

"No, old man. We're on the right side."

"But we're not in the garden!"

"After what we've seen and heard, we'd better avoid the garden," said Nipper.

"There may be trip-wires all over the place. We don't want those men out again, do we? No, my sons—we'll keep on the safe side. In

any case, there's nothing to be gained by prowling about in there. Come on—don't forget our original game. We've got to keep the guv'nor under observation."

"By jingo! That's right!" said Church, nodding.

They felt secure out here. They were on the open downs—public land, more or less. And they knew that the cliffs were somewhere close, for they had passed Crag House often enough in the summer-time, during their hikes and rambles.

"I can't quite understand it," whispered Nipper, as they hurried along, keeping parallel with the high wall. "You know where the guv'nor jumped over?"

"Yes," said Handforth. "The wall was pretty low there."

"Well, as far as I can remember, there's no path or anything on the other side," went on Nipper. "There's nothing but the sheer cliff. I'm worried."

"My only sainted aunt!" ejaculated Handforth, startled. "I'd forgotten that, too! Come on! Something may have happened to Mr. Lee!"

They turned the angle of the wall. The grounds of Crag House were not extensive, and they sprawled unevenly. On every side—except the cliff side—they were cut off from the downs by the high wall. The boys hurried along and at length they approached the cliff edge. The wall went right to the edge, and here there was a sharp turn. For a



Jokes from readers wanted for this feature! If you know a good rib-tickler, send it along now. A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; pocket wallets and penknives are also offered as prizes. Address your jokes to "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

#### **A PARTY WITH A PUNCH.**

**Fond Mother:** "Did you enjoy yourself at the party, Bobby?"

**Bobby:** "Oh, I had a wonderful time!"

**Fond Mother:** "And did you dance with a lot of nice girls?"

**Bobby (scornfully):** "Gee, I didn't dance at all. I had three fights with Tommy Jones and I licked him every time."

(C. Storey, 49, Storks Road, Bermondsey, London, S.E.16, has been awarded a handsome watch.)

#### **NO SUCH LUCK.**

Although he was a particularly long-suffering parent, there were times when his nerves gave way under the constant stream of questions asked by his small son. One evening, as he was settling down to a quiet perusal of the evening paper, a small voice piped:

"Dad, am I made of dust?"

"I think not," was the weary reply; "otherwise you would dry up now and again."

(B. Ekins, 84, Phibsboro Road, Dublin, has been awarded a useful prize.)

#### **QUITE LIKELY.**

**Club bore:** "You know, I am very fond of birds. Yesterday one actually settled on my head."

**Fed-up listener:** "Really! It must have been a woodpecker."

(A. Gonniney, 1, Fairview Cottages, Stone Street, Lympne, has been awarded a penknife.)

#### **A PROBLEM.**

**Teacher:** "Has anyone a question to ask?"

**Smart boy:** "Yes, sir. Can a short-sighted man have a far-away look in his eyes?"

(R. Floquet, 132, Howard Avenue, Benoni, S. Africa, has been awarded a useful prize.)

#### **THE THRILLER.**

**Author:** "This is the plot of my story. A midnight scene. Two burglars creep stealthily towards the house. They climb a wall and force open the window; enter the room. The clock strikes one——"

**Listener (breathlessly):** "Which one?"  
(M. Abrahams, 42, Half Moon Lane, Herne Hill, London, S.E.24, has been awarded a penknife.)



yard or two, perhaps, it was possible to edge along a little precarious strip of turf, with the wall of Crag House at the rear and a sheer drop in front; but after that wall and turf met, and further progress was impossible.

The boys stood on the very edge, listening to the murmur of the sea from below.

"Guv'nor!" called Nipper, in a low, urgent voice.

The seconds passed. There was no answer.

"He's not here," said McClure, in a strange voice.

"Look!" whispered Nipper, pointing. "The wall is high at this corner, and it remains high for some yards. It only gets lower farther along—where there's no possibility of climbing over. My only hat! Don't you see? When the guv'nor took his jump, he went clean over that wall—and he must have gone right down!"

"No!" gasped Handforth in horror.

"He's not so familiar with the cliffs as we are," went on Nipper. "Perhaps he didn't know that the sheer cliff was just on the other side of that wall. And he leapt over and——"

He broke off, afraid to put his thoughts into words. Yet the thing was as clear as daylight. Nelson Lee had plunged down—for nothing on earth could have saved him from that fate. And, far below, they could hear the swish and murmur of the sea.

"I say!" exclaimed Handforth suddenly. "The tide's right in! If he did go over, he wouldn't fall on the beach or on the rocks. He would have plunged into the sea—and that might have saved him."

"Let's go down," said Nipper tensely. "No sense in staying up here. The guv'nor may be in a bad way—he may need help. Come on!"

They knew the cliffs like a book. Running back for a couple of hundred yards, they reached a spot where the drop was not sheer—where the cliff, although steep and treacherous, was at least negotiable.

They scrambled down, taking all sorts of desperate risks. And in their hearts lurked a sense of tragedy.

## CHAPTER 14.

### The Fight in the Cave!

NELSON LEE realised the need for action.

He was becoming numbed with the intense cold of the sea. He had been all right whilst he had been swimming, but now, clutching at the rocks in the cavern, and watching the men on the ledge, the lack of movement was having an effect.

The strange boat was securely moored, and the two men with the lanterns, and a third who had come from the boat, were standing

### RATTLED!

Professor: "Why don't you answer me?"

Student: "I did, professor. I shook my head."

Professor: "But you don't expect me to hear it rattle from here, do you?"

(J. Macoskie, "Macdean," Halifax Old Road, Huddersfield, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

### LOST.

He was a very famous gentleman, but he also had a very bad memory. One day he was travelling in a train when the ticket inspector came round and asked to see his ticket. The gentleman could not find it anywhere.

"Oh, don't worry, sir——" began the inspector.

"That is all very well," interrupted the other unhappily, "but I can't remember where I am going until I have found my ticket."

(D. Andrew, 76, St. Dunstan's Crescent, Worcester, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

### IMPROBABLE.

A wealthy old gentleman was having his first experience in a night flying passenger aeroplane, and was showing marked signs of nervousness. At length he turned to the steward, and asked:

"Is this door securely locked?"



"Certainly, sir," replied the steward. "Why are you afraid you might fall out?"

"No," said the gentleman, "I was thinking of the possibility of burglars breaking in."

(B. Aickin, 7, Ardoyne Street, Black Rock, Victoria, Australia, has been awarded a useful prize.)

### NOT CORRECT.

Teacher (during grammar lesson): "If I said, 'You was late for school,' would that be correct?"

Pupil: "No, sir."

Teacher: "Why not?"

Pupil: "Because I wasn't."

(A. Heath, 300, St. Benedict's Road, Small Heath, Birmingham, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

### THE PAINTER WON.

Small boy (watching a painter at work on a door): "How many coats of paint do you give that door?"

Painter: "Two, my boy."

Small boy (brightly): "Then I suppose if you gave it a third coat it would be an over-coat?"

Painter: "Yes; it would also be a waste-coat!"

(A. Crowe, 154, Regent Road, Handsworth, Birmingham, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)



in a group talking. Their voices were low, and, try as he would, Nelson Lee could not catch any of the words. This was partially due to the swishing and lapping of the water close at hand.

He came to a decision.

To reveal himself to these men would be fatal; they were obviously engaged in some unlawful practice. Smuggling, perhaps. Yet, somehow, Nelson Lee dismissed the theory of smuggling almost at once. There was something bigger here. If those schoolboys had been kidnapped by these men—and now it seemed highly probable that such was the case—there was some deep and sinister plot afoot. Smugglers would have no use for schoolboys.

Lee withdrew his numbed fingers from the rock, and he was alarmed to find that his limbs were deadened and almost without feeling. When he commenced swimming, he did so with difficulty; but a few strokes, he felt, would restore his circulation. Once out of the cave, he would swim strongly, reach the rocks, and climb up. He could come here again—to-morrow night, perhaps—and he would come better equipped. Nelson Lee, better than anybody else, knew the folly of precipitate action. He had discovered much this night—and he would be satisfied.

But it so happened that the men on the ledge made a move at that moment.

They all started walking back towards the rear of the cave, and presently they vanished into a low tunnel entrance. The light disappeared with them, and after a final flicker or two, and a glimpse of reflected glow, darkness shut down completely.

"Hallo, hallo!" murmured Lee, changing his direction.

Even those few strokes had strengthened him. Some of the numbness had gone out of his limbs. He swam back into the cave, and he resolved to have a closer look at the mystery boat.

It had occurred to him that he might not get another chance. For all he knew, this boat was an infrequent visitor—perhaps it would not come again for weeks. Indeed, it was any odds that he would never have another opportunity such as this. And he was intensely curious about that queer craft.

Nearer and nearer he swam, and at last he felt the huli of the boat close at hand. He paddled his way along, fingering the metal plates. Another two strokes took him between the moored boat and the ledge. He felt the rocks, and he dragged himself up. It was a relief to be out of the water for a while. On his hands and knees he waited for a moment; then he rose to his feet and moved forward. He stumbled against a little projecting rock and nearly fell.

"What's that?" asked a sharp voice.

Lee stood stock-still. His heart beat more rapidly. He had believed that all the men had gone, but it now seemed that one had been left behind, and this man was on the boat, in absolute darkness.

Something clicked, and a beam of light shot out like a beacon. It wavered for a moment, swept along the ledge, and then steadied. Nelson Lee was revealed clearly.

"Gosh!" came a muttered ejaculation.

Nelson Lee's brain acted like lightning. This was a moment for strategy. If he plunged back into the sea and attempted to escape, he would be at a hopeless disadvantage. One shot, accurately aimed, would finish him off. He could not take a chance like that. Besides, it would tell these men that he was after them.

"Help—help!" he mumbled feebly, sinking to his knees.

There came a clatter from the boat. A heavily-built man leapt across to the rock. At the same moment he lifted his voice.

"Hi! Come back, you fellers!" he bellowed. "Hi!"

He reached Nelson Lee, and the detective made a feeble clutch at him.

"Save me—save me!" he mumbled.

"I'll save you!" grated the man, his voice harsh with suspicion.

Crash!

He was taking no chances. His horny fist thudded violently against the side of Nelson Lee's head. Lee sagged, his senses reeling. If he had desired to put up any fight, the chance had now gone. He was half-stunned.

Then voices sounded, the light re-appeared, and the other three men emerged from the low tunnel.

"WHAT'S wrong, Jed?" asked the man who was in the lead—a broad, square-shouldered individual wearing a peaked cap tilted to one side.

"Come an' look 'ere, capt'n," shouted Jed excitedly. "Just found this feller swimmin' about in the cave."

"What!"

It was a shout of alarm, and the three came stumbling along the ledge. The other two men were Shorty and Jim, and they were looking thoroughly frightened.

"What is he—a 'busy'?" gasped Shorty.

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Jim. "The police aren't on to us—there are no detectives round here."

"Keep your traps shut, you fools," growled the captain. "This feller can hear all you say! Here, wake up! What are you doing here?"

Nelson Lee, partially recovered from the effects of the blow, was careful to keep his head sunken, so that his face was not too clearly revealed. The men only saw a wet, bedraggled figure, and when Lee spoke, his voice was quavering and feeble.

"I—I fell over the cliff!" he muttered truthfully.

"You did what?"

"I'm a stranger in Caistowe—commercial traveller," muttered Lee, feeling that the situation justified a certain amount of prevarication. "Came over dizzy—went for a walk—fell over the cliff. I couldn't get





As Nelson Lee and the boys drifted through the cave, they passed a curiously-designed motor-boat. It was another of the many mysteries in this concealed cavern.

ashore again, and I swam and swam—  
Where am I?"

The captain muttered viciously.

"Just our luck that this bird should accidentally swim into this blamed cave," he said harshly. "We can't take no chances, you men. We can't let him go."

"What can we do with him, then?" asked Shorty fearfully.

"I'll tell you what," retorted the captain. "I've got a special way for blokes like this! It's no good bein' squeamish. We've got to finish him off."

Lee waited. To commence a fight now would be fatal. The odds were too heavily against him—and, moreover, he was feeling weak.

The captain had gone lumbering off, and presently he shouted to the others. They seized Nelson Lee and half-carried, half-dragged him along the ledge. The captain was standing on a queer-looking raft—floated some feet out from the rocks. It was evidently moored there, for it remained in the same position, and Lee could see that it was streaked with seaweed.

"Push that swab across to me," said the captain.

"Look here, Slaney, you can't do this," said Shorty. "We'd best take this cove up the tunnel. Crowson will want to see him —"

"You shut your trap," interrupted Captain Slaney harshly. "I'm dealing with the swab. He's seen too much! Chuck him over!"

"What—what are you going to do to me?" wailed Nelson Lee, acting his part well. "Let me go—let me go! What are you men doing? Why——"

Crash!

Jed's horny fist rammed against Lee's head like a sledgehammer.

"That's enough of that!" said Jed sourly.

Lee was again half-stunned. That blow had been unexpected. He was pushed across to the floating raft, and Captain Slaney quickly fastened some ropes about his feet. The ropes were attached to the floor of the raft, and now Nelson Lee was secured to the raft. The captain quickly passed another rope round Lee's wrists, at the rear.

"I'll show you!" he muttered evilly.



Lee, only half-conscious, could see that Captain Slaney had been drinking heavily. Otherwise, brute though he was, he might not have resorted to the diabolical trick he had in mind.

Overhead, in the rocky roof of the cavern, was a rusty iron ring, and from this dangled a rope. No doubt it was an old relic of the ancient smugglers. For in days gone by, many of the caves along this part of the coast had been used by the smugglers.

"Up, darn you!" grated Slaney, jerking Nelson Lee to his feet. "An' ye'd best keep standin', too!"

He dropped a noose of rope over Nelson Lee's head, and pulled it tight round the detective's neck. Not until that second did Lee realise the appalling peril of his position. And now it was too late!

"You're only foolin', ain't you, capt'n?" muttered Jed, in a hoarse whisper.

"Fooling, am I?" snarled Captain Slaney. "This ugly skunk has butted in on our business—and we can't let him escape. See? None of us don't want to do him in, do we? That would be what they calls a felony. Eh?" He chuckled evilly. "So we'll let the tide do it. Nobody can blame us for what the tide does. Eh?"

"You can't do it!" ejaculated Jim, horrified.

Yet he realised, in the same moment, that there was a good deal in what Captain Slaney said. This man who had drifted into the cave could not live—unless he was to take strange stories away with him—stories which would lead to investigations by the coast-guards.

So why not let the tide do its grim work?

Nelson Lee himself, whilst pretending to be only semi-conscious, was acutely aware of his predicament. He was standing upright upon that floating raft, and his feet were secured to the raft. His hands were bound behind him, and the noose round his neck was attached, at the other end, to the roof of the cavern.

And the tide was falling!

That noose was slack at the moment, but as soon as the tide fell it would become taut; one surge of the sea, more forcible than any of the others, would jerk that rope, and—

Nelson Lee would be hanged—his neck would be broken—as surely and as swiftly as any condemned man on the scaffold.

## CHAPTER 15.

### Nipper to the Rescue!

IF Lee had had any doubts regarding the mysterious occupants of Crag House, those doubts were now set at rest. He was up against desperate men! Men who were prepared to go to the length of murder in order to preserve their ugly secrets.

"Come on!" growled the captain gruffly. "No need for us to stay here—and watch! You'd best come, too, Jed."

"I'm coming!" said Jed huskily. "I couldn't stay here alone an' see that pore feller——"

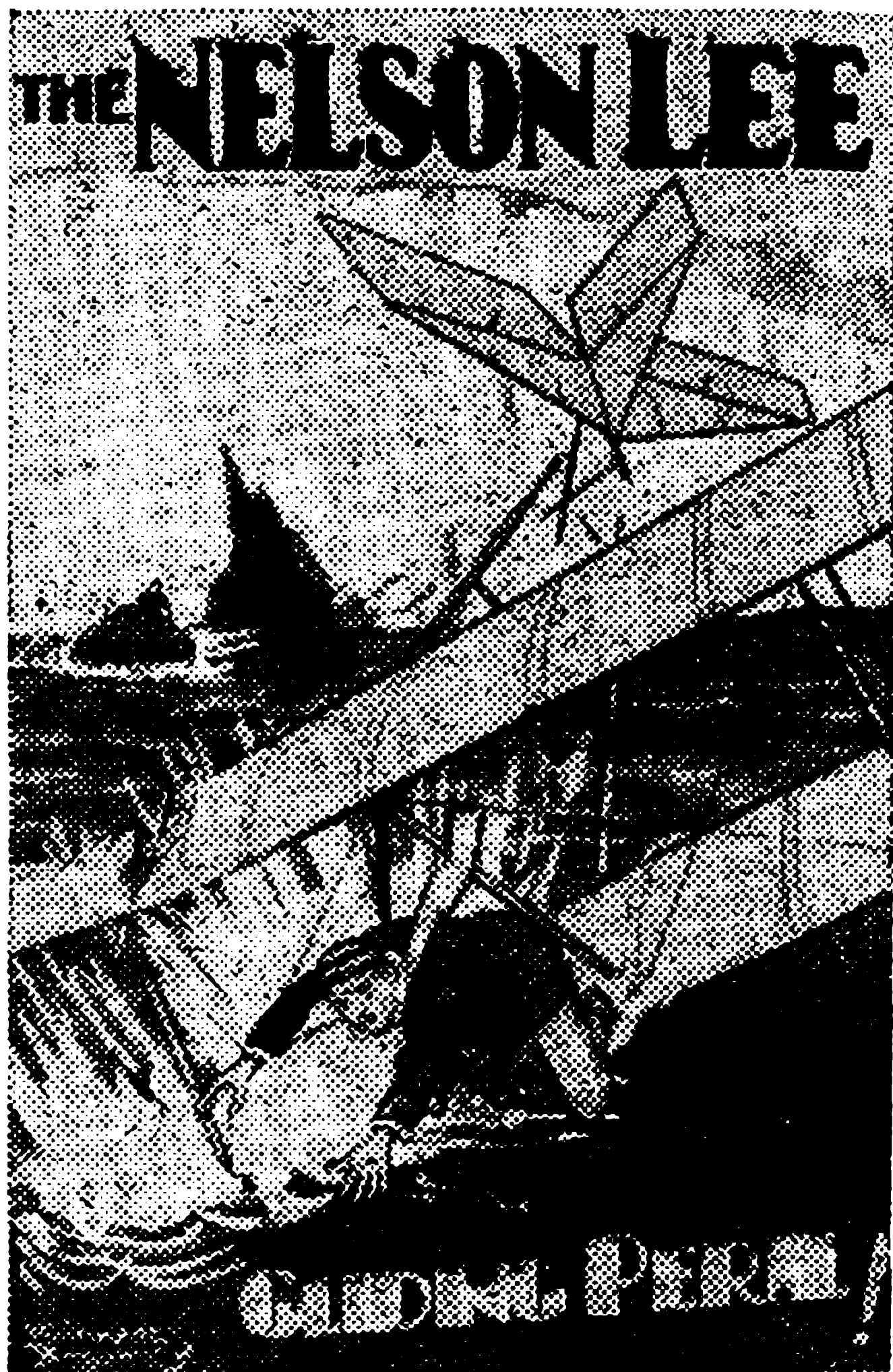
He broke off, shuddering.

They all went along to the tunnel entrance and passed inside. Slaney was inclined to be hilarious. He did not seem fully to comprehend the consequences of his dreadful deed. The others were scared.

Thus they went along this tunnel, which rose steeply in places. After a while, having turned many twists and bends, they came into the old disused quarry working.

It was Jim who pressed the secret button and opened the rock door which led into the

## COMING NEXT WEDNESDAY!



hand-controlled lift. They all went up; they reached the warm cellars of Crag House, and the quiet, dignified figure of Crowson, the butler, was awaiting them.

"You have been a long time," said Crowson, eyeing the men carefully. "Drinking again, eh, Slaney? How many times have I told you——"

"Drinking, nothing!" interrupted Captain Slaney boisterously. "Never touched a drop until I set foot ashore. Don't you worry about me, chief! I never touch no drink while I'm aboard. But, blame me, after I'm ashore——"

"That'll do!" said Crowson curtly.

Slaney opened his mouth to speak, stared, and then he closed his mouth again. There was something about this dignified butler which completely silenced him.



"There's—there's a man down in the cave, Mr. Crowson," said Shorty eagerly.

"What? A man?" repeated Crowson. "What do you mean?"

"A commercial traveller—said he fell over the cliff," explained Shorty. "Swam into our cave by accident. The capt'n tied him to that old raft and shoved a noose round his neck."

"Oh!" said Crowson, and his voice cut like a knife. "Tell me about this."

They told him.

"You infernal fool!" said Crowson, striding up to Captain Slaney and catching hold of

## "THE MYSTERY OF THE SMUGGLERS' CAVE!"

By E. S. BROOKS.

His glider out of control, Stanley Waldo crashed into the sea—then disappeared completely!

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## ~~~~~ORDER IN ADVANCE!~~~~~

one of his coat lapels. "What's this you're trying to pull? Murder?"

"Swab me! If the tide happens to go down——"

"The tide!" snapped Crowson. "Don't fool yourself, Slaney! If that man dies, his blood will be on your head! You fool! This is the last time I shall warn you. Understand that, Slaney!"

The captain was bigger than Crowson but he shrank back, cowed by the other man's tone.

"I didn't mean no harm, guv'nor," he muttered. "Sorry! Mebbe it was a mistake."

"Go back at once—all of you," said Crowson, pointing. "Release that man and bring him here. Don't you understand that he will serve us as another—recruit?"

They went, only too glad to get out of Crowson's presence.

And at that very moment, down in the cavern, intense activity was afoot.

For Nipper and Handforth and Church and McClure were on the job! Having scrambled down the steep cliff, they had found themselves close against the cave entrance. It was Nipper who led the way, and he slithered from rock to rock, intending to get right down to the water. He was frantic with anxiety. Nelson Lee had fallen somewhere here—and it seemed any odds that Lee had gone to his death. For, although there was plenty of water, there were many jagged, cruel rocks, too.

And then, slithering round a wet rock, Nipper had seen right into the depths of the cave—and he had seen a light.

"Hush!" he breathed, half-turning. "Great Scott! There's something rummy going on here! Quiet, you fellows!"

They all edged round the rocks, and they saw that by keeping to this uneven ledge, and taking a chance now and again, they could get right into the cave without plunging into the water.

And they beheld an extraordinary spectacle. Some men, vague and indistinct—like grotesque black shadows against the light of the lantern—were fixing another man to a floating raft. There was a noose round that man's neck, connected with the rock roof!

"The guv'nor!" breathed Nipper, with mingled relief and horror.

Handforth and the others said nothing; they could only stare. Even Handforth, who was always ready for something melodramatic, was knocked off his balance, so to speak.

Nipper saw, at a glance, the dire peril of his beloved guv'nor. Secured to a raft, with a noose round his neck, with his wrists bound—and a falling tide! And in that same moment Nipper knew that he and his chums were no match for these strong men. Nelson Lee had escaped death from the rocks, but he had fallen into the hands of this mysterious enemy—and they were preparing to murder him.

"Come on—no need for us to stay here and watch," came a queer, echoing voice out of the cave, booming grotesquely. "You'd best come, too, Jed."

"I'm coming!" said another voice. "I couldn't stay here alone an' see that pore feller——"

He broke off, and those words told Nipper a great deal. The lad's heart gave a jump as he saw the men entering a side tunnel at the end of the cave. The light went, and everything became black; there was no sound except for the lapping and swirling of the water.

A song of joy in Nipper's heart.

The men had gone—they had decided not to watch the dreadful end of their victim. Nipper knew, too, that Lee was now quite alone. And the men had referred to him as "that pore feller." This indicated, surely,



that they were unaware of Nelson Lee's real identity. It was an important point.

"Come on!" said Nipper urgently. "Now's our chance!"

## CHAPTER 16.

### Nelson Lee's Strategy!

**N**IPPER'S knife was sharp; the electric torches held by Handforth and Church were effective; and all the boys were filled with eager excitement.

"It's all right, guv'nor—we'll have you free in a jiffy," said Nipper confidently.

He slashed through the ropes which bound Lee's wrists, and then he attended to the ropes at Lee's feet. Meanwhile, the detective himself had loosened the noose about his neck—and only just in the nick of time. For the tide was falling rapidly, and more than once that rope, connecting with the cavern roof, had almost pulled taut.

"So you disobeyed orders, boys?" asked Nelson Lee rather unsteadily, when they all stood on the ledge of the cave.

"Yes, sir," said Nipper, looking straight at him. "We followed you—we saw you jump over that wall—and we climbed down the cliff."

"Well done, lads—splendid work!" said Nelson Lee, his voice a little husky. "In the circumstances, I can hardly punish you for disobeying orders. You have saved my life. Another five minutes——"

"The devils!" burst out Nipper furiously. "The murderous brutes!"

"Only one of them, Nipper—and he was the worse for drink," said Lee. "But we must make haste; those men may return at any moment, and we must not be found here."

"Did they recognise you, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"No; I fooled them," replied Lee. "They don't know who I am."

"I say, let's go along this tunnel," suggested Handforth. "Perhaps we can capture the whole gang——"

"No," broke in Lee, much to Handforth's disgust. "We're going, my boy—and we're going as quickly as we can move. By James! I'm stiff—I feel all numbed. These scoundrels know nothing of your activities, boys," went on the detective, forcing himself to think. "We must use strategy here."

"How do you mean, sir?" asked Church breathlessly.

"There is unlawful work going on here, boys—not only here, but in Crag House, too."

"By George, yes!" muttered Handforth. "Smugglers!"

"I fancy they are something more than smugglers, Handforth."

"Coiners!" said Handforth tensely.

"Not even coiners," replied Lee with a half-smile. "No, there is a deeper game afoot. I cannot be certain, but everything seems to indicate that the six missing boys were brought to Crag House. So we must

go warily. We have no shred of real evidence—and if we were to show our hand now we should only spoil everything."

"You're right, guv'nor," said Nipper. "That's why we'd better clear out quickly. But what about those men? When they come back and find that you have escaped, they'll get the wind up."

"Not if we use a little strategy," said Lee thoughtfully.

He leapt upon the raft, and, reaching up, he grasped the noose. With all his strength he jerked; but the rope remained firm. With Nipper's knife, Lee cunningly frayed the rope just above the noose, and then he jerked again. It snapped, leaving a torn and jagged end.

Going on his hands and knees, Lee felt round the raft, and he soon located the mooring ropes. He treated these in the same way, fraying them first and then breaking them with a jerk. Thus every rope had the appearance of having broken. There was nothing to show that they had been cut.

"Come on!" said Lee briskly. "All aboard!"

"But—but what——"

"No time to talk, young 'uns! Jump!" said Lee. "The tide is just how we need it."

There was plenty of room for them all on the raft, and it went drifting past the moored mystery craft. Lee flashed a light upon it as they went by. He could see that it was a curiously designed motor-boat, very low in the water, with the deck almost completely covered. There was only a tiny cockpit, and this, too, could be enclosed.

"I'd like to go aboard this craft, but there's no time," muttered the detective. "Perhaps I shall have another opportunity."

The raft was now drifting rapidly out of the cave entrance, carried by a strong current. Soon it bumped against some of the outlying rocks. Lee leapt ashore, and he told the others to do the same. From this point they could easily scramble up the cliff and reach the downs. The raft drifted out on the tide, and it was soon lost to sight.

"I think we can be quite certain that the raft will be carried far out to sea," said Nelson Lee. "That is what we want. Come on, boys! The faster we can move now the better."

As they were climbing up the cliffs, Captain Slaney and the other three men arrived in the cavern.

"Look! The raft's gone!" shouted Shorty excitedly.

Captain Slaney ran blunderingly along the ledge, and he stared like a man in a daze at the jagged, broken end of the rope which dangled from the cavern roof.

"What's happened?" asked Jim, in alarm. "If that feller has escaped——"

"He's gone, if that's what you mean," muttered the captain, sobered. "But he's as dead as mutton by now."

"We can't be sure of that, cap'n," said Jed, shivering.



"Can't be sure?" growled Slaney. "Look at that rope! Can't you see what's happened? There must have been an extra big wave, and it not only tore the raft from its moorings, but the blamed thing gave such a lurch that it snapped the overhead rope."

"And—and that pore feller's neck——" began Shorty, and then stopped. "Well, it must have been quick," he added, after a pause. "I don't suppose he felt nothin'."

They fished for the mooring ropes which had held the raft, and they found, upon examination, that the ends were broken. It became clearer and clearer. Captain Slaney's theory was obviously correct! A big wave had come, and the raft had broken free. Without any shadow of doubt the prisoner, with his neck broken, was now floating out into the Channel.

And yet the prisoner, with his neck quite whole, was at that moment vigorously climbing up the cliffs!

## CHAPTER 17.

### A Baffling Mystery!

"**F**EELING better, guv'nor?" asked Nipper anxiously.

They were at the top, and that climb had been an arduous one. But Nelson Lee, at all events, was glad of it. At first he had been scarcely able to move his limbs. Gradually his circulation had been restored, and his muscles had recovered some of their old suppleness. He was not shivering so much; his head had ceased to throb so agonisingly.

"Yes, I'm better, young 'un," said the detective. "Come along! No pausing! We shall have to run for it!"

They were within sight of Crag House. It rose against the skyline mysteriously, and it seemed to look more sinister than ever now. But this was no time for further investigations.

The boys ran. They proceeded at a steady trot, and thus, without meeting a soul—without even seeing P.-c. Sparrow, the local constable—they passed through Bellton, went up the lane, and arrived at St. Frank's.

The night's adventures were over.

The school was quiet. Even the lights in the East House were out. Mr. Goole, no doubt, had grown tired of waiting, and he had gone to bed.

"It is just as well," murmured Nelson Lee. "Poor Goole! He will be in a terrible way to-morrow. And I am afraid I shall not be able to help him."

They went straight to the Head's house. Lee felt that the boys deserved some special refreshment after their adventures. Presently they were piling into some appetising sandwiches. Lee himself had gone straight upstairs, and he had plunged into a hot bath.

It worked wonders. Although feeling far from normal, he was very much better, and when he came down to his study, wrapped in a heavy woollen dressing-gown, Nipper

was delighted to see the change for the better. Lee sampled the sandwiches eagerly.

"Well, boys, I think you can go to bed now," he said dryly. "You'll have to excuse me speaking with my mouth full, but I'm famished. Rather an hectic adventure, eh?"

"It's marvellous, guv'nor—the way you escaped, I mean," said Nipper breathlessly. "What do you make of it all? That qucer boat—those men in the cave—the tunnel. Do you think that tunnel leads up to Crag House?"

"I haven't a doubt of it," replied Lee, frowning. "I also believe that the missing boys are imprisoned there. Heaven alone knows why they were taken. But I mean to find out—I am going into this mystery with a fixed determination to succeed."

"But—but, sir," said Handforth, his eyes full of excitement, "couldn't we tell the police? And couldn't you have a raid on Crag House?"

"If I thought for a moment that a raid would be successful, I would organise one without an hour's delay," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "But I have seen enough to convince me that there is a big organisation at work here. If we were to raid that cave and search the tunnel, I very much doubt if we should find a connection to Crag House. If we raided Crag House, we should find nothing but a perfectly normal home, in charge of a highly respectable butler."

"No, boys, it would be sheer folly to act so precipitately," went on Lee decisively. "We shan't rescue those unfortunate boys by such methods. We must go carefully—we must get our evidence. Meanwhile, the boys must remain in the hands of these crooks. I fancy they have come to no harm; but you can be quite sure that I shall use every effort to get in touch with them at the earliest possible moment. And now, enough! You must go to bed."

"We can't sleep, guv'nor," protested Nipper.

"You'll have to sleep," commanded Lee. "And, above all, keep this matter entirely to yourselves. I am relying upon you, boys—I am trusting you. This is our secret, and we must keep it. Say nothing to any of the other boys—do not even give them the slightest hint. You promise?"

"Yes, rather, sir," they chorused. "Word of honour."

And thus they went to bed. They slept, too. Their minds were active enough, but after tossing about for some little time, slumber came to them.

In spite of their short night, they were up with the rising-bell. And they found the school seething with mild excitement.

Nobody knew much, but it was at least general knowledge that six boys belonging to the Fourth Form had failed to turn up the previous night. Not a trace of them had been seen. They had vanished from the Caistowe train, and, like ghosts, they had apparently evaporated into thin air.



Mr. Goole was at his wits' end. He was certain by now that some dreadful fate had befallen the six missing boys. He telegraphed to their parents, he telephoned to Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington police. Inquiries were set afoot in every direction.

Telegrams came from anxious parents, declaring that their boys had not returned home. Parents themselves were hurrying towards the school. The Bannington police, the Caistowe police—in fact, the police of the entire county—were active.

But all the inquiries came to nothing.

Handforth was a hero. He not only kept quiet about the previous night's adventures, but he went about with just the right amount of eager interest in the mystery. And Nipper, who had been rather anxious on account of Edward Oswald, was reassured.

Nelson Lee performed his duties as headmaster with his usual perfection. He attended morning prayers, and nobody in the school knew that his head was swimming, that his temperature was dangerously high. The great detective was, in fact, feverish and ill—from the effects of exposure.

But his iron will conquered. He swore to himself that he would not go under, and before the day was half over the fever had decreased, and he was becoming normal. He was the quiet, dignified schoolmaster, yet inwardly he was burning with an altogether different kind of fever, the fever to get out on the trail, and to get to the bottom of this amazing mystery.

## CHAPTER 18.

### The Human Machines!

“**L**OOK at this,” said Nipper, in a curious voice.

It was tea-time, and he had just come into Study D. Handforth & Co. were sitting down to tea, and their conversation, of course, was confined to the matter which was agitating the entire school.

The day had passed without any further news of the missing boys; parents had been coming, to say nothing of other relatives. Police officers were everywhere.

“What is it—something fresh?” asked Handforth eagerly, as he saw that Nipper held a newspaper in his hand.

“This is the London evening paper,” said Nipper. “Look here—a small paragraph. It's only a brief report, and it says that a quaint old raft has been found in mid-Channel to-day, containing the dead body of an unknown man. A search of his pockets has not revealed his identity. His neck had been broken by some strange means, and he is unrecognisable owing to the action of the storm which cropped up in the Channel to-day. It is believed that the raft drifted out from some point on the French coast.”

“Great guns!” ejaculated Handforth, staring.

“What—what does it mean?” asked McClure.

“Mum's the word,” said Nipper, in a low voice. “Can't you twig, you fatheads? This is a wheeze of the guv'nor's.”

“What!”

“Plain as the nose on your face,” went on Nipper, grinning. “Mr. Lee has had this paragraph put in all the London newspapers. Can't you see the idea? He wants the enemy to read it, so that they'll think that the man they captured is really dead—and not only dead, but unrecognisable. It will relieve them of all anxiety.”

“Oh!” said Handforth coldly. “Well, I don't think much of it. Why should Mr. Lee want to relieve those rotters of anxiety?”

“You hopeless chump!” growled Nipper. “The guv'nor doesn't mean it in that way. If they think that ‘the unknown man’ is dead, they won't worry. And that will leave the coast clear for Mr. Lee—and for us, too—to make investigations.”

“By George!” said Handforth, his eyes gleaming. “I understand now! What a brilliant wheeze! I say, when are we going to get busy again?”

“I don't know—yet,” replied Nipper. “Anyhow, Handy, I'm relying on you not to do anything foolish. We mustn't move an inch without Mr. Lee knowing. We might blunder into something and ruin all his plans. He means to get on the track of these missing chaps. The police are here, and I've heard that Scotland Yard is being informed. We know something, but, as I said before, mum's the word.”

“Rather!” agreed Handforth & Co. in one voice.

During the evening there were two startling pieces of news for St. Frank's.

In addition to the disappearance of the Fourth-Formers, and before that, Joe Spence, it now came out that six other stalwart young fellows in the district had unaccountably vanished during the past week or so; two from Caistowe, one from Bannington, and three from outlying districts. They had all gone without leaving a trace!

Nelson Lee and the four Removites, hearing of this, could only put two and two together. Surely this could be no mere coincidence? There was a direct connection between all these dramatic disappearances.

Everybody else thought so, too, and something like a panic began to spread through the district.

The second exciting piece of news came later, when no less a person than Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, appeared at St. Frank's.

“Why, Mr Lennard!” ejaculated Nipper, when he happened to meet the burly Yard man outside the Ancient House. “What a surprise! It's great to see you here!”

“Hallo, young 'un!” said the chief inspector gruffly.

“Going along to see the guv'nor?”

“That's why I'm here,” replied Lennard.

“But it's not a friendly visit—it's purely official. I'm in charge of this disappearance case.”



"You mean that you're going to stay in the district?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Right here!" replied the Scotland Yard man. "It's an infernally funny business, Nipper. And the deuce of it is, we can't find a ghost of a trace. There's not a clue. I'm not altogether sure that I like the job."

He was worried, and he walked on without waiting for Nipper to make any further comment.

Nelson Lee was glad to see his old Scotland Yard friend, but he was extremely cautious. The time was not yet ripe for him to take Lennard into his confidence fully.

"Well, old man, we hardly expected to meet again so soon," said the great detective as they shook hands. "We had a bit of excitement together during the Christmas holidays, and now it seems that we are in the thick of something fresh."

"What do you make of it, Lee?" asked Lennard bluntly. "Six of your boys—gone! I've heard most of the details, and I shall find it necessary to question some of those Remove youngsters soon. These six boys simply vanished, and as far as we can make out, they left the local train when it happened to stop between Bellton and Caistowe."

"I am glad you are here, Lennard," said Nelson Lee slowly. "Your very presence will help to relieve the anxiety of the boys' parents. It's an ugly business. We're quite certain that the boys did not go off of their own accord. Something dramatic has happened to them, and you can rest assured that I shall do everything within my own power to get to the bottom of the mystery."

"That's what I've been waiting to hear," said the chief inspector heartily. "Forget that you're a schoolmaster, Lee. I need your help in this business."

"And you'll have it," promised Nelson Lee emphatically.

**F**AR, far below Crag House, working in the ill-lit quarry tunnel, a gang of drably-attired machines laboured. For they were machines—human machines. It was difficult to appreciate that they had once been quick-witted, laughing youngsters. They had been deprived of their memories—deprived of their power to think. Their strength was unimpaired, however, and they obeyed orders with the mechanical efficiency of machines.

They had no desire to talk to one another; indeed, they had nothing to talk about, since connected thought was denied them. They were told to shovel, and they shovelled. They shovelled continuously, in that same mechanical way. And they would have gone on shovelling until they dropped from exhaustion.

The gang in the tunnel was hard at work mixing concrete and conveying it to the hand-controlled lift. Here it was dumped into big metal containers and taken away. The "human machines" worked under the orders of one man, and this man held a whip. If there was any sign of flagging, he

merely cracked his whip and shouted curt commands, and the work proceeded.

Crag House itself stood quiet and sedate, except for the blustering wind which roared round it from the Channel. Far below the waves were crashing noisily upon the rocks.

And in that black cave, cunningly concealed by great masses of seaweed, lay the mystery boat. The weather was too rough for it to venture forth.

In the comfortable, cosy sitting-room, Crowson, the butler, sat at his ease, reading the evening paper. On his dignified, placid face there was a quiet expression of satisfaction.

The door opened and Jim came in. Jim was quietly dressed as a footman.

"Everything's all right, Mr. Crowson," he said, as he shut the door.

"Have you seen the news?" asked Crowson, indicating the paper.

Jim did not like to meet the other's eyes.

"There's a rare sensation, isn't there?" he asked. "Perhaps Shorty and me were wrong in getting hold of those boys——"

"I told you at the time that you were wrong, but it's too late to talk of that now," said Crowson. "In future, we must confine our attentions to youngsters of less importance. These Public school boys have wealthy parents—influential parents."

Jim saw the glaring headlines of the evening paper—headlines which sensationally told of how a number of boys had mysteriously vanished from St. Frank's and the neighbouring district. It had been made the chief item of news by all the London papers.

"There's something else here—something far more interesting," said Crowson, handing over the paper.

Jim read that paragraph about a raft being found in mid-Channel.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated, staring.

"We are safe, but no thanks to that fool, Slaney," said the butler. "By that one act of incredible folly, he might have ruined our whole elaborate scheme. But I don't think we need to worry now. The man is dead, and there is very little chance that he will be identified. We're safe."

"Well, that's a comfort," said Jim, taking a deep breath. "I've been worrying all day, Mr. Crowson. I say, look here! Scotland Yard men are down here on the job."

Crowson smiled.

"Let them all come," he said contemptuously. "We're not afraid of Scotland Yard. They can search this house from top to bottom, and they'll find nothing."

Little did these men dream that the world's greatest detective was not only on the job—but hot on the trail!

THE END.

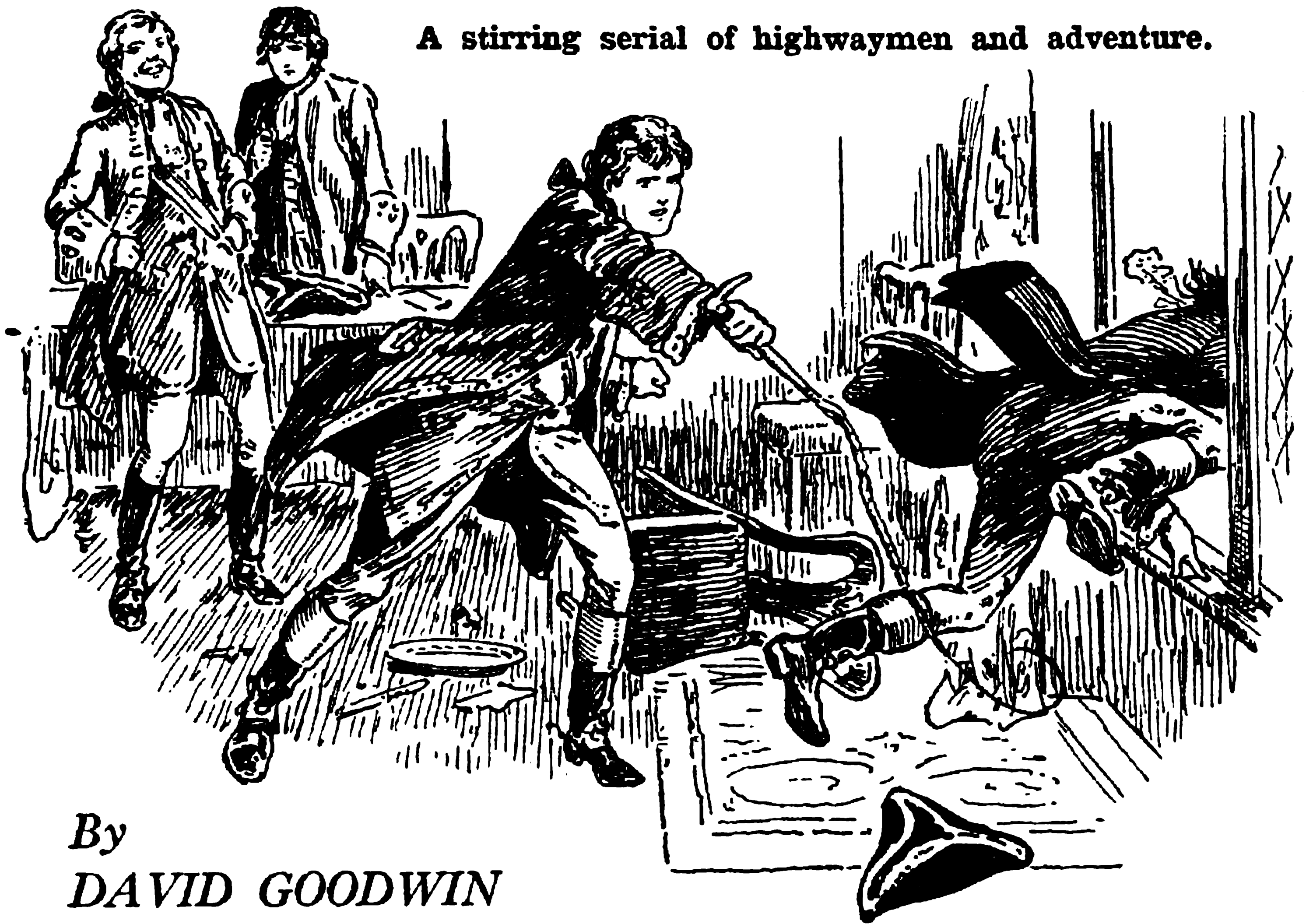
*(How Nelson Lee and Nipper & Co. set out to solve the secret of Crag House is told in next week's exciting long, complete yarn, entitled: "The Mystery of the Smugglers' Cave!" Full of thrills and surprises—and you will meet an old favourite character in Jim the Penman.)*



Dick proves to Captain Spott that he holds the whip hand!

# Outlawed!

A stirring serial of highwaymen and adventure.



By  
**DAVID GOODWIN**

## The Attack by Night!

**A**FTER his narrow escape from the King's Riders, Dick rode towards St. Austell's School, and, it being then the two free hours of midday, he saw the boys at football in the playing-field, and drew back among the trees at the far end to watch. It was not such football as is played nowadays, but very good sport nevertheless.

The outlaw saw that his young brother Ralph was in fine form, making rings round his opponents, and felt the more pleased with himself. Dick did not ride on till the practice ended.

"'Od's fish," he mused, "'tis a long wait till to-night, to meet Ralph; but pink me it I can go back and dine at Basing with yonder riffraff of Captain Spott's there. I'll put up at the inn and ride back to see Ralph after dark, as agreed. Yonder comes a fat alderman from Hutton on his bay nag. I'll wager he has a heavy purse in his breeches. Ah, well, I must let him pass! 'Twill make things awkward for Ralph if I indulge in any professional business about here."

He remained at Fensford till the shades of night drew in, and then rode back to the

plantation just outside St. Austell's, where he halted and whistled softly for Ralph, who appeared immediately.

"Hallo, Dick!" greeted the boy. "How goes it at Basing?"

"Ill enough," returned his brother, and told him how he had found the old house.

"Things are not too happy here, either," remarked Ralph. "A new fellow came to-day, and I don't like the look of him much. A sleek, oily-looking customer, and rather like Hector in appearance. The Housemaster chummed him on to me."

"H'm!" said Dick, frowning, "I don't like that. Keep an eye on him, Ralph."

"I think I could make hay of him if I came to that," grinned Ralph.

"It's treachery you have to fear," warned the outlaw. "I'll see Trelawney and find out who it is. Hallo, who comes here?"

His hand dropped on the butt of his pistol as he heard the sound of an approaching horseman; but he soon recognised the rider as a friend.

"Turpin! What brings you here, comrade?"

"A vast number of things," said Turpin, reining up beside him. "What news, Dick? Hallo, Ralph! How goes it with you? Your



brother will have to leave you and ride back with me. There's work towards, Dick, such as we both love, so turn your horse to Basing, and I'll tell you all about it as we go."

"You two have all the fun," said Ralph enviously. "I say, Turpin, couldn't I ride the highways with you and Dick? I can handle a barker with the best of you!"

And he drew one of Dick's large double pistols from the holster as he spoke.

Before Turpin could make any reply, Ralph was knocked off his feet by one of three dark figures that suddenly rushed out from the wood, and as he rolled over among the brambles he heard a harsh voice cry:

"Stand! Move a finger, and you are a dead man!"

### The Tables Turned!

DICK, who had been off his guard, saw how completely they were trapped. Two pistol-muzzles stared him in the face, held by a couple of the rascals whom he recognised as friends of Captain Spott's.

A third—the man Barnard, who had been so anxious to put an end to "Mr. Smith" when they found him asleep at Basing Hall—had no pistol, but held his sword-point at Turpin's breast.

For a moment neither of the two comrades spoke or stirred. They saw that their lives depended on a touch of the finger or a turn of the wrist, and that to draw a weapon would mean their instant death.

"Disarm Forrester!" cried Barnard, who was plainly the leader of the three. "One of you pluck the pistols from his holster and pull him from his horse. As for you"—facing Turpin—"you have but to stir an eyelid, and my steel goes through you!"

Ralph, lying where he had fallen, unnoticed by the enemy, was amazed at the sudden onslaught, but he still kept his wits about him. He remembered that he had Dick's pistol in his hand.

As one of the rascals stepped to Dick's saddle and felt in the holster, Ralph rose noiselessly. He was directly behind the man who was covering Dick, and, with a quick dart, he knocked the fellow's pistol up into the air.

It exploded, sending its bullet skywards. At the same moment Ralph clapped his weapon to the neck of the man who was

searching Dick's holster and dared him to move.

The unexpected attack had drawn Barnard's eyes from Turpin for one single instant, but that instant was enough for the watchful highwayman. He snatched at the sword, twisting it aside, and clapped his own pistol to Barnard's head.

"I think," said Turpin blandly, "you have entered on a contract that is too much for you, gentlemen."

Barnard muttered furiously, but Turpin's black pistol-muzzle warned him not to move. The others had already surrendered hopelessly.

"And so," went on Turpin, "you thought to steal a march on your comrades, Master Barnard, and ensure the reward for yourself? There is mighty little honour among thieves of your kidney; yet I grant you have a little more pluck than your precious Captain Spott. Dick, it is curious that this should happen just as I was about to explain to you. We will now go and deal with the worthy Spott himself, who will afford us more sport, methinks. Ralph, boy, our thanks are due to you. Can you oblige further by finding a few yards of rope?"

"There is some in the football shed near by," said Ralph. "Hold him there, Turpin, while I fetch it!"

"Turpin?" exclaimed the three rascals; and at the name of the notorious highwayman their faces blanched.

"Otherwise Mr. Smith, at your service!" said Turpin with a grim smile.

And while Ralph went to fetch the rope, Turpin explained to Dick all that happened at Basing Hall. He told of Captain Spott's scheme; how he—Turpin—had pretended to fall in with the plot and had agreed to drug Dick's wine that night.

Dick laughed heartily—especially when he heard that Turpin had arranged for him to be handed over to Sir Adam Vincent—for the magistrate was an old friend!

"Oho!" exclaimed Dick. "I had not thought yonder rascals were so enterprising. Well, comrade, you and I must go to that summer. 'Twould never do to disappoint them!"

"Just my way of thinking," agreed Turpin heartily. "And now here comes Ralph with the rope. Stand over those two scoundrels, Dick, while I tie Master Barnard to the trunk of this tree."

### HOW THE STORY BEGAN.

DICK FORRESTER, formerly a young highwayman, has been deprived of his fortune and estate at Fernhall by the trickery of

HECTOR FORRESTER. This is only the beginning of Dick's troubles, for he next falls foul of CAPTAIN SWEENEY, the notorious leader of a gang of footpads, and is also wanted by the King's Riders for assisting his former comrade of the road,

RICHARD TURPIN, the famous highwayman, to escape capture. Dick is forced to become an outlaw, and he and Turpin ride off together. They encounter many stirring adventures, during which Sweeney makes numerous unsuccessful attempts on Dick's life. The two comrades frustrate a plot arranged by Hector to kill Dick's young brother Ralph, and the young outlaw sends the boy to St. Austell's School. The highwaymen pay a visit to an old friend, Sir Henry Stanhope, only to discover that he has died. His son has succeeded to the title, and Sir Cecil, weak and extravagant, is mixed up with a number of sponging "friends." Dick makes an enemy of one of these in Captain Spott, and while he is out riding, Spott arranges with Turpin—whom he knows as "Mr. Smith"—to drug the young outlaw's wine. Turpin pretends to fall in with the scheme.

(Now Read On.)



He bound Barnard to a small oak-tree; nor did the worthy dare resist. Turpin's name had cowed him effectually. Then the two other rascals were tied up in the same way, within a few yards of each other and effectually gagged.

And there the two highwaymen left them. Bidding farewell to Ralph, and promising to visit him again as soon as possible, they rode off towards Basing Hall. They soon hit upon an idea for frustrating Captain Spott's scheme without that rascal suspecting, and in such a way that they would be provided with the maximum amount of sport.

Arriving at their destination, Dick and Turpin—or "Mr. Smith," as he was known to Captain Spott and his cronies—entered the dining-hall, there to be greeted by the captain. Playing his part, Turpin nodded slightly to Spott, who interpreted it as a sign that all was well. Spott's eyes momentarily gleamed with evil triumph. Little did he suspect that Dick was walking into the trap as a willing victim!

### Dick Springs a Surprise!

"WELCOME, travellers!" greeted Captain Spott with a great show of heartiness. "Have you seen anything of Barnard? There are three of us still away."

"We saw nothing of them," replied Turpin, who had no compunction in disregarding the truth. "But as they are not here, and supper is ready, I suggest we do not delay."

"I agree, Mr. Smith," beamed Captain Spott. "I trust your appetite is good, sir?" he added, addressing Dick affably. "Let us forget our disputes and sink all ill-feeling over a glass of wine and a hearty meal."

"Ecod, 'tis forgotten already," replied Dick, noting the ugly look that lurked in the captain's eye, despite his efforts to look genial.

"Yonder's your place, Forrester," said Turpin. "I'll sit beside you, and see you want for nothing."

As he and Dick went to their seats, Captain Spott surreptitiously slipped a little packet into his hand.

"Empty it all in," he whispered.

Turpin nodded, and then seated himself by Dick's side.

Both Dick and Turpin, who were hungry after their ride, did all justice to the viands, which were of the best. The talk round the table ran high, and everyone was very jovial.

Dick filled his goblet with wine and then turned away to help himself from a dish. He grinned inwardly as, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Turpin deftly draw a little paper packet from his coat, and, with a quick movement, empty the contents into the glass.

A few moments later Captain Spott sprang to his feet.

"Your health, sir!" he cried to Dick, raising his glass.

"Yours," replied Dick, and drained his goblet to the dregs.

He made a slightly wry face, and then sat

down. He noticed that the man nearest the door had slipped out of the room.

Dick's head dropped slowly on his chest. He roused himself with a start and looked round him. Dull and heavy-eyed, he blinked stupidly. The guests, though still talking busily, watched him narrowly. Soon his eyes seemed to close altogether and his head drooped.

"At last!" muttered Spott, rising from his place, a look of hatred in his red-rimmed eyes. "The score's nearly paid. We've got him!"

Dick's hand, with the motion like that of a man who turns in his sleep, fumbled to his pocket, and drew from it a double pistol. He snored loudly; but the pistol, waving like a reed in the wind, pointed itself slowly at Captain Spott, who muttered a frightened oath.

"Ah, he often does that when he's asleep!" said Turpin coolly. "'Tis force of habit, I suppose—he dreams he is on the highway! Do not be afraid, captain; it is unlikely he will be able to hit you."

"The dangerous knave!" cried Spott anxiously, and hurried across the room. But the pistol's-point followed him accurately, and his terror increased. "He'll have a bullet into me!" he shouted, dodging behind one of his comrades.

"Don't get behind me, hang you!" cried the man he used as a shield, for Dick's pistol now pointed straight at him, and the two played at Jack-in-the-box for some seconds, each trying to dodge behind the other.

"Take the thing away from him, can't you?" cried Spott, making a dash for the wall. "Take it away!"

One or two of them started to get behind Dick and disarm him, but Turpin was there first. He took the pistol from Dick's grasp. The young highwayman snored on, as though he would not wake for a week.

"What a plaguey trick!" cried Spott, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "The knave is still dangerous when he's asleep. No matter, he's off now, and the magistrate will be here in a minute, for I have sent for him. The three hundred guineas are ours, and Galloping Dick is as good as hanged!"

"I shall shortly trouble you for my share of the guineas," said Turpin.

A dispute immediately followed as to the share which each was entitled to, until at last a peal was heard on the great hall bell, and footsteps were heard outside.

"'Tis Sir Adam!" cried Spott. "Let him in, boys! The game's ours at last!"

"Cheer for the three hundred guineas!" said a loud, clear voice.

Captain Spott turned with a start and an oath, and his red face blanched to the colour of slaked lime.

Dick was sitting easily in his chair, very wide awake, a pistol in each hand, the muzzles of which were directed on the company.

"I hold two lives in each hand," said Dick blandly. "The first who moves will be shot!"

(Continued on page 44.)



## New Year's Greetings from the Editor to his reader chums!



A breezy chat with readers conducted by the **EDITOR**. All letters should be addressed to The Editor,

**NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.**

**T**HE Ancient House at St. Frank's is so called, W. J. W. (Cambridge), because it is built on the site of the original school—built, in fact, with the same old stones, and many of the walls themselves are the originals. The Modern House does not date so far back, but it is by no means really modern. The only St. Frank's periodicals are the "Senior School Magazine" and "Handforth's Weekly."

\* \* \*

The birthdays you ask for, William Kelleher (Folkestone), are as follows: Nipper—July 31st; Handforth—April 18th; Church—August 28th; McClure—May 9th; Teddy Long—July 12th. Yes, Nelson Lee did great service for his country in the Great War.

\* \* \*

Nipper has not always been captain of the Remove, Howard Binns. (Whitley Bay). Ralph Leslie Fullwood was the captain when Nipper first arrived. Reggie Pitt was skipper for a period—during a prolonged absence of Nipper from the school. There have been other fleeting occupants of the post—such as recently, when Adams bagged the captaincy—and in the past even Handforth has been captain for a time, and others.

\* \* \*

Here are pen-sketches of three more Fifth-Formers at St. Frank's: **MAURICE BENTLEY**. Tall and loose-jointed and blundering. The clumsiest fellow in the Fifth. Can't walk across a room without bumping into people. If anything, is clumsier than Handforth, which is saying a lot. **SPENCER MINTER**. A meek, inoffensive fellow with a passion for music. Is a bit of a naturalist, too, and when he is not at his studies he is either wandering about the country searching for specimens, or sitting in his study listening to the most highbrow chamber music. **REGINALD SWINTON**. Rather a duffer. One of Mr. Pagett's trials in life. Sticks firmly to the bottom of the class. But who, with the exception of Mr. Pagett,

cares? Swinton is a great man at sports, and popular in the Fifth on that account.

\* \* \*

I am afraid that you are in the wrong, John Morten, about that argument concerning Nipper and Handforth. Handforth is the better fighter, perhaps, but Nipper is a far more skilful boxer, and if it came to a serious scrap between these two Nipper would almost certainly win. Nipper has no parents, and Mr. Nelson Lee is his guardian.

\* \* \*

No, Jean Dalchon (Bournemouth), Nelson Lee has not always been at St. Frank's. When he did first arrive it was more or less of a subterfuge to avoid the attentions of a Chinese secret society which had sworn to kill him. But that danger passed, and Nelson Lee was so in love with his new work that he stayed on—acting, then, as Housemaster of the Ancient House.

\* \* \*

No, W. J. G. (Peckham), there is not a coloured boy at St. Frank's, unless we mention Hussi Khan or Sessue Yakama or Yung Ching. You evidently mean a negro boy. At some time in the future, perhaps, Mr. Brooks will find occasion to introduce such a character.

\* \* \*

Another year has passed; a new year is with us. Greetings and best wishes for 1932, chums. This is the time for resolutions, and I have resolved to make the **NELSON LEE** better and brighter and even more popular. I hope to make many new chums during 1932, and present readers of the Old Paper can help me achieve that aim by showing their copies of the **NELSON LEE** to friends. And I hope your resolution will be to remain as staunch to the Old Paper as you have done in the past. Ask your newsagent to reserve a copy of your favourite weekly book every week—that's one way in which you will be able to start the new year well!



## "Outlawed!"

(Continued from page 42.)

"And I," said Turpin, who was sitting on the table behind him, "have a pistol in each pocket, which I will produce for the benefit of the first man whose hand seeks a weapon."

"We are betrayed!" shrieked Spott furiously.

### Spott is Taught a Lesson!

THE door was flung open, and in strode a big, well-formed man of fifty, with much dignity of bearing. He was dressed in riding clothes, and carried a hunting-crop in his hand. He was Sir Adam Vincent, and he stared in astonishment at the scene around him. Then his gaze fell on Dick, and his face brightened.

"Arrest him, Sir Adam!" cried Captain Spott eagerly. "It is the highwayman, Galloping Dick, whom we have captured! Taken in the very act—see his pistols! I appeal to you, as a Justice of the Peace! You must know him!"

"Know him?" said Sir Adam curtly to Spott. "I know you, you scoundrel! The constables have wanted you this long time past!" He strode up to Dick who, smiling, put one of his pistols down on the table. "By the rood! I'm right glad to see you, Dick! And there's my hand on it!"

The magistrate and the highwayman shook hands warmly.

"Now," said Dick fiercely, "out of this, you scoundrels, and never show your faces at Basing Hall again! The man who is here after I have counted ten will receive a bullet through his coat-tails—all save Captain Spott, who will remain at my pleasure. Away with you!"

Nobody waited for the counting. By window and door they scuttled out as fast as they could go, and hurried away from the house of Basing at top speed. Captain Spott, covered by Dick's pistol, alone remained.

"Sir Adam," said Dick, "I find this house in sorry case since I was last a guest in it.

I find it in the hands of a youth whom I still think more fool than knave, and since he has tried to entrap me, I will repay him by doing him a service. If the method of it is rough, he has but himself to thank for that."

"Ay, and right sorry I am to see what has come to pass since my good friend, Sir Henry, died," said Vincent. "Dick, you have a happy knack of coming always at the right time. I hope some good may come of it, and now these rascals have gone——"

He glanced scornfully at the young baronet. Sir Cecil Stanhope came across to Dick, his face working piteously.

"'Twas not my wish!" he said hoarsely. "I swear I would have had no hand in it. But Spott forced me."

"Sir Cecil," said Dick sternly, "you see to what a pass your folly has brought you. You, an English gentleman, herd with rogues, and allow them to fleece you till it reaches the point of betraying a guest under your own roof. You have brought this goodly estate near to ruin and made your name a byword in the country."

"Ay, he has in all truth!" muttered Sir Adam.

"You owe your downfall to this cowering knave here—the leader and head of them all!" went on Dick, pointing to the scowling Spott. "So now to reckon with him, and even the score against us both. I crave the loan of your hunting-whip, Sir Adam."

Vincent gave it readily, and the young outlaw, throwing down his pistol, laid into Captain Spott with a zeal that made the rogue caper and roar for mercy. Up and down the room he whipped him, till at last, black and blue, the scoundrel burst through the window and rushed away through the park. Bellowing like a bull-calf, he disappeared into the night, and Basing Hall never saw him again.

(Accompany Dick and Turpin on the highway of adventure in next week's rousing instalment.)

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