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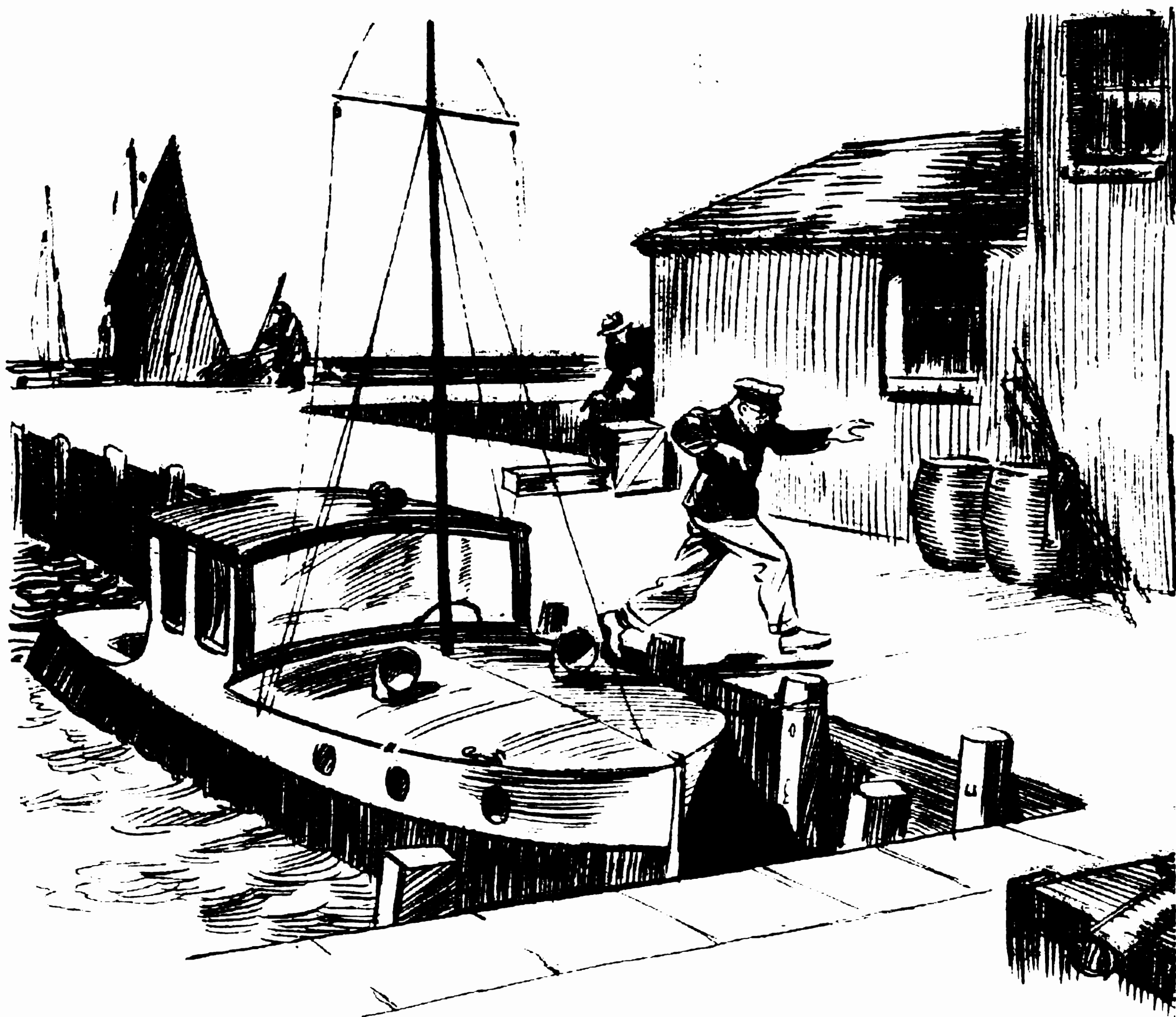
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New Series No. 151.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

December 10th, 1932.

THE HIDDEN



CHAPTER 1.

The Mystery of the Housemaster.

ST. FRANK'S was looking drab and grey in the cold light of the wintry morning, when Nipper emerged from the Modern House. He was up early—even before the sounding of the rising-bell. "Brrrrh!" he shivered, as he pulled his overcoat more tightly about him.

In the early light the old school did not look attractive. There had been a mist during the night, and it still hung about. The farther buildings looked vague and shadowy. The sun, hanging low, showed coppery and dull through the mist. Later, perhaps, the sun's warmth would break through and clear the air.

Nipper, for the time being, was back at

St. Frank's as a scholar. He was, in fact, deputy captain of the Fourth. John Basterfield Boots, the real skipper, was in the sanatorium with a sprained leg, so Nipper was filling his shoes.

Everybody at St. Frank's believed that Nelson Lee and Nipper had come to the school for a fortnight's holiday—and Nipper had improved the shining hour, as soon as he heard of Boots' indisposition, by stepping into the Fourth captaincy. It was a bit of a change for Nipper—for, in the old days, of course, he had been the captain of the Remove.

Actually Nipper had seized that chance for a very definite reason. He had a particular desire to reside in the Modern House just now; for, by being in the Modern House, he could be in almost constant touch with Mr. Arthur Stockdale, the Housemaster.

PERIL!

By EDWY
SEARLES BROOKS



Who killed Marcus Strutt, the mysterious hermit of the Moat House? All the clues point to Mr. Stockdale, Master of St. Frank's, as being the culprit. But Nelson Lee is sure that there is someone else behind the whole crime. It is the famous detective's difficult and perilous task to discover this unknown foe, and to save not only Mr. Stockdale, but the fair name of St. Frank's, from disgrace.

And considering that Nelson Lee and Nipper had forged a chain of evidence which connected Mr. Stockdale directly with the murder of Marcus Strutt, of Moat Hollow, it was very necessary that he should be watched!

The thing was incredible—yet it was a fact. Mr. Stockdale, the staid, scholarly man who ruled the destinies of the Modern House, was

unquestionably involved in one of the most brutal crimes which the district had known for years. That he had been in Moat Hollow on the night of the murder was an established fact. But, fortunately, the police knew nothing. Nelson Lee and Nipper were keeping their evidence to themselves—hoping against hope that some fresh fact would crop up and clear the suspected man. Nelson Lee

was particularly anxious to avoid the hideous scandal which would descend upon the old school if one of its masters was arrested as a murderer.

The trail had started in London, where Nelson Lee had been called in to investigate an apparently trifling flat burglary. He had thought little of it until his keen, searching eyes detected a tiny golden charm, evidently torn from a watchchain. It was in the shape of an elephant, and had originally possessed two ruby eyes. One was missing. And Nelson Lee, much to his astonishment, had recognised the golden elephant as the property of Mr. Stockdale, of St. Frank's! Even then Lee had been prepared to believe that Mr. Stockdale had been victimised by a pickpocket—and that this same pickpocket had broken into the flat.

But there was evidence that the amateurish burglar wheezed badly—and Mr. Stockdale was suffering from asthma. On the top of this had come the startling news that old Marcus Strutt, of Moat Hollow, had been found brutally stabbed to death.

And not only did Marcus Strutt live within a mile of St. Frank's, but it was Marcus Strutt's flat which had been burgled! And on arrival at St. Frank's for a "holiday," Lee had found Mr. Stockdale to be haggard and wild-eyed and obviously suffering from some tremendous strain.

Grim evidence had quickly accumulated.

Fingerprints were found in the room where the man was murdered; footprints in the grounds of Moat Hollow. Nipper, the previous night, had not only secured splendid specimens of Mr. Stockdale's fingerprints, but he had found them to be identical with the fingerprints found in the dead man's room. Nipper had photographed them, so he had concrete proof.

In addition, as though to clinch the matter beyond dispute, he had found in the staircase cupboard a pair of Mr. Stockdale's shoes—with rubber soles which exactly matched the footprints in the Moat Hollow grounds.

And late at night Nipper had trailed Mr. Stockdale out of the school—only to lose him, at a crucial moment, through the misguided activities of Handforth, of the Remove. Mr. Stockdale had cleverly turned the tables on his pursuers, for he had boldly shown himself and had ordered the boys back to bed—thus preventing Nipper from continuing the trail, and possibly finding some definite and damning evidence in the monastery ruins, which had been Mr. Stockdale's objective.

So Nipper had much to think of this morning.

He half expected Lee to take drastic action. It could not be delayed much longer. Already Mr. Stockdale must suspect that he was being watched—that he was marked down—not by the police, but by Lee.

Nipper had one ray of hope. Before turning in he had seen his *guy*'nor; and Lee

had assured him, much to his astonishment, that he was convinced of Mr. Stockdale's innocence—so far as the actual murder was concerned. Yet Lee believed that if he unmasked the murderer, he would bring irreparable tragedy upon the Housemaster.

"It looks like being a big day," murmured Nipper, as he thrust his hands into his pockets, and strolled off towards the Ancient House. "I wonder if the *guy*'nor's up yet? I'd give quids to know what his plans are for the day?"

"Good-morning, Nipper!"

He looked round and almost jumped. For standing on the Modern House steps was Mr. Arthur Stockdale. And the change in the Housemaster was so startling that Nipper could only stand for a few seconds and stare.

"Goo-good-morning, sir," he stammered, instinctively doffing his cap, as he used to in the old days.

"You're up remarkably early, aren't you?" smiled Mr. Stockdale.

Nipper found it difficult to answer. Last night Mr. Stockdale had looked very much like a guilty man—nervous, jumpy, haggard, with a fever in his eyes. This morning he was calm and serene, and even the lines of his face were smoothed out. He looked like a man who had been relieved of an overpowering load. And Nipper could not understand it; for, according to all his calculations, Mr. Stockdale should have been ready to collapse this morning.

"You're looking a lot better, sir," he managed to say.

"For once I've had a good night's sleep," replied the Housemaster. "Young man, I hope you never know what asthma is! My nights, of late, have been racked with fits of coughing which have kept me awake for hours on end. No wonder I became a wreck! Just one night's sleep has set me well on the road to recovery!"

Nipper didn't believe it. Mr. Stockdale's change—his dramatic change—had nothing to do with asthma. In that moment, looking at the Housemaster, Nipper felt very relieved. It was impossible that this man, so upright, so kindly, could be a murderer.

"I'm awfully glad you've had a good night, sir," said Nipper.

"Oh, and by the way," said Mr. Stockdale, "about last night, Nipper! I realise that your motives in being out of bed, and influencing those Ancient House boys to get out of bed, was a good one. So we'll say no more about it. You can tell Handforth of my decision when you see him."

And, with a nod, Mr. Stockdale walked away.

"Well, I'm blowed!" murmured Nipper, baffled.

When he entered the Ancient House, some minutes later, he ran into Nelson Lee in the lobby. The detective was wearing his overcoat and hat, and he was walking briskly. There was nothing in his appearance to indicate that he had been up all night,

"Guv'nor!" said Nipper, quickly, "I've got something to tell you."

"Quite a remarkable change, eh?" said Lee, nodding. "Our friend seems to have lost his burden."

"But how did you know?" asked Nipper, staring.

"I have eyes—and there are windows in this building," replied Lee. "I think I can guess just why Mr. Stockdale is so much better."

"Tell me, guv'nor!" urged Nipper.

"Oh, no! I always keep my guesses to myself," replied Nelson Lee. "When I know something definite, I will tell you. I'm going down to Moat Hollow now; Lennard is to meet me there. Coming?"

"You bet I'm coming, sir."

As they walked down Bellton Lane, Lee heard the full details of the conversation which had taken place between Nipper and Mr. Stockdale.

"You mustn't overlook the fact, Nipper, that Mr. Stockdale has had time to realise his danger—and if you had looked at him more closely, I think you would have seen that his calmness and his serenity were partially assumed," said Lee quietly. "Between ourselves, that man is still on the verge of a volcano—and he knows it. I think he must have had a temporary relief—and even that temporary relief has given him a passing peace. There will be a reaction—and he will be more distraught than ever."

"It beats me," said Nipper frankly. "According to this, he's really the murderer. And yet you told me, last night——"

"We won't go over that again," interrupted Lee briskly. "I've been making some experiments, and I've come to a most interesting and singular conclusion. I believe this murder was committed in a manner which is absolutely unique in the history of crime."

Nipper stared.

"But old Strutt was stabbed in the back," he said. "There's nothing unique about that."

"He was stabbed in the back—but not as you imagine," replied Nelson Lee. "And if I can prove my theory to be correct, I shall prove, at the same time, that Stockdale could not have struck the fatal blow."

"By Jove! I'll bet you've got hold of something sensational, sir," said Nipper eagerly.

"'Sensational' is a much abused word—but for once I think you have used it with justification," replied the great detective.

By this time they had nearly reached Moat Hollow, and further discussion was difficult. Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, was standing in the gateway of the gloomy old house; and he looked a very dejected and disconsolate man. Even his pipe drooped miserably from the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, hallo!" he said gruffly.

"Had a bad night, inspector?" asked Nipper.

"Don't be funny!" said Lennard. "I'm in no humour for jokes this morning, my lad. You know thundering well that I haven't been to bed at all."

"Hard lines," said Lee, smiling. "But don't look so down, Lennard. I haven't been to bed, either."

The Yard man looked at him enviously.

"Wish I could turn out in the morning, after a hard night, looking as fresh as you look," he said. "I can never understand how you do it, Lee! It wouldn't be so bad if I had some kind of clue to this infernal mystery! But there's nothing—absolutely nothing."

"What about that man you were hunting for on the moor?" asked Lee. "He was seen last night, in the mist, and there was an even chance that he was the murderer."

"And a thousand-to-one chance against us nabbing him," growled the inspector. "We've combed the moor, and a score of men are even now beating the wood. But I don't suppose they'll find anything."

"Somehow, I think you're right," said Lee dryly. "I believe that man has successfully eluded you—and it's any odds that he was helped."

Nipper looked at Lee sharply—and Nipper was thinking of Mr. Stockdale's changed demeanour. Was Mr. Stockdale the one who had helped the hunted fugitive? And was Mr. Stockdale's relief occasioned by the fact that he had successfully hidden the fugitive away?

"We're up against a brick wall at every turn," said Lennard irritably. "I wouldn't mind so much if there was even one line of inquiry to bite at. I've been through old Strutt's papers until my eyes ache. There's nothing to hang anything on. He seems to have been a wealthy old boy, in spite of his hermit-like existence; we've found out that he has at least three banking accounts, and they're all pretty impressive. Of course, we've given orders that any cheques which trickle in are to be stopped—and traced. His investments are sound enough, and there's no trace of anything irregular. No sign of anything being missed. He wasn't even robbed. We found a hundred pounds in notes in his pocket, and another hundred-and-fifty pounds in the drawer of the bureau—and a drawer, mind you, which had been forced open by the murderer. We can only conclude that it was simply a case of revenge or homicidal mania."

"I might be able to help you later on," said Lee quietly. "In the meantime, here's the dagger back, Lennard. Thanks for the loan of it."

He took from his pocket, the long, slender dagger with which the crime had been committed. Lennard would not have entrusted such a piece of vital evidence to any other man. He had even exceeded his duty in leaving it with Nelson Lee all night.

"Now, I wonder why you wanted this?" he asked, looking at Lee searchingly. "You've

been experimenting, haven't you? Am I allowed to know what you discovered?"

"Not yet—if you don't mind," said Lee. "But I think I've discovered something of importance. Do you mind if I have a walk round," he added abruptly.

Without waiting for the inspector to reply, he passed through the gateway, and walked slowly round the house. He came, at length, to a spot in the weed-grown pathway immediately beneath the upper window of the room wherein Marcus Strutt had been killed. He faced about, and looked thoughtfully at the high wall which faced the window, some distance away. He looked beyond, at the trees on the outskirts of Bellton Wood.

"Got the key of the back gate, Lennard?" he asked.

"Don't need it—the door's unlocked," said the inspector.

They walked out, both Lennard and Nipper puzzled by Lee's movements.

"Is this morning constitutional anything to do with your experimenting?" asked Lennard, somewhat sarcastically. "Or don't you think I've done enough walking?"

"I'm curious to have look up into this tree—particularly in that fork which overlooks the Moat Hollow grounds," said Nelson Lee, pointing. "As you'll notice, if anybody climbed this tree, Lennard, he would be able to look almost directly into Strutt's library window. I fancy there may be some tell-tale marks in that fork."

Lennard stared.

"You're not going to tell me that the murderer threw the dagger from outside the grounds, are you?" he asked. "Because, if so, I won't believe you. I know it's an unusual dagger, but I saw it sticking in Strutt's body, and even a fifty horse-power catapult wouldn't have been strong enough. That dagger was driven home at close quarters—and by a strong man."

"I wouldn't dream of disputing it," said Lee. "Nevertheless, I fancy there might be a clue in the fork of this tree. That's the only reason I've come down this morning, Lennard—to examine it."

"You're welcome," said the inspector. "Go ahead! There's a ladder just inside the back gate, Nipper, if you'd care to fetch it."

Nipper did fetch it, and Lee looked at the inspector reproachfully.

"You're tired, old man, or you wouldn't show such luke-warm interest in a matter of major importance," he said. "Don't you realise that I'm putting you in the way of a vital clue?"

Lennard only grunted, but he was the first to mount the ladder—much to Nipper's indignation. No sooner had the Yard man reached the fork of the tree than he whistled, and bent forward eagerly.

"You're right!" he called down. "There are some freshly made marks on the bark, here. Somebody has been standing in this tree pretty recently."

"And old Strutt never pulled the blind of his library," said Lee quietly.

"I know that," agreed Lennard, after another look. "But what does it prove, anyhow? Merely that the murderer made a preliminary survey before he entered the grounds—which, after all, is just what you'd expect. He got up this tree, saw that Strutt was in the room, and then dropped over the wall and got into action. I'll admit I hadn't thought of looking here before, but I'm hanged if I can see where the vital clue comes in."

He climbed down, and Nelson Lee took his place. Lee got right up into the fork and straddled one of the strong limbs. Nipper mounted the ladder, too, and stood there, breathless. He knew his famous guv'nor better than anybody—and he knew that Lee had given Lennard a hint which the latter should have heeded more thoroughly.

The inspector proved how little he thought of the "discovery" by his next words.

"Well, I'm off to breakfast," he said. "It was ready for me at the George, ten minutes ago—and I hate cold bacon and eggs. I'll see you later."

"I'm afraid Lennard is a bit fed-up," mused Lee, after the inspector had gone. "Of course, there may be nothing to find in this tree, but I am convinced that the murderer stood in it."

"And threw the dagger, sir?"

"No, that would have been a physical impossibility as Lennard quickly saw," replied Lee. "He was right, too, in contemptuously rejecting the catapult theory. No catapult could send a dagger with sufficient accuracy. Yet I'm willing to wager my reputation that the murderer stood in this fork, and a careful scrutiny of the surroundings might prove profitable—— By James!" he added, with a sudden change of tone.

"What is it, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

Lee did not answer, and Nipper saw that the detective was leaning over and detaching a few wispy hairs from a twig five feet above the massive fork.

CHAPTER 2.

The Clue of the Circular Hair.

NELSON LEE was a changed man as he carefully took those strands of hair in his hand. His whole frame vibrated with eagerness, his eyes were aflame with inward excitement. Seldom had Nipper seen him so affected.

"I never dreamed that there would be such an amazing clue as this," he muttered. "We're lucky, Nipper. You don't know how lucky!"

"But what have you found, sir?"

"I've found something which tells me that the murderer is a man of about five-foot-four in height, and that he is a Chinaman—or, at least, a man of the yellow races."

"But—but that's incredible, guv'nor!" gasped Nipper. "How could you possibly know that? And how about old Stocky?"

"Never mind old Stocky," retorted Lee. "We'll leave him out of it for the time being. You see this twisted twig. Our esteemed friend must have jerked his head backwards with sudden violence on the night of the crime—and I think I know why he did so. The back of his head caught against this twisted twig, and a few strands of his hair were trapped in the cleft. When he moved forward again the hair was torn out by the roots. In the darkness he did not realise that the hair was caught in the tree—and that it had remained as a silent evidence of his presence."

After Lee had got to the ground, Nipper had a closer look at the hairs. There were not more than a dozen—and less keen eyes than Nelson Lee's would not even have seen them, for they had been practically invisible against the tree. They were black, and Nipper would have identified them unhesitatingly as animal hairs.

"We'll have a look at these through a powerful lens later," said Lee. "And then you'll see the little bulb of the roots more clearly—proving that they were torn out of the living scalp. You'll also see that the hairs are perfectly round in section."

"But how do you know that they came from the head of a Chinaman—or an Oriental?" asked Nipper. "They look like the hairs of a black bear to me. An animal of some kind, anyhow."

"I have yet to learn that black bears roam wild in the English woods," said Lee tartly. "And will you show me the black bear, Nipper, which climbs trees? No; an Oriental gentleman shed these interesting relics. Haven't I told you that human hair is divided, roughly, into three main classes?"

"I believe you have, guv'nor," said Nipper meekly.

"The white races, generally speaking, have oval hair," explained Lee. "The black races have flat hair; and the yellow races round hair. That's a generalisation which fairly covers the subject. These hairs are perfectly round, and that proves that they come from the head of a pure-blooded yellow man. By their character I imagine him to be an educated Chinaman."

"I'll admit the Chinaman, sir—but where do you get the 'educated' from?"

"It's not such a long shot as it sounds," replied Lee. "The hair is well kept—it is clean, and shows traces of dye. A rough Chinaman of the coolie class would neither keep his hair clean nor dye it."

"It sounds awfully simple when you explain it, sir," said Nipper humbly. "But what are we going to do now?"

"Find that Chinaman," replied Lee. "It ought not to be so difficult, and we shall probably learn something of importance within the first half-hour. The murderer believes himself to be safe because he thinks that he left no clue behind him; and he has not even found it necessary to flee the district, or go into hiding."

"Well, it's a funny thing if a Chinaman came into Bellton and nobody knew it," said Nipper, shaking his head. "Chinaman aren't too common in the rural villages of Sussex."

"Well, we shall see," said Lee crisply.

Nipper had never known him to be more eager. They hurried into the village, and, arriving at the George Tavern, they went into the cosy commercial room, where the fire was burning cheerfully, and they found the chief inspector in the middle of his breakfast. With him was Detective-sergeant Tracey, his second-in-command.

"Any luck?" asked Lennard, with his mouth full.

"It all depends," replied Lee. "I'm just wondering if, in the course of your inquiries, you have heard anything of a Chinaman, or a Jap in the district?"

The inspector stared.

"What in thunder are you getting at now?" he asked blankly. "A Chinaman! But, my dear Lee, there's not a ghost of a hint——"

"That's funny," said Tracey, frowning.

He was a thin, melancholy-looking man, and he chiefly recommended himself to Lennard by reason of his taciturnity. Tracey seldom spoke unless he was spoken to, and he was a keen, intelligent, painstaking officer.

"What's funny?" asked the inspector, looking at him.

"Funny that Mr. Lee should be asking about a Chinaman," replied the sergeant. "Only last night I was talking to the landlord, and he happened to mention that a Chink was seen on the river last Monday."

"What!" ejaculated Lennard.

Lee shot an amused glance at Nipper, who was looking startled. Lee had prophesied that it would not be long before they heard something. It was simply a case of a man escaping notice because there had been no reason to inquire after him. But the instant an inquiry was set afoot, he came into the picture.

"A Chinaman was seen—on the river?" repeated Lee, with interest. "How do you mean—on the river? In a boat, or what?"

"In a boat," replied Tracey. "A motor-launch. Been up and down often. Used to cruise between Caistowe and Bannington. Harmless enough chap, I understand, and quite educated. Wouldn't know he was a Chinaman at first sight."

"Any idea where he is now?"

"Landlord said he hasn't been seen since Monday—but that's probably because of the river mists," replied the sergeant. "I dare say his boat will be found somewhere up or down the river."

"But what's all this leading to?" asked Lennard impatiently. "How did you know anything about a Chinaman, Lee? And where does he connect up with this Moat Hollow business?"

"I'll tell you after you've located him," replied Nelson Lee. "Honestly, Lennard,

"I'm asking you to devote yourself wholeheartedly to this job. Find that man—but don't let him know that you're after him. If you do, you'll lose him. And he's a vital witness."

"Witness!" yelled Lennard. "Do you mean to say that this Chink saw the murder?"

"Exactly!" replied Lee grimly. "He saw the murder from the fork in the tree I pointed out to you. He was in that tree when the fatal blow was struck—and he saw it. Find that man, and you'll soon clear up the mystery—and get the murderer. But go warily. I'd like you to let me know as soon as you come across anything definite."

And Nelson Lee nodded and walked out of the commercial room. Outside, Nipper looked at the detective in wonder.

"I don't get you, sir," he said. "Not long ago you told me that the Chinaman was the murderer. Now you say that he was sitting up in that tree—that he was a witness. And I'm jiggered if I can understand how you arrive at these conclusions at all. It's like black magic!"

"It's just simple reasoning, Nipper—the putting of two and two together," replied Nelson Lee. "I'm happier now than I have been since I commenced this investigation. The discovery of those circular hairs has put a completely new complexion on the mystery. I'm tempted to confront Stockdale straight away, and get him to tell me his story. It should be very interesting—and very instructive."

"Then you don't think he's guilty any more?"

"I never thought he was guilty."

"But the evidence——"

"The evidence was misleading—so much so that I was misled at first," replied Lee. "I thought that the apprehension of the murderer would mean tragedy for Stockdale. But it won't. I fancy that Stockdale himself is labouring under some fearful misunderstanding. But a frank talk will probably clear that up. I'm at liberty to come out into the open at last, Nipper—and I can assure you I'm pleased."

Nipper gave a helpless shrug.

"And I'm more fogged than ever," he confessed.

They were walking up Bellton Lane now, and the sombre bulk of Bellton Wood loomed on their right as they strode along. Abruptly Lee came to a halt, and half-turned back.

"There's something I neglected," he said. "You go on to the school, Nipper, or you'll be late for breakfast. I'm having mine with Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes, anyhow—and they breakfast half an hour later than the boys."

"Bother brekker!" said Nipper. "Can I help?"

"There's no need for you to help," replied Lee.

And he dismissed Nipper without any further argument. Walking back to Moat Hollow, he returned to the tree which over-

looked the grounds. And here he spent some time in searching carefully in the long grass. But after a while he looked at the wall thoughtfully, saw how close it was to the tree, and then he transferred his attentions to the inner side.

Here the grounds were in a great tangle of overgrown weeds and dead leaves and grass. Lee could see at once that it was an almost hopeless task—unless he was prepared to spend some hours in search.

"Lost something, sir?"

It was one of the Bannington constables who spoke. He had been on duty in the grounds, and he had been watching Lee for some minutes.

"I've lost nothing—but I'm looking for something," replied Lee cryptically. "Perhaps you can help me, Baines. See if you can spot a little metal washer. I imagine it will be fairly bright, but rusted in parts through exposure for a day or two. There will be a hexagonal hole in the centre of it."

The constable scratched his head.

"That's a rum kind of washer, isn't it, sir?" he asked.

"It is—but I think you'll find it here, all the same," replied Lee. "If you locate it, Baines, I'll give you a pound."

The unfortunate Baines was destined to disappointment—for Handforth had that very washer in his pocket at that moment. Handforth had found it by sheer chance the morning after the murder, when he had jumped over the high wall into Moat Hollow. And although it was an important clue, he had put it in his pocket, and had forgotten all about it. Which, after all, was just like Handforth.

Lee saw no reason why he should remain, and once again he set his footsteps in the direction of St. Frank's.

Then suddenly he gave a start. There lying on the path immediately in front of him, and pinned in place by a dagger, was a sheet of paper.

He was walking past the wood, and the lane was deserted in both directions. Not a living soul was in sight. Lee bent down to examine it, and even as he did so, something came coiling down from the high trees of the wood which bordered the road.

Nelson Lee uttered a sharp exclamation. The coil of thin rope dropped like lightning over his head, settled round his neck, and was drawn tight. There came a "twang," and the detective was lifted clean off his feet.

He owed his life to the fact that he had had the presence of mind to raise a hand to his throat at the critical second—and that hand was now thrust between the rope and his neck.

The incident had not occupied more than a few seconds. If there had been a dozen people within earshot of Nelson Lee, they would have known nothing.

The detective made a desperate struggle for life.

He was furious with himself for having been caught unawares. This invisible death had come upon him so stealthily, however, that he had had no time to guard himself.

Just that one hand between the rope and his neck! Without that Lee's senses would have left him within a few seconds. He would have been ruthlessly hanged as surely as the sun was shining. And the whole thing would have been accomplished with a fiendish silence and speed.

rope. He went tumbling to the ground, to crash amongst a litter of twigs and dead leaves.

As he struck, he rolled over and over—fearing a pistol-shot, or perhaps a knife attack. And he was not—as yet—ready to meet the murderer on equal terms.

As he lay half-buried in the leaves, he used the knife again, and cut the cord from about his neck. From somewhere near by he heard a faint breaking of twigs. Then silence.



Nelson Lee whipped round behind a tree and stared at the furtive figure that was leaving the very wood where, only a few minutes ago, an attempt had been made on the detective's life. The figure was that of Mr. Stockdale, master of St. Frank's.

Even as things were, Nelson Lee's predicament was horrifying. The cord cut into his hand agonisingly; it gripped the sides of his neck until he could scarcely breathe. But he could breathe; he retained his full senses. And, retaining them, he knew that the would-be murderer must be aware of his escape, and it was quite likely that the unknown would change his tactics.

Nelson Lee's only chance was to act speedily.

With his free hand he managed to take a small knife from his waistcoat-pocket; the blade snapped open at the touch of a button—for it was a pocket-knife of patent design, for which Lee was grateful.

Slash!

With one swift movement the detective raised his free hand and cut through the

Lee leapt to his feet, his automatic gripped in his hand. He was ready now. He was panting heavily, and his neck burned, but he was master of himself.

"By James!" he muttered.

Moving forward, he found no traces of his mysterious attacker. Even the dagger and paper had been removed. The only evidence that the attempt had been made was the scrap of thin rope which Nelson Lee had retained. He advanced carefully amongst the trees, and as he did so he knew that he was taking a considerable chance. Death might lurk anywhere amid this gloom. But Nelson Lee's whole life was made up of taking chances, and he was not the kind of man to hesitate because of danger.

Somebody had deliberately attempted to murder him—and he wasn't at all pleased

about it. He remembered that Bellton Wood was being searched by the police and volunteer helpers. Where were they? How was it that Nelson Lee's attacker had dared to take such a step? Surely it implied that the attacker, whoever he was, had no reason to fear the police? He was somebody who, if seen, would occasion no suspicion.

He was something of a will-o'-the-wisp, too. He had vanished with the stealth of a Red Indian. Nelson Lee had not even caught a glimpse of him.

Crack, crack!

Nelson Lee stood stock still. From somewhere deeper in the wood came the unmistakable breaking of a dead twig. Like lightning the detective ran forward, and then he saw a figure in a small clearing just ahead.

The figure half-turned, suddenly conscious of Lee's approach. It tried to move away into the undergrowth, but there was not sufficient time.

"Good-morning!" said Lee steadily.

The man in the clearing was Mr. Arthur Stockdale!

CHAPTER 3.

Bannington 3847.

IT was a dramatic meeting—in the circumstances.

Mr. Stockdale was breathing heavily, as he was greatly startled.

"Really, Mr. Lee, you gave me quite a turn!" he said, striving to conceal his agitation. "I—I did not expect you to appear so—so silently. I am almost tempted to believe that you were watching me—although such a thought is fantastic."

"You must pardon me for appearing in such a melodramatic fashion," said Lee, his voice as steady as a rock. "But I had a good reason, Mr. Stockdale. Did you notice anybody in the wood a minute or two ago?"

"Why, no."

"Did you see any figure running, or acting in any way strange?"

"I saw nothing."

"And heard nothing?"

"Not until you so unexpectedly came," replied Mr. Stockdale, recovering himself somewhat. "Really, Mr. Lee, your actions are most disturbing."

Nelson Lee gave him a hard look.

"I thought you might have been able to help me," he said. "There was somebody in the wood, Mr. Stockdale, whom I particularly wished to interview. Unfortunately, he has eluded me. It is a pity that you cannot give me any help."

"I? Really, Mr. Lee, I don't know what you are talking about," said the House-master. "I came out for a walk, and I was strolling through the trees when I heard your approach."

Nelson Lee did not press the matter. He did not ask Mr. Stockdale why the latter had attempted to efface himself. Together they walked along the woodland path until

they reached the stile. They walked up the lane to the school—and it was significant that never once did Mr. Stockdale make any mention of the Moat Hollow crime. He seemed eager to talk on trivial subjects—the weather, the St. Frank's sports, local politics, and so forth.

They parted in the Triangle, and Nelson Lee went into the Ancient House and retired at once to his own room. Here he inspected his throat in the mirror, and was not surprised to see the ugly red mark which was furrowed deeply into his skin. Some of his fingers were puffy, too, from the effects of his adventure.

"A particularly nasty incident," he told himself. "But for the luck of getting my fingers through that cord, I should now be dangling in Bellton Wood—and Lennard would have been provided with another sensational murder mystery, and one without a clue."

Lee knew that Mr. Stockdale had had nothing to do with that fiendish attack. That meeting in the wood had been pure coincidence. Yet it was strange that Mr. Stockdale had seen or heard nothing of the would-be murderer. It was a point which gave the detective food for thought.

He derived a certain amount of satisfaction from the situation, too. The murderer of Marcus Strutt was not so sure of himself. He was afraid that Nelson Lee, at least, was getting on his trail. And so he had taken the desperate step of attempting to commit a second murder. Nelson Lee's escape would mean that the unknown would be more than ever relentless.

"I shall have to be careful, that's all," decided Lee. "And it is more than ever necessary to get at Stockdale's end of this remarkable affair."

Lee would not be able to devote any time to Mr. Stockdale during the morning. He had other work to occupy his attention. But there was Nipper.

He said nothing to Nipper when they met shortly afterwards about the incident of the wood. And Nipper did not know until some time afterwards how narrow an escape Lee had had that morning.

"Any way in which I can help, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Yes, there is—you can keep a very close watch on Stockdale for me," replied the detective in a low voice. "I want you to keep a tag on all his movements; and if he leaves the school, you must follow him and find out where he goes."

Nipper looked a bit blank.

"But I'm in the Fourth now, guv'nor," he said. "I mean, I'm supposed to go into the class-room with the other chaps. Stocky isn't a Form-master, and I don't see how I can keep an eye on him—"

"You must find a way," interrupted Lee. "You needn't worry about him during first lesson, because he is presiding in the Sixth Form-room. Maths, I think. But after that he is free for some time. Then he is occu-

pied for the rest of the morning with the Sixth again. If he does anything at all, it will be during that 'free' period. That's when you must keep a careful watch. I had a casual chat with Mr. Wilkes this morning, and he gave me the routine—without realising that I needed it for a definite purpose."

"All right, guv'nor—leave it to me," said Nipper. "I'll find a way."

Then he looked at Nelson Lee with sudden intentness.

"Does this mean that you suspect old Stocky of being mixed up with the crime, guv'nor?" he asked.

"Mr. Stockdale was in Moat Hollow on the night of the murder," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "It is my business, Nipper to find out just what Mr. Stockdale was doing there. If I were to question him, I have no doubt that he would freeze up completely and refuse to say a word. But if I can obtain the information I require by strategy—then, when I challenge Stockdale, he will crumple up and tell me everything. But I must have my facts at my fingertips first."

Nipper came in for a good deal of chipping before the boys went to their class-rooms. In the old days Nipper had been captain of the Remove, and his former chums—Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Handforth & Co., Reggie Pitt, Travers and other stalwart Removites—were inclined to resent his present activity. He was in the Fourth—deputy-skipper of the Fourth—and that meant that he was "up against" the Remove. None of the juniors knew of Nipper's real purpose—that he was in the Fourth because it gave him free entry into Mr. Stockdale's House.

The Fourth-Formers, of course, were delighted with the arrangement; they were glad to have Nipper in their midst, glad to accept him as temporary captain. There had been an important football match between the St. Frank's Junior Eleven and the River House School. Nipper had scored brilliantly for the Saints, and his popularity was greater than ever.

Just before lessons Nipper had a private word with Tregellis-West and Watson, his old intimate chums of Study C. They eagerly fell in with a little plan he suggested.

Then he went into the class-room with the Fourth—in the School House. Mr. Horace Pycraft, who presided over the Fourth, regarded Nipper with uncertainty, and even disapproval.

"I am not quite sure that this is—er—regular, young man," he said, after the boys had settled down into their places. "You don't really belong to this school now, and I cannot say that I approve of these goings-on. Either you come back to St. Frank's as a scholar, or you do not. There cannot be any half-way measures."

"Don't worry sir," said Nipper coolly. "I shan't give you any extra work."

The Fourth-Formers grinned, and Mr. Pycraft frowned.

"I was not thinking of myself," he retorted sternly. "I was thinking of the discipline of the school. I think the headmaster is ill-advised in permitting you to stay at St. Frank's in these unsatisfactory circumstances."

"Perhaps you had better go and see the Head about it, sir?" suggested Nipper.

"That is enough!" snapped Mr. Pycraft. "I did not ask you for any insolence!"

Any other Form-master would have welcomed Nipper with a kindly and friendly word; but Mr. Pycraft was notoriously a "beast." He made a practice of going out of his way to be nasty.

However, he was not bothered with Nipper for long; for five minutes after lessons had started a tap sounded on the class-room door, and in response to Mr. Pycraft's irritable "Come in!" Tubbs, the Ancient House page-boy, entered.

"Well, what is it?" demanded the Form-master. "What do you want, Tubbs?"

"I don't want nothing, sir," replied Tubbs. "I've got a note for Master Nipper, and it says 'important' on it."

"Most irregular!" muttered Mr. Pycraft. "All right—come here. Give the note to me."

But Nipper reached Tubbs first.

"Excuse me, sir—this looks urgent," he said briskly.

He tore open the envelope, scanned the message, and then looked at Mr. Pycraft with eager eyes.

"Do you mind excusing me, sir?" he asked intently.

"Not at all! You can go as soon as you like," replied Mr. Pycraft in a sour voice. "Then, perhaps, the Form can get on with its morning's work."

"I wouldn't ask, sir, only something has suddenly cropped up," said Nipper. "I'll try to be back as soon as possible—"

"You needn't bother about coming back at all," broke in Mr. Pycraft tartly. "I shall be glad to put an end to the farce. You do not really belong to this Form."

Nipper went, much envied by Bob Christine and Talmadge and Denny and all the other Fourth-Formers. None of them guessed that the "important" note had been sent by Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West. But it served its purpose. Nipper went out—and he made his way into the Modern House while Mr. Stockdale was still instructing the Sixth Form into the intricacies of maths.

"Good egg!" he murmured. "That was easy!"

He knew that Mr. Stockdale had been watching when he had gone into the School House with the rest of the Fourth. It was any odds, then, that the Housemaster would take it for granted that he—Nipper—was still with the Fourth, and would remain with the Fourth all the morning.

Nipper found the Modern House empty. No doubt there was plenty of activity in the domestic quarters of the building; but

in the Junior passages and in the Common-room not a living soul was to be seen. Nipper took up a position in one of the studies, from the window of which he could keep a close watch on the School House. He wanted to be sure of seeing Mr. Stockdale when the latter came over.

It was not altogether an enjoyable vigil. This spying on a Housemaster was distasteful to Nipper; but he put aside all such thought. Stockdale, without question, was somehow mixed up with the Moat Hollow murder. And it was highly necessary that Stockdale should be watched.

It occurred to Nipper that he had plenty of time; twenty minutes, at least, before the maths, lesson would be over. And Nipper took the opportunity to slip down the corridor to Mr. Stockdale's study.

Finding the door unlocked, he came to the conclusion that any search of the study would be fruitless. Nipper took stock of the passage just outside. He saw there was a cupboard almost opposite the study door. And when he tried the door of the cupboard, it opened easily and noiselessly. Inside there was a clear space.

Nipper noted all these things. It was just as well to be prepared.

Some minutes later he was glad that he had made that preliminary survey. Back in his old vantage post, he saw Mr. Stockdale come striding quickly across the deserted Triangle from the School House. The Housemaster's gown was floating in the wind, and his mortar-board was set squarely on his head. Nipper could see an expression of eagerness on his face.

Waiting, the unseen watcher heard Mr. Stockdale go striding down the corridor. Without hesitation, Nipper followed, and, as he had suspected, Mr. Stockdale had gone straight to his study.

There was a certain amount of risk in listening outside the door—for a servant might come along, and surprise him. And that would be most awkward. But Nipper had to take this chance. It was equally likely that Mr. Stockdale would suddenly emerge, and catch him redhanded. That would be awkward, too. However, there was the cupboard, opposite—and Nipper had the door open ready, so that he could dodge in, in case of surprise.

"Bannington 3841," came Mr. Stockdale's voice suddenly.

Nipper crept nearer. He was safe from the Housemaster, at all events—for, clearly, Mr. Stockdale was sitting at his desk, telephoning. There came a tiny drumming sound, and Nipper guessed that Mr. Stockdale was impatiently tapping his fingers on the polished desk.

"Yes?" came his voice, at length. "Oh, it's you, doctor. Good morning! I hope I'm not troubling you by ringing up, but I would rather like to know how Mr. Harrison is this morning?"

There was a pause. Nipper wondered.

Harrison. Another name! Who was he, anyway?

"He slept all night, and he's still sleeping?" came Mr. Stockdale's voice. "That's splendid."

There was another pause.

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Stockdale. "But please don't disturb him, doctor. Yes, I'll ring up later in the day. Yes, yes, naturally. Thank you very much."

The man at the other end of the wire spoke for some time, evidently, for Mr. Stockdale remained silent, except for an occasional interjected "yes," or "really?"

"Well, it is very cheerful to hear that the patient is making such good progress," said the Housemaster, at length. "And please bear in mind, doctor, that this matter is absolutely private. If you wish to communicate with me, do so by letter or telegram. Please do not ring up the school, or give any message. I have a definite reason for asking you to respect this wish of mine."

A few moments later Nipper heard the "click" of the receiver as it was placed on its hook. And from within the study came a very distinct sigh—a sigh, it seemed, of relief. It was followed by the sound of a chair being pushed back.

Like a rabbit, Nipper dodged into the cupboard, opposite, and pulled the door to. He was only just in time, for Mr. Stockdale emerged from the study, and walked slowly up the passage. Nipper cautiously opened the cupboard door an inch, and looked.

Mr. Stockdale went out into the Triangle. Nipper followed his movements from one of the handy windows. He saw the Housemaster pacing up and down, finally strolling into the cloisters, where he continued his perambulations. After about fifteen minutes, Mr. Stockdale looked at his watch, and then hurried back into the School House.

"Good enough!" muttered Nipper. "That means that he has gone back to the Sixth Form class-room."

He gave himself up to thought. What he had overheard was significant. Who was this mysterious patient—this Mr. Harrison, who was still sleeping? And why had Mr. Stockdale been so insistent that his connection with Mr. Harrison should be kept private?

It is not necessary for Nipper to be much of a detective to deduce that Mr. Harrison was lying in a hospital, or some such establishment.

And a theory came into Nipper's mind—a startling one.

He remembered how he and Handforth & Co., in returning from the football match, and making a detour across the misty moor, had encountered a wild-looking man, unshaven, in muddy, stained tweeds.

There had been a wide search for this mysterious man—for Chief Detective-inspector Lennard believed that he was the murderer of Marcus Strutt. It was certainly significant that such a man should be wandering in the neighbourhood. The search had continued throughout the night; but, as Nipper knew,

the mysterious wild-eyed stranger had not been found.

Nipper remembered, too, how he had followed Mr. Stockdale out of the Modern House late the previous night—how Mr. Stockdale had carried an attaché case, as though going upon a journey. Nipper had been baulked of that trail owing to the enthusiastic, but ill-advised, activities of Handforth.

And this morning, Mr. Arthur Stockdale had seemed intensely relieved!

Everything fitted. Why had Stockdale left the school late at night? Surely, because he knew the hiding-place of the "wild" man! He had gone to that man—presumably the murderer—and he had helped him to escape. That was why the police had met with non-success. The stranger had been taken by Mr. Stockdale to a local hospital—and the hospital doctor, having no suspicion against a schoolmaster; had respected Mr. Stockdale's wishes for privacy.

"My only sainted aunt!" ejaculated Nipper breathlessly.

This was a first-class piece of information for Nelson Lee. But Nipper frowned when he gave more thought to the situation. If Harrison was the murderer, then who was the Chinaman who had lurked in that tree, overlooking the Moat Hollow grounds? And if the murderer was the Chinaman, why had Stockdale been in such a stew, and why had he hidden Harrison away? The only possible theory was that Stockdale and Harrison had been concerned with the Chinaman in the murder. They had not actually committed the crime—but they knew all about it—were, in fact, accessories.

"Oh, rats!" grunted Nipper. "I'm getting into deep water now! I can't think that old Stocky would be mixed up in such an awful business. Anyhow, I've got on the trail, and I'll jolly well follow it up!"

He remembered the telephone number—Bannington 3841—and his first task, now, was to get hold of a local telephone directory, and look up the local hospitals. There were only three, and all the numbers were different from the number Nipper had overheard.

"H'm!" he grunted. "That's awkward."

He thought of telephoning the exchange, and asking them to trace the number; but if he did that he would have to state his business—and it was quite likely that the post-office authorities would refer him to the police.

Another idea came to him. There were at least two private nursing homes in Bannington. One was called "Pine Hill Nursing Home," and it was really situated a mile or two out of the town, amid lonely rural surroundings. It was a likely enough place. If Stockdale had taken Harrison to a nursing home in the middle of the night, he would hardly have chosen a place in the middle of the town.

Nipper turned the pages, and looked up the Pine Hill Nursing Home—and his heart gave

a little jump as he saw the telephone number. Bannington 3841. He had traced it!

"That's good enough," he muttered. "I'm going to find out who this fellow, Harrison, is—and how he got into that place!"

Another thought came to him before he took his departure from the Modern House. Reasoning things out in his own mind, he was quite certain that Mr. Stockdale would not have taken that "wild man" to the Pine Hill Home. Even in that out-of-the-way spot, the doctor and the nurses must have heard of the man hunt in the district.

Nipper remembered the man he and Handforth had seen on the moor—muddy, bedraggled, unshaven—hunted. If Stockdale had taken such a man to the home, he would have aroused grave suspicions.

The suggestion was that he had provided Harrison with a change of clothes—had, perhaps, given him a shave.

On the off-chance, Nipper hurried upstairs, and, finding everything quiet, he nipped into Mr. Stockdale's bed-room, and stood looking round. His heart was beating rapidly now. There was a chance that Mr. Stockdale would come in—and if he did so, Nipper would have no reasonable explanation to offer for this intrusion.

The bed-room was very orderly and tidy. Nipper did not go near the wardrobe, or the chest-of-drawers. He concentrated his attention upon a cupboard, in a corner of the room. And when he tried the cupboard door, it refused to budge. The very fact that the door was locked struck Nipper as being significant.

He pulled a queer key from his pocket—a kind of skeleton key. With nimble fingers, he inserted the instrument in the lock, and twiddled about for some moments. Nipper was an expert at this sort of thing; and he was gratified, a few moments later, when he felt the lock click back.

He swung the door open. His position was even more precarious now—for it would be serious to be caught red-handed, prying in Mr. Stockdale's bed-room cupboard.

"Oh, well!" muttered Nipper, with a shrug.

He swung the door open—and jumped. For the very first thing he saw, lying on the floor, at the back of the cupboard, was a grimy, muddy tweed suit. He recognised the colour and the check at once. It was the self-same suit which the "wild man of the moor" had been wearing the previous night!

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Nipper.

There were boots, too—and a hat. The man's entire outfit. So Stockdale had brought him here—actually to the school—and he had changed in Stockdale's own bed-room.

And the Housemaster, sure of his immunity—by reason of his respectable status—had not even troubled to get rid of the incriminating clothing! He had left it here, in his cupboard, and his only precaution had been to lock the cupboard door.

Nipper could not fail to see the grim suggestiveness of his discovery.

For here was an added proof that Stockdale was "up to his neck" in the Moat Hollow mystery. No innocent man would have brought that wild stranger to the school; neither would he have provided the man with a new outfit, afterwards taking him to a nursing home. It was all so simple—and yet so significant. While the police had been scouring the countryside, Mr. Stockdale, eminently respectable, had calmly taken the wanted man to a local nursing home! The audacity of the thing left Nipper breathless.

Here was a perfect explanation of Stockdale's change of front. This morning he had been almost cheerful. Nelson Lee thought that it was a temporary cheerfulness—and no doubt Lee was right. Already, Mr. Stockdale was growing anxious, or he would not have rung up the nursing home.

The very fact that the Housemaster had held back—that he had refrained from taking the story to the police—indicated that it was a guilty story.

The chain of evidence which Nelson Lee and Nipper were forging, between them, was growing stronger and stronger. The case against Mr. Arthur Stockdale was becoming as black as night itself.

Nipper did not disturb the clothing. With lightning speed he closed the cupboard, re-locked it, and stole out. But he did not breathe freely until he was once again in the open air. He had taken a big chance in going into Mr. Stockdale's bed-room. Any of the servants might have seen him. But Nipper knew his business—and he had been excessively cautious. He was satisfied that he had conducted his investigations ably.

His next move was to enter the Ancient House, in search of Nelson Lee. But Lee was not there, neither could Nipper find out where he had gone.

He borrowed a bicycle—Tommy Watson's machine, as a matter of fact—and pedalled down to the village.

Here he met Detective-sergeant Tracey.

"Haven't seen him for an hour," said the sergeant, in answer to Nipper's inquiry. "Mr. Lee went off in the car somewhere. Mr. Lennard's gone to Bannington, to have an interview with the Chief Constable. We don't seem to be getting anywhere in this case."

"You will—soon," promised Nipper. "Don't forget that my guv'nor is working on the mystery."

He pedalled away, and there was a look of determination on his face. Since he could not find Lee, he would cycle over to the Pine Hill Nursing Home—and he would trust to his own ingenuity to obtain an interview with the mysterious Mr. Harrison.

Nipper felt that he was on the verge of a discovery. But never for a moment did he realise how, in making this journey, he was playing into the enemy's hands!

CHAPTER 4.

The Black and White Launch.

CHIEF-INSPECTOR LENNARD was leaving the police-station, in Bannington, when he caught sight of a long, rakish car which immediately attracted his attention. Nelson Lee sat at the wheel.

"I was just about to inquire after you, Lennard," said the detective, as he pulled up.

The Scotland Yard man rested his elbows on the side of the car.

"I'd like to know just how much you've discovered," he said thoughtfully. "This Chinaman, for example? You were infernally mysterious earlier this morning. Can't you give me a hint?"

"I want to know if you have located that motor-launch, Lennard?" said Lee.

"As a matter of fact, we have," replied the inspector. "We've located it so easily that I can't believe there's anything in your theory. The launch certainly belongs to a Chinaman, and it's just as certain that he is a well-to-do fellow on holiday. He has been up and down the river quite a lot lately, and there has been nothing in his movements to occasion suspicion. His launch is lying at Caistowe now—at its usual mooring place, against one of the quays."

"How did you find this out?" asked Lee.

"Nothing easier," said the other. "There are heaps of people in Caistowe who could have given us the information. Half the town knows this Chinaman. By the way, are you sure he is a Chinaman? I understand that his name is Whitaker. And that's not Chinese."

"Well, thanks for the information, Lennard," said Nelson Lee. "I think I'll drive along to Caistowe, and have a look round. No, I'd rather you didn't come—you're too well known. I don't want Mr. Whitaker to have any suspicions that his movements are of interest to the police. Do you know if the launch has been up the river this morning?"

"No; but it's quite likely," replied Lennard. "I've already told you that it is always up and down. The fellow practically lives on the river. And, for the life of me, I can't see anything suspicious in that. Why shouldn't he live on the river if he wants to? And how could such a man have any interest in old Marcus Strutt?"

"I'll see you later, Lennard," replied Lee, with a nod.

He left the inspector disgruntled. Yet Lennard was hopeful. Whenever Nelson Lee was very mysterious it generally meant that a "kill" was near at hand. Lennard had worked with the famous detective so many times that he knew all of Lee's moods.

Driving to Caistowe, Lee was thoughtful. He needed one vital piece of evidence before he could give the police definite information, so that a warrant could be sworn out. Without that evidence the police would not move.

It would be futile to mention the attack on his own life in Bellton Wood. There was



Nipper reached the motionless figure and bent down. "This looks bad," he muttered. The next moment a foot swung up and drove with brutal force clean into Nipper's face.

nothing but Nelson Lee's own word—and a tiny scrap of thin rope. Lee had not even seen his assailant. But he knew that the river flowed quietly along on the farther outskirts of the wood. But it seemed that the police were taking little or no interest in the craft which went up and down the river.

Arriving in Caistowe, Lee drove straight to the police-station. He was greeted warmly by Inspector Walton, who had been attached to the division for many years. Nelson Lee had known him well in the old days.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, as he wrung Lee's hand. "I hear you're interesting yourself in that Belton murder? Queer affair, wasn't it? One of those cases with all sorts of clues—but the clues lead nowhere."

"Yes, so I understand."

"They've found fingerprints, and all that sort of thing—but the job wasn't done by a professional criminal," went on the inspector. "Mr. Lennard tells me that the fingerprint department, up at the Yard, has been turned inside out. But it's no good. The man who killed Strutt isn't known to us. And that's what makes it difficult. We've been delving into his past, and the further we delve, the less chance there seems of making an arrest.

The old man never had any visitors, either down here or in London."

"The solution may not be so far off as Mr. Lennard believes," said Lee dryly. "I am wondering, Walton, if you will let me use your private office for a few minutes? Don't look surprised, but I want to alter my appearance slightly."

"You don't mean that you're going to disguise yourself?" asked the inspector, staring. "I thought that sort of thing was only done in detective stories."

"Occasionally we have to do it in real life," smiled Lee.

When he emerged, a few minutes later, from the inspector's private office, Walton was astonished. Nelson Lee had only touched himself up here and there, but he looked twenty years older. His whole facial expression, too, was different, and with a twist of his hat, and an untidy twirl of his necktie, his very dress was changed.

"Well, upon my word!" said the inspector blankly. "I'm jiggered if I should have known you, Mr. Lee!"

"You don't mind if I leave my car outside for a bit, do you?" asked Lee in a voice which was quite unlike his own.

"Not a bit," said Walton. "How on earth do you do it, sir? And what's the game,

anyway? Something in connection with the Moat Hollow affair?"

"Yes, but you'll forgive me if I don't let you into any secrets yet," said Nelson Lee. "Many thanks, inspector. I'll see you later."

He walked away from the police station and left the inspector staring after him in wonder.

Lee made his way to the water front, and at length he came to a quiet quayside at the mouth of the River Stowe, where all manner of sailing boats and other craft were moored. In the summer-time, these moorings were crowded; but now the boats were only dotted here and there.

Lee soon located the launch he was particularly interested in. There was no secret about it; it was lying openly next to the quay, moored securely. It was a smart motor launch, painted black and white, and it boasted of a covered-in super-structure, with a neat little cabin.

Lee had been making some discreet inquiries himself that morning, and he knew that this was the craft which had been seen, many times, up and down the river of late. The very openness with which the launch had moved about indicated that its owner had no reason to be afraid of inquiries.

Lee walked slowly along the quay, inspecting the launch thoughtfully. Quite near to it stood a board, and on the board there was a notice, with the words "For sale," and an intimation that anybody interested should inquire of some agents in the town.

Nelson Lee wilfully misunderstood. He knew that this notice referred to some other craft—which, no doubt, had been sold long ago. Lee preferred to think that the black-and-white launch was the vessel in question.

So he went down to it inquisitively, nosing about, and finally stepping on to the launch itself and testing the door which gave into the little cabin.

But it was securely locked. Lee was quite prepared to force that lock, and to get into the cabin. In fact, that was why he had come here.

However, his opportunity did not come. For before he could even attempt to force the door lock, he heard a soft voice from the quay. Turning, he found a slim, smiling gentleman regarding him.

"Good morning, sir," said the smiling gentleman.

"Oh, yes! To be sure!" exclaimed Lee, stepping off the launch. "I see that this charming little craft is for sale." And he indicated the board. "If the price is not too high, I might be interested. Do you happen to know the owner, sir?"

"I do," said the other, eyeing Lee steadily. "I am the owner."

"Oh, really! Splendid!" said Lee. "Then perhaps you can tell me——"

"I can tell you that the launch is not for sale," interrupted the other. "I think you have made a mistake, sir. The board does not apply to my boat."

"Oh, really?" said Lee in an assumed confusion. "I really beg your pardon, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Whitaker is my name, sir."

"Whitaker?" repeated Lee, raising his eyebrows slightly. "I'm happy to meet you, sir. My own name is Wren. Did you say Whitaker?" he added curiously.

He was looking at the other with frank curiosity. The man was neatly dressed, well groomed, and, although he was foreign-looking, he did not, at first sight, look Chinese. The natural yellowness of his skin was half-hidden beneath a healthy-looking tan. His features were by no means unpleasant, and the slant of his eyes was more or less concealed by the big horn-rimmed glasses which he wore.

"Yes, Whitaker—Sidney Whitaker," he said deliberately. "I am a Eurasian. My father was English, and my mother Chinese. You disapprove?" he added dryly.

"Why, good gracious, no!" said Lee hastily. "I fear I owe you an apology, sir. I was staring quite rudely, wasn't I? Forgive me."

They stood looking at one another. Lee wondered why Mr. Whitaker had volunteered the information that he was a Eurasian. That information was a lie. Lee knew perfectly well that "Whitaker" was an assumed name, and that the man was a pure-blooded Chinese. Vanity, perhaps, had influenced him to use hair dye and a false tan, so that he took on the appearance of a Eurasian. This was not a recently assumed make-up; it was the habit of years.

"You are interested in my launch?" went on Whitaker. "Perhaps you would care to go aboard again, sir? Perhaps you would like to explore the interior?"

"As the vessel is not for sale, I'm afraid I should be wasting your time and my own," replied Lee.

"You think so?" said Whitaker, smiling. "Would you not like to go aboard—out of curiosity? I can assure you the vessel is most interesting."

There was almost a mocking note in his voice; his eyes, behind the spectacles, held a challenge. And Nelson Lee knew, in that moment, that Whitaker suspected him. It was more than likely, in fact, that Whitaker had penetrated Lee's simple disguise. This man was no ordinary criminal. Lee felt a little thrill. He was face to face with one of the most audacious and cold-blooded murderers within his experience. Lee knew it. Not only did his instinct tell him so, but the facts he had already gained corroborated his instinct.

They stood here, on this deserted quay, the famous detective and the murderer, smiling at one another, uttering polite commonplaces. Lee was certain that this man had, not two hours earlier, attempted to murder him in Bellton Wood.

In a word, Sidney Whitaker was quite contemptuous of the police—as was evident by his open movements in the district. But he knew that Nelson Lee was suspicious of him—and, for that reason, he had attempted to put Lee out of the way before the latter passed any of his information to the police.

The detective was aware that he stood in imminent danger. This man, smiling and urbane, was even this moment thinking of murder. Only the daylight and the fact that people were in view in the distance saved Lee from another attack.

And, in spite of himself, the detective admired the cool, cunning devil who faced him. The man was clever. He might have directed suspicion against himself if he had left the district. But he believed that he had left no clue—that he had nothing to fear—and he was in no way afraid of police inquiries. If questioned, he could have accounted for his movements satisfactorily.

But Lee! Lee was different. Lee did not represent the official force, and the very fact that he had come to inspect this launch proved to Whitaker that Lee had formed certain suspicions. And Nelson Lee was dangerous.

"You will come aboard?" asked Whitaker, indicating the launch. "I should be charmed to show you the interior of my little craft, sir."

"Thank you, no," said the detective. "As the vessel is not for sale, I am not really interested."

He was aware that this invitation was comparable to the celebrated offer of the spider to the fly. And Lee was far too wary a bird to walk open-eyed into a death-trap.

"As you will, Mr. Wren," said Whitaker with a shrug. "I would not dream of persuading you against your will. I am sorry, however, that you are not sufficiently interested. Can I have the pleasure of giving you a lift up the river? I am about to set off on a trip, and I should be most happy to accommodate you."

It was a challenge, but Nelson Lee rejected it.

"Thank you all the same, but I am staying in the town," he said.

"It is a pity," murmured Whitaker. "I would have liked you to see the cabin of my wonderful little launch."

He extended his hand in friendly fashion, and as Nelson Lee took it he felt a hearty grip—and, at the same time, a tiny pin-prick of pain in his third finger. And in that second, Lee remembered that the Chinaman had, a moment before, stood with both his hands behind him.

Like lightning, Lee withdrew his grip and looked at his hand. On the third finger there was a tiny scratch.

"I am dreadfully sorry," said Whitaker with concern. "It is this Oriental ring of mine. I must have it seen to. You are not the first person I have accidentally scratched in shaking hands."

They looked at one another, and Nelson Lee's gaze was as steady as a rock.

"That was clever of you, Mr. Whitaker!" he said deliberately.

He turned abruptly on his heel and walked away.

"Good-bye—Mr. Lee!" came the soft voice from behind him—and it was full of intense gloating.

When Lee glanced back, the Chinaman had leapt aboard the launch, and was already making preparations for an immediate departure.

Lee would have preferred to leap aboard that craft and tackle his man straight away. But it was impossible. His very life depended upon the next few minutes.

For Lee knew perfectly well that Whitaker was wearing a trick ring, and by the touching of a hidden spring, or some such device, he had caused a poisoned spike to project. He had pressed that spike firmly into Lee's finger during the hand grip. In a word, Lee was poisoned; and the chances were that he would collapse within the next few minutes. When found, there would be no trace on him—nothing to show how he had met his death. It was almost certain that he would be picked up, carried to a doctor—and the doctor would declare that he had died from heart failure.

No, this was no time to chase after the murderer.

Lee walked first, and as he walked he took out his penknife, and, without compunction, he jabbed the point deeply into his finger, where the scratch was.

Then he not only sucked the spot, drawing a great deal of blood, which he spat out, but immediately afterwards he halted. Taking out his automatic petrol lighter, he struck the flint, and then held the flame against the little wound, burning his finger badly. The agony was intense, but, by these simple methods, Lee had already extracted most of the deadly poison. If he had waited even one minute, it would have been too late.

Even now he felt a numbness creeping over him. His very brain seemed to become sluggish, and he found thinking difficult. But, somehow, he managed to reach a chemist's shop. Fortunately, the shop was empty, and Lee strode straight up to the counter, and thrust his hand under the surprised chemist's face.

"Quick! Cauterise that wound!" said Lee tensely.

The chemist gazed at it in wonder.

"Dear me! This looks bad!" he said. "What on earth have you been doing to it, sir? It appears to be burnt as well as cut—"

"Don't ask questions," interrupted Lee. "The finger is poisoned—badly poisoned. I think I have extracted—"

He swayed as he spoke, and the chemist looked more startled than ever. However, the man was quick-witted, and, without any loss of time, he cleaned the wound, and then cauterised it thoroughly—and in a manner which was dictated by the patient himself.

"How did it happen, sir?" asked the chemist, when the finger was dressed.

"I suppose I have myself to blame," replied Lee, with a rueful laugh. "Monkeying about with a poisoned needle. And experiment, that's all."

He put the chemist off, and, having paid the small bill, he took his departure.

Outside in the road, he halted. Some distance away, on the other side of the street, he caught a glimpse of Mr. Sidney Whitaker. And that gentleman had seen him—and was now hurrying away.

Lee was still feeling dizzy and numb as he walked in the other direction—back towards the police-station. He knew that he could not swear any information against the man who had attempted to kill him in such a bare-faced manner. Lee's evidence was useless. He could not even prove that he had been poisoned. Whitaker, too, knew it. The man had made a daring attempt to rid himself of his dangerous enemy and he had failed. Twice that morning he had failed.

Nelson Lee could scarcely believe that he had really escaped. Only by digging ruthlessly into the wound, and sucking the poison out, had he saved his life. It was just a case of presence of mind. And if the detective had been grim before, he was now coldly furious. He blamed himself for his carelessness. He ought to have been more on his guard—knowing, as he did, the fiendish ruthlessness of the man he was after.

He would have taken some action at once—but for the fact that he was not feeling up to it. To tell the truth, he felt deathly sick, and that dreadful numbness was increasing.

"Well, sir, any luck?" asked Inspector Walton, smiling, as Lee came into the police-station.

"It all depends upon what kind of luck you mean," replied Lee.

And without another word he went into the inspector's private office, and removed his simple disguise. When the inspector joined him, some minutes later, the good man was startled.

"Hallo! You look bad, sir!" he said, eyeing Lee closely. "You're as white as paper!"

"Do you mind if I rest here for awhile?" asked Lee dully. "I should like a little cold water, inspector."

The water was brought, and Lee, with a hand which trembled visibly, lifted the glass to his lips. Then he gulped down a liberal swig of brandy from his flask.

"You had a shock, Mr. Lee," said the inspector, with concern.

"No—worse than that," replied Lee. "Do you mind if I stay here for half-an-hour—quiet?"

The inspector took the hint, and Lee was left alone. Truth to tell, the detective was little more than half-conscious. Even the fractional amount of poison which had entered his system had semi-paralysed him. He knew all too well that the full dose would have killed him within three minutes.

After half-an-hour he was so much better that some of the colour had returned to his cheeks. His limbs were steadier, and the flat, blank look had gone from his eyes. Rapidly, now, he was recovering. His injured hand throbbed with such agony that he was obliged to clench his teeth.

"This won't do!" he muttered, getting to his feet. "Exercise is what I need—action.

By Heaven! That fiend shall pay the full penalty!"

If there was any satisfaction to be gained from his experience, it was that the criminal had plainly shown his hand. He was desperate. And, knowing that Lee was still alive, he would now probably make a bolt for it. Nelson Lee's chief concern—his big worry—was that he had insufficient evidence to lay before the police. They would never issue a warrant for Whitaker's arrest on Lee's word alone. The police require cast-iron evidence before they will arrest a man on a murder charge.

Lee was angry with himself because he felt that he had blundered. Not only had he shown his own hand too soon, but Whitaker had recognised him. The Chinaman was brilliant. Even now, Whitaker was certain that Lee could do him no harm.

The detective failed to give Inspector Walton any satisfaction. He offered no explanation of his strange indisposition, and soon afterwards he left the police station.

He got into his car, and the cool air of the wintry day did him good. By the time he reached St. Frank's he felt more himself—and he was ready for the next round in this grim battle of wits.

CHAPTER 5.

The Shot from the River.

THE question of time played an important part of the events of that morning.

Nipper, for example, had been doing his quiet investigations in the Modern House at St. Frank's during the same hour as Nelson Lee had been experiencing such a narrow escape at Caistowe.

And as Nipper pedalled along the quiet road towards Bannington, on Tommy Watson's bicycle, Lee, at that same time, was motoring to St. Frank's—after his rest at the Caistowe police-station. As for Sidney Whitaker—that ingenious Oriental with the English name, was active, too.

At one spot on the road between Bellton and Bannington, there was a short rise, with a sharp turn at the top. From here it was possible to look down at the River Stowe, close at hand. A reach of the river was in full sight. As Nipper reached this little hill-top, he glanced casually at the river, and then his heart jumped. A black and white motor-launch was moving up the stream, and even from this distance Nipper could see that the man at the wheel was a foreigner of some kind. He was well dressed—but he looked rather out of place. Knowing all he did, Nipper had no difficulty in placing the man as a Chinaman, or, at least, a man of the East.

"My only hat!" muttered Nipper breathlessly.

This was undoubtedly the man Sergeant Tracey had spoken of—and the man who,

according to Lee, had sat in that tree overlooking the Moat Hollow grounds.

Nipper pedalled on, and a moment later some willows concealed the launch from view. Nipper himself, free-wheeling down a short hill, lost sight of the river completely. He wondered what he should do. It would be difficult to approach the river without arousing the suspicions of the man in the launch. Yet Nipper was quite certain that the man had seen him—had looked at him searchingly during that brief minute when they had both been in clear view.

Some distance farther on a break in the hedge allowed Nipper to get another glimpse of the river across a short stretch of grassy meadowland. But the launch had evidently gone well ahead by now, for Nipper saw no sign of it, or even heard the soft purring of its motor.

Crack!

On the still wintry air a report sounded—and Nipper was far too familiar with that sound to be mistaken as to its origin. He recognised it at once as a pistol-shot. There was something ominous in that report amid such peaceful surroundings—particularly when Nipper remembered the launch and the man it contained.

His heart suddenly gave a jump as he thought of Nelson Lee. Where was his guv'nor, anyway? Was it possible that—

Scarcely daring to formulate his thoughts, he jammed on the brakes, leapt from the machine, and broke through a gap in the hedge. He was quite alone on the road; not a vehicle or a pedestrian was within sight.

No sooner had he broken through the hedge than he caught his breath in. The river was hidden, mostly, by willows and clumps of bushes. A man in a light-coloured rain-coat and a soft hat was staggering into view from behind the bushes. He was clutching at his chest, and even as Nipper watched, the figure half ran, half stumbled, a few feet farther, and then collapsed.

The whole thing seemed incredible. Undoubtedly the man had been shot; and it was just as certain that he had been shot by the man on the launch. Perhaps the unfortunate stranger was a detective, or—

Again Nipper did not wait to complete his thought. He raced across the marshy meadow at full speed. His errand was forgotten. As he ran he looked at the river, expecting to see the launch, but it was nowhere in view.

Then he came to the fallen man, and he bent down, breathing rapidly.

The figure was lying face upwards, absolutely motionless, and both hands were pressed hard on the chest, as though in a convulsive attempt to ease a sudden pain. The face was invisible, for the man's soft hat had fallen over it.

"This looks bad!" muttered Nipper.

He reached for the man's hat in order to remove it—and at the same second one of the stranger's feet came up into the air with incredible speed and force.

Crash!

Even as Nipper took the hat away he caught a glimpse of the face—and it was the face of Sidney Whitaker! But the lad had no chance of expressing his astonishment, for Whitaker's foot, driven with brutal force, struck Nipper full in the face.

It was like the kick of a mule. Nipper crashed over backwards, his senses reeling, a jagged cut on his forehead caused by the toe of Whitaker's boot.

It had been a trick; simple enough, but deadly in effect. Whitaker had deliberately fired that shot so that Nipper would be lured off his machine; and then the man had waited until Nipper had broken through the hedge. After that it had been simple enough for the Chinaman, having donned a waterproof, to stagger as though mortally wounded.

"This is very obliging of you, my young friend," muttered Whitaker.

He was on his feet in a moment; and Nipper, who was attempting to struggle up, received another kick on the side of the head which completely laid him out. Whitaker's eyes were burning with a relentless fixity of purpose.

He took a quick look round, saw that no other eyes had witnessed the incident, and the next moment he lifted Nipper into his arms and carried him round the bushes, and so to the river bank.

The black-and-white launch was close in amongst the reeds. It had been hidden from Nipper by reason of the bushes and the willows.

The whole thing was over within a minute.

Nipper was carried aboard, taken into the cabin, and then the engine purred into life, and the launch glided sedately into midstream. If anybody happened to look at the vessel now, there was nothing suspicious to be seen.

But Whitaker nearly made a bad blunder. He had got Nipper—but he had overlooked something. Suddenly a startled expression came into Chinaman's eyes. He stopped the launch's engines, and, diving into the tiny cabin, he got some stout cords, bound Nipper hand and foot, and wrapped a heavy scarf round his face. Then he closed the cabin again and took the launch to the river bank.

Running over the meadows, he reached the road, and was relieved to find that he still had the scene to himself. There was Nipper's bicycle, leaning against the hedge.

The anglicised Chinaman seized the machine, cursing himself in his own language as he did so. Fortune was favouring him; but he knew that half a dozen people might have come along during this interval, and they might have seen the bicycle, too. It was just pure luck that Whitaker was still alone.

He got the machine on to the launch, but he did not keep it there for more than thirty seconds. As soon as the craft had reached midstream Whitaker took another quick look round, and then he dropped the bicycle into

the river. It sank instantly, leaving no trace, for in that spot the water was deep.

And now Whitaker breathed more freely. He had made good his blunder. Not only Nipper had vanished, but the bicycle, too. The launch glided easily downstream.

But it did not proceed far. Whitaker was only too well aware that Nelson Lee had escaped death—and he knew that Lee would now relentlessly pursue his inquiries. It was far too risky to carry Nipper in the cabin of the launch. Whitaker had other ideas in mind—and he promptly proceeded to put them into practice.

He was, in short, desperate. And having seen Nipper, he had recognised him, and had taken this drastic step on the spur of the moment. He thought that it would give him just the advantage he needed.

A few hundred yards farther on he turned the launch into an almost hidden backwater, a tiny branch stream, it seemed, where the banks were festooned with reeds, and where the trees on either side almost met overhead. Gliding easily, the launch penetrated deeply, and the bushes and the trees grew more thickly here.

A building came within sight at the end of the backwater—a ramshackle, creeper-covered hut which had apparently been left derelict for years. There was not even a path through the tangle of undergrowth, for behind this spot there was a dense spinney, and on either side great sprawling masses of blackberry brambles, almost impenetrable. The only way to reach the hut, it seemed, was from the river. All the other approaches were guarded by the prickly brambles.

Whitaker secured his craft, leapt ashore, and a minute later he had succeeded in forcing open one of the ramshackle doors. He had never been to this old hut before, but he had often seen it when passing up and down the river, and it occurred to him that it would make an excellent prison for Nipper.

The old building was really a disused boat-house, and Whitaker neither knew nor cared to whom it belonged. There wasn't a chance in a million that anybody would come to the place at this time of the year. It had apparently been abandoned for many years, even during the summer months. So what chance was there of anybody coming during the winter?

Inside he found that the building, although dilapidated, was sound enough. The walls were intact, and the roof, although showing holes here and there, was solidly built.

Nipper, still bound hand and foot, was dragged into the old hut; and here the Chinaman improved upon his former efforts. More ropes were used, and they were used cruelly. Nipper's legs and arms were so thoroughly secured that it was impossible for him to move. And so cunningly were those bonds placed upon the lad that any exertion on his part would inevitably tighten the cords, thus adding to his agony.

Whitaker now removed the scarf, and he gazed down into Nipper's face with gloating

satisfaction. It was very gloomy in the old hut, but Nipper, who was now fully conscious, could see his tormentor fairly plainly. The blood was streaming down Nipper's face, and he was not a pleasant sight.

"You—you devil!" he panted.

"Come, come!" said Whitaker softly. "You are not going to be melodramatic, surely? I am not mistaken, am I, in recognising you as the young assistant of Mr. Nelson Lee?"

The man spoke university English, and he had all the manners of a gentleman.

"If anybody's being melodramatic, it's you," said Nipper scornfully. "What's the idea of tricking me like this—roping me up, and bringing me to this old hut? What are you going to do? Kill me?"

"If I had intended killing you, my young friend, I should not have gone to the trouble of roping you up so thoroughly."

"My mistake!" said Nipper. "You killed old Strutt, so I thought you wouldn't mind adding another murder to your list!"

"What makes you think that I killed Strutt?" asked Whitaker sharply.

"The gov'nor——" Nipper suddenly checked, realising the folly of giving this man any gratuitous information. "What do you take me for?" he added. "If you're not the murderer of Marcus Strutt, why have you bagged me like this? What do you hope to gain by it?"

"The situation is becoming annoyingly dangerous," replied Whitaker. "I find it necessary to take certain protective steps. I regret that you should be victimised in this way—but it is necessary."

The man's calmness sent a chill down Nipper's spine. European though he looked, in dress, even in complexion, he was purely Oriental beneath the surface.

"You've made an awful mistake," said Nipper scornfully. "By grabbing me like this you have put the noose round your neck. You may have fooled the police—but you mustn't think that you've fooled Mr. Lee!"

"I do not think so," replied Whitaker, and his voice was ominous. "It is because I know that Lee is conducting his investigations in certain channels that I have decided to interfere. It is a pity. I am being caused a great deal of uncongenial work—even dangerous work."

And, without giving Nipper any further opportunity to talk, the man thrust a rolled leather strap into Nipper's mouth. In vain Nipper gurgled and protested. The rolled strap practically filled his mouth. After that the Chinaman tied a silken scarf completely round Nipper's head, winding it like a bandage round his chin, and over the top of his head—so that his jaw was kept securely closed. Finally, he bound another scarf round his mouth, and bound this also like a bandage, from front to back. Never in his experience had Nipper been so thoroughly gagged. He could breathe, but it was an impossibility to make any sound above an inward gurgle. His discomfort was excru-

tiating. And he knew that later on he would be in positive agony.

Sidney Whitaker had made no mistake about his prisoner.

He left Nipper in that old shed, utterly helpless. The door was securely closed, and not only locked on the outside, but Whitaker jammed several baulks of old timber against the door, thus wedging it immovably.

After that he re-entered the launch, and edged it carefully out of the backwater. A few minutes later he was back on the river proper, and the engine was purring softly. Whitaker was once again a harmless-looking holidaymaker, enjoying a morning on the river.

Everything about this man was calm and deliberate. He was audacious, too. He had taken a big chance this morning, but it had come off trumps.

Here he was, cruising harmlessly on the river, contemptuous of the police. And Nipper, cycling to Bannington, had vanished as though the earth had opened and had swallowed him up. Not a trace of him remained—not even the bicycle. Moreover, he had not told anybody of his proposed destination, so it would be difficult to make any inquiries.

Whitaker, cunning as he was, would never have taken such a step had he not been desperate. He did not look desperate, for it was his habit to appear calm and unemotional. But, inwardly, the man was badly frightened. The knowledge that Nelson Lee was on his track, and getting nearer and nearer to a solution of the mystery, had driven Whitaker into panic.

He took the motor-launch to Bannington. Here he went ashore, and soon he was walking through the streets of the town. At an isolated public telephone box—one of those concrete booths which have been erected in all parts of the country—he paused. He entered the box, and gave a number.

NELSON LEE happened to see Detective-sergeant Tracey in Bellton, as he was driving through.

"Hallo, hallo!" said the sergeant, giving Lee a hard look. "What's wrong, sir? You don't seem to be yourself."

"I've had rather a nasty experience this morning, Tracey," replied Lee. "I may tell you about it later. Where's your chief?"

"In Bannington," replied the other. "Conference with the Chief Constable. I don't suppose anything will come of it. Done anything about that Chinaman, sir?"

"I have located him—and he appears to be a very harmless individual," replied Lee evasively. "Have you been to Moat Hollow recently?"

"Just come from it, sir."

"Do you know if Baines has found a small metal washer I asked him to search for?"

"Baines is a bit fed up, sir," replied Tracey. "Told me he's looked until he's cross-eyed. Can't see no sign of it." The

sergeant gave Lee a close look. "Is it important, sir?" he added.

"Very important," replied Lee. "Later on, perhaps, I will join in the search myself. When the inspector comes back, will you ask him to give me a ring?"

"Yes, sir," said Tracey. "By the way, your youngster was through here some little time ago."

"Nipper! Where was he off to?"

"Didn't say, sir, but he was on a bike, and went along the Bannington road."

As Lee completed his journey to the school he wondered what Nipper had been doing—and why he should have gone on a bicycle trip. Apparently, he had disobeyed orders—for Lee had told him to remain on watch all the morning in the Modern House. It must have been something important to take him away.

Curiously enough, no sooner had Lee entered the Ancient House than Mr. Alington Wilkes, the Housemaster, came bustling into the lobby.

"Well met, Mr. Lee!" he said. "I was trying to find somebody to look for you. You are wanted on the telephone."

"Inspector Lennard, probably," said Lee. "Thanks, Wilkes."

"In my study," said Old Wilkey.

A certain amount of noise from the Triangle told Nelson Lee that morning school was over. The boys had been released, and they were making their usual noise. Mr. Wilkes discreetly left Nelson Lee alone in the study, retiring and closing the door.

"Yes?" said the detective, as he picked up the receiver.

But it was not Inspector Lennard's voice at the other end. It was a totally unfamiliar voice, gruff, guttural, with a Teutonic twang to it.

"You are Mr. Lee, yes?" asked the voice.

"Yes," said Lee. "Who is it talking?"

"It is the murderer of Marcus Strutt," came the startling reply.

"What!"

"I have given you the big start, yes?" chuckled the voice at the other end. "I thought you would be glad to hear from me, Mr. Lee. You are the very clever man. But I think you are not clever enough."

Nelson Lee thought rapidly. During the ride from Caistowe he had recovered some of his old briskness, and now, at the sound of this strange voice, he was once again alert and virile.

"You do it well, Mr. Whitaker!" he said briefly.

"You are the fool!" snarled the voice. "I know nothing of any Whitaker. What do you say? Why do you talk of such a name?"

Lee inwardly chuckled. He was gratified because he had surprised that inscrutable Oriental into an exhibition of temper. The voice was perfectly disguised; it bore no resemblance to the voice of Sidney Whitaker. But the man's anger now convinced Lee that he had scored a bullseye.

"Unfortunately, a confession over the telephone will be of no use as evidence," said Lee evenly. "But at least I am satisfied that my own inquiries have been directed in the right channels."

"You shall make no further inquiries," said the voice. "I am telling you, Mr. Lee, to leave this district at once. You must tell your police friends that you can do nothing. You understand? You must return to London immediately."

"And if I don't?" asked Lee.

He was expecting the man to say that there would be another attempt upon his life; but what he actually heard startled him greatly.

"If you do not, your young man, Nipper, will not live!" said the voice.

"What do you mean?" demanded Lee sharply.

"Ah! You are pained, yes?" asked the disguised voice. "Very well, then. I will tell you. I have secured Nipper. He is quite safe—where you will not find him. Abandon this case at once, and return to London, and the boy will be released. But if you move one step farther in the case, Nipper will die. That is all. I will ring you again later this afternoon. And, remember—you must take no further action."

The line became dead, and Lee breathed hard. He did not doubt that the man had spoken the truth. Either Nipper had been decoyed away by some false message, or he had been captured during his bicycle ride to Bannington. In either case, it would be an extremely difficult matter to trace him.

Lee did not believe that Nipper would be saved if he—Lee—would abandon the investigation.

Thinking quickly, the detective got in touch with the exchange.

"This is Nelson Lee talking," he said urgently to the Bannington supervisor. "I want you to trace the call which just came through to this number. It is vitally important."

Lee's tone, as well as the influence of his name, had its effect. Within a minute the supervisor was talking.

"The call came from a public box in the Bryston district," he said.

"Thank you," said Lee. "Put me through to the police station at once, please."

Within a minute he was talking to Chief Inspector Lennard—Lennard having been called to the 'phone by Inspector Jameson.

"I want you to rush out to a public telephone call-box in the Bryston district, Lennard," said Lee. "It is down in the lower part of the town—not far from the Bannington Town Football Ground. By James! That's near the river, too!"

"But what's the idea?" asked Lennard in surprise.

"A man telephoned to me five minutes ago—and I urgently want him traced," replied Lee. "There may be somebody who saw him enter the box or emerge. Do your best, Lennard. Find out where that man went."

Within two or three minutes, not only Inspector Lennard, but a number of plain-clothes men were dashing to the Bryston district. They made endless inquiries. But they could find nobody who had seen a man entering the telephone box, or leaving. The district was a quiet one at that time of the day. There were one or two shops near by, but nobody had been taking any interest in the telephone box. The inquiry, in short, came to nothing.



Together Handforth & Co. and Mr. Smithers tore the floor, lay the

Nelson Lee was informed—and he was not surprised. Knowing the cunning of his adversary, he could well believe that the man had taken precautions.

"What's the trouble, anyway, Lee?" asked Lennard.

"Trouble enough," replied Lee grimly. "Nipper has been kidnapped by the murderer of Marcus Strutt."

"What!"

"It is true," continued Lee. "I can only tell you that Nipper left the school on a bicycle. Something must have happened to him on the main road between Bellton and Bannington. Do everything you can, Lennard—get every available man on the

job. The man who telephoned to me was the murderer—and he threatened to kill Nipper unless I abandoned the case.”

“Good heavens! But—but that’s fantastic!” ejaculated Lennard. “People don’t do that sort of thing.”

“This man has done it—and he means business, too,” replied Lee. “I’m telling you, Lennard, that Nipper’s life is in deadly danger.”

He rang off, and, leaving the study, he

He disappeared somewhere on the road between here and Bannington.”

It occurred to Lee that the telephone caller had been bluffing, but he quickly dismissed this theory. It was almost certain that Nipper had been seized, and was being held. There would have been no object in a bluff.

Those words of his, spoken with Mr. Wilkes, were overheard by some of the boys who were not far distant. And within five minutes the sensational news was circulating throughout St. Frank’s.

Nipper had been kidnapped! Nipper was in the hands of the Moat Hollow murderer! It was a dramatic and startling development.

CHAPTER 6.

Nelson Lee Shows His Hand.

NELSON LEE’S immediate inquiries bore little fruit.

All he could definitely discover was that a note had come for Nipper during the early part of the morning, and that it had been delivered in the Fourth Form class-room. At first Lee half-believed that this had been a decoy message; but Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West soon cleared up the little mystery. They had sent that note, at Nipper’s request, but they did not know what Nipper had done afterwards.

Nobody had seen him leaving the school, and Sergeant Tracey, it seemed, was the only man who actually knew that Nipper had gone to Bannington on a bicycle. Not only was the Bannington Road searched, but an attempt was made to identify the motor-cars and other vehicles which had passed along the road during the morning. Lee realised that it was a hopeless quest.

Then it was that he discovered more or less accidentally that Nipper had left a note for him—and the lad had placed it on the mantelpiece of Lee’s bed-room.

It was informative.

Briefly, Nipper told Nelson Lee of the result of his morning’s work. He explained how he had overheard Mr. Stockdale talking to the Pine Hill Nursing Home, inquiring after the health of a certain Mr. Harrison. Nipper also gave his own theories regarding Mr. Harrison’s identity—that he was, in short, the “wild man” who had been seen on Bannington Moor. Nipper concluded by saying that he was borrowing a bicycle, and going off at once to make discreet inquiries at the nursing home.

Nelson Lee telephoned at once, and he was soon talking to Dr. Drysdale, the principal.

“No, Mr. Lee; the lad has not been here,” said the doctor, in answer to Lee’s inquiries. “We have had no visitors this morning. I don’t think Nipper could have done, or I should have heard something. However, I will make inquiries, if you would care to wait.”

Lee did care; and, after an interval, Dr. Drysdale returned to the telephone to report



down the door and burst into the boathouse. There, on the missing Nipper.

came face to face with old Wilkey. The latter quickly saw, by Lee’s expression, that something serious was amiss.

“The case does not appear to be going smoothly, Mr. Lee,” he remarked.

“Until an hour ago the case was going perfectly,” replied Lee. “But Nipper has been kidnapped.”

“Good gracious!”

“Kidnapped by the murderer!” went on Lee. “It has been an eventful morning, Wilkes—and I may as well tell you that I have been getting very near to the end of the case. And now this has happened! I must make very careful inquiries, and find out, if I can, just where Nipper was going.

that Nipper had not been seen by any members of the staff. In short, he had not arrived at his destination.

Lee rang off, grim and thoughtful. This information merely corroborated the murderer's telephone call. Nipper, then, had been seized at some spot on his journey. It was impossible to say how he had been kidnapped, or where he was now.

Nelson Lee had a shrewd suspicion that Nipper had somehow been lured aboard the motor-launch. But Lee also knew that it would be a waste of time to have the launch located and searched. It was any odds that the launch was openly on view, somewhere on the river. Whitaker was sure of himself.

But there was another angle in this strange case which Lee could concentrate upon. He decided, then and there, to show his hand.

The police were looking for Nipper; they were doing everything possible. Lee could occupy his time more profitably in another direction. He was very anxious concerning Nipper's safety—for he knew only too well from his own personal experience that his enemy was ruthless. Indeed, Lee half-believed that Nipper was already dead. And, because he believed this, he became hard and grim. The time had come for action.

The detective went across to the Modern House, and his progress was watched by the breathless juniors. Handforth was particularly excited, and he and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and a few others surrounded the detective, plying him with eager questions.

"I can tell you nothing now, boys," said Lee. "Everything possible is being done."

"Do you think Nipper is in danger, sir?" asked Handforth.

"Yes, I do."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"But you boys can do no good by worrying," continued Lee. "It will be much better if you carry on as usual."

"But can't we help, sir?" asked Tommy frantically. "I mean, Montie and I are horribly worried. Nipper's our chum, you know, and—"

"Yes, I know," said Lee gently. "I wish I could suggest some way in which you could help. But there is nothing that you can do. Thank you, boys, all the same, for your kindly thoughts."

He walked on, and the juniors were disconsolate. Handforth was inclined to be rebellious, and he openly talked of setting off, without any further delay, on a hunt.

"Why not?" he demanded. "Nipper disappeared somewhere between Bellton and Bannington, and we might pick up a clue, mightn't we? Why not scour the whole countryside? All of us, I mean—the whole giddy school! Isn't it worth it?"

"Better go to the Head, and ask him if we can do it," said Church, with a sniff. "Don't be an ass, Handy! There's not a chance in a thousand that we shall be allowed to do anything."

"We can go without permission, can't we?" retorted Handforth.

In the Modern House, Nelson Lee made straight for Mr. Stockdale's study; and he was pleased to find the Housemaster there. Lee closed the door, and he did not fail to see the colour draining from Mr. Stockdale's face.

Lee had decided to obtain Stockdale's story at once. There was just a chance—a very slim one—that the hunt for Nipper would be assisted by what Stockdale would have to say. In any case, the time had arrived for this heart-to-heart talk, and no good purpose could be served by delaying it.

"Mr. Stockdale, I think you have something to tell me," said Lee quietly, when he sat down.

"I? Surely you are mistaken, Mr. Lee," said the agitated Housemaster. "What can I have to tell you?"

"Just this," replied Lee, looking the other straight in the face. "I believe that you know a good deal of what took place at Moat Hollow the other night—I believe that you are aware of the murderer's identity."

"No, no! You don't know what you're saying!" panted Mr. Stockdale, pale to the lips.

"And I think you might be able to give me some information regarding the murderer which will help me in my search for Nipper," continued Lee relentlessly. "Nipper has been kidnapped, and I am determined to find him. You may be able to help me, Mr. Stockdale—although it is quite likely that you do not realise that fact."

"Nipper—kidnapped!" muttered the Housemaster dully. "But—but how can I possibly know anything of it, Mr. Lee? You don't know what you're saying."

"I know a great deal more than you believe," said Lee. "I know, for example, that you were in Moat Hollow on the fatal night; I know that you were in Mr. Strutt's flat in London. I know that you shielded a man last night; that you brought him to the school and provided him with a complete change of clothing. Your movements, Mr. Stockdale, have been exceedingly suspicious, and if the police knew as much as I knew, you would have been arrested long before this."

"Heaven help me!" muttered Mr. Stockdale, crumpling in his chair.

"But from the very first I have been convinced that you had no hand in the murder of Marcus Strutt," continued Lee. "Knowing that, I have worked hard to avert a scandal which would reflect upon the good name of the old school. It is quite likely that your name can still be kept out of this dreadful business, Mr. Stockdale. But you must be absolutely frank with me—you must tell me everything you know."

Mr. Stockdale partially recovered.

"I cannot tell you anything!" he panted. "I defy you to do your worst, Mr. Lee! I admit nothing—"

"Come, come! You think you are shielding somebody, eh?" broke in Lee. "Possibly the man you took to the Pine Hill Nursing Home last night?"

Mr. Stockdale collapsed.

"In Heaven's name, Mr. Lee, how did you know?" he muttered wretchedly. "Don't send the police there! If you have my brother arrested——"

"Your brother?" asked Lee sharply.

"Poor, impulsive fool!" said Mr. Stockdale. "I know he did not mean to kill Strutt. The blow must have been struck whilst he was suffering from some kind of brain-storm. Charles would not deliberately kill——"

"Charles did not kill Strutt," interrupted Lee sharply. "So that is why you have been at such pains to hide him away, Mr. Stockdale? You believed that your brother Charles killed Strutt? I can tell you that Strutt was murdered by another hand."

Mr. Stockdale half rose from his chair, his face flushed, his eyes burning.

"But—but I don't understand!" he whispered. "I thought that Charles—— Charles himself believes—— Oh, my brain is bursting! I don't know what all this means!"

"Therefore, the sooner we have a straight talk and clear up these minor tangles, the better," said Nelson Lee. "It is evident to me that you have been suffering from a terrible misapprehension. You are no criminal, Stockdale, and although you have exercised a certain amount of care in your recent movements, you have left a trail which, to my eyes, is as plain as a steamroller track across a field of virgin snow. The police would have had you long ago if I had not withheld certain evidence. Your footprints and fingerprints, too, although meaning nothing to the police—since they had no reason to pursue their investigations at St. Frank's—were very easily verified by Nipper and by myself. But I want you to appreciate that, far from spying upon you and conspiring to bring about your downfall, we have been trying our hardest to help you. We wanted to save you from yourself. I knew how useless it would be to question you during the earlier stages of the inquiry. Before I could show my hand, as I am showing it now, I had to make certain of the murderer."

"I am going mad!" muttered Mr. Stockdale. "My brother is the murderer! You know it!" he went on fiercely. "You're just trying to trick me—to make me confess——"

"I think you know me better than that, Stockdale," interrupted Lee sharply. "I don't indulge in trickery of that sort. In any case, a statement from you would not be a 'confession.' Neither would it be of any value as a statement, since we are talking privately."

"Forgive me," muttered the other, "but I am bewildered—confused. Even Charles himself has admitted to me that he must have killed Strutt. That is why I have been at such pains to hide him away."

"There are some things about that tragic night which I cannot understand," said Lee. "I think it is very likely that you will be able to clear up these puzzling points, Stockdale. I want to know just why you and your brother were so interested in Marcus Strutt—why you practically broke into his house at dead of night—why you entered his London flat during his absence? You must understand that your movements have been very suspicious——"

"I know—I know!" groaned Mr. Stockdale. "Yet I swear to you, Mr. Lee, that I have done nothing really wrong. My conscience is clear."

"In that case, there can be no harm in you telling me the whole story," said Lee gently. "Begin at the beginning; don't hurry yourself. Tell me how you became involved in this extraordinary affair. I am greatly worried about Nipper, and I am anxious to take a certain drastic step. But I can't do that until I know the truth of your visit to Moat Hollow. It was another man who murdered Strutt, and I fancy I can effect his arrest quickly; but he is likely to talk. And if he talks, I want to be certain that he can do you no harm. Please believe that I am on your side, Stockdale."

"I do believe it, and I am grateful, indeed," said the other. "At the same time, your hint of a third man is unbelievable. There was no third man."

"So you think—but I know."

"Well, to begin with, I must tell you that my brother Charles is a schoolmaster like myself, although, at the moment, he is out of a position," said Mr. Stockdale slowly. "Five years ago he retired, and I was thinking of retiring, too. I am no longer a young man, Mr. Lee, and I have been looking forward keenly, joyously, to the time when I could take things easily. Charles is two years older than myself, and very much more impulsive. He is an excitable man, quick-tempered, direct of action."

"I can imagine that," said Lee, nodding.

"All his life he has been, like myself, a careful man," continued the other. "And some time before retiring he invested all his money in the Singapore and Bornea Oilfields Corporation."

"I see!" said Lee keenly. "That was the company which crashed three years ago."

"You will pardon me, Mr. Lee—it did not crash," said Stockdale. "The company was a thoroughly sound one, and was doing well, in spite of the world's over-production of crude oil. For some years Charles and I had been receiving handsome dividends, and we regarded our invested capital as safe as the money in the Bank of England. Then, as you know, the Singapore and Bornea Corporation literally fell to pieces."

"Is that any different from crashing?"

"Different in this way—the collapse was not due to world depression or over-stocked markets, or bad business," said Mr. Stockdale. "Charles and I lost all our money—every

penny of our capital—in common with thousands of other unfortunate people. But we lost it because Walter Drummond, the managing-director of the corporation, absconded."

"Yes, I think you are right," acknowledged Nelson Lee. "I remember the details quite clearly."

"Walter Drummond bolted with over sixty per cent of the company's money," went on Stockdale fiercely. "Naturally, the company crashed. It went bankrupt, and none of the shareholders received a penny. Drummond, it turned out, had been plotting for years—and he had plotted so cunningly that none of the missing money was ever traced. He had converted it into cash and securities which defied detection. He vanished. To this very day, the world does not know what became of Walter Drummond."

"That's true," said Lee.

"To Charles and myself it was an appalling blow," said Stockdale. "It meant that we must go on working—that our dreams of retirement were shattered. I think you must have known, Mr. Lee, that for some time I have been financially worried, and I fear my work at St. Frank's has suffered greatly on that account. But I was carrying on normally until—until I made the great discovery."

"That Marcus Strutt, of Moat Hollow, was really Walter Drummond?"

"How did you guess?"

"Even a guess is not necessary. The inference is obvious."

"It is curious that I recognised him at all," said Mr. Stockdale thoughtfully. "I had never previously met the man—knew him only as the managing-director of the company in which my money was invested. But after the collapse, Charles, whose nature is perhaps somewhat vindictive, sent me a large photograph of Drummond, and advised me to hang it in my study—so that I could memorise the face, and bear Drummond in mind as the man who wrecked my dream of happy retirement. I didn't like the idea much, but I kept the photograph in a drawer of my desk. Then, one day, some time after Strutt had bought Moat Hollow, I happened to meet him face to face in the lane. I did not recognise him at the time, but his face somehow struck me as being vaguely familiar. Drummond had a big moustache. Strutt had none. But there was an unmistakable mole on the left side of his face, near the ear. It was not until two days later, when I happened to glance at the photograph, that I realised the truth. The mysterious hermit of Moat Hollow was none other than Walter Drummond, the man who had wrecked thousands of lives."

"What did you do?"

"I at once wrote to my brother and told him of my strange discovery," replied Mr. Stockdale. "Perhaps it was a mistake—for Charles, of course, in his impulsive way, conceived the idea of forcing Strutt—or Drummond—to pay us the full amount of money we had invested. I told Charles that this would be dishonest—it would be unfair to the

other investors. Why should we get our money back, and they get nothing? I told him it would be far better to get some direct evidence that Strutt actually was Walter Drummond. So far, there was only my chance recognition, and that would have been no good to the police."

"I agree," said Lee. "That was sensible of you, Stockdale."

"This was some weeks ago," went on the Housemaster. "I confess I was useless at detective work, and my own inquiries, at this end, were more or less futile. I could only tell Charles that Strutt always went to London for the week-ends. Well, Charles did some detective work on his own account, and when Strutt went up to London, as usual, last Saturday, my brother followed him. He located the flat in Colne Court. Charles rang me up on Monday, after Strutt had returned to the country, and he told me that he meant to break into Colne Court that night. I was aghast. I told him that he was mad. Yet his argument seemed sound enough, when I came to consider it. Strutt was not there, and it was more than likely that some documents could be found in the flat which would definitely identify Strutt with Drummond."

"So your brother, Charles, planning to break into Strutt's flat, really embarked upon a piece of amateur detective-work?" asked Lee dryly.

"That was how Charles himself put it," replied Mr. Stockdale. "But I did not like the idea at all. I went up to London on Monday, failed to find Charles, although I waited for him for hours, in his rooms. Finally, I went to Colne Court, and to my horror I found that the place had already been broken open. The front door was even smashed, and standing half-ajar."

"And then?"

"I thought perhaps Charles was still within the flat, and I entered," continued Mr. Stockdale. "I fell over one or two pieces of furniture, and I believe I made a considerable amount of noise. That was why that young journalist, I have no doubt, entered the flat."

"Charles was not there?"

"No; he had gone, and I only entered to get him away, in case he should still be there," replied Mr. Stockdale wretchedly. "Then young Derwent sprang upon me, and we struggled, and somehow I managed to get away. I did not see Charles, but late on Tuesday evening he came here—to St. Frank's—entering privately, so that nobody else knew of his arrival. He told me that his search of the flat had been fruitless, and that he intended going down to Moat Hollow and facing Strutt as man to man. I argued with him, but it was useless. He was determined. I told him that he would only get himself into trouble, but he swore that he would get hold of Strutt, and force him to disclose where he had hidden the missing millions. My brother's idea was to compel Strutt to disgorge, so that all the swindled shareholders would get some of their money back."

"Your brother should have gone to the police, then and there," said Lee.

"That is what I told him," replied Mr. Stockdale breathlessly. "I pointed out that we had enough evidence to lay an information; but he disagreed. He argued that Strutt would smell a rat and bolt again. And then we should never get him at all. Anyhow, he went away, and I waited and waited, growing more and more feverish."

"And then, I take it, you followed him to Moat Hollow?"

"I could not stand the anxiety any longer—for I knew how hot-headed Charles could be," replied Mr. Stockdale. "I could obtain no answer to my ring, and the great outer gates were closed. There is a bell which communicates direct with the house, and I could even hear it tinkling faintly in the distance. After a while I went round the high walls, and at a convenient place I managed to climb. Then, to my astonishment, I saw that one of the upper windows stood wide open, and the curtains were drifting out. There was a light in the room, but there was no sign of any living being. Everything was deathly quiet—and I felt afraid."

"Then I thought I saw something lying on the path, beneath that open window—and my heart leapt into my mouth," continued the Housemaster tensely. "I climbed the wall, Mr. Lee. I don't know how I did, but at last I got over. I ran through the tangle of weeds and grass, and dived beneath the window—and there, lying on the path, was Charles!"

Nelson Lee was looking at Stockdale closely; he was drinking in every word of this strange story.

"I see—I see!" he said. "Your brother was lying on the path, unconscious? He had fallen out of the window?"

"That is what I imagined," replied Mr. Stockdale. "Charles was quite senseless, suffering from a horribly ugly bruise on his left temple. His clothing was disarranged, too, and I realised, to my horror, that he must have been having a struggle with Strutt. And in the course of that struggle he had fallen through the window. But what of Strutt, where was he?"

"I forced a door, yes, ruthlessly forced it—and, running upstairs, I entered that room, where the light was burning, and—and—" Mr. Stockdale nearly choked. "And there, lying on the floor, was Strutt, dead, with a dagger sticking out of his back."

"So now we have a clear explanation of your presence in Moat Hollow on that fatal night," said Lee nodding. "I can now understand why your fingerprints were found—and your footprints, too. In the circumstances, you took no precautions."

"I never thought of fingerprints, or footprints," said Mr. Stockdale. "I only knew that Strutt was dead, and that my brother had been there. I managed to get Charles out of that awful place—and as I am being frank with you, Mr. Lee, I will tell you that I took him down into the old vault, beneath

the monastery ruins. I felt that it would be possible to keep him there for a time—until the hue and cry had died down. I tended him, and, at last, I brought him back to life."

"And he admitted killing Strutt?" asked Lee wonderingly.

"Not exactly; he remembered nothing whatever," replied Mr. Stockdale. "Nothing, that is, except a fight. He had challenged Strutt, and the pair had had hot words, and it finally came to a fight. Charles vaguely remembered the fight, and he remembered, too, falling backwards through the window, after tripping. To his unutterable horror, he realised that he must have stabbed Strutt in his frenzy, although he could not remember doing so. He begged me to help him. I left him in the vault, making him as comfortable as possible."

"Then, later, I heard about a 'wild man' being seen on the moor, and I knew that Charles, in his peculiar mental condition, must have wandered away. I found out that he actually went through that old tunnel which leads to the disused quarry, and that is how he got on to the moor."

"Where he was seen by Nipper and some of the Remove boys," nodded Lee.

"~~Massively~~, I was able to get hold of Charles—and I brought him here, to the school, ~~risking~~ everything," continued Mr. Stockdale. "I shaved him, gave him a change of clothes—and then, in the middle of the night, I took him to the Pine Hill Nursing Home, where I am well known and respected. Dr. Drysdale, in fact, is a friend of mine."

"And they took your brother in without a suspicion?"

"Why should Drysdale suspect me of being implicated in a terrible murder case?" replied Mr. Stockdale. "I did not tell him that Charles was my brother—I invented the name of Harrison on the spur of the moment. I told the doctor very little, in fact, saying that I had certain reasons for secrecy. He trusted me. And there, Mr. Lee, you have the whole story."

"And you have satisfied me, Mr. Stockdale, that my first impression was right—that you have not done one dishonest action throughout this unfortunate affair," replied Lee quietly. "Even your brother has done nothing actually wrong—although he made a grave mistake in forcing his way into Strutt's flat. But his motive was a good one, and so I suppose we can excuse him."

"Excuse him!" exclaimed Mr. Stockdale breathlessly. "But what of the murder? All along I have believed that Charles killed Strutt—that he did it in a blind fit of anger, without realising what he was doing. Charles thought so, too—"

"You both thought wrong," interrupted Lee, rising to his feet. "Now, Mr. Stockdale, pull yourself together. We are going on a little journey—to the Pine Hill Nursing Home. I want to question your brother on this matter—to question him closely. He

might be able to help. Immediately afterwards I shall take steps to have the real murderer apprehended."

"I am in a maze!" said Mr. Stockdale. "You talk of the real murderer as though you know him!"

"I think it will be possible to keep both you and your brother out of this case," replied Lee quietly. "But I must see your brother first—to make sure. Come along, Stockdale—clouds which have been hanging over you so ominously are clearing away."

"Thanks to you, Mr. Lee," said the House-master gratefully. "What a fool I was to think, even for a moment, that you and Nipper were trying to trap me. I might have known that you were helping me all the time!"

CHAPTER 7.

Good Old Handy.

"WHY not?" demanded Handforth obstinately.

"I could give you a dozen good reasons, but one will do," retorted Church. "It's a potty idea."

"But look here——"

"Besides," said McClure, "it's practically dinnertime."

Handforth looked at his chums in amazement.

"Dinner!" he exclaimed. "You stand there, talking of dinner, and Nipper has vanished. I'm ashamed of you! I don't want to own you as my chums!"

"For goodness sake be sensible, Handy," urged Church. "Make a special effort—and try."

"What do you mean—make a special effort?"

"Well, be sensible, anyway," said Church hastily. "You know jolly well that the police are searching for Nipper——"

"The police!" broke in Handforth, with fine scorn.

"What's the matter with the police?"

"Nothing—when they're doing their own job," replied Handforth. "But what's the good of putting police on this job? You know jolly well that Nipper has been kidnapped by a gang of criminals——"

"Has he?" asked Mac. "First we've heard of it."

"He's been kidnapped, anyway—Mr. Lee practically said so," declared Handforth.

"What good can the police do? Uniformed men, with big feet, clumping all over the place! They can be seen a mile off—and they don't stand an earthly chance of getting anywhere near the crooks. That's where we come in. We're different."

"Perhaps there's something in it, Mac," said Church, changing his tone.

"You can bet there's something in it!" said Handforth eagerly. "We're three school-boys. Who'll take any notice of us as we potter about, looking for clues? We stand a lot more chance of getting on the trail than

the police. And Nipper's our chum. It's our duty to do all we can to help him."

"Good old Handy!" grinned McClure. "All right, then—if it's going to please you, Churchy and I will come along."

"Then why couldn't you have said so, in the first place, instead of making all that idiotic fuss?" asked Handforth gruffly. "I've never known such a couple of magpies!"

They hurried round towards the garage, for Handforth was determined to go on this investigation in his little Morris Minor. Church and McClure pointed out that they would stand far more chance of success on foot, but he would not listen to them. He was as keen as mustard. He had no settled plan of action, but that made no difference.

"We've got to look out for bicycle tracks," he said, as they drove to the village. "Nipper took Watson's jigger, and not a fortnight ago Watson had two new Dunlop tyres fitted. So the tracks ought to be easily spotable."

"On the main road?" asked Church.

"Eh?"

"Getting a bit doubtful, are you?" went on Church. "I don't wonder! There's a fat chance of our spotting any bicycle tracks on a hard tarred road—and a dry road, too. The best thing we can do, Handy, is to make inquiries of people all the way along—until we get to Bannington. Somebody must have seen Nipper riding into the town."

But Handforth was not willing to abandon his plan. The road was not dry, as Church had said, and at this time of the year there were patches of the road surface, sheltered from the wind by neighbouring trees, which remained not only moist, but almost wet.

At every one of these patches Handforth stopped, got out of the car, and he made a careful examination of the road surface. Fortune favoured him at the fourth attempt.

"By George! Look here!" he shouted exultantly.

The surface, for some little distance, was not only moist, but sandy, and the unmistakable tracks of bicycle tyres could be seen.

"Now what about it?" demanded Handforth. "Look at these! Dunlop tyres! And they're on the left side of the road, too—proving that the cyclist was on his way to Bannington!"

"That's right," agreed McClure, nodding.

"And it proves that Nipper got as far as this, anyway."

"Rats!"

"What do you mean—rats?"

"It proves that a cyclist, with Dunlop tyres on his jigger, came this way—but it doesn't prove that the cyclist was Nipper," said McClure. "It's possible he was Nipper—but that's not evidence. Don't you know better than to take things for granted, Handy? Hundreds of bikes are fitted with Dunlop tyres—and they've all got this standard tread."

But Handforth waved the objection aside.

"Rot!" he said firmly. "Look at the marks! They were made by new tyres, and we know that Nipper was coming along this road."

How many bikes, do you think, have been fitted with new Dunlop tyres within the last week or two? It's any odds that these tracks were made by Watson's machine—with Nipper in the saddle."

"Very likely," said Mac. "But there's no proof."

"Proof enough for me!" said Handforth, as he climbed back into the car. "Come on! Let's drive along to the next damp patch. We shall probably find more tracks."

The little car started off, and descended a short hill. It was one of the loneliest spots between the village and the town—and this road, even on the brightest of days, was little frequented.

"Hallo!" said Handforth suddenly.

The engine was making a peculiar noise, and all the power vanished. Some splutters followed.

"Running short of juice," said Church. "Better turn on to your reserve supply, Handy."

Handforth was still looking startled.

"That's the trouble," he said. "I am on the reserve supply now. My only sainted aunt! I meant to get some petrol in the village—and forgot all about it."

"Isn't there any in the spare can?"

"Used it!" grunted Handforth. "Used it last week, when I was hard up, and couldn't buy any for the main tank. Rats! We're dished!"

He climbed out, looked in the tank, and found it empty. They were stranded—until some friendly motorist would come along and oblige them with some spirit.

"People who can't remember to fill their petrol-tanks oughtn't to own cars!" said Church tartly. "Of all the places to run short of juice! There's not a house for miles, and we might wait an hour before another car comes along."

"Well, it's no good grumbling," grunted Handforth. "I've got more important things to think of than petrol! I dare say some car will come along soon—"

He broke off, and an expression of eagerness came into his face. Leaping up one of the side banks, he looked over the hedge, and saw, across the meadows, the placid river. Faintly on the air came the "chug, chug, chug!" of a heavy and slow-going petrol engine; and in the far distance, round one of the bends, a barge was creeping into view.

"Good egg!" said Handforth. "No need to wait for any motorist now."

"What do you mean?" asked his chum.

"There's a barge coming up the river, isn't there?" replied Handforth. "It's got a petrol motor—and that means there's plenty of petrol aboard. I'll bet the old bargee won't object to selling us a gallon of juice."

It was certainly an idea, and Church and McClure offered no criticisms. Once in a while, Handforth did manage to get hold of a sensible wheeze.

The spare can was quickly unshipped, and then the three juniors, leaving the little car standing on the grass verge, broke through a

gap in the hedge, and commenced running across the meadowland towards the river.

"Take it easy," advised Handforth. "No need to run. The barge won't be level with us for another five minutes."

They were nearing some bushes, and were getting close to the river when Handforth, who was leading, suddenly checked.

"I say, look at this!" he exclaimed. "There's been a fight, or something, just here! Recently, too! Look at the way the grass is all trampled down and broken."

Church and McClure did not seem very interested.

"Nothing in that," said Church. "Anybody might have been here—"

"Anybody!" broke in Handforth. "This morning—the very morning that Nipper vanished! Don't forget that he vanished between Bellton and Bannington, and they haven't been able to find a trace of him on the road."

His chums caught some of his sudden excitement.

"Footprints, too!" went on Handforth tensely. "Look here! Look at this damp patch of earth! There's two distinct footprints here—and one's a lot smaller than the other. There were two people—By George! This smaller footprint must be Nipper's!"

"It almost looks as if there might be something in it, Handy," said McClure keenly. "What a stroke of luck!"

"Luck?" repeated Handforth, staring. "Where do you get 'luck' from? Didn't I come out deliberately to look for clues?"

"Ahem! If you hadn't run short of juice you wouldn't have stopped at this place at all."

"We won't argue!" said Handforth coldly. "We're here—and we've found some clues. Go easy now, my sons! Don't trample on any of this grass. Make a wide circle round it. There might be some other tracks near the river bank."

Handforth's proverbial luck held good. Within a minute he had made another discovery—and this time it was a momentous one.

For just against the bank there was a faint, but unmistakable impression of a cycle tyre!

Just a little scrap, not more than three or four inches in length. And the tread was that of a new Dunlop! The evidence was that somebody had been carrying the bicycle, and one of the wheels, by chance, had touched the ground. Certainly the machine had not been wheeled, or the tracks would have been much plainer. There was just this one tiny impression.

All three juniors were now thoroughly excited.

"While the police are wasting their time on the road and in Bannington, we're on the trail!" said Handforth breathlessly. "You can see what happened, can't you? Nipper came down to the river for some reason—"

"What reason?" asked Mac.

"Goodness knows! He might have been called by somebody—lured here," replied

Handforth. "Anyhow, we've seen his footprint, and there's the mark of that bike tyre. It's as clear as daylight that he was taken on the river."

"I say!" exclaimed Church, uncomfortable. "I—I suppose——"

He paused, and some of the colour had left his face.

"You suppose what?" asked Handforth.

"I suppose he wasn't thrown in?" asked Church. "I—I mean, it looks pretty awful."

"Far more likely that he was carried away in a boat of some kind," said Handforth, frowning. "By George! What about this barge? It's the only boat on the river. There aren't many boats going up and down at this time of the year, are there? Supposing Nipper is a prisoner down in the cabin of the barge at this very minute? Who's to know? I say, we shall have to be careful."

His chums looked dubious.

"No need to get any wild ideas into your head, Handy——" began Church.

"Wild ideas, be blowed!" broke in Handforth. "After what we've seen, anything is likely! Anyhow, we'll jolly well give this bargee a close examination, and, if he looks crooked, we'll grab him, make him prisoner, and search his barge. First of all, though, we'll stop him and ask him for some petrol. That'll put him off his guard."

Very soon the barge came chugging up the reach, and as Handforth & Co. waved and held the petrol can aloft, the craft edged towards the near bank, and the engine was slowed down.

"Well, bless me!" came a hearty voice. "What's the trouble, young gents? Ain't seen you for many a week, Master 'Andforth!"

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Handforth. "It's old Sam Smithers!"

"And young Sam, too!" added McClure.

If the juniors had had any doubts regarding the bargee, they were quickly dispelled. They had often seen old Sam Smithers up and down the river with his barge. He generally carried his son with him—a cheery, burly lad of about sixteen. They were well-known characters on the Stowe, and a more honest, likeable couple could not have been found.

As soon as the barge was near enough, Handforth and his chums leapt aboard, and they found Sam Smithers grinning at them cheerfully. But the bargee's grin soon vanished when he noted the set, serious expressions on the faces of the juniors.

"Strike me sideways!" he exclaimed. "You young gents don't look any too 'appy!"

"It's like this, Sam," said Handforth quickly. "We really came to ask you for some petrol——"

"And welcome to it ye are, young sir."

"I know, but never mind the petrol now," said Handforth. "Thanks, all the same. You've seen a chap named Nipper, haven't you? His real name is Dick Hamilton, but that doesn't matter. Everybody knows——"

"Why, to be sure," said Mr. Smithers. "Who don't know Master Nipper?"

"Something's happened to him—something nasty," said Handforth. "There's been a murder in the village, and Mr. Nelson Lee and Nipper have been investigating. It looks as though Nipper has been grabbed by the murderer or by some other crooks, and——"

"'Ere, draw it mild, Master 'Andforth!" said the bargee sceptically.

But after the juniors had given him the details, he changed his tone. He was particularly interested when they told him of the traces they had found near the river bank.

"You see, it looks as though Nipper was taken aboard a boat of some kind," said Handforth at length. "You've been on the river all the morning, haven't you, Sam? Have you seen any other boat going up or down?"

Mr. Smithers thoughtfully scratched his scrubby chin.

"A barge or two, mebbe," he said. "Why, yes, and that smart black-and-white launch. She passed me this morning—goin' up-river towards Bannington—same way as we're going now."

"A launch?" exclaimed Handforth. "That's the very kind of boat."

"'Ere, you mustn't say things like that, Master 'Andforth," said Smithers, shaking his head. "The gent who owns that launch—a furriner, I believe—is as nice a fellow as you'd wish to meet. One of these 'ere leisured gents. Cruises about just for the fun of it."

"In the winter-time?" asked Handforth.

"Oh, 'e don't care!" said Mr. Smithers. "Winter's just as good as any other time to him. And let me tell ye, sir, that the river can be more pleasant on a bright winter's morning than it can be in the summer-time. I'm up and down, month in and month out, and I know."

"Well, look here—I wonder if you'd let us ride on your barge for a bit?" asked Handforth eagerly. "We might spot that black-and-white launch on its way back, and then, with some excuse, we could stop it. What do you say?"

Mr. Smithers wasn't very hopeful, and he had no objection to the boys remaining aboard. So, without any further loss of time, the engine was restarted, and the barge chugged on its way up-river.

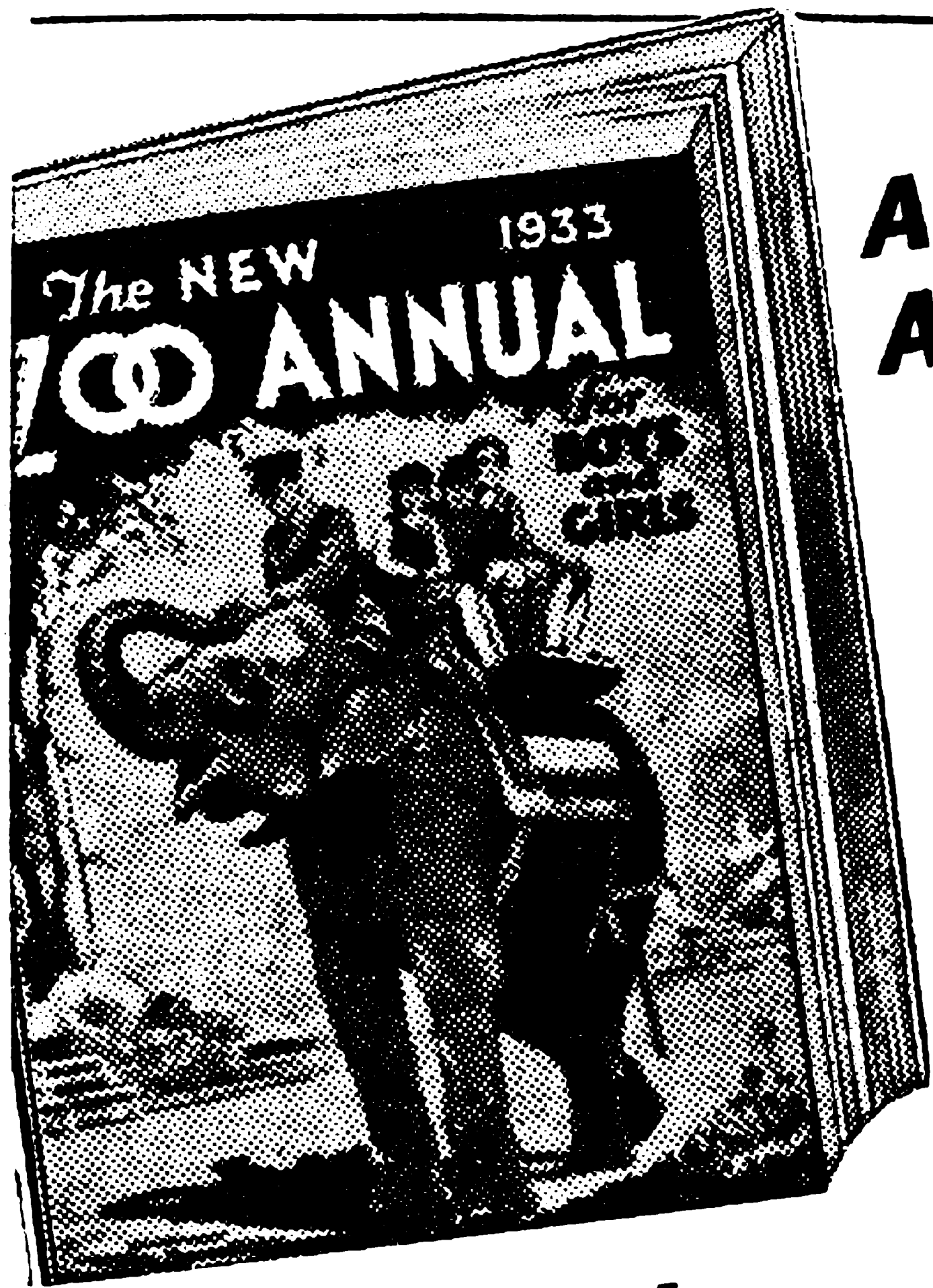
Then, within five minutes, came Handforth's second stroke of luck. There was no coincidence about it—for what happened was directly caused by the chugging of the barge's engines.

The clumsy craft was moving slowly along near the left bank of the stream when Handforth suddenly listened intently; and at the same time he stared towards some dense willows and bushes round the entrance to a secluded backwater.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

(Continued on page 31.)

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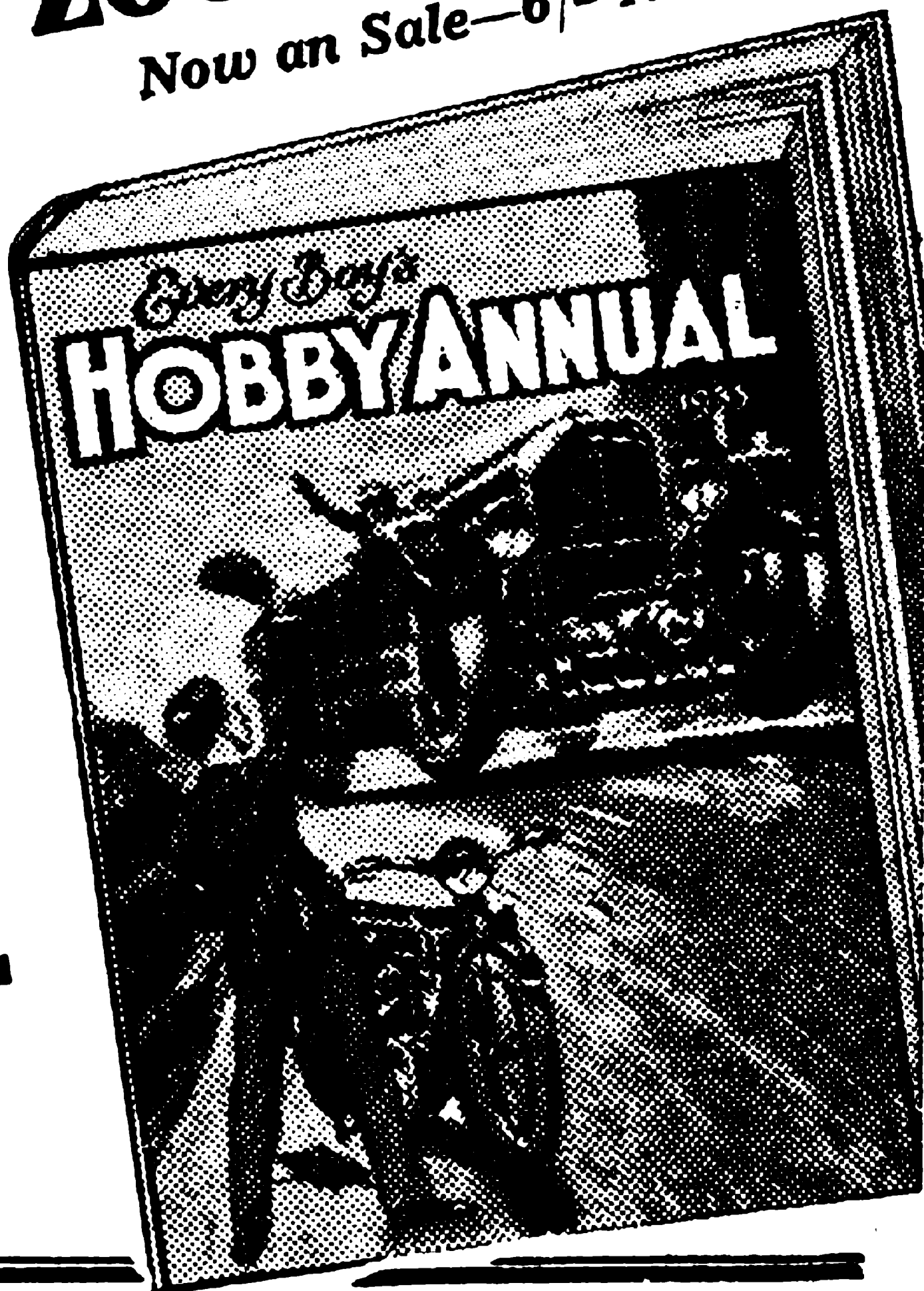
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(Continued from page 30.)

"What's that?" asked Handforth suspiciously.

"Sounds like somebody hammering," replied Church, as he stared.

"Funny!" muttered Handforth.

"You're too jolly ready to jump to conclusions," growled Church. "Anybody can hammer if they want to—"

"But it is funny," insisted Handforth. "Look for yourself! There's not a house over there, or a cottage, or anything! Nothing but those willows and blackberry brambles and— Wait a minute, though! By George, I've just remembered!"

"Remembered what?"

"You know that old boathouse," said Handforth eagerly. "We explored it once, two or three terms ago. It's tucked away there, at the rear of that backwater. And that's where the hammering is coming from, too!"

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The sounds came again—undoubtedly the sounds caused by somebody hammering upon a wooden door or some planking.

"It does seem a bit queer," admitted McClure.

"Queer!" roared Handforth. "It's—it's just what we might have expected! Nipper has vanished—he was brought to the river—and now we hear bangs coming from an old deserted boathouse!"

"Great Scott!" yelled Church. "You don't mean—"

"Yes, I do!" shouted Handforth. "Hi, Sam, edge her in a bit, will you? We want to go ashore here."

As the barge drifted nearer to the backwater the boys could see down the little "lane," and at the end they dimly beheld the ramshackle doors of the boathouse. And even as they looked, one of the rotten planks bulged outwards, having been dealt a heavy blow from within.

Crash!

The sound came noisily.

"There you are—there's somebody in there—trying to break out!" gasped Handforth, breathless with excitement. "What did I tell you? I! Nipper! Nipper!"

As though in answer, there came three or four heavy crashes from the boathouse. Handforth and his chums leapt ashore, raced along the bank as far as possible, and then their way was barred by the impenetrable brambles.

Mr. Smithers solved the difficulty, however, for he had already jumped into the little dinghy which was trailing behind the barge. He came rowing up the backwater. Handforth & Co. were taken aboard, and then they penetrated deeply, until they came to the derelict boathouse.

It was Mr. Smithers who tore the balks of timber aside; then, with his mighty arms, he literally pulled the door to pieces.

CHAPTER 8.

The End of the Case.

"NIPPER!" shouted Handforth in triumph.

They found Nipper in a bad way. The cruel bindings had bitten into his flesh until he was racked with agony. He had been almost suffocated by the brutal gag which had been thrust into his mouth.

Handforth was glowing with joy. His "mad" investigation had turned up trumps! He had done better than all the police. But even he was ready to admit afterwards that his own investigations might have come to nothing had it not been for Nipper's own efforts. For it was any odds that the barge would have gone past that backwater without Handforth suspecting a thing.

But Nipper, hearing the chugging, had, at the risk of cutting those deadly bonds right into his flesh, wormed his way across the floor, and had hammered at the old door with his feet, hoping to attract attention.

It had been his one chance—and he had taken it.

He literally writhed in agony for some time after his bonds had been cut. The restoring of the circulation was almost more than he could bear; his face was puffy, his tongue swollen, his eyes bloodshot. But Nipper's spirit was as strong as ever. As soon as the first effects began to wear off he insisted upon struggling to his feet.

"Thank you, you chaps—thanks a thousand times," he panted. "You've saved my life."

"Rot! You wouldn't have died," said Handforth.

"Wouldn't I?" replied Nipper. "That devil would have come back. I'm sure of it. And I believe he meant to finish me off, too! He didn't do so at once because he wanted to trap the 'guv'nor, I believe. Perhaps he's done it by this time. We've got to move."

"But—but who are you talking about?" asked Handforth.

"That Chinese chap—the man on the black-and-white launch!" said Nipper.

"What?" yelled Handforth, his eyes blazing. "Why, I suspected—"

"For goodness' sake, Handy, let's be getting a move on!" said Nipper. "I'm all right now. We've got to find the 'guv'nor. Do you know where he went?"

"I don't think he went anywhere—he stayed at the school," replied Handforth.

"Then come. We can get to the barge, and I dare say Mr. Smithers will put us ashore, and then we can get back to your car."

"Sure enough, young gents," said the astonished Mr. Smithers. "I'll do anything I can, within reason. You shall 'ave a supply of petrol, too."

AT the Pine Hill Nursing Home, Nelson Lee and Mr. Stockdale were admitted into the private ward where "Mr. Harrison" was in bed. The patient was looking almost normal after his long,

restful sleep. But when he heard Nelson Lee's name, the colour drained from his face.

"It's no good, Arthur—I've been expecting it," he said quietly. "I'm ready. This had to come, sooner or later——"

"But you don't understand," broke in Mr. Stockdale. "Mr. Lee says that you did not kill Strutt."

Charles Stockdale looked bewildered.

"Then you haven't come to arrest me, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly not," replied Lee. "I am convinced that you did no more than have a harmless tussle with Strutt. In the course of that fight he must have thrown you backwards, and you toppled out of the open window. The blow on the head confused your memory. Strutt was killed after you had fallen to the ground, and when he had turned his back to the window, evidently with the intention of crossing to the door."

"But—but I don't know what you mean," said Charles Stockdale. "Strutt could not have been stabbed in that way. There was nobody at the window——"

"You'll understand later," put in Nelson Lee. "What I want to know now is this: did you see a long, slim dagger on Strutt's desk? Do you remember handling it?"

"I have been trying for hours to bring that dreadful scene back to my mind," replied Charles. "Arthur has told me about the dagger, but I don't remember it."

He told his story quietly; and, in every respect, it exactly tallied with Mr. Stockdale's. But when it came to the fight in Strutt's study, he was vague. He had been very angry, and he could remember little. He had believed, since that fatal night, that he must have taken up the dagger unconsciously. Afterwards he must have staggered back to the window and toppled through. That was his own theory of the crime. There had certainly been no other man in the house, or anywhere near. He and Strutt had been quite alone.

"You are quite wrong, Mr. Stockdale," said Lee smoothly. "There was a witness of your struggle with Mr. Strutt—and that witness was the murderer. He has not come forward to tell of what he saw, because such a step would instantly have involved him in the inquiries, and he would have been required to explain his own presence near Moat Hollow. No doubt he believed that the police would ultimately get on your trail and arrest you for the crime. I am glad to say that my own investigations have cleared up every point—and it now only remains for the criminal to be arrested. I shall see to that without any further delay."

"And Nipper?" asked Mr. Stockdale gravely.

"I had been hoping to learn something from your story which might lead me on the other trail," replied Nelson Lee. "By this time, perhaps, Nipper has been found. Inspector Lennard and many men are searching the countryside. The seizing of Nipper was a last desperate resort of the murderer's

to force me to abandon the case. The man made a big mistake there—for I am more determined than ever to bring him to book."

"I don't understand at all—although, naturally, I am intensely relieved by your confidence," said Mr. Stockdale. "Charles is certain that there was no third man at Moat Hollow. How, then, could the murderer have struck the fatal blow? You haven't explained that, Mr. Lee."

"If you will come with me, you will be enlightened," replied Lee quietly.

BY the time Nipper reached the road, with Handforth & Co., he was feeling so much better that he could walk almost normally. His limbs were swollen and painful from the effect of the cruel binding, but he was able to get about.

The petrol was soon poured into the empty tank, and then the little Morris Minor sturdily purred along the road back to St. Frank's. Handforth was planning to stop in the village, and he was hoping that he would meet Inspector Lennard.

Something even better than that happened.

For just before Bellton was reached, a hooter sounded, and when Church glanced through the rear panel he gave a yell. The car which was overtaking them was Nelson Lee's—and Lee himself sat at the wheel, and Mr. Stockdale was beside him.

"Hi! Pull up!" shouted Church. "It's Mr. Lee!"

Handforth jammed on his brakes, and made frantic signals for the overtaking car to stop. Nipper himself opened the near side door, and stood out on the step, so that his head projected above the little car's roof.

"Guv'nor!" he shouted.

"Thank Heaven! It's Nipper!" said Lee fervently.

He stopped his car, and Nipper came running across to him. The pair clasped hands—and although they said little there was a world of warmth and affection in that grip.

"I was afraid, young 'un," said Lee huskily.

"Handy save me, sir," explained Nipper. "Handy and Church and Mac. They came out on a lone investigation, and they got right on the trail. They've beaten the police at their own game!"

"Didn't I always tell you chaps that I was a detective?" asked Handforth proudly.

"Well done, Handy, old man," said Lee, giving him a grip of warmth. "You have rendered me a wonderful service to-day—and I shall not forget it."

They heard the details. And by the time Nipper had finished, Lee was looking almost flushed.

"We will not delay another minute," he said. "Lennard is in Bellton—I heard that as I was coming through Bannington. We will collect him and we will effect the arrest at once. You had better come with us, Stockdale. It should prove interesting."

"What about us, sir?" chorused Handforth & Co.

"Yes, you can come—I'll make things right for you at the school," smiled Lee. "You deserve it. And I think, Nipper, that you had better go with the boys. Keep in the background until I ask you to come forward."

None of them knew what Nelson Lee's plans were. In the village the Chief Inspector was flabbergasted to see Nipper safe and sound—and he was not a little crest-fallen. For all his own efforts had proved futile. Indeed, Lennard afterwards wrote this case down as one of his greatest failures, for he had been baffled from the very beginning.

"Come along, Lennard," said Lee briskly. "I have arranged matters with the Chief Constable in Bannington. The warrant will be ready for us in Caistowe—and I shall leave it to you to execute the warrant."

"All right—but it's a risky business," said Lennard. "Where's your evidence?"

"The warrant has been issued on the flimsy evidence of those strands of hair I recovered from the tree," said Lee dryly. "Flimsy enough—but I gave the Chief Constable my word that there would be plenty of evidence immediately after the arrest. If I fail in this, I shall have made the worst blunder in my career. Oh, by the way—there's one important link which ought to be found. Have any of your men located that little metal washer, Lennard?"

"Not a trace of it," replied Lennard gruffly. "You impressed upon me, this morning, how important it was—and I set a dozen men to work. Labourers from the village, mostly."

"It is very annoying—and very mysterious," said Lee, frowning. "That washer must be in the Moat Hollow grounds."

"But why must it? Where did it come from, anyway?" asked Lennard. "And why are you so certain?"

"Because the murder could only have been committed in one way—and that washer was an essential part of the mechanism," replied Lee. "It is not particularly big, and there is a hexagonal hole——"

"Gug-great Scott!" gurgled Handforth, turning pale.

He dived a hand into a waistcoat pocket and produced a washer with a hexagonal hole.

"Well, I'll be boiled!" said Lennard blankly.

"Handforth! How long have you had that thing?" demanded Lee sharply. "Where did you find it?"

"In—in the Moat Hollow grounds, sir—the morning after the murder!" faltered Handforth. "I jumped down from the wall, and I saw the washer, and I put it into my pocket, and I forgot——"

"That'll do!" said Lee, with a twinkle in his eyes. "I might have known it! A truly characteristic touch of yours, Handforth! One of the most important clues in this case—and you carry it about in your pocket! Why didn't you show it to me?"

"I never thought any more about it, sir," replied Handforth. "I say, I'm awfully sorry——"

But Lee would not listen to any apologies. He was so pleased with Handforth to-day that he forgave him everything.

SIDNEY WHITAKER was arrested as he was coming ashore from his launch—which was back again at its Caistowe moorings. Lennard and three or four armed men had been waiting in cover, at Lee's suggestion. And as Whitaker jumped across to the quay, they ran towards him, and he was seized before he could produce any weapon, and Lennard made his charge—immediately afterwards snapping the handcuffs over the Chinaman's wrists.

"May I ask what this means?" said Whitaker, with the utmost calmness. "You are mad, inspector! You have no evidence against me——"

"Anything you say will be taken down——"

"You cannot bluff me with your warnings!" interrupted Whitaker impatiently. "I shall demand heavy compensation for this wrongful arrest."

An evil light suddenly came into his eyes—for he saw that Nelson Lee was not only aboard the launch, but was breaking open the saloon door—calmly deliberately, openly.

"Stop that man!" screamed Whitaker. "How dare you? You can't damage my property——"

"Unfortunately," said Lennard smoothly. "Mr. Lee is in no way connected with the police. His action may be unlawful—and it will be for you to prosecute him."

Lennard, to tell the truth, was highly nervous. All this was very irregular. Nelson Lee was taking an awful chance.

They waited—and the Chinaman had a look in his eyes which almost amounted to panic. Presently Nelson Lee emerged—and he was carrying an old-fashioned rifle.

"Here is your evidence, Lennard," said the detective grimly. "I took a chance, I will admit—but I worked on the theory that Whitaker was afraid to get rid of this weapon. He knew that the river might be searched—even dragged—and the whole countryside scoured. He was so certain that there would be no suspicions against himself that he felt that it was safer to keep this strange gun in his locker."

"You, too, are mad," said Whitaker contemptuously. "Strutt was stabbed."

"Yes—he was stabbed by you," said Nelson Lee. "You were sitting in the fork of the tree which overlooks the Moat Hollow grounds, Whitaker. This gun, which you had previously converted into a powerful air rifle, was in your hands. When you went there, you did not know that your task would be so easy—but Strutt happened to come to the open window, and he turned his back. You seized your chance—aimed this gun, and sent the dagger hurtling into his back."

"A lie—A lie!" screamed Whitaker. And then he suddenly turned a distorted face towards Lee. "Unless I am released, your young friend, Nipper, will never be seen again!" he went on, in his frenzy. "I've got him. Do you hear, Lee? I've got him!"

"You are wrong, Whitaker," said Lee quietly. "Nipper is here—safe."

And at a signal Nipper came forward—with Handforth & Co.

Sidney Whitaker was taken away almost foaming at the mouth.

Later, Nelson Lee demonstrated.

The dagger had been specially made by Whitaker, and the boss at the top of the hilt was of exactly the same dimensions as the end of the hilt. The dagger was dropped into the rifle barrel, slipped in easily, until the end of the hilt appeared in the open breech.

"But it seems incredible!" said Lennard.

"You won't say this when I have projected the dagger," replied Lee. "You see, in order to be effective, the dagger has to travel point foremost—and that meant that it must spin. It was the spinning of the dagger which gave me the first clue—for I saw that the wound in Strutt's body was a most curious one, suggestive of a turning movement, as the dagger had entered. The barrel of this gun is rifled; but as the hilt of the projectile would not engage in the rifling, something else had to be provided. This is it," added Lee, taking out the metal washer. "You see, it fits upon this hexagon nut—this boss. Thus, when the trigger is pulled, the dagger is sent spinning out of the rifle barrel—and I knew that the washer would drop off immediately after the weapon had left the barrel. That is why I was so certain of finding it."

Nelson Lee proved his theory—for, having fitted the washer, and having placed the dagger in the rifle, he pulled the trigger. The weapon was sent hurtling a full thirty yards, direct into a bullseye which Lee had provided.

It was Nelson Lee's evidence, at the subsequent trial, which sent Sidney Whitaker to the gallows.

At the trial, it came out that Whitaker had been the Eastern manager of the Singapore and Bornea Oilfields Corporation—and he, like most of the shareholders, had been swindled by Walter Drummond. He had lost a fortune—and he had sworn to hunt Drummond down and kill him.

Good came out of evil—for when Drummond's affairs were fully gone into, a big secret hoard was unearthed, and most of the luckless shareholders in the smashed company received a good proportion of their money.

So Mr. Arthur Stockdale and his brother came out of the affair well—and never once was their name mentioned. They had every cause to be grateful to Nelson Lee.

THE END.

(Next week: "Archie's Christmas Party!" Gripping long complete story dealing with the strange adventures of the Chums of St. Frank's! By E. S. Brooks.)

Readers Prize Jokes.

Snobbish Sportsman (riding to the hunt): "Out of my way, wretch! I'm riding to the hounds!"

Tramp: Give us a lift, guv'nor; I'm going to the dogs meself!"

(C. E. Rush, 3581, Mayfair Avenue, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.—A grand prize.)

Sergeant-major: "You've been on this square three weeks now, and what d'yer know?"

Recruit (utterly fed up): "The reason why soldiers are ready to die!"

(J. Chappell, 4, Loufields, Peak Vale, via Stockport.—A pocket wallet.)

The teacher was trying to give his young pupils an illustration of the word "perseverance."

"What is it," he said, "that carries a man along rough roads and smooth roads, up the hills and down the dales, across the valley and through the pass, through the mighty jungle, swamps, deserts and raging torrents, across the sun-drenched veldts and the wind-swept plains?"

There was a long silence, and presently Freddie, whose father owned the local garage, rose to his feet.

"Please, teacher," he said. "There isn't such a car!"

(T. Morcom, 55, Tasman Street, Nelson, New Zealand.—A grand prize.)

Father (taking son to cattle show): "Now, what is the skin of a cow used for?"

Tommy: "To keep the beef in, I suppose."

(A. Groom, 36, High Street, Burnham-on-Crouch, Essex.—A penknife.)

A visitor to China was congratulating his cook on having prepared a very tasty meal which he had enjoyed. Just by way of a joke he said to the cook:

"I hope it wasn't a stray dog that you had killed?"

"No," said the cook. "Doggee alleady dead when I pickee him up."

(K. Moody, 39, Aquila Road, St. Helier, Jersey, C.I.—A grand prize.)

Customer: "I'm going to a fancy-dress ball this evening as 'Father Time'; have you a scythe you could sell me?"

Shopkeeper: "No, sir, I'm sorry I haven't one; but I could let you have a very nice lawn-mower."

(T. Thorpe, 4, Bolton Road, Wednesfield, Staffs.—A pocket-wallet.)

COCK O' THE WALK!



Edward Oswald Handforth is elected junior skipper of St. Frank's, but he makes such a hash of everything that the juniors are determined to make him resign. It is Reggie Pitt who hits upon a brainwave for forcing Handy to relinquish the reins, which brain-wave he proceeds to put into action.

Church Hears Something Fishy!

CHURCH and McClure were worried over Edward Oswald. After the expulsion of the deputation from Study D, Handforth had apparently suffered a relapse.

He was still on the couch, and he still uttered occasional moans—sounds which resembled, according to Church, the wail of a banshee.

Study D was no haven of comfort.

That Handforth was in pain there could be no question. Any of the other juniors would have callously ignored the patient's symptoms of distress. But Church and McClure had a soft spot for their leader. And McClure, in particular, was worried about that meat paste. He knew more about it than Church. He had smelt it, and he had a dim recollection that it had been mouldy.

Perhaps Handforth's pains were caused by his sufferings in the River House scrap, but it was just as likely that the meat paste was seriously getting to work. And McClure had a horror of ptomaine poisoning, as his father had once nearly died from it. The state of uncertainty was worrying him.

"Feel any better, old man?" he asked at last.

"No!" grunted Handforth.

"Pains any worse?"

"Yes!"

"Do you feel dizzy and sick?"

"Well, not exactly——"

"Then it can't be ptomaine poisoning," said Church.

"Oh, can't it?" growled Handforth, turning over and glaring. "I should like to know who's poisoned, anyhow? Can't I have a few symptoms now without you chaps accusing me of lingering?"

"I suppose you mean malingering?" asked McClure. "That means pretending."

"Are you trying to teach me English?" demanded the patient aggressively. "I know what my pains are, and I don't want any rot from you chaps!"

"But we're trying to help you!"

"That's jolly kind of you, and I appreciate it," said Edward Oswald. "But I shall appreciate it a lot more if you dry up. How do you suppose I can get a nap if you keep jawing?"

"You never told us you wanted a nap!" said Church.

"You ought to have enough sense to know it without any telling," retorted Handforth, whose pains had made him rather peevish. "I don't like to keep rowing with you chaps, but I'm feeling off colour. Be a couple of sports and leave me alone for a bit. Any-

how, those other fatheads aren't going to make me resign!" he added gruffly. "I'm Form captain, and I'll remain Form captain, whether I'm poisoned or not!"

His chums went out and gently closed the door.

"You needn't worry about that meat stuff," said Church. "I don't believe it was bad—"

"My dear ass, it niffed frightfully!"

"It couldn't have done," argued Church. "Handy couldn't have eaten it if it was as wonky as all that. It's a pity you told him anything about it."

"Handy would eat anything!" said McClure. "What about last week? Didn't we catch him on the point of scoffing some salmon that had been left in the tin for three days? He'd have been dead by this time if he'd eaten that!"

Church sighed.

"Well, look here, as you're so jolly worried, I'll pop down to the telephone and ring up the chemist," he said. "I'll ask him if there's anything we can give Handy to put him right quick. We don't want to bother the school doctor until we know something for certain. And Handy would pound us to splinters if he was carted off to the sanny!"

"He's a sore trial!" said McClure soberly.

Church went off, leaving McClure on guard outside the door of Study D. If anybody came along to see the patient, he was to be told that the patient was asleep, and couldn't be disturbed. Handforth's chums were very faithful to him.

Rather to Church's surprise, he found the Common-room nearly empty, and he was pleased. He went across to the telephone-box, and enclosed himself in it. All the St. Frank's Common-rooms were provided with their own telephones. They were, indeed, public telephones, and the users were required to put their coins in the box if they wanted a call.

The chemist's number was engaged. So Church had to wait. And while he was waiting, he opened the door slightly, as the confined air was rather stuffy.

Archie Glenthorne and Alf Brent had strolled into the Common-room, and they apparently knew nothing of Church's presence in the telephone-box. And it never occurred to him to make his proximity known. He just waited for the ring, and watched Archie in the meantime, speculating as to the approximate cost of Archie's latest necktie.

"Oh, absolutely!" Archie was saying. "Not a word, eh?"

"Not to Church and McClure, anyhow," said Brent. "They're as faithful to old Handy as a couple of Newfoundland dogs, and they'd peach in a minute if they got wind of this."

Church, bristling with indignation, was about to burst forth and demand an apology for being likened to a Newfoundland dog, when he checked himself. There seemed to be something fishy about this business!

"And the dear old laddie is popping into the nurse's outfit now?" asked Archie. "I

must remark that it's a frightfully juicy scheme, as schemes go. I mean, Handforth is easy game when it comes to a girl, what?"

"Any girl can twist him round her fingers!" grinned Brent. "And a nurse, mind you! A pretty nurse, who'll pay him all sorts of flattering compliments. He'll fall into the trap gloriously."

"You think the dear old boy will absolutely make himself look like a real girl?"

"Leave it to him!" said Brent. "You know as well as I do—"

The door opened, and Tommy Watson looked in.

"Quick, you chaps!" he grinned. "We're not quite ready, but we want you to come and have a look. They're over in the West House—it's safer there. We don't want Church or McClure to spot anything."

Church's luck was phenomenal. For the Common-room door had hardly closed before the telephone bell tinkled. If the juniors had remained a few moments longer they would have heard, and Church's presence would have been discovered.

Church lifted up the receiver.

"I want something for ptomaine poisoning—" he began.

"Two pennies, please," observed a cold voice.

"Oh, blow!" growled Church. "Always a bother over these giddy pennies! Well, I'm jiggered! I'm broke— No, half a tick! Just found a couple of pennies in the lining of my waistcoat."

He put them into the box, and was soon talking to the chemist. He briefly explained Handforth's symptoms, and the chemist said that he could not do better than come down at once and explain more fully. And he was to be sure and bring at least half-a-crown.

"And I'll bet the stuff costs about fourpence!" said Church, as he hung up the receiver. "I'll be a chemist when I grow up!"

He nipped out of the box and hurried from the Common-room. His mind was full of that other matter, but he had had to attend the 'phone call. McClure was still outside the door of Study D when he arrived.

"I say! I've heard something!" said Church tensely.

"About Handy?" gasped McClure. "Is he liable to die—"

"It's about Handy, but it's nothing to do with his complaint," replied Church. "I can't talk here, either—let's go inside."

"But he's having a nap."

"Then he'll have to wake up," said Church grimly.

They went into the study, and found Handforth rolling about on the couch in evident pain. There was no pretending about it. Unquestionably, Handforth's tummy was in a very bruised condition, and he was suffering accordingly. He could hardly move without being racked with spasms. Anybody who has been drastically winded in a rough-and-tumble will appreciate Handforth's plight.

"Go away!" he said irritably. "My only hat! Can't you leave me alone for ten

giddy minutes? A fine pair of chums, to keep butting in——"

"They're getting up a rag, Handy," interrupted Church.

"A which?"

"They're going to play a trick on you, old man," said Church. "I heard it quite by accident just now. They've planned to keep Mac and I out of it, but we're up to their dodges."

Church and McClure were probably as keen as any of the other fellows to see Handforth deposed. But, somehow, they didn't like the idea of their leader being hoodwinked. And the very fact that they had been kept out of the game annoyed them. If the other juniors had taken Church and McClure into their confidence, it would have been different. They felt, somehow, that it was now their duty to stick to Handforth.

"They're going to trick me, are they?" said Handforth, slowly sitting up. "Let 'em try it! What's the game, anyhow?"

"I don't know all the details, but one of the chaps is dressing up as a nurse," said Church.

"Oh, goodness!" said McClure.

"A nurse?" repeated Handforth ominously. "Well?"

"And he's coming here to get round you," explained Church.

"To get round me?" said Handforth. "What does he want to get round me for?"

"You ass, I mean he's going to spoof you up with a lot of flattery," said Church. "I can't tell you any more, because I don't know any more, but it's up to you to be on your guard——"

Tap-tap-tap!

A rather timid knock sounded on the door, and Handforth & Co. started.

"Come in!" said Handforth thickly.

The door opened softly, and the chums of Study D stared. A demure-looking nurse stood in the doorway, and she looked so much like the real article that Handforth & Co. could do nothing but gaze at her dumb-founded. And she even flushed under the close scrutiny.

Which wasn't surprising, for the girl was Dora Manners herself!

Handy Makes a Mistake!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH changed his attitude and beamed invitingly.

"Come in!" he said sweetly. "You chaps can buzz off!" he added. "I'll deal with this young lady! You'd better go to the chemist's while you're away and get that stuff for me."

Church and McClure went out, eyeing Dora with frank amazement as they passed. In fact, they were quite rude, giving Dora a totally wrong impression. For Church and McClure were not rude fellows at all, and they wouldn't have dreamed of subjecting any girl to such a frank stare. But this was different. She was one of the fellows dressed up! And they were wondering who on earth "she" could be. Anyhow, the impersonation

was thundering good! The chap looked like a girl from head to foot!

Church and McClure went away, not only puzzled, but filled with admiration for the unknown spoofer. They even stared as they went down the passage, and Dora was well aware of this prolonged inspection. She hesitated before entering the study.

"Come in!" said Handforth. "I don't know who the dickens you are, but come in!"

Dora still hesitated, her heart fluttering.

By one of those strange chances which seem to assist misunderstandings, the only person she had encountered in the Triangle had been Tubbs, the page-boy. And Tubbs had escorted her to the Ancient House, and had told her to walk straight down the passage to Study D—Dora having inquired for Handforth.

And Tubbs, being in a violent hurry on an errand for Browne of the Fifth—a fat tip being tacked to it—had left her more or less stranded.

However, Dora was comforted by one pleasing feature. This boys' school wasn't half so seething with rough youths as she had pictured it. There was quite a simple explanation for this—for practically the entire Ancient House contingent of juniors were over in the West House, helping Reggie Pitt to get into his wonderful disguise. And the seniors were at tea in their studies.

So, perhaps, it wasn't so much a matter of chance after all. The circumstances had come about in a perfectly natural manner.

Although seventeen, Dora looked much younger; she was one of those timid, retiring girls, although by no means soft. Among her feminine companions she was as spirited and as gay as the rest. But she had been brought up in the secluded atmosphere of a quiet country home, and it was only recently that she had assumed her nurse's avocation. To be quite frank, she hadn't actually assumed it yet, and was just giving the uniform a sort of trial run.

"No," she said nervously. "I don't think I'll come in, thank you. Are you Ted Handforth?"

"Am I Ted Handforth?" snorted Edward Oswald. "You know jolly well I am!"

They couldn't fool him like that! But Handy grudgingly admitted to himself that the chap was a pretty good "girl." He was wondering who the dickens he could be. It wasn't an Ancient House fellow, as far as he could make out!

"But I don't know you at all," protested Dora, startled by his brusque manner. "Irene asked me to come——"

"By George!" breathed Handforth, under his breath. "The rotters! Bringing Irene's name into it! Before I've done, I'll push this fathead's face into the coal-box, and biff him out! But I'll spoof him first! I'll play his own giddy game!"

"I beg your pardon!" said Dora timidly.

She didn't like Handforth's curious muttering, and his aggressive glare.

"Oh, nothing," said Handforth, seizing her arm, and pulling her roughly into the study. "Don't stand there in the draught! I want to have a word with you on the quiet. What's your name to begin with?"

"Oh!" said Dora, rather frightened.

His fingers had closed round her arm so powerfully that she gasped. And the next moment she was in the study, and the door was closed. She had thought that Church and McClure were very rude, but this fellow was a perfect wretch. What could Irene be thinking of to make friends with him?

"Now then," said Handforth, "name!"

"Dora," said the startled girl.

"Don't think much of it," said Handforth frankly.

"Oh, really——"

"And what's your other name?" he demanded.

"My name is Dora Manners——"

"Don't tell fibs!" interrupted Edward Oswald indignantly. "It's a bit thick to come here, spoofing me up—— I—I mean Dora Manners, eh?" he repeated hastily. "And you're a nurse?"

He had pulled himself up, remembering that he was supposed to be hookwinked. But they would have to get up pretty early to catch E. O. H.! He was deliberately using a rough and uncouth manner—just to give a gentle hint that he wasn't easy game!

Dora was nearly scared out of her wits.

"And you're a nurse?" repeated Handforth, eyeing her with frank curiosity. "I like the way your hair curls round that little hat of yours. By the way, hadn't you better take it off? I don't allow hats on in my study."

A brilliant idea occurred to him, and he reached for the hat. It would be rather rich to pull off the chap's wig at the same time, and expose him as a fraud. Then he'd kick him out on his neck!

"Off with it!" said Handforth briskly.

He grabbed at the hat, and pulled. But, somehow, the wig was fixed on very tightly, for although Handforth tugged at a stray curl, the wig refused to budge. Dora gave a little scream, and backed away, freeing herself.

"How—how dare you!" she cried angrily. "Oh, you cad!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Handforth mockingly.

Dora looked at him, genuinely frightened. This fellow was mad! There could be no other explanation for his extraordinary conduct.

"Please—please let me go!" she panted.

"Not likely!" said Handforth, who seemed to have recovered very rapidly from his poisoning. "You'll go when I let you go, my girl, and not before! I should like to know what you came to me for, anyhow?"

He wasn't going to let this spoofer escape without learning the meaning of the jape!

"I think you're a blackguard!" panted Dora hotly. "Oh, I can't credit it! You—whom Irene calls her friend! She asked me

to come here to see you, and to introduce myself. And this—this is how you treat me!"

Handforth grinned.

"You can tell that yarn to the marines!" he said lightly.

"Are you daring to disbelieve me?" she cried.

"Daring!" jeered Handforth. "I should be a fine idiot if I believed all your bunkum, shouldn't I?"

For a moment Dora was speechless. This was simply outrageous. From the very instant she had entered his presence, he had insulted her! And now he was openly accusing her of lying! Timid though she was, this treatment aroused her to unaccustomed strength.

"Stand away from that door?" she commanded hotly. "I won't stay here another second!"

"Oh, won't you?" said Handforth. "We'll see about that! You'll stay here just as long as I like to keep you!"

Inwardly he was chuckling. Defeat! This vanquished japer had found him too difficult to fool, and was seeking escape! Well, he wasn't going to let "her" go until he had thoroughly revealed the fact that he was aware of the dodge. Incidentally, he was jolly glad that Church had given him the tip, because his visitor was so much like a real girl that he might easily have been spoofed! All the same, any fathead could tell that "she" was only a chap dressed up!

"I'll scream if you don't let me go!" cried Dora desperately.

"Good!"

"Oh, you cad!"

"Scream away!" grinned Handforth callously. "But you needn't think that you'll get any help! You want the chaps to come, I suppose, so that they can save you? But I'm jolly well going to give you something to be getting on with before you leave this study!"

Dora recoiled, alarmed by his changed manner.

"Yes," said Handforth grimly. "I've decided to end this rot! Do you think I don't know you? Huh! You must take me for a chump! It's just about time this foolery was finished, and I'm going to send you back to those jokers who asked you to come here, with a few souvenirs!"

"I—I don't know what you mean!" said Dora breathlessly.

"Well, my souvenirs are pretty well known at St. Frank's, I should think," said Handforth, with heavy humour. "Black eyes and thick ears principally. It'll be a pity to spoil all that paint and powder on your face, but it's got to be done!"

"Help!" cried Dora frantically. "Oh, help!"

By this time she was thoroughly convinced that she was dealing either with a lunatic or a young hooligan. He seemed sane, but there was no question of his brutality!

"That's right—yell away!" said Handforth, grinning. "You're pretty scared now,

eh? The trick hasn't worked, has it? It was like your nerve to think it could! I'll spoil your pretty features, by George!"

What a joke! The chap had certainly made himself look like a girl, but she wouldn't look much like one by the time she got away!

Dora made a frantic attempt to open the door, but Handforth seized her arm, swung her round, and grabbed for an open fruit tart which lay on the table—the tea-things being still uncleared.

"The very thing!" said Handforth gloatingly.

With one sweep, he swung that jam tart round, and Dora screamed. The tart all but struck her when she managed to break clear—the next moment she was outside.

A twinge of pain made Handy give up the idea of pursuit. He slammed the door, and felt so chirpy that he soon recovered from his interior pains. By George, he was going to let the Remove know that he was boss!

And Dora, outside, was more humiliated and distressed than she had ever been in her whole life. This treatment would have been serious enough for a girl like Doris Berkeley, but Dora was much more timid natured.

There was nobody in sight, and as she fled like a frightened fawn through the lobby and out into the Triangle, she was mercifully swallowed up into the dusk. And thus another stroke of chance was furthering the evening's caprices! For none of the fellows knew that Dora had come, and none had seen her go.

And Reggie Pitt was still making his preparations!

Out in the lane, Dora ran on and on until her panic abated slightly. And then she came to a frightened halt, for there were figures in the dusk ahead—St. Frank's boys!

"Oh!" she panted helplessly.

She couldn't be seen like this! With a quick glance, she noted a gap in the hedge, and she ran through it, and plunged into a meadow. And then she ran. Her impression of St. Frank's was an appalling one—and her impression of Edward Oswald Handforth was so terrible that it was impossible to visualise it.

And Handforth, in Study D, was chuckling with pure and unadulterated joy. Little did he know that he had unpardonably insulted a real young lady! He would sooner have cut off his right hand than act in such a blackguardly manner. But Handy didn't know!

And Still He Didn't Guess!

EVERYTHING had been happening so quickly that there was really no time for the real truth to assert itself. It was just one event after another, and they were so cunningly interwoven that misunderstandings were inevitable. By all appearances, this was not exactly one of Handforth's lucky evenings.

He cooled down after a while, wondering, rather, why the fellows didn't come and congratulate him for having spotted the spoof.

At least, they might as well give him the credit for being smart!

But no, he reflected bitterly, they were all against him. They were trying to make him resign—trying to weaken him—trying to biff him out of the captaincy. By George! He'd let them know whether he was going to give in just because he was seedy for once!

The recollection of being seedy reminded him of his pain, and he gave a start. Why didn't Church and McClure come back with that physic? What did they care? They were probably gorging in the village tuckshop, and here he was, in danger of pegging out!

He sat down on the couch, and reflected.

It was rather rummy, but the passage seemed strangely silent! There appeared to be nobody about at all, and he was disappointed at the lack of noise. But yet it was perfectly natural. The fellows were so sick at being dished that their voices were small and subdued. They had probably crawled away, sick and disgusted at the whole frost.

Or, more likely, they were plotting again!

"By George, that's what they're doing!" said Handforth grimly. "They're faking up another jape to make me resign. But I won't resign! I won't give in! I'm going to stick to this iron rule, and nothing is going to shift me! Nothing!" he thundered, crashing his fist on the table.

In order to accomplish this thump, he had leaned forward, and now he sank back with a hollow groan. The effort had exercised the bruised tissues underneath his waistcoat. Handforth's agony was no myth. He had been really and truly hurt during that fight, and if the school doctor had known anything about it, the leader of Study D would have been in the sanny by now.

But Handforth was a fellow who took bruises and hurts in his stride, ignoring them as trifles. The fact that he was now aware of his acute pain was proof positive that he was really crocked. But he kept thinking that these pains were due to the squiffy meat paste.

"Oh, my hat!" he muttered huskily. "I'm poisoned all right!"

He lay there, breathing hard. And his mind was full of suspicions. What were the chaps planning now? Some fresh trick, of course! The mean rotters! They were trying to get rid of him while he was incapacitated! But he would be ready for them at every turn!

Curiously enough, Handforth was convinced that his own methods were the correct ones, and he was angry with the Remove for desiring his dismissal. For Handforth was a fellow who could never be in the wrong—in his own opinion. If he planned a thing, it was naturally right.

Tap-tap!

Handforth sat forward, suspicious on the instant.

"Come in!" he said grimly.

He instinctively reached for a cricket stump, which rested against the wall near by.

But the visitor was only Tubbs. And Tubbs was looking very bright and cheery, Browne having sprung three shillings, when Tubbs had only expected two.

"You're wanted on the 'phone, Master Handforth," said Tubbs brightly.

Handforth gave a hollow laugh.

"Oh, am I?" he said heavily. "How much did they pay you to tell me that?"

The page-boy appeared surprised.

"Pay me, Master Handforth?" he repeated. "Who?"

"Those who sent you!"

"But I ain't being sent, sir," declared Tubbs. "I heard the bell ringing in the Common-room, and so I answered it, as there didn't seem to be nobody about. It's a fair rum 'un, Master Handforth," he added, shaking his head. "There don't seem to be nobody about nowhere. All the young gents have cleared hoff!"

"Well, you can clear hoff, too!" said Handforth.

"But about this telephone call, sir?" asked Tubbs, astonished.

"Rats! You can't kid me——"

"Honest, sir, you're wanted!" urged Tubbs, wondering what was the matter with Edward Oswald. "In fact, sir, it's Miss Irene!" he added with a stage wink. "Miss Irene, of the Moor View School, Master Handforth."

"Look here, are you telling me the truth?" asked Handforth sharply.

"Why, yessir—honest!"

Handforth rose from the couch, and winced. He could hardly move without feeling pain. He was torn. Was this a genuine call from Irene, or were the Removites trying on another dodge? He believed Tubbs to be sincere, but Tubbs might easily have been deceived by a voice over the 'phone.

Anyhow, he couldn't afford to risk it. He would have to go and see. He was just in that state when he was suspicious of everything and everybody. He even gave Tubbs a very sharp look, to make sure that he was Tubbs.

He went out without saying a word—much to the page-boy's surprise—for Handforth was generally good for sixpence, and sometimes a bob. Going down the corridor, Edward Oswald recollected that that japer—that chap dressed up as a girl—had used Irene's name. Surely they wouldn't try the same trick twice? No, this was probably a genuine call.

"Anyhow, they can't beat me!" he muttered.

He put on a fierce, aggressive glare just before opening the Common-room door. But that effort was entirely wasted, for the Common-room was empty. It certainly was queer, where all the fellows had got to!

He went to the telephone-box, and put the receiver to his ear.

"Hallo!" he said cautiously.

"Oh, Ted, is that you?" came Irene's musical voice.

Handforth's frown vanished, and his pains disappeared. He forgot the Remove, he forgot his woes, and life became sweet.

"Yes, rather!" he said eagerly. "Thanks awfully for ringing up, Irene! As a matter of fact, I'm feeling a bit blue this evening, and I need something to buck me up. Your voice is ripping."

Irene laughed—a sure enough indication that she was, as yet, in ignorance of the startling fate which had befallen her cousin. There could be no mistaking that merry laugh of hers. There was no japing here!

"You need something to buck you up, eh?" she asked. "Well, in a few minutes you'll probably be receiving a call from my cousin, and she's going to bring you back to tea. Everything's nearly ready."

"I say, how jolly nice!" said Handforth, with forced enthusiasm—for he was not feeling fit enough to go visiting, although he was far too gallant to admit this. "Thanks, Irene!" Something stirred in his memory. "Your cousin, you said?"

"Yes, Dora Manners."

Handforth started so violently that the telephone-box quivered.

"Dora Manners!" he shouted.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Nun-nothing!" gasped Edward Oswald. "I—I was wondering if—if she could have been here——"

"Oh, no, she won't be there for another five minutes," replied Irene, who was under the impression that Dora had gone to the village first. "Why, Ted? You seem rather startled, or something?"

Handforth breathed a great sigh of relief.

"Oh, no!" he said hastily. "It's nothing—nothing at all!"

Idiot! Fathead! Imbecile! Why the dickens hadn't he jumped to it in the first second? Of course, some of the other fellows must have met Dora Manners already, and that had given them the idea of spoofing him! Church had been positive about the jape—and, besides, Irene had said that her cousin wouldn't be at St. Frank's for another five



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or ten minutes. Still, it would be just as well to make sure.

"I say, Irene," he said, "have any of the chaps met your cousin yet?"

"Yes—Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey were introduced to her——"

"I knew it!" roared Handforth.

"Eh?" came Irene's surprised voice.

"Sorry!" said Handforth hastily. "Oh, so they were introduced?"

"Yes, in the lane," explained Irene. "And that's really why I'm ringing up. Dora is rather reserved—quite shy, in fact—and so we told her to come and fetch you. But perhaps it was a little mean of us, and I'd like you to meet her in the Triangle, if you can, before any of the other fellows can bother her. Then come straight on, will you? Oh, by the way, she's a nurse, you know."

"Yes, I know that," said Handforth promptly.

"Who told you?"

"Nun-nobody!" said Edward Oswald, covering up his slip. "That's all right, Irene. I'll pop out at once and meet her. Don't you worry—I won't let the chaps bother her."

"Good-bye, then," said Irene. "Expect you in about twenty minutes."

"That's it," said Handforth. "Good-bye."

He hung up the receiver, and was so fascinated by his own explanation of the mystery that he allowed the truth to pass by unnoticed. Just for one horrifying second it had half come to him—only to be dismissed. And when he heard that Pitt and Grey had already met Dora, the thing was obvious!

She had given them the idea of the jape. They had tried to forestall the real Dora, and had actually done so, only to see their game fail. Well, it served the beggars right!

From Handforth's point of view, everything now seemed perfectly clear. But in reality Handforth was more mixed than ever, and going full speed ahead towards a second frightful blunder!

Poor Old Handy!

"**M**ARVELLOUS!" said Jack Grey enthusiastically.

"By Jove, Pitt, old man, you're a wonder!" grinned Fullwood.

"Unless I knew the truth in advance, I couldn't possibly guess. You're a girl to the life—and you'd fool anybody in that get-up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Buck up, Reggie—get busy on the job!"

The Common-room in the West House was just as lively as the Ancient House common-room was deserted. This was because all the Ancient House Removites were over there. And in their midst stood a very charming young girl—a girl in the demure dress of a nurse.

"She" was not only exceedingly pretty, but looked shy and sweet. And when she spoke, her voice was soft and gentle. Reggie Pitt was a past-master in the art of feminine make-up—as he had proved on other occasions. His own personality had vanished,

and so clever was his work that he no longer looked like himself in any way, and his every mannerism was changed.

"Oh, Ted!" he cooed. "You mustn't say such sweet things!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Reggie, you're a scream!" gasped Tommy Watson.

Little did they know how near their scheme had come to disaster! If Edward Oswald Handforth had only seen the truth when it was in front of his very eyes, the jape would have come to naught. But there were two reasons for Handforth's present attitude. Firstly, the thought that he had pushed a jam tart into the face of Irene's real cousin was so stupefying that he thrust it aside; and, secondly, he was convinced that his own analysis of the affair was correct. The fellows had seen Dora, and so they tried to kid him! But Dora herself would be coming along in five minutes!

The juniors crowded towards the West House lobby, but Reggie Pitt pulled them up before they passed out into the Triangle.

"Just a minute!" he said, in his natural voice. "Not so much cackling, my lads. We don't want Handforth to get a suspicion of the truth—and this isn't an ordinary jape, played just for the sake of a laugh. There's an object in it—a serious object, too."

"By jingo, so there is!" agreed Fullwood.

"Church and McClure have gone to the village," put in Jack Grey. "I was doing some scouting, and I saw them hurry out. Gone to fetch some medicine, or something, I believe. Now's your chance, Reggie—before they get back."

Pitt nodded.

"My object in fooling Handy is to make him resign," he said. "That's what we're out for! Once we've got him to throw up the captaincy, we shall be all right. And you can trust me to work my hardest. We've simply got to finish up this idiotic iron-rule business. Handy's a fine chap as Handy—but as a skipper he's worse than torture."

"All right—go ahead, and for goodness' sake wangle the thing," said Fullwood. "We'll hang behind here for a bit, and then steal across to the Ancient House Common-room in a few minutes. You come there and report as soon as you finish the good work."

"Right!" said Reggie briskly. "That's settled."

And as Handforth entered the Ancient House lobby, he glanced out into the dusk and saw a dainty figure in nurse's uniform crossing the Triangle. He started, and then smiled with superior self-complacency.

"Just five minutes," he murmured. "So this is Irene's cousin!"

If Reggie Pitt had wanted Handforth to be in a ready mood for the jape, nothing could have been better than this. Handforth was expecting Irene's cousin—and here she was, prompt on time!

Even if Handforth had had any lingering doubts about his earlier visitor, they were

All About Next Week's Great Christmas Story!

My dear Chums,
—If I were asked to make a guess as to the thoughts at the moment of my readers, I shouldn't be far wrong in saying, "Christmas." Why, you can't help but think of Christmas these days, with all the shop windows crowded with



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seasonable gifts, mother and dad making lists of what they've got to buy, puddings being stirred, carollers rehearsing, etc— Yes, we're in the throes of the great festive season once again. Which brings me to one of the two important items of this chat. This concerns Christmas presents. Now you may possibly be wondering what kind of present to ask for or to buy, and here and now I can settle the little problem for you. You are looking for something extra-good, for something that will last, and that will be worth while having. Right! Then you will find, in the following list of Annuals, the ideal Christmas present.

- "The HOLIDAY Annual," price 6/-;
- "The POPULAR BOOK OF BOYS' STORIES," price 2/6;
- "The HOBBY Annual," price 6/-.
- "The MODERN BOY'S Annual," price 6/-;
- "The New ZOO Annual," price 6/-;
- "Every Boy's Book of MOTORS, SHIPS and ENGINES," price 7/6.

The next important Christmas announcement is about next week's issue of the Old Paper. This will be a Christmas number containing an extra-special Yuletide story of the Boys of St. Frank's written by E. S. Brooks. This story is the first of a series of three, and it's the real goods!

What do you know about ghosts? You have read about them many hundreds of times — but what would you do if you were to come up against one? Wants a lot of thinking about, eh? Now, what would you do if when, walking through a quiet

stretch of the New Forest at night, you saw pixies dancing in front of you, a witch scream past on the wind, a tree talk and wave its boughs at you, trying to clutch you; green eyes peering from under bushes, and skeleton hands suddenly reaching out to grab you? What would you do? I, personally, would do about sixty miles an hour! Archie Glenthorne's of St. Frank's experiences all these frightful phenomena in next week's long complete story, "Archie's Christmas Party." So look out for it next week.

Now, don't forget what I've just said about those ideal Christmas presents, and don't forget to order next week's number in advance.

PEN PALS!

Miss Hilda Swain, Bishops' College, Chesham, Herts., wants girl correspondents in the British Isles; ages 18—21.

Arthur Baker, Wills Road, Cronulla, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia, wants correspondents in the Empire.

Buang Onea Jo, Kg. Glam Malay School, Singapore, Straits Settlements, wants to exchange postcards and newspapers with readers all over the world.

Douglas Luntley, 12, Cardigan Terrace, Kirkstall Road, Leeds, wants correspondents.

now dispelled. Here was the real Dora, just as Irene had said.

For he had made up his mind that this second nurse was the genuine one, and there was no thought of suspicion. And when Handforth made up his mind, it was like a mixture of concrete and glue. Not only was it as hard as iron, but absolutely unstickable.

Pitt as he approached, congratulated himself upon the very fortunate chance meeting.

"Good-evening!" said Reggie in a soft, low voice as he paused.

"Oh, good-evening!" replied Handforth. "Awfully pleased to meet you!"

Pitt gave him a shy glance. In the dusk, this visitor looked very alluring and sweet, and Handforth's mood became softer still. It stood to reason that any relative of Irene's would be the right sort.

"I—I am just wondering if you could direct me to a boy named Handforth," went on Pitt demurely. "Perhaps you know him? A tall, handsome boy, with a wonderful figure and strong, manly features?"

Handforth started, and unconsciously pulled himself up to his full height.

"Oh, rather!" he said. "That's me! I'm Handforth, you know."

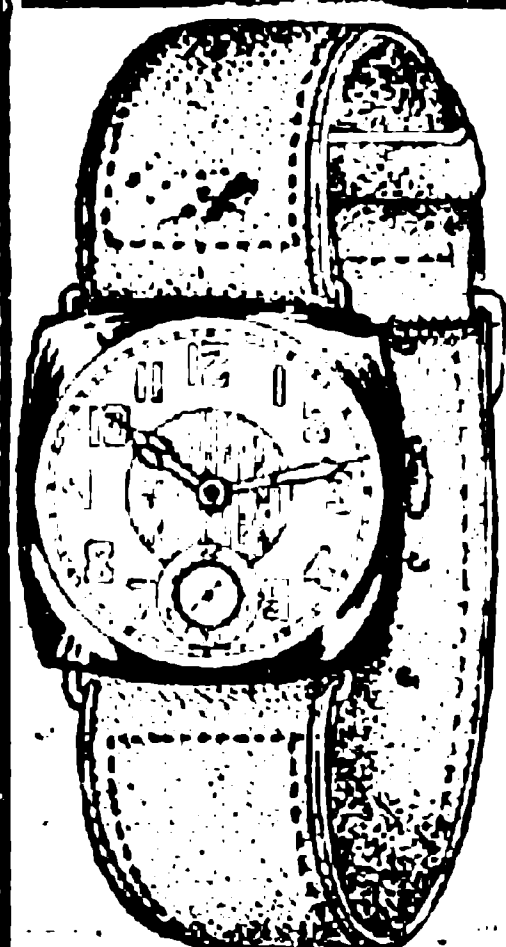
"Oh, really?" said Pitt, with a delightful little upward glance into his face. "I ought to have known! I can see now!"

(Now we are going to see some fun with Handforth thinking that Reggie Pitt is the real Dora Manners, and Pitt being the humorist that he is, you bet the fun will be fast and furious. Don't miss next week's rollicking instalment of this fine School Story.)

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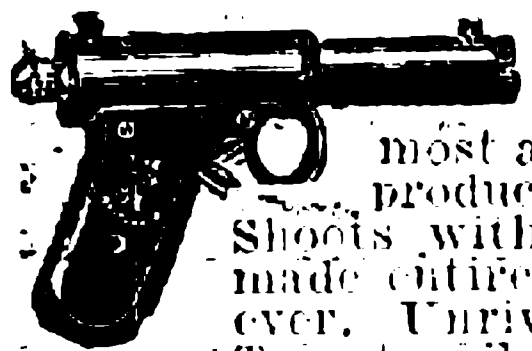
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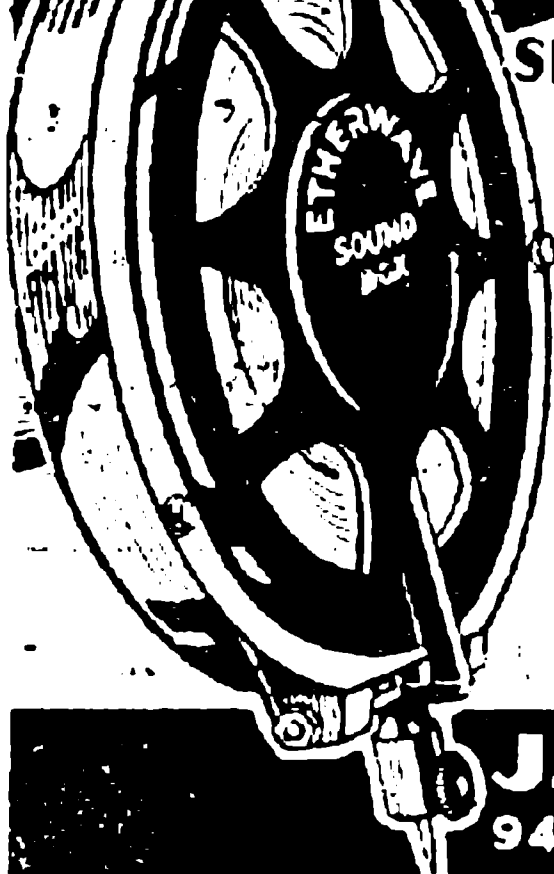
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